

AMERICA FALLS



STORM CLOUDS

SCOTT MEDBURY

Contents

STORM CLOUDS

Prologue

PART ONE: TAKEN

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

PART TWO: A NICK OF TIME

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

PART THREE: PURSUIT

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

PART FOUR: CONVERGENCE

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Epilogue

STORM CLOUDS

AMERICA FALLS

Book 11

Scott Medbury

Also by Scott Medbury

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Hell Week

On the Run

Cold Comfort

Rude Shock

Luke's Trek

Civil War

Lone Wolf

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Some license has been taken with the locations and geography in this fictional work to better progress the story.

Prologue

The moon hung low in the ink-black sky, casting ghostly shadows over the overgrown landscape surrounding the city of Manchester. Three figures in black moved with sinister purpose through the trees and foliage that was slowly but inevitably reclaiming the city's outer suburbs.

These men were no ordinary wanderers of the night, for their intentions were as dark as the shadows that concealed them. Their faces were masked by black scarves, and each carried a collection of guns and blades.

One of them, a burly figure with a jagged scar across his cheek, hissed a command as they reached the end of the scrub that slowly encroached upon the outskirts of the city.

“We’re close now. Keep your wits about you.”

They’d already lost one member of their team a few days before to a stupid accident; they couldn’t afford to lose another without having to abort the mission.

His two companions nodded as he squatted in the shadows and looked into the overgrown backyard of a two-story home—one of many in a long line of abandoned houses.

“We’ll camp in that one and begin the hunt tomorrow.”

Their eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“You sure we shouldn’t scope them out tonight, Mason?”

“No point,” he said, without looking back. “The rat says they’re well protected and stay locked down in the tower after dark. The best time will be tomorrow, when they all start heading out to forage and work in the fields.”

They easily broke their way through the rotted wooden fence and approached the abandoned house. Most of its windows were shattered, and the back wall was overgrown with a vine that had engulfed the whole backyard. It was the perfect hideout, far enough from the prying eyes of the inhabitants of the Brady Sullivan Tower, yet close enough to

stalk the unwary they would abduct to sell to their Chinese buyers.

Mason, an impressionable fifteen-year-old when America fell eleven years before, was now a hardened survivor of the After Days. He broke the back door in with a heavy kick of his boot and they entered.

Ten minutes later, in the flickering glow of a small LED pocket lantern, they huddled together in a circle, their voices hushed yet charged with an eerie energy as they ate.

“We need to be quick, no room for mistakes,” Mason growled, and tore a bite off his jerky. “Children or teenagers are the preference but if they’re hard to find adults will do. The Chinese pay top dollar for the young ones, but because of that detour we had to take when the bridge collapsed, we only have one day to hunt, so we’ll take what we can get. If we don’t get to the rendezvous by next Friday sundown, we’ll miss out and they won’t be back for three months. That only gives us six full days to get back.”

Chris, who at fifteen was the youngest and newest member of the crew, nodded.

“You sure Steve was dead? I thought I heard moaning _____”

“What do you think?” Mason snapped. “Even if he survived the fall into the gulley, there’s no way we could have got him out, so he was as good as dead. If the idiot had reacted a bit quicker, he wouldn’t have fallen at all. Now he’s screwed up our chances of bringing back any more than six slaves.”

Chris dropped his eyes and nodded.

The other member of the crew, Caleb, a twenty-two-year-old with a solid build and a terrible haircut, sneered at Chris before turning his attention back to Mason and grinning, his missing front tooth marring what would have been a remarkably bright smile for someone who had never used a toothbrush.

“So, I heard they do experiments on them, like the Nazis used to.”

“What’s a Nazi?” asked Chris.

“Boy, you’re a dumb one ain’t ya?” spat the toothless Caleb. He’d spent a good part of the trip bullying the younger man and didn’t seem inclined to stop yet. “Those Nazis nearly took over the world a hundred years ago till we beat their asses.”

“How do you think he’s ‘sposed to know that?” Mason asked Caleb. “Kid was barely out of diapers when the shit hit the fan. Nazis were from a place called Germany and they used to put Jews in camps and gas ‘em. It wasn’t a hundred years ago, either.”

“And experiment on ‘em!”

Chris shifted uncomfortably. He wanted to ask what a Jew was but didn’t want Caleb to rag on him again.

“Do you think that’s what the Chinese do too, Mason?”

The leader chewed his jerky thoughtfully for a moment.

“Not what I heard. The buyer says they use ‘em as slave labor. *But* who knows—or cares. As long as the bastards stay their side of the mountains, I don’t care what they do.”

“Why do you reckon they don’t come back east?” asked Chris.

“They’re scared of the virus we set on ‘em,” said Caleb.

Mason shrugged.

“Maybe. More likely they bit off more than they could chew and are happy with the middle and the western states.” He washed down the last of his jerky with a gulp of water. “Anyway, enough talk. Let’s sleep, I want you two on your game tomorrow.”

“How many are we aiming for?” asked Caleb.

“We should be able to handle eight if we scare ‘em bad enough. We’ll kill one if the message ain’t getting through...”

PART ONE: TAKEN

Chapter 1

“Mom, can me, Cade and a few of the kids go to Livingston Park for a swim?” Samuel asked his mother, Diana, as she washed dishes in the sink. “Vincent’s mom already said okay.”

Diana wasn’t surprised. Vincent’s mother Gloria was at her wits end with the four children she had, and getting the energetic teenager off her hands for the day would no doubt be a godsend.

It was the height of summer, and the kids were on a break from school. She could already feel the warmth seeping through the tinted ceiling-height windows of their apartment. When she and Ben had applied for a bigger room to accommodate their growing family the previous winter, picking a room on the eastern side of the building had seemed like a good idea. Not so much now.

“Which kids apart from Vincent?”

“Max and Peace.”

“Well, you can’t ask those two and not Erin.”

“Oh, of course, yeah. And what about Blake?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so. He’s not so strong a swimmer yet.”

“We’ll look after him, Mom, and if we don’t, mother hen Peace will!”

She laughed.

“Well, it’s alright with me, but you need to check with the other parents. Go see Becky and Indigo. Isaac is out with Ben inspecting the farms today.”

“Yes! Thanks Mom! We’re on, Cade!” The gangly seventeen-year-old called out to his stepbrother as he began running for the bedrooms.

“Sam?”

He skidded to a halt, his old sneakers squeaking on the timber floor.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll pack you some lunch and you guys can have a picnic. Come and collect it in twenty minutes. And you need to promise me you’ll watch Blake at all times, and don’t let him go in deep.”

Sam put an arm around his mother’s shoulders and leaned down to kiss her on the top of her head, something he was able to do now with ease.

“Roger that!”

Diana smiled and dried her hands on the worn dish towel. Samuel was barely recognizable as the scared kid who had watched his Uncle Tommy killed by the Brotherhood back in Willatan Green. He’d grown into a tall, confident young man and had taken to Cade, the refugee from the Marauder attack, the instant she and Ben had adopted him. Over the years, the two boys had become inseparable friends. Both dark-haired and gangly, they even looked like brothers.

Blake, on the other hand, was blond and olive-skinned like his dad. Diana’s youngest son idolized his older brothers, and he would have made her life unbearable the whole day if she’d said he couldn’t go. Besides, a bit of sun would do her little bookworm some good.

“Blake! Time to put the *Famous Five* down and go have a real-life adventure!” she called, as she reached for the loaf of bread, she’d baked that morning.

*

“So hot today!” said Blake, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

“Yeah,” agreed Cade. “Can’t wait to jump in the water!”

The sun hung high in the pale blue sky, casting its warm rays over the now bustling area around the Brady Sullivan Tower, where the group had made their home seven

years before. Laughter and chatter filled the air as children played in the streets, relishing the freedom of summer vacation.

Founding a school had been one of the first things the council had implemented, so naturally they used a schedule as close to the one they were all used to from their high school days, including a ten-week summer break.

“It’s only a half-hour walk,” said Samuel, patting his younger brother on the head when he sighed in response. “It’ll be worth it when we get there.”

He, along with Cade and Vincent, led the other kids, kicking an old soccer ball as they made their way through the town towards Livingston Park. Their excitement was palpable, a contagious energy that spread through their group like wildfire. They chattered and laughed, their youthful exuberance a soundtrack to the perfect summer’s day.

Their ultimate destination was Dorr’s Pond. Back before the Fall it was not really a part of the park, but eleven years of unrestrained growth had seen the park and the woods surrounding the pond merge into close to 200 acres of thick forest and scrub.

As they walked away from the Tower, the people and kids playing and working eventually thinned out. After they turned onto Webster Street, the abandoned stores, car lots, gas stations and assorted business from the Before Times reminded them that the city was still not much more than a shell of its former self. Manchester’s new population was still confined to little more than two city blocks eleven years after the Fall.

“It’s so creepy here,” said Erin softly.

“Yeah,” said Peace. Ava’s daughter, conceived in the facility so long ago, had bloomed into a confident and responsible teenager, very much in the mold of her Uncle Paul. “Here, you can hold my hand.”

The younger girl accepted the offer without hesitation.

Blake was straggling behind everyone else, looking around with moon eyes. He had just finished a post-apocalyptic novel by an English writer called John Christopher, which his father had recommended, and the abandoned buildings around them were just as he'd visualized the landscape in the story to be.

"This is like *Empty World*, the book I just finished."

"Well, we're living the documentary version," said Samuel, who preferred gaming and old movies to books.

As they approached an intersection, Vincent picked up a stone and threw it at the street sign. He missed it completely and to cover, he snorted and said, "Walnut Street! Did we miss Peanut Avenue?"

This drew a spattering of laughs from the other kids, and none of them noticed Blake stop in the middle of the intersection as they walked on.

"I guess it'll be right before Chestnut Street," Cade joined in.

"Um, guys?"

"Yeah, and just after Acorn Avenue," said Samuel.

"Guys!"

They turned as one and looked back at Blake, who was standing still, looking along Walnut Street and its row of abandoned two-story homes.

"What's up?" said Sam.

Blake raised his arm and pointed to the first two-story house about a hundred yards from the intersection. It was red with a peaked roof, and he was pointing at the attic window.

"There's someone in that window."

Sam, along with Isaac and Indigo's son Max, stepped up to him, shielding their eyes from the sun.

"No there's not."

"I can't see anyone either," Max said.

“There was! I swear. He had something over his face.”

The certainty in his voice convinced Sam to walk a few paces down the street until his view of the window was about to be obscured by a big Maple in the vacant lot next to the house.

“You are seeing things, Shorty,” said Vincent. “Come on Sam.”

“I am not!”

Sam didn’t let himself be rushed by Vincent, but even on closer inspection all he saw was an empty window, and no sign of movement there or anywhere else. A high-pitched scream behind him made him jump and with a thumping heart, he spun around to find Erin flailing her arms at a pretty black and purple butterfly.

Vincent brayed like a donkey, pointing at Samuel and Blake. They all joined in the laughter after the shock had worn off. All except Blake, who was as still as a statue as he continued to stare at the window. His big brother put his arm around his shoulder.

“Sorry Blake, I don’t see anything. Must have just been a shadow.”

He saw his younger brother’s certainty dwindle into doubt, before he finally nodded and turned away.

“Come on, it’s hot, let’s go swim,” said Samuel.

“K.”

“Told ya you were seeing things,” teased Vincent.

Max opened his mouth to tell Vincent to leave it alone when Blake beat him to it and flipped the older kid the bird. Vincent brayed again.

“I’m just teasing, Shorty.”

Blake looked back one more time as they continued on, but all he saw was an empty window.

It wasn’t until the group was about to veer onto Hookset Road and the mile-long stretch to the park that a dark

figure reappeared at the window, the lenses of the field binoculars it held glinting with the reflected light of the bright summer day.

*

Luke Merritt offered his hand to Joshua Ragland after they'd exchanged names. For Ragland, the encounter had taken an unexpected turn. Fearing the worst after he had been skillfully disarmed, he now found himself face-to-face with the man who had bested him, but instead of conflict, the younger man with the open, honest face was holding out a hand in friendship.

Ragland's instincts told him to be cautious, but there was something in Luke's steady gaze that spoke of good intent. He took the strong, callused hand.

"Pleased to meet you."

Luke tucked the handgun into the waistband of his jeans.

"I don't mean you any harm, Joshua. We were just passing through when I noticed the smoke from your fire. Had to make sure we weren't stumbling into trouble."

Ragland took a measured step back, maintaining a cautious distance.

"Fair enough. Caution is understandable. I don't take kindly to being snuck up on, but I reckon I can see you meant no harm. What brings you and your group through these parts?"

Luke motioned towards the group of seven people huddled in the moonlight a short distance away.

"We're just travelers. Like you, I'm guessing."

Ragland's eyes scanned the group. None of them appeared to be threatening. If anything, they looked weary and ragged.

"Ain't often you see a group like yours traveling at night. Don't you have a home?"

Luke shrugged, his eyes never leaving Ragland's. "We prefer the cover of darkness. There are dangerous folk out there."

"Don't I know it."

Luke regarded him for a moment.

"We were going to make camp on another mile. You picked a good spot; would you be open to us joining you? Just for tonight."

Ragland was about to say no, when Luke bent down and picked up his bow and knife, handing them back to him.

"Thanks. Well, I don't normally--"

"I have an unopened bottle of Jack Daniels. I sure would like to enjoy it with someone who would appreciate it, and maybe swap a few stories."

There was a slight desperation in the young man's voice. It was clear he was craving the kind of company that the defeated travelers with him couldn't provide. There was something more to the strange group than met the eye, and Luke was the one who stood out from the others. Somehow, they didn't belong together, and Ragland was curious now.

After a long pause, curiosity and the empathy that hadn't quite been eroded from his character yet won over reluctance.

"Well, how can I say no to that?"

Luke grinned.

"Excellent dude, thank you. We'll be out of your hair at first light."

"One thing though... don't call me dude."

"Haha, you got it."

Two hours later they were sitting alone in front of the subdued campfire. Luke's fellow travelers were huddled together in bedrolls and sleeping bags at the base of a big old oak tree a few yards back from the fire.

Ragland took a long sip of whiskey from his tin cup as old Reliable snorted behind him.

“So how did you come to be together?” he asked, gesturing to the rest of the group. “You seem a little different to them. Not as...”

“Beaten down?”

“Yeah, for want of a better phrase.”

“I recruited them,” said Luke, draining his cup and staring into the flames.

“Recruited?”

“Yeah. It’s a term we use for gathering refugees.”

The Drifter regarded him, his eyes dangerous.

“For what purpose?”

Sensing the change in tone, Luke looked up at him.

“Oh, nothing sinister. I’m not a slaver.” Luke knew of the slavers operating in New York and Vermont but hadn’t run across any in all his travels through New Hampshire. “I’m from Manchester. We are trying to repopulate. So, our team, Messengers, travel around and tell people of the cities, Manchester, Concord and Albany. We explain how things are. You know about the electricity and running water and medicine, and we try to recruit them. Anyway, when we’ve gathered enough on a mission, we return with them.”

“Ahh, I’ve heard of the Cities. I planned to make my way down there for a look one day.”

“Well, *cities* is a loose term, I guess. They weren’t that big before the fall, but they are a damns sight better than how some of these survivors are living, so it’s pretty easy to find willing people.”

“So, you’re heading west. Not ready to return yet?”

“I have one more town to check. Greenfield. About another day’s walk west.”

Ragland nodded and held a hand up to reject the offer of more whiskey. It had been a while and the liquor had somewhat gone to his head. He could tell from the slight slur of Luke's speech that he was also feeling the effects.

"Good call," said Luke, putting the lid back on the one-third empty bottle. It dawned on him then that he'd done most of the talking. "So, you're just drifting around, you say?"

"Yeah," said Ragland without elaborating.

"No troubles?"

"Oh plenty."

Luke laughed.

"You like to keep your cards close, huh?"

Ragland shrugged.

"If I start my story, it won't be over until sundown tomorrow." He stood up and stretched. "Speaking of tomorrow, I reckon its time I hit the hay and get there all the sooner."

"Another good call. Can I ask one question, though?"

"Well, you can ask..."

Luke laughed again.

"What did you do in the Before Times? You must have been, what, twenty-five or so?"

"Twenty-four. I was an associate attorney. I'd just finished my degree and was about to start with a firm when it hit the fan."

Luke nodded.

"I wouldn't have picked it," said Luke, standing up.

The other man chuckled. "No, I daresay that Joshua Ragland from back then wouldn't recognize the current model either."

Luke grinned and held out his hand again.

"Thanks for the hospitality and the fireside chat."

“Welcome, thanks for the whiskey.”

“By the way. If you’ve got nowhere else to go, you’re welcome to join us on the walk to the next town. We could use another hand, and we’ve got enough food to share.”

Ragland shook his head with a faint smile.

“I appreciate the offer, but old Reliable and I are headed in a different direction. Got some business to attend to,” he lied smoothly.

Luke nodded.

“Alright. We’ll camp here for the night and head out at dawn. If you change your mind, we won’t turn you away.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

With a nod of mutual respect, the two men went to opposite sides of the fire, each finding a spot to bed down for the night.

Ragland found sleep evasive, his head buzzing from the alcohol he’d imbibed and senses alert to any sound or movement around him. He eventually fell asleep sometime in the wee hours, knowing he’d pay the price for lack of sleep in the morning.

When dawn broke, he was surprised and alarmed to find the camp empty. Luke and his group of refugees had disappeared.

Surprised because he expected to rise before everyone else, except maybe Luke. Alarmed because he’d slept through their departure.

“Well, it’s back on the wagon for you Ragland,” he growled to himself as he saddled Reliable and packed up his belongings before spreading the ashes of the fire with his boot.

From the height of the sun in the sky, he guessed it to be about nine a.m., and the day was already hot. He climbed into the saddle.

“Might be time for a beach vacation, Reliable, what do you think?”

As he resumed his journey in an easterly direction, he found himself grateful for the unexpected encounter with Luke the Messenger. It served as a reminder that the road ahead was best traveled with caution but also with opportunities to connect... opportunities he'd perhaps missed with his siege mentality.

*

Dorr's Pond lay before them, its tranquil waters shimmering under the midday sun, inviting the children to embrace the respite from the sweltering heat. Their laughter filled the air as they splashed and played, their carefree spirits unburdened by the weight of the world's troubles.

Little did they realize, though, that trouble was about to come calling.

As the children frolicked in the water, Peace, ever the responsible one, volunteered to set up the picnic. She began unpacking the provisions they had brought, carefully arranging the sandwiches and fruits on a blanket spread under the shade of a towering tree.

Erin, sensing the chance for some playful teasing about the shape in the window, sidled up to Blake.

"You know what they say about boys who see things that aren't there, right?"

Blake rolled his eyes, unamused, but still managed a retort.

"Yeah, I also know what they say about girls who scream at butterflies."

Erin grinned, but before she could retaliate, Samuel interjected.

"Enough, you two. Let's just enjoy the day."

The friendly chat continued amongst the teenagers and younger kids as they settled into their picnic, savoring the taste of summer and the simple pleasures it brought. Peace smiled at the camaraderie; her heart warmed by the bond she shared with these friends who had become like family.

“Your mom makes kickass sandwiches,” said Vincent. He was a little on the heavier side and clearly enjoyed his food.

As his mother had requested, Samuel made them wait a half hour before going back into the water, ignoring the complaints of the younger kids. The hours slipped by quickly, and as the shadows began to stretch across the clearing and the pond, Peace gave them all a twenty-minute warning.

“I’ll pack up the lunch mess,” she said, heading to shore and picking up a towel to shake the breadcrumbs off it.

Facing the water, she didn’t see the three dark figures slowly emerge from the trees, the biggest of them moving with calculated confidence as he gestured to his comrades to spread out.

Preoccupied, the kids in the water didn’t notice the armed men either. In fact, no one noticed until Peace was grabbed from behind by the scar-faced man, his arm locked around her neck and a long-bladed knife pressed against her throat as she squeaked in surprise.

Erin’s high-pitched scream echoed across the water and off the trees. Everyone in the pond froze and slowly turned, their faces etched with shock.

“I want you all out of the water,” the man with the knife at Peace’s throat commanded.

No one moved.

“Now!” he roared, and lifted Peace off the ground so that her legs kicked out trying to find purchase. “Or I slit her throat open.”

Cade was the first to recover from the shock.

“Come on! Let’s do what he says,” he called, and began wading towards the shore.

Erin was whimpering and everyone except Cade and Samuel were wide eyed with fear and shock. Both of the older boys’ eyes sparked with anger.

The leader stayed in place with Peace at his mercy as the other two men came forward with rifles pointed at the group.

“Turn around and face the water.”

Peace remained calm, despite the knife at her throat. She glanced at her friends, her eyes conveying a silent plea to comply. The fear in her eyes was evident, but so was her determination not to let her captor sense it.

The younger kids and Vincent obeyed immediately, and when Samuel nodded to Cade, they complied as well.

“Good,” said the leader, releasing Peace and stepping back. He slid his knife into his boot and pulled out a pistol and gestured to the girl, who was rubbing her throat.

“Now, you hand them their towels and clothes. You’re all going to get dressed and put your shoes on. No funny business or I shoot that little girl on the end through the head.”

Erin bowed her head and began to weep again.

“You hurt anyone, and you’ll regret it,” Max grated, looking over his shoulder at the man with the scar.

“Oh, is that right?”

The leader stomped over to Erin and put the muzzle of his pistol hard against the back of her head.

“No! Don’t hurt her!” yelled Max, holding up a placating hand as the others in their group gasped in shock.
“Sorry! I’m sorry, okay?”

The leader held the gun where it was, as Erin’s weeping became wailing, daring the boy to say more. After a few seconds, when it was clear he’d learned his lesson, he pulled the gun away and went back to where Peace was gathering up towels and clothes.

Within a few minutes they had all pulled clothes on over their wet swimmers.

“Now everyone put your hands behind your back. You get in line and do it too Missy.” Peace nodded and moved

across to stand between Cade and Max and put her hands behind her back. “Tie ‘em!”

The two accomplices quickly and efficiently moved along the line, zip tying the hands of each of their captives.

“Okay kiddies. We’re going on a road trip. If you’re good, you’ll get there in one piece. If not... well, let’s just say, you don’t want to find out what happens if you don’t. Caleb, you lead ‘em out. Chris, you bring up the rear.”

“Aren’t we gonna try for more?” asked Caleb quietly as they formed up.

“Nope. We hit the motherload. Seven kids are worth at least twelve adults and as long as we get them there by sundown Friday, this’ll do nicely. Get moving.” Caleb was making his way to the front when the kid who had been mouthing off burst out of the line and ran for the trees.

“Shit! Chris, get him!”

Chris was by far the fastest of the three slavers and was after the kid in an instant. The little bastard was fast though and beat him into the trees.

“Go Max!” yelled Cade.

The big man clubbed him hard over the ear with an open hand and he fell to the ground, suddenly finding the boot of the leader pressed hard down on his face.

“If he gets away, you’re the first sacrifice son.”

Chapter 2

Ragland's senses were keenly attuned to the world around him despite the beautiful day, and the faint sound of a male voice carried on the breeze caused the hackles on his neck to rise. Twenty minutes before, he had led Reliable down off the road and through a small thicket of trees to drink from a stream. He'd taken off her saddle and given her a brief rubdown, before letting her graze on the lush grass beside the stream. Tired from his late night, he took the opportunity to rest against a tree with his hands behind his head, closing his eyes in the midday sun.

Now on full alert, he circled the tree he had leaned against, and staying low moved through the scrub until he had an unimpeded view of the road. As the seconds passed, he discerned more voices. Male voices. A shadow amongst other shadows, he peered intently as the owners of the voices came over the rise.

Ragland counted seven of them. All of them were armed with handheld weapons, clubs and axes and the like, and one of them, the shortest, had a rifle slung over his shoulder. They were all lean and weathered, with hardened faces that told Ragland they were bad news for anyone they came across.

He didn't know if they had a destination, but they moved with a sense of purpose even as they joked amongst themselves.

"How far ahead do you think they are, Chief?" asked the shortest member of the gang.

Ragland watched. Short maybe, but he had a stout physique, and his muscular arms were impressive. No doubt he could swing the club he held loosely in his hand very effectively. He appeared to be the leader.

His question was addressed to the one that walked ahead of the others, a bow over his shoulder. The man, with a distinctive long ponytail, stopped and look intently at the ground at the edge of the road then around at the surroundings.

Ragland held his breath as the tracker's gaze scanned in his direction and stopped. The seconds seemed to stretch for minutes before it moved on.

"I'd say half a day if they camped the whole night. Maybe longer if they moved through the night, but I doubt they did with kids in the group. There are other tracks coming this way. A man on foot and a horse. They went that way." The man pointed directly at the trees where Ragland hid. "Should we investigate?"

Ragland's hand went to the pistol on his hip.

"No, I don't want to waste any time. We focus on the ones we're hunting. Let's pick up the pace, I want to catch them by sundown."

"Think they'll be any trouble, Boss?" asked the biggest of them as they began to move on. He was a shaved headed man with what looked like a samurai sword at his hip. The spiderweb tattoo that adorned the skin of his head added to his sense of menace. Even so, he looked less a threat than the short guy.

"The big guy with the hook maybe, but once he's out of the way," he reached up and patted the stock of his rifle, "we're good."

Ragland watched them move off, staying still until they'd disappeared. He wore a frown as he stood up, brushing away the leaves that clung to his jeans, and began walking back through the thicket.

The clearing next to the stream was empty when he emerged from the cool shadows.

"Reliable?"

He looked this way and that but there was no sign of the chestnut horse. Her tracks disappeared into the shallow stream and appeared again on the other side.

"Reliable my ass," he said under his breath and pulled off his boots before negotiating the slippery rocks to the other side. He searched for ten minutes with no luck.

The horse was nowhere to be seen.

“Ahh well. Happy travels, friend,” he growled, before crossing back to the other side.

He felt sad as he put his boots back on and picked up his backpack, leaving the saddle where he’d dropped it before walking back out onto the road. He’d gotten used to the company of the horse and if he’d had more time, he would have continued the search.

Alas, his conscience got the better of him. He didn’t know if they were slavers or just a gang of miscreants out for blood, but he knew he couldn’t just leave the gang to ambush Luke and his people.

“Goddamned humans!” he growled, before jogging in the direction the gang had taken.

*

Max drew breath in big heaving sobs as he scrambled through the forest, branches and leaves whipping his face. The crashing through the undergrowth behind him was getting louder and with every yard, his inevitable capture seemed closer.

Just as the harsh breathing of the slaver closed in on him, he saw a glimpse of Hookset Street through the gaps in the trees. He put on a burst of speed but found himself lifted off his feet as the slaver grabbed the collar of his prized denim jacket and pulled him down.

Max Race crashed heavily to the forest floor, the wind knocked out of him, as the youngest slaver stood bent over him, hands on knees, sucking in deep breaths.

“You’re – a – fast – little – fucker...” he heaved.

Lungs still burning, Max scrambled to his hands and knees ready to make another escape, but the slaver’s hand latched onto his upper arm, and he pulled him to his feet and gave him a violent shake.

“No! We’re done, boy. Come on and don’t try anything stupid again or Mason will shoot someone.”

From the tone of the slaver's voice, Max gleaned that he was afraid of the one called Mason and believed his words weren't just rhetoric.

Max nodded and allowed himself to be directed back the way they had come.

"Well," said Mason, when they emerged from the trees. He pushed his boot down on Cade's face one more time for good measure before letting him up. "You just dodged a bullet my friend."

He crossed over to Chris and Max with a smile on his face.

Chris grinned uncertainly, but his mouth dropped open when Mason punched the young boy in the nose. The blow knocked Max onto his backside with blood gushing down over his mouth and chin as his friends gasped in shock. The leader of the slavers wasn't done. He picked the eleven-year-old up by the lapels of his jacket and shook him violently before bodily lifting him from the ground and putting his face in Max's.

"You try shit like that again and I murder a little girl," he grated. "Understand?"

Max nodded, his face pale with shock. The big man flung him to the ground. Isaac and Indigo's son lay still, the remnants of his blood-soaked jacket hanging off him.

Peace ran over to her friend and helped him up, placing a damp towel against his nose. She shot the leader a baleful look before telling Max to put his chin up and pinch his nose.

"Right!" yelled Mason. "You've had your excitement for the day. Any more *excitement* like that and someone dies. Now move!"

They began walking and after Mason had moved to the front, Max shrugged off the remains of his jacket and let it fall to the ground. Two places behind him, Samuel kicked it into the long grass as he passed by.

He didn't know if Max had meant to drop the jacket as a clue for their parents, but he knew it would be a valuable

hint that they were in trouble.

*

Isaac and Ben arrived back from the farms as the sun was going down. They climbed the six floors to their level and entered the hallway.

“Why doesn’t that get any easier the more we do it?” Ben panted.

Isaac laughed.

“You say that every second day...”

“Ben, Isaac!” They both turned as Diana rushed down the corridor. “The kids went for a swim at Livingston Park, but they’re not back. Did you see them outside?”

“No. When did they leave?”

“It was about nine-thirty. They were going to have a picnic lunch, but I told them to be back well before sundown.”

The door closest to them opened and Indigo emerged, a worried look on her face.

“The kids?”

“Yeah,” said Diana, her voice containing a slight tremor. “They should have been back by now.”

“Okay, steady on,” said Ben, grasping her hand. “I’m sure they’re fine, probably just got wrapped up in the fun and lost track of time. Who went?”

“Cade, Samuel, and their friends Vincent, Peace, Max, Erin and Blake.”

Isaac looked somewhat relieved. Both Samuel and Cade had proven themselves to be reliable kids with good common sense.

At that moment the fire stair door opened and Becky, Luke’s partner, emerged with little Elizabeth at her side. Obviously there to collect Erin, she took one look at their faces and asked what was wrong.

Ben filled her in.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” said Isaac. “Sam and Cade have good heads on their shoulders. Ben let’s you and I walk out there. We’ll probably meet them on their way back.”

“I’m coming too,” said Indigo.

“Me too,” seconded Diana.

“Right,” said Becky. “I’ll leave Elizabeth with Ava. Meet you downstairs.”

Isaac gave Ben a grin and shrugged.

“Right. I’ll grab some flashlights in case.”

“Okay, I need to go to the bathroom, we’ll meet you all on ground in five.”

Indigo followed him inside and closed the door. He didn’t go to the bathroom but instead headed straight for their bedroom.

“Gun?” she asked.

“Yeah, didn’t want to alarm the others, it’s just in case.” He unlocked the cabinet in their wardrobe and checked that the Glock had a full magazine before tucking it into the waistband of his jeans and pulling his jacket on. It was very similar to the denim jacket Max wore religiously, whether or not it was hot or cold.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” she said, squeezing his hand.

He smiled.

“Me too. Let’s go.”

By the time they reached the main entrance to the park the sun was just a smudge of pink on the horizon, and they turned their flashlights on as they entered. Luckily the path to the pond was quite well worn, as it had been a popular spot for swimming every summer. It allowed them to make their way through the trees quickly and confidently.

Isaac did his best to try and spot clues of the children’s passing but didn’t see anything.

"I wish Luke was here, he's an excellent tracker," said Ben at the rear, as if reading his mind.

The mood of the group was tense and anxious. Their hopes of running into the kids on their way back to the tower had been crushed, and now, as they picked their way through the dark and silent forest, there wasn't one of them that didn't have worrying thoughts.

"I think it's just through here," said Isaac, picking up his pace as the trees thinned out.

"Yeah, this is the spot," said Becky.

They all began calling out the kids' names as their lights illuminated the grassed area at the shore of the pond.

"They're not here," said Indigo.

"Spread out with your flashlights," said Isaac. "First look for any clues they *were* here. Once we confirm that, we can put our heads together and try and work out where they went."

They did as he asked and within the first minute Indigo called out.

"I found a crust of bread! It's fresh."

"I made them sandwiches for lunch!" said Diana.

"Yes," said Ben. "They were here for certain. The longer grass here is flattened and, in some places, still damp."

"Okay, great. Keep searching for clues. Ben, check the tree line, see if there is a disturbance or any sign, they went into the forest rather than back via the track."

Isaac was about to call them together when he heard Diana say, "Oh no."

"What is it?" he asked, as they all rushed over. When he saw what the pool of light revealed, his stomach dropped.

It was Max's denim jacket. The one he hardly ever took off, stained with blood. Lots of blood.

“Oh my God,” gasped Indigo, putting a hand over her mouth.

Isaac immediately took her in his arms and Diana and Becky moved in to comfort them both. Ben however, while acutely aware of their shock, shone his flashlight across the ground in tight arcs and began following the trail of beaten down grass and blood spatters. He spotted a partial bloody boot print.

“They went this way! Take heart, the trail leads back to the path, but it looks like he stopped bleeding not long after they were on the path, or we would have spotted the blood on our way in.”

Isaac broke away and followed him.

Ending near the edge of the worn grass of the path they’d followed in from Hookset Road there was indeed a trail of blood. Ben shone his light on another boot print; this one clearly showed the heel and part of the sole.

“There’s no way that boot belonged to any of our kids,” said Ben, putting his fingers in the indentation. “Too heavy and too big.”

The three women came across to join them.

“You think they were taken?” asked Diana, her voice tight. “Who would do this?”

Ben put his arm around her shoulder.

“I don’t know. But we’ll bloody well-”

“Slavers,” said Isaac.

“No!” whispered Indigo sharply, her reaction mirrored by the gasps of Diana and Becky.

He looked at her evenly.

“I think so... at least I hope so.”

“What?!”

“Look, let’s get back to Hookset and I’ll explain.” Without waiting for a reply, he pointed his flashlight beam at

the track and began following it out. “I’ll focus my beam on the track, you all use yours to scan the surroundings as we follow it back to entrance to the park.”

Ten minutes later they arrived back at the entrance on Hookset Road.

Having looked more thoroughly than they had on the way into the pond, on the way out, they’d spotted several more prints in the dirt and grass. The trail ran dry when they reached the parking lot and now that they were out on the road, there was no way to tell which way they had gone.

Isaac turned to face them. Indigo folded her arms and drilled him with her a steely gaze.

“Explain?”

“We’ve heard reports of slavers in New York State. They snatch survivors and sell them to the Chinese. Apparently, there is a lucrative black market for slaves in the west. Anyway, if they’ve been seen in New York, it’s no stretch to think they might have started coming into New Hampshire.”

“Why didn’t this get brought to everyone’s attention?” Indigo asked, her hands bunched into fists by her side.

“To be honest, we didn’t think it was going to be a problem for a long while. Albany had already chased off many of the gangs. Bowman’s scouts have been monitoring our borders, but to be honest, their resources are stretched pretty thin.” He saw his words were not having a calming effect. “Look, I know it’s scary, but to be honest, if it is slavers it wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

“Isaac!” yelled Becky. “How the hell could it be worse? They have our children!”

Isaac held up his hands.

“Think about it. If it was someone with other intentions, like cannibals or... I don’t know—some other kind of sick freaks, we’d maybe never find them again. If it is slavers, it means they’ll be transporting them to New York State to sell. They won’t hurt them... well, they won’t kill

them if they can get gold for them. That means we have time to get them back.”

“What if it’s not slavers-”

“Oh, it’s slavers alright,” a strange voice interrupted.

They all jumped, except Isaac. His senses heightened, he immediately snatched his Glock out of his pants and pointed it in the direction of the voice.

“Whoa, don’t shoot, quickdraw!”

Ben’s flashlight illuminated a figure of medium height. The man, who looked about their age, was painfully thin and wore filthy orange pants and a purple tie-dyed T-shirt that had seen better days. His shoeless feet were filthier even than his face.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” asked Ben.

“*Who the bloody hell are you?*” mimicked the man with a laugh that trailed into a hacking cough.

When he finally recovered, he held up his hand to the tense group.

“Sorry. Sorry for sneaking up. I’m Wesley.”

“Where the hell did you come from?”

“Oh, here of course,” he said with a flourishing gesture that could have meant the parking lot, the city or indeed the country.

“Manchester?”

“Yes, *Isaac Race*,” he said the name in a deep baritone voice. “Been here since the day I was born.”

“How do you know my name?” said Isaac, taking a step forward and raising the muzzle of his gun to the strange man’s face.

“Isaac,” said Indigo, quietly.

The man named Wesley simply smiled, his white teeth starkly contrasting his dirty, smudged face.

“I listen. I watch. But don’t worry, dear, though I’m near, you need not fear.”

“Enough with the shit!” snapped Isaac. “Did you see what happened to our children?”

Wesley giggled like an idiot.

“I did! I did! But my words, I’ll withhold, because your scary gun makes my truth untold.”

Indigo stepped forward and put her hand on Isaac’s gun hand, gently pushing it down until he surrendered and tucked it back into his jeans. His wife turned to the stranger and smiled.

“I’m sorry Wesley,” she said gently. “We are just terrified for our kids, and we weren’t expecting a... visitor. Did you see them?”

The man turned his erratic attention to her, and his face became serious.

“I did, pretty lady,” he said, and bowed with a flourish.

Isaac made a noise deep in his throat, clearly one of frustration than jealousy, but Indigo stepped between them.

“Can you tell us what you saw or heard?”

“I saw a group of children head into the park and not long after, three bad men who followed their path. So, I followed them, silent and sly. Like a whispering breeze, I passed them by. Slavers they are with a deadline to meet-”

“A deadline?!” Isaac interrupted.

“*As long as we get ‘em there by sundown Friday,*” he rasped in a voice that made Indigo shiver. “*This lot will do nicely.*”

“How long ago was this?”

Wesley looked up at the stars and pulled at the scruffy beard on his chin.

“Hmm, three hours ago they passed this very spot and headed that way, Isaac Race.”

Isaac dismissed the eccentric loner immediately. He turned back to the others but zeroed in on Ben.

“Three hours. If we start now, we can catch them tomorrow sometime.”

“Isaac, no,” said Indigo. “We need to go back and form up a search party. We can call in Bowman-”

“We don’t have time Indy! They are already three hours ahead. I’m pretty sure of the route they will take. If Ben and I start out now we have a better chance of catching them.”

“But you don’t even know where they are taking them, what if you go in the wrong direction?”

“I won’t go in the wrong direction. There is an unsanctioned Chinese outpost in Catskill, New York. It’s where they are operating the black market in slaves and weapons. They’ll be taking them there to be sold.”

“Isaac, you know where it is?” said Indigo.

“It’s come up in the council meetings...” he said.

“You knew about this too, Ben?” asked Diana.

“Yes Love,” Ben said, his face reddening.

“Why haven’t we shut it down?” asked Indigo, her voice going up an octave.

“It’s not that easy, but we’ve talked about it,” said Isaac. “It’s well-fortified with a decent-sized population and we have to weigh up the consequences of alerting the Chinese authorities.”

“Why? I don’t get it, who is in this outpost?”

“It’s a mix, mainly Chinese rebels who’ve left their side, but mainly American survivors taking advantage of the situation. The Chinese know they’re there and leave them alone as long as they are providing goods and slave labor. Look I know this is a shock, but we have to get moving.”

“Fine, but we’ll be talking more about this...”

Isaac had no doubt, but he understood why she was upset. In fact, now he wondered himself if they shouldn't have just taken care of the outpost the moment, they'd become aware of it. In hindsight, the roaming slavers were always bound to come further east eventually.

"So, you have a gun, do you have anything Ben?"

"I have a knife, but we can look for weapons and pick up provisions along the way."

"Yes. Look, I don't mean to rush this, but we need to move now. Wesley, you said—"

Isaac had turned to address the stranger, but he was nowhere to be seen. He'd disappeared as quickly and silently as he'd appeared.

"Well, where the bloody hell did he go?" asked Ben.

No one else had seen him leave but it didn't matter. The information he'd given them had been invaluable.

They began to say their goodbyes.

"Bring them home safe," whispered Indigo in Isaac's ear.

"I will," he nodded solemnly. "You should get in touch with Concord, first thing in the morning. We'll head across the Merrimac and onto the 114, to Route 9. It's the most direct way west, hopefully we'll catch them long before they get too far or take a turn. Reach out to Bowman and see if he can do anything to help."

The three women watched them go, then began their trek back to the Tower.

"Should we form a party when we get back to follow them, in case they need help?" asked Diana.

"No," said Indigo. "They'd be too far ahead by the time we managed that at this time of night and all we'd have is another group of our people out wandering around without knowing exactly which way they went. I'll send someone to Concord tomorrow at first light."

“Okay.”

“Well,” said Becky, in a determined voice. “There is one person who has to be told and he knows the lay of the land even better than Isaac. When we get back, I’m taking one of the trailbikes and going to find Luke...”

Chapter 3

As dusk settled under dark skies, Luke and his group of refugees finally reached the outskirts of the sprawling town of Greenfield. They had covered an exhausting sixteen-hour journey on foot, and weariness was a heavy shroud over the whole group. Luke knew they needed a safe place to rest and recuperate before they entered the town proper.

He pointed to a small park. Although abandoned and overgrown, the last picnic shelter still standing would offer some semblance of cover if the threatening rain did come.

“Let’s make camp there. We’ll make ourselves known in town tomorrow morning.”

It was a familiar routine for the group, having set up camp in various places during their journey. With practiced efficiency, they gathered firewood, unfurled sleeping bags, and arranged them around the rickety picnic table. Once that was done, Luke and one of the men arranged the remains of an old cinderblock barbecue in the corner into a workable fire pit.

Always attentive to the needs of his companions, he ensured everyone was comfortable before stepping back to survey their temporary abode.

As the refugees settled down, exhaustion quickly claimed them, and the rhythmic crackling of the fire blended with the soft symphony of night sounds. Luke, however, found himself restless. His mind was preoccupied with meeting the townspeople of Greenfield the next morning. No matter how many times he did it, he always felt like an interloper, and often times he was treated as such.

People were wary of uninvited strangers, and with good reason.

Eventually giving up on sleep, he quietly slipped away from the slumbering group, slipping into the shadows like a wraith. The sky had cleared in the last hour and moonlight guided his steps as he reconnoitered the area, his senses alert for any signs of danger. When he could, he liked to check the

layout of a town before making his presence known. That way if things went sideways, as they did occasionally, he'd know the quickest way out.

Greenfield looked like it had once been a picture book, sleepy little town, but now its empty streets, decaying buildings and overgrown gardens bore witness to the harsh realities of the After Days.

That aside though, something felt wrong. Even though it had been pegged as a refuge for survivors by the scouts just two months before, it appeared oddly empty for a town with a reported population of thirty-five souls this early in the evening.

“Shit,” he said under his breath, fearing this leg of his journey had been wasted.

He stayed in the shadows and explored the edges of the main street but when he was certain, he wandered through the quiet streets and checked in windows to seek a clue as to what had happened.

There was nothing. The whole town could have been empty since the Fall and it would have looked no different. He walked into the middle of the main street and without warning, the feeling that he was being watched settled over him.

Every rustle of leaves, every creak of an old structure rang an alarm bell in his head. Luke reached over his shoulder with his right hand and unclasped his axe. He had learned to trust his instincts. Safety was never guaranteed in a world teeming with desperate, hungry souls.

He began walking out of town, slowly and in plain sight. While he was easily visible, being out in the open also negated the ability of anyone to sneak up on him. All was quiet, and he began to wonder if he was perhaps being paranoid.

He was passing a little white church he'd seen on the way in, when the silence was interrupted by a faint sound. It came from the direction of the church and was barely audible in the night breeze.

Gripping the haft of his axe a little tighter and treading softly, he followed the direction of the sound, his eyes scanning the darkness in and around the building, seeking out concealed dangers.

As he neared the abandoned building, he heard the sound again. It was a child weeping. He was sure of it. Luke's instincts kicked into high gear, and he approached the long side of the building. Just another shadow, he raised himself to his full height and peered through the broken window. His eyes adjusted to the dimness within before opening wide with surprise.

There, in the gloom, he spotted a figure huddled in a corner. It was a boy of no more than six. Being a father, the sight of the abandoned child struck a chord deep within Luke's heart. He holstered his axe and quickly made his way around to the front door of the church, which was unlocked.

The boy ceased weeping and tried to crawl deeper into the corner as Luke appeared in the doorway. With measured steps that echoed in the vacant timber building, he approached the boy.

"Hey kid, my name's Luke," he said in a low voice. "I won't hurt you."

The boy peeked over the folded arms that were wrapped tightly around his knees and Luke stopped and held out his hands, palm out to show they were empty.

"What's your name?"

"Billy."

Luke smiled and squatted so he was almost on eye level.

"Pleased to meet you, Billy. Are you hurt?"

The kid shook his head.

"Where are your parents?"

His breath hitched.

"Slavers took 'em."

“Sorry to hear that. Did they take everyone?”

He nodded and began weeping again.

“You must be hungry, huh?” The boy nodded again. “Tell you what Billy, my friends and I have a camp just a short walk from here. How about you come with me, and we’ll rustle you up something to eat and drink, okay?”

“Are you a slaver?”

“No, son. I am... I help people like you.”

Young Billy nodded and slowly unwound himself from his defensive huddle and stood up. Luke didn’t push it by offering him a hand, he simply smiled.

“Good boy, just follow me.”

As they made their way slowly back to the campsite, Luke felt a glimmer of satisfaction. Even one life saved meant the journey to Greenfield hadn’t been a total waste, and he could turn them around and begin the trek back to Manchester at dawn’s first light with some satisfaction.

They had just turned the final bend with less than a hundred yards to the camp when he sensed the kid had stopped. He turned just as the crack of a gunshot split the silence of the night. The bullet meant for him buzzed by his ear and struck Billy high in the center of his chest. The kid flew back and landed in a crumpled heap.

“Noooo!” Luke screamed, already running for the trees to his left as the refugees, shocked from their slumber, began screaming and running in all directions.

He barely made it two feet before there was another gunshot. As Luke felt a searing slap to his right thigh, he tumbled into the waist-high grass a few yards short of the trees, and immediately crawled to the right as more rounds ripped into the ground where he had fallen. Dragging his wounded leg, he resumed crawling to the tree line.

“Spider! Chief!” roared a deep voice. “Make sure he’s dead! You others, with me! Let’s round up these assholes. Pity

about the kid, the big dumb bastard moved just as I squeezed the trigger.”

Pity about the kid...

The words seared into Luke’s brain as he pulled himself up behind a tree. In the shadows he was able to look back without being seen. Two figures were approaching. A big lumbering man with a bald head and a shorter, lean man. The lean man suddenly changed course and darted at a right angle into the trees to his left, thirty yards away.

Shit thought Luke. He spotted me.

He couldn’t see any of the rest of their gang, but based on the distant shouts and screams, they seemed safely preoccupied with running down the fleeing refugees. Luke knew he couldn’t stay where he was. The lean man was creeping through the trees behind him somewhere, and being caught between him and the big guy was surely a death sentence.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled a throwing knife from its slit in the belt over his chest, pinched the point of the blade between his fingers and stepped out from behind the trees.

The big man stopped in his tracks before overcoming his surprise and roaring as he charged at Luke, moonlight glinting off the long steel blade he held above his head.

*

Becky wouldn’t be talked out of going after Luke. Indigo and Ava, seeing how adamant she was, agreed to look after Elizabeth while she was away. In truth, Indigo was all for Luke’s involvement, she was just worried that Becky might get into trouble looking for him, even with the knowledge of his route and destinations.

Word of the missing children had spread through the Tower and quite a crowd had gathered as Becky emerged from the elevators and began wheeling Luke’s dirt bike through the lobby. Indigo followed her holding Elizabeth’s hand, along with Diana, Paul and Ava. Diana had briefed Paul and Ava on

what had happened. Ava was terrified for Peace, but Paul had managed to calm her fears for the time being.

“She’s with Sam and Cade, and Isaac and Ben are already on the case,” he had told her. “Tomorrow we are getting Bowman involved, it will be fine, I promise.”

“Are you even sure it’s got the range to get to him?” asked Paul, looking at the dirt-bike with his eyebrow raised.

“Well, I have a full tank, plus Luke rigged up these auxiliary tanks,” she said, patting one of two red plastic containers attached to the bike. “They’re full too. I should have enough to get close to his last stop at Greenfield, but he should be on the way back by then, so I’m hoping so.”

“How will you stay awake?”

“I had a nap with Elizabeth before all the excitement this afternoon, plus I have coffee,” she said, holding up a thermos. People parted as she neared the big doors and Paul rushed over to help her down the stairs.

She kicked the bike’s stand down and turned to Indigo and the others.

“I’ll be fine. I have a gun and you know I know how to use it. It should take less than four hours so I’m in no danger of falling asleep, trust me.”

Indigo nodded, looking far from convinced. They all took turns hugging Becky, before she leaned over and picked up Elizabeth, engulfing her in a big hug.

“I love you, baby. Mommy is going to find Daddy, okay? Aunty Ava will look after you while I’m gone.”

“Okay Mommy,” she said before looking up at Ava. “You promise we can play hide and seek?”

Ava, her face lined with worry, smiled and pressed her nose.

“I sure do, as long as I get to hide first!”

“Okay.”

They went back up to the top of the stairs as Becky switched on the engine and gave it a rev, before putting on her helmet and climbing on. She gave a lingering wave to Elizabeth as she rode slowly down the half-circle driveway, then pulled out onto Elm before gathering speed and disappearing.

“I hope she’ll be okay,” said Diana, as they turned to go back inside.

“I think she will,” said Paul. “I think a little bit of Luke’s audacity and nerve has rubbed off on her.”

*

Isaac and Ben kept up a good pace and limited their conversation to preserve energy. After walking for four hours, weariness began to settle over them.

“I don’t think it will be as easy to catch them up as we thought,” Ben said. “Perhaps we should rest until dawn?”

“No,” said Isaac, his voice steely with determination. “They will have to stop and sleep at some point, and that’s when we can catch up.”

“Think about it, Isaac. They have to know that we will give chase, so even if they stop, they won’t be camping in the open where we can see them. We could miss them easily and go on for miles before we realize it, if we ever do.”

Isaac chewed on this for a while. Ben was right. If the slavers did stop it wouldn’t be for long as they had their deadline to keep. They had roughly a three-hour head start, and it was possible he and Ben could have made up maybe a half hour on that, but if the group ahead rested for two hours and went on again, it would mean he and Ben would become more and more tired and have to rest eventually, resulting in them losing more time.

“I guess you’re right. They won’t be able to drag the kids along indefinitely without resting. Let’s walk for another hour, then we’ll find somewhere to sleep for a few hours.”

*

They didn't know it, but Ben was right. The slavers had actually forced the children along at a decent pace, but as midnight passed, the younger children, Erin and Blake, were noticeably slower, and no number of threats or pushes would make them move faster.

By the light of the moon, Samuel could see they were on a long and wide two-lane road with houses on large lots scattered along the right-hand side, and thick forest on the left.

"All right," said Mason, pulling them to a stop. "We are going to bed down for the night here."

They'd stopped at a gate that opened onto a long dirt driveway. At the end of the driveway was a big white, two-story house.

"It looks scary," said Erin in a quavering voice, as she reached out for Peace's hand.

The slaver called Caleb suddenly bent over her.

"Scarier than me?" he said, leering at her.

Erin squealed and Peace pulled her into her chest.

"Oh, leave her alone you asshole."

Caleb drew himself up to his full height and stepped up to Peace.

Cade and Samuel both tensed.

"What did you-"

"Caleb!" roared Mason. "Stop horsing around and get the gate open."

"You'll keep, bitch," the slaver said under his breath.

Once they'd passed through the gate, they began the slow walk along the driveway. Samuel dragged his feet, attempting to scuff up the compacted dirt as much as possible, hoping it would leave a sign of their passing. He felt sure that his people would come after them if they could work out which direction they'd taken.

Mason had them gather in a rough circle by the front porch and sent Caleb in to make sure it was vacant. The slavers spoke in hushed tones, even though the chances of anybody being in the house were next to zero.

Samuel thought it was funny that no matter how much time had passed since the Fall, entering an abandoned home felt like trespassing or breaking and entering. Even these tough guys felt it.

Caleb came out after a few minutes.

“All clear, boss. Not even a dried-up mummy to worry about.”

“Okay, get ‘em in. Chris, you go upstairs and drag down a mattress for me. The slaves can sleep on the floor as punishment for slowing us down, but I intend to be comfortable.”

Cade bristled at being called a slave and Samuel put a restraining hand on his arm. He shook his head and mouthed ‘*save it.*’

As the group hunkered down in the living room, Mason took charge.

“Listen up! Chris, you take the first watch, two hours. Caleb, you’ll be on second, and I better not catch either of you slacking off during your watch. After you’ve had some water, the rest of you get some sleep. We move in four hours.”

The captives were positioned in a rough circle on the floor, which had been cleared of a coffee table, and thankfully had a large rectangular mat which kept them off the cold floorboards.

The slavers started to arrange themselves for their rest. Mason took the mattress that Chris had dragged down from upstairs, and Caleb planted himself down on a long couch, using a cushion as a pillow, and almost immediately began snoring. Chris sat down on a kitchen chair he pulled in from the dining room and balanced his rifle on his knees.

Samuel looked around at the other kids, who, exhausted from the long day, were huddled together on the

floor. His eye was caught by Mason, who had propped his head up on one hand.

“Don’t even think of trying something, sport.”

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Sam lied.

“No chance. You can wait until we wake up. Chris, if he gets up in the night, shoot him. Or anyone else for that matter.”

“Yes boss.”

Sam gave up. Best to get the rest while they could and try to come up with a plan to escape when the opportunity presented itself. He was still wide awake as the breathing of the other children and the two slavers evened out. He rolled away from the suspicious gaze of Chris and his eyes met those of Peace. Her blue eyes were wide and reflected the thin silvery light of the moon that made it through the dusty lace curtains. She had her arm protectively curled over a sleeping Erin.

“Is this really happening?” she whispered.

Samuel nodded solemnly.

“Yes, it is. But we have to stay strong for each other.”

She nodded.

“Do you think they’ll send someone after us?”

“Of course! They’re probably on the way right now. Tomorrow we’ll try and slow the slavers down-”

A shadow loomed over him, and Peace squeezed her eyes closed as Samuel felt the muzzle of Chris’s rifle pressed against his shoulder.

“You better shut up if you know what’s good for you.”

The youngest slaver, whom Samuel judged to be no older than he was, sounded nervous, perhaps frightened they would wake Mason. Clearly, he was the lowest rung of the ladder in his group. Samuel banked that insight in case it could somehow be used in the following days.

“Sorry,” he whispered, and the pressure of the gun disappeared.

Samuel rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. Eventually, fatigue overcame his busy mind.

*

Seven miles behind them, Isaac and Ben had bedded down in the room of an old motel. They’d stripped the moth-eaten bedding away, but the mattresses must have been fairly new when the country fell and were in good enough condition to sleep on without worrying about critters. Ben went to the wardrobe and also found a brand-new pillow still sealed in plastic.

“Shall we play rock paper scissors to see who gets it?”

“No, you have it. Let’s get some sleep, we’ll leave as soon as one of us wakes up, okay?” Isaac suggested.

“Sounds good to me. I believe there is an old Aldi store a little further along this road. Perhaps we can do a quick raid for canned food when we come to it.”

“Sure,” said Isaac.

They settled down without any further talk, their thoughts occupied with worry about their children. Isaac wondered how they were coping and comforted himself by remembering the trials he, Ben and the rest had gone through themselves not so long ago at roughly the same ages.

Samuel and Cade were both competent young men, and he knew they would do anything to protect the younger children. They just had to hold on long enough for him and Ben to catch them up.

He stared at the ceiling for a long time, and when he was almost sure he wouldn’t be able to sleep, he drifted off to the sounds of Ben’s soft snores.

*

Two hundred miles west, Becky had stopped by the side of the road and was pouring the last of her reserve fuel into the main tank of the Yamaha. Her face felt grimy, and her

cheeks stung from the cold night air. She discarded the fuel bag and took the folded road map from her inside jacket pocket.

She had crossed Vermont and entered New York State twenty minutes before, finally stopping outside a town called Cambridge to refuel. After estimating it would take about another forty minutes, she splashed some water on her face, had a drink and started the dirt bike again before taking off with a spit of gravel.

*

Luke threw the knife and was already moving and pulling a second one as it flew towards its target. The first blade struck the big man in the sternum, but apart from a hitch in his battle cry he kept coming. Luke threw the second one and charged towards the big man, ignoring the searing pain in his thigh.

The second knife hit the man to the right of the first, and this time his face twisted in pain as he stumbled before righting himself. Closing fast, Luke pulled his axe from its clasp and swung it as he pivoted to the left. The big man's samurai sword sliced harmlessly through the air where he had been just a split second before, the momentum of his charge carrying him past Luke, as the blade of the axe buried itself deep in the ribcage under the bald man's arm.

His attacker tumbled face first into the grass, his momentum pulling the axe from Luke's grasp. Luke didn't actually hear the footsteps of the man behind him, but he sensed his presence and when he spun around, he found the tracker ten feet away, drawing the string of his bow back, the wicked iron head of the arrow aimed right at his heart.

He met the cold eyes of the man and knew his luck had finally run out...

PART TWO: A NICK OF TIME

Chapter 4

The insistent shaking of his shoulder pulled Isaac from a deep sleep.

“Morning sleepyhead,” said Ben.

Isaac sat up and rubbed his face. It was pitch black outside the window.

“Yeah, morning isn’t really the term I’d use.”

Ben laughed.

“No.”

They were walking again within a few minutes.

“I had a horrible thought,” said Ben. “What if our paths diverge?”

“It’s possible. But our destination is the same and you and I are going the most direct route. They should know the route better than we do, but even if they don’t, eventually we should be back on the same track.”

Isaac and Ben pressed on through the moonlit terrain in the hours before dawn. It was an alien landscape. In the years after the Fall, mother nature was slowly but inexorably reclaiming the works and structures of man in the lesser populated parts of the eastern states.

Each was lost in their own thoughts—thoughts that were heavy with worry and determination. For Isaac especially, the memory of Max’s torn and bloody jacket in the clearing fueled his determination to catch up to the abductors, and he set a pace that Ben struggled to keep up with.

As the sun rose, the temperature began to increase and soon sweat was dripping from their brows. Neither complained. They knew every second counted, if they wanted to close the gap between them and the abductors.

Ben drained the last of his water.

“I need a refill and something to eat.”

Isaac looked at him. The Englishman's face was beet red.

"Are you okay? You look like you have sunstroke."

"Oh, I'm fine. I've told you before, haven't I? I tend to go red instead of sweating. It's an English thing. Then again, maybe it's just me."

Isaac laughed.

"Yeah, I remember it's come up before. There is an abandoned mall in the next town, let's do a quick scout and see if we can find some canned beans or something. You can share my water until we find a creek or river to refill."

"Okay, sounds good."

One positive note about being eleven years into post-America was that the rivers and streams were pretty much pollution free and sometimes the water was good enough to drink without boiling, although they made it a rule to do it anyway.

They came to a town called Pulborough.

"There it is," said Isaac, pointing down the main street. In the distance, they could see the shopping mall, its once-gleaming façade now stained and weathered. "Let's check it out."

Inside, the mall was a labyrinth of dark walkways and shattered glass. They moved slowly, stepping over fallen debris and broken tiles. The air was thick with the smell of decay, but they pressed on, driven by the need to find supplies.

It was slim pickings in the mall's grocery store. It had already been mostly cleared out, but they found some canned baby corn, watercress and bean sprouts in the Asian food section.

Ben opened a can of baby corn and ate as they walked out of the grocery store.

"Now, we just need water," said Isaac.

"Hey! Look at that. Bikes!"

Ben ran over to a large window. The glass had long since been smashed but was reinforced with a grid of steel mesh that the vandals had been unable to bash in. Beyond it were gleaming bicycles of all shapes and sizes. Rows and rows of them.

“I’m surprised they haven’t been looted before this,” said Isaac, examining the door. “But then, it looks like it wasn’t for a lack of trying.”

There were deep scratches and dents in the metal framed door and around the handle and deadlock above it.

Ben looked over at him.

“We could cover more ground if we had bikes!”

“It’s a no brainer,” agreed Isaac.

Isaac examined the lock, pondering their options. Breaking in might take a while but the potential benefit of having bikes was too enticing to ignore.

“Let’s give it a shot,” he said. “Can I borrow your knife?”

Ben handed him his knife and Isaac began to work around the edges of the deadlock. He’d decided that it would be easier to try and pry it off than use brute force to break in the door. It looked like that method had been tried plenty of times before without success.

“Can I do anything?” asked Ben.

“Sure, I could do with a hammer or something to bash the handle of the knife.”

By the time Ben came back holding a short metal bar, Isaac had the point of the blade under the circular barrel.

“Ahh, excellent. Thanks,” he said, taking the bar and banging the blade deeper into the crack he’d managed to pry open. After a few tense minutes, the outside of the lock broke and fell to the floor and Isaac was able to attack the interior of the lock.

"I think we can try opening it now," he said finally, handing Ben the knife and bar.

He held the handle and hit the door with his shoulder. It took four heavy blows before it finally gave and flew inward, crashing against the wall behind it.

Isaac rubbed his smarting shoulder and waved Ben through the door.

The Englishman was like a kid in a candy store, moving from rack to rack and running an admiring hand over frames, handles, seats and tires.

"We have to come back here; the kids will love..." He paused, remembering the reason they were there. "Well, after we get them back, I mean."

"We will. So which ones should we take?"

"Well as much as I'd like a racing bike for speed, I think we better go for mountain bikes. They'll do better on the overgrown roads, and obviously are the best for any spots we need to move offroad."

Isaac nodded.

"All the tires are flat."

"That's to be expected after all this time. No problem, I'll have them pumped up in a jiffy."

Ten minutes later they wheeled their sturdy mountain bikes out into the sunshine and saddled up, with Ben hanging the bag of canned food on his handlebar.

"Race you to the traffic lights!" he yelled, taking off.

"Cheat!" called Isaac and took off after him.

With a sense of liberation, they pedaled through the empty town. The wind in their hair and the thrill of speed brought a fleeting sense of fun to their otherwise deadly serious mission.

*

Time seemed to slow in what would be the last milliseconds of his life, and Luke noticed every detail as the man drew back the bowstring. He saw the hand gripping the bow tremble slightly at the increased tension from the drawback. He saw the killer's chest compress as he exhaled. And finally, he saw the fingers of the man's dominant hand opening to let the arrow fly...

When the killer suddenly arched his back and jerked upright, it sent the arrow whizzing past Luke's left ear and time sped right back up again. The thug dropped to his knees, his wide eyes locked onto Luke's, and then fell face down with a thud. Ironically, an arrow protruded from his spine.

Luke crouched, watching the shadows as he drew his last throwing knife.

One shadow, darker than those around it, morphed into a figure he recognized immediately. Joshua Ragland, who was holding a bow.

“Goddamn...” he breathed but didn’t move until Ragland gestured.

“Am I glad to see you,” he whispered, as he limped to the trees and joined the Drifter in the shadows. “I was done for.”

“No problem,” rumbled Ragland, and pointed at his leg. “How bad is it?”

“Just a graze. Hurts like a bitch, but it didn’t incapacitate me... yet.”

From the amount of blood seeping from the wound, Ragland doubted it was just a graze, but didn’t pursue it.

“Good. Now we better go help your friends. Here.”

He handed Luke a pistol.

“Got that off the first one I killed. The others chased your group into a field just beyond that rise. Let’s stick to the trees until we have a visual.”

“Okay.”

Luke, still feeling strange and disquieted after the death of the boy and his own near miss, was happy to let someone else take charge.

With the pistol in hand, he followed Ragland and they cautiously advanced through the shadowy undergrowth, making sure to keep their presence concealed. As they neared the rise, Luke could hear faint voices and crying in the distance. The urgency of the situation helped him focus.

The Drifter motioned for him to get lower, and they crept up to the edge of the rise, peering down into the field below. What they saw was a chilling sight—the four remaining members of the outlaw gang had gathered the refugees in a circle. All were carrying long guns, although from this distance they couldn't tell what type. The refugees' hands were tied, and their fear was characterized by the set of their shoulders as two of the men went between them, looping a long rope between their tied hands to keep them tethered as one.

Luke only counted two of the men from his group, and his eyes fell upon a dark shape lying in the grass a few feet away from the others.

His grip on the pistol tightened as his heart pounded in his chest. Joshua, sensing his anger, placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and whispered, "Steady now, lad. We'll get them out of this mess."

Ragland began whispering a plan of attack.

"You make your way down the slope to the edge of the trees. When they begin shepherding them back to your camp, I'll take out whoever is bringing up the rear. It'll be quiet so I should be able to put another down before they know they're under attack. When the second one goes down, you make your move."

Luke nodded and began to make his way quietly between the trees and down the slope. Ragland knelt and pulled out an arrow, nocking it and drawing the string back in one efficient move. He drew a bead on the man who brought up the rear just as the leader, his brutal club in one hand and

automatic rifle in the other, gave the order to move from the front.

Ragland loosed the arrow and his mark collapsed silently to the grass, the arrow protruding from his neck. A split second later he had another arrow nocked.

Luke saw the first man go down and his heart began to gallop as he made ready to attack as soon as a second one hit the ground. Ignoring the pain in his leg, he focused solely on ending this as soon as possible. He expected the leader to take the hit, as he was the easier shot from Ragland's vantage point, but a cry of pain from the far side of the group soon changed his mind. The man closest to Luke spun around, frantically looking in all directions as Luke burst from the trees.

The leader was facing in the wrong direction and Luke's first shot took the thickset man in the shoulder. He spun to the ground, his automatic weapon spraying bullets harmlessly into the grass as Luke thundered towards the last man, yelling at the refugees to get down.

The guard between him and the group raised what Luke could now see was a squirrel rifle; he squeezed off a shot but wasn't even close. His return shot took the man in the throat, and he fell to the grass, his hand futilely trying to stem the blood gushing from his breached carotid artery.

Luke heard a scream and turned around. The leader, down on one knee, had grabbed one of the children, the young girl, and had the muzzle of his gun jammed hard under her chin.

Not willing to have another young life taken this night, Luke immediately raised his arms in surrender, releasing his grip on the pistol so that it spun on his trigger finger and came to rest against the open palm of his hand, pointing harmlessly at the sky.

"Okay big guy. Throw it away and then call your buddy with the bow and-"

The leader's sentence was cut off by the arrow that thunked into his eye and burst through the rear of his skull.

Oddly, his lips kept working until his brain finally registered that he was dead. His chin dropped to his chest where he stayed, propped against the weeping girl like a strange kneeling statue.

The mother of the girl rushed over and pulled her away from the slaver, spitting on him when he toppled to the ground. The refugees cried out in fear when Ragland emerged from the trees, before recognizing him from their meeting the previous night.

Luke limped over and pulled him into hug, clapping him heavily on the back.

“Thanks man. This could have ended very differently. I owe you.”

Ragland, looking vaguely uncomfortable, patted him back before they broke away.

“No problem,” he rumbled. “Let’s see to that wound before anything else.” He looked to the two remaining men of the refugee group. “Would you gentleman untie everyone and take them back to the camp?”

Ragland helped Luke back and told him to sit down while he restarted the fire and helped get the refugees settled.

When he was done, he disappeared briefly before returning with the backpack he’d retrieved from the trees, where he deposited it before coming to the rescue. Ragland rifled through the pack and pulled out a first aid kit.

“Where’s your horse?”

“Don’t know. On her way home maybe. She took off on me yesterday.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Take off your jeans.”

“But it’s only our second date...”

“Hardi har har.”

Luke winced as he undid his jeans and slipped them down over his thighs.

“Graze my ass,” the older man said, as he inspected the wound. “It went right through your thigh. You’re lucky it’s shallow and didn’t hit a bone or an artery.”

While it had indeed gone through, the entry and exit wounds were only two and a half inches apart.

“Yeah, real lucky.”

Once his wound had been cleaned and dressed, Ragland stoked the fire some more and they bedded down. The exhausted adult refugees were still talking in low voices, the children already asleep.

“Get some rest,” Ragland growled. “I’ll help you bury the bodies of your friend and the boy tomorrow.”

For the second time in as many days, Luke and Ragland found themselves in front of open flames.

“So old timer, how did you come to be Johnny on the spot when this shit went down?” asked Luke, staring into the flames.

Ragland grunted, then nothing. Luke began to think he wasn’t going to answer.

“You got any of that whiskey left, son?”

“What a great idea.”

An hour later, his tongue oiled by the alcohol, Ragland had explained to Luke how he had come across the slavers, and what he’d overheard.

“Couldn’t just leave them to ambush you.”

“I appreciate that. And everything else you’ve done tonight. Maybe you’d like to stick with us for a while when we head back tomorrow?”

Ragland didn’t say anything for a long time.

“Maybe. For now, I’m getting some shuteye.”

“Amen to that.”

Chapter 5

Joshua Ragland, ever watchful, sat by the fire, his eyes scanning the dark forest for any signs of danger. He'd only slept for an hour. In the years since the Fall, he'd learned to take rest when he could get it, but rarely slept more than a few hours at a time, and even then, on a hair trigger. That night, the encounter with the slavers had left him on edge and further sleep was impossible.

Abruptly, he cocked his head to the right. Three seconds later, his hand shot out and shook Luke awake. A bleary-eyed Luke raised his head, blinking in confusion.

“Listen”.”

Ragland's voice was barely audible over the nighttime sounds.

Luke strained his ears. At first, he heard nothing except the sound of crickets and the soft snores of one of the refugees. Then it came to him—the distant but unmistakable sound of a motorcycle engine. He frowned. He hadn't seen vehicles or, for that matter, any signs of habitation for miles. Who would be riding a motorcycle at this hour of the night? Certainly no one with good intentions.

The engine grew louder, and Luke saw Ragland reach for his bow. The Drifter stood up then dowsed the fire before stomping it into a smoking mush. Luke's heart raced; he hadn't expected them to face danger again so soon.

He winced as he put weight on his leg. Sleep hadn't done him any favors, but the stiffness eased as they crossed the clearing. It was left unsaid, but they both knew they'd be perfectly visible when the motorbike emerged from the tree-lined road and into the clearing. They preempted it by approaching the road with weapons ready.

A few moments later, the beam of a headlight sliced through the trees, and soon after, the dirt bike came into view. Ragland raised his bow and pulled back the bowstring. Luke raised his pistol and pointed it in the direction the road

traveled, indicating the rider should keep going if they didn't want trouble.

The rider spotted them and ignoring the clear and present danger posed by them, turned their way and began riding across the grass directly at them.

Luke sensed Ragland tense beside him just before his eyes widened.

“WAIT!”

Ragland immediately eased the tension on the bowstring and looked at Luke, his eyebrow raised. The rider slowed and came to a stop barely five feet away, planting their feet either side of the machine before switching it off and reaching up to pull off their helmet.

It was Becky, her face streaked with dirt and tears.

A lump formed in Luke's throat at the sight of her. He rushed over. Becky dismounted, her eyes briefly passing over the stranger before settling on Luke's face as she was engulfed in a bear hug. As they embraced, Ragland lowered his bow, his face unreadable at the unexpected reunion.

“I had to come”, she said, her voice catching with emotion as they broke away. “It's Erin and the others. They were taken by slavers—Samuel, Cade, Peace, Max, Blake, and Vincent, their friend.” The words tumbled from her mouth without pause. “Isaac and Ben went after them, but I know you're the best tracker, so I had to find you...”

Luke paled at the news, the gravity of the situation sinking in.

“Slavers?” he muttered, clenching his fists. “We had trouble with them too. When did this happen?”

Becky told him everything.

“Friday?”

Becky nodded, her eyes pleading for help. “Luke, we can't let them reach that slave market in Catskill”.”

Luke knew this was true. Besides the fact they'd be smuggled into the Chinese states within a few hours of arriving, he had sat in on many of the same briefings as Isaac and knew Catskill was a festering pit of mercenaries and ex Chinese military. Once they were through the gates of that town, it would become a much tougher assignment to rescue them. He clenched his jaw as he thought of Erin in the hands of slavers like the ones that they had killed the previous night.

"I'm leaving in ten minutes."

Ragland, having heard the conversation, stepped forward.

"I'm coming with you," he declared, his gruff voice filled with determination.

Luke looked at Ragland as if only just remembering he was there.

"This is Joshua Ragland," he introduced him to Becky. "He's a skilled tracker and one of the toughest men I've ever met." Becky nodded, offering a distracted smile to Ragland. Luke looked back at him. "But I can't ask you to do that."

Ragland shook his head, his eyes landing on Luke's injured leg.

"You're not asking, I'm insisting," Ragland grumbled and pointed to his leg. "You'll need all the help you can get, and I don't have anything planned for the next few years."

Luke shook his head.

"I'm taking the bike-"

"You can't," said Becky. "It's literally running on fumes. You wouldn't get a mile."

Luke swallowed his frustration.

"I guess Mr. Ragland and I are taking a walk then..."

"Looks that way."

"Do you think you can lead the refugees back to Manchester?" he asked. "I'll leave you the gun. Ragland and I

will leave now to find Erin and the others.”

Becky’s face showed a mix of concern and determination.

“Of course, but I didn’t know you were hurt. Are you sure you can do this with your leg”?”

“I’ll manage,” Luke replied, looking over at Ragland. “We’ll manage. The priority is to bring the kids back safe”.”

Becky nodded.

“What about your dirt bike?” she asked.

“We’ll leave it,” Luke replied. “If I was solo, I’d take it as far as I could, but obviously that won’t be far.”

Becky nodded and held up her hand when Luke offered her the pistol.

“No, you take it. It’s unlikely we’ll encounter more slavers in this territory. If we run into trouble, we’ll avoid it.”

“Take it. I have my eyes on the AR-15 of the slaver that my friend here skewered.”

Back in the camp, Luke and Ragland packed up their belongings. Luke had retrieved his throwing knives and had the AR-15 over one shoulder and his axe on his back.

Ragland had a full quiver of arrows and had also commandeered a Glock 17 from the body of another dead slaver.

Becky hugged Luke tightly as they said goodbye.

“Please be careful,” she whispered. “And bring them back.”

“I will.”

Ragland stepped forward, offering his hand to Becky.

“We’ll do everything we can,” he assured her.

With one last look at the camp, Luke and Ragland set off. Luke wouldn’t have admitted it, but he was reassured by Ragland’s presence. He’d only known the man for forty-eight

hours, but except for his best friend Isaac, there was no one he'd rather have at his side.

Behind them, Becky stood with the adult refugees and watched their retreating figures. When they had disappeared into the trees, she ordered the others to get some more sleep before they departed at dawn, and then rolled herself into the blanket Luke had left her.

Fear mingled with hope as she looked up at the starry sky. Fear that Erin was already lost and that she had sent Luke on a fool's errand and towards inevitable danger. And hope, that if anyone could bring Erin and the other children back alive, it would be Luke.

*

Even though the roads they had followed out of Manchester were far from multi-lane highways, and after ten-plus years of zero maintenance were damaged badly, Isaac and Ben were making good time on the bicycles.

With every mile traveled, they became more and more upbeat about their chances of catching up with the slavers.

They didn't know it, but just two miles back, they had cycled past the farmhouse where the slavers and their children had slept the night. They had now closed the gap to just one hour.

It was when they came to the small city of Hillsboro that they struck trouble. Trouble in the way of multiple options for roads the slavers could have taken.

Isaac narrowed it down to two possible routes. The 202, which would take them south-west towards Springfield Massachusetts, which they could skirt and then head almost directly west to Catskill. Or two, the Franklin Pierce Highway, Route 9, almost directly west, then a series of smaller highways that would run further west.

"I'd say they'll avoid Albany," said Isaac. "And probably turn south before they get that far west."

"So do you think they took the 202 or the 9?"

“I don’t know. It’s a coin toss.”

Ben kicked a stone off the road into the bushes at the intersection they’d halted at.

“A toss with a bloody big stake. You make the call.”

“My head is telling me they took the 202.”

“Then we’ll take that one.”

“But, maybe I’m wrong, maybe it’s the 9-”

“Always go with your first choice, Isaac. Luke drummed that into me a long time ago.” With a sigh of indecision, Isaac looked down the 202, the hot sun baking the road ahead. “Alright. The 202 it is.”

“Roger that,” said Ben.

The decision was made, and they pedaled onto the 202, the wheels of their bicycles humming rhythmically on the asphalt beneath them. As they ventured farther along the highway, the landscape began to shift, transitioning from the suburban outskirts of Hillsboro to a more rural and less-traveled region. The road stretched out ahead, an uncertain path that held both hope and doubt.

The miles rolled by, and Isaac and Ben pushed themselves, their muscles working in tandem with their will to catch up to the slavers who had taken their kin. They passed by towns that might have once been described as quaint, and vast open fields, but they saw no sign of the slavers and their children.

*

Unknown to them, their choice of the 202 was the wrong one. Barely an hour before, Mason, the leader of the slavers, had steered his men and their captives onto Route 9, the Franklin Pierce Highway.

Wary of pursuit, he decided that the 202 was the obvious choice, being a more direct route if the people of Manchester actually knew his final destination. While he doubted they had a clue, he hadn’t survived this long in the After Days without weighing up every scenario.

He had roamed New York State and Vermont extensively since he began abducting kids to trade in the Catskill slave market, and he knew the roads and highways of both states like the back of his hand. The route he decided to take was not as direct as the 202, but it also wouldn't be much slower. They would still make their destination by midday Friday.

The sun was high in the sky an hour into their trek on the 9 when Mason finally called a stop. The younger children had been bitching and moaning about sore legs and feet, which in turn got the older teens in their group upset. He had learned things often went better with slaves when he used a carrot instead of a stick. Of course, that was after you'd shown them the stick first, which he'd done the day before with the attempted runaway.

"Alright. We'll stop for a half hour for some food and water. When we move on, I want no more complaining or someone will cop a beating."

Once the captives were seated in the shade of a big Sycamore tree, well off the road, he passed around strips of jerky. Most of the kids chewed it enthusiastically except for Blake, who initially screwed up his nose at the tough texture and salty flavor.

Mason was about to rebuke him when Samuel, his older brother, beat him to it.

"Just eat it Blake, we're gonna need all our strength."

You sure are kid, thought Mason. *You all are.*

As the sun dipped low on the horizon at the end of their first full day, its warm hues casting long shadows over the road, Mason pulled his men aside and pointed further along the highway.

"There is an overpass about half a mile along. We'll camp there for the night."

Relief washed over his two companions. Like the children, they were also weary, having walked the whole day with just four hours sleep the night before. Only Mason

seemed immune to the hardship of the journey, road fit as he was from two years of hard traveling.

The smaller children groaned and collapsed to the ground once they'd reached the overpass and were told it was their camp for the night.

Mason surveyed their surroundings, his mind calculating the risks and possibilities of their chosen campsite as Caleb, his second-in-command, burly and rugged, moved with practiced efficiency, setting up a makeshift perimeter with a few rusted barrels from a truck they found abandoned just fifty yards past the overpass.

Chris, his eyes betraying a mix of worry and exhaustion, helped Caleb with the tasks assigned to him. Despite his inexperience, Chris knew that his survival depended on proving his worth to the others, and proudly informed Mason when he found a large canvas tarpaulin in the footwell of the truck cabin.

"Good work. Lay it out and set the fire well clear of it. I'm going to see if I can rustle up some rabbit. Give these kids more water and if any even look like making a run for it, put a bullet in 'em."

This was more a warning for the children than anything. Both Chris and Caleb knew if they dared damage one of the children without Mason's direct order, they would be the next to catch a bullet. Mason pulled a compact crossbow out of his pack and headed for the trees beyond the overpass.

Ten minutes later, sitting near the fire, the children watched their captors with wary eyes, the weight of their situation settling heavily upon them in their exhausted state.

The teenagers, Samuel and Cade, had exchanged a silent glance when Mason departed, both aware that the leader's absence might represent an opportunity.

Vincent, still the joker of the group, made some attempts at humor with the younger children to mask the fear that gnawed at his insides. But Caleb's abrupt '*Shut the fuck*

up' as he watched them from the other side of the fire with a shotgun on his lap, saw Vincent do just that.

His presence with the weapon in hand also put paid to any hope Samuel and Cade had of an opportunity. The other children huddled close together, their faces dirty and exhausted.

Mason returned with a brace of rabbits after forty minutes and within half an hour the two skinned rabbits were spit roasting over the fire, the delicious smell of the fat sizzling in the embers causing all of their bellies to grumble in anticipation.

Mason kept one rabbit for him and his companions and allowed the children to share the other one. Samuel's thanks was genuine; he knew very well that Mason could have just as easily kept both for his men.

Not quite full after the meal, yet still pleasantly satisfied, the children one by one began to find their own space and drop off to sleep. Before long, only Samuel and Cade were awake as the flames flickered in the evening breeze, casting shadows that danced upon the concrete pillars of the overpass.

“You two, scoot closer.”

Mason’s voice was low and commanding.

“I know you’re probably thinking about escaping at the first possible chance. I know I would be. But I want you to get any such thoughts out of your head.”

Cade shrugged and Samuel made a face like they didn’t know what he was talking about. He grunted in amusement.

“It’s okay. As long as thinking about it is all you do. I don’t want to kill any of you, but if I have to I will. And you know the worst part?”

Next to him, Caleb elbowed Chris.

“I love this bit...”

“If I have to kill one of you, *you*,” he said, pointing at Samuel. “Will be the one who has to choose who I kill.”

Caleb laughed and clapped his hands and Samuel wondered if he wasn’t a few cards short of a full deck.

“Oh, and he’ll do it!” yelled Caleb, gleefully. “I watched him blow a guy’s head clean off, after making one slave pick someone to die!”

The words chilled Samuel to the bone and he dropped his eyes to the flames of the fire.

“Do you understand what I said?” asked Mason.

They both nodded, their eyes downcast.

“I said, do you understand!”

“Yes, we understand,” said Cade, his voice tight.

“Yes,” Samuel agreed after a beat.

“Very good.”

The night air seemed to grow cooler, and Mason’s words hung in the air like an unfulfilled promise. Samuel and Cade both now understood the harsh reality of their circumstances. While they couldn’t converse freely, they had just glimpsed the darkness that resided in the hearts of their captors, and, for now, thoughts of escape had been usurped by survival as their shared goal.

“Alright, let’s get some sleep. Caleb, you take first watch. Wake Chris in two hours. I’ll take the last watch two hours after that. We move out at dawn.”

Under the freeway overpass, as the stars winked in the ink-black sky, the slavers and the children settled in for the night. The fire crackled, its warm embrace a stark contrast to the cold world the children now inhabited.

*

Under the cover of the night, Luke and Ragland set out, the forest enveloping them in its silent embrace. The wind that had been rushing through the leaves and branches earlier

had eased to an eerie stillness that only heightened their senses.

They had decided at the outset that they would attempt to cut a direct route to Catskill, and that meant traveling off road. Their steps were careful, both of them experienced from their years of traversing the wild, but even so, it was not easy going and, as the night wore on, Luke's injured leg began to protest with every step.

He pushed on, fueled by determination and a sense of duty to Erin and the missing children. Ragland's presence was reassuring. The older man was a competent partner who seemed to share the weight of their mission, even if he didn't have a direct stake in it. As they moved deeper into the wilderness, the landscape shifted, the terrain becoming more rugged and challenging.

When Luke stumbled on a rock, only Ragland's quick reflexes and steady hand saved him from a tumble onto the unforgiving ground. It prompted him to call time.

"It's time we rested. We'll sleep until dawn and then set out again."

"No, I'm good."

"Look Luke, I admire your perseverance, but you aren't going to do anyone, particularly me, any good if you break an ankle. We made a good start, let's rest and set out when we can see one foot landing in front of the other, okay?"

Luke tried to come up with a valid argument, but it was hard to fight logic.

"Yes, Dad..." he grumbled.

Ragland was too tired to give any more than a grunt in return, and he picked a level spot by a tall tree and began to quickly unpack some gear. Not that they would have fit in it anyway, but there was no need for his small tent—the night was still warm.

"Should we take turns at watch?"

"No, we both need the rest, you especially," Ragland said as he began to gather wood. "I have a better idea, you set a fire, and I'll set some tripwires."

Under the faint glow of the moonlight, Ragland moved with practiced efficiency around their small campsite. His fingers worked deftly, securing thin but sturdy lines of wire between trees and bushes. Luke stoked the fire, looking up occasionally to mark the Drifter's progress.

Again, he thought how great it was to have someone else taking care of business. For a long time, in most of his endeavors, he had been the one to call the shots and make sure others were safe. It was a real novelty to have Ragland doing it in his place.

The Drifter's hands worked swiftly; his years of survival experience evident in the way he expertly positioned the tripwires. He placed them at strategic points, encircling their camp like a protective barrier. Each wire was taut, barely visible in the darkness, yet ready to raise a clattering of his pots and pans at the slightest disturbance.

He finished setting the last tripwire, and straightened up, wiping his hands on his pants. He turned to Luke, his expression one of quiet assurance.

"Should keep the critters at bay while we sleep,'" Ragland said in his characteristic gruff tone. "If something comes prowling, we'll know before it gets too close."

Luke nodded, appreciating Ragland's thoroughness. The woods all over the country had not been hunted by man for over a decade and wildlife had flourished. It meant there was plenty of food at hand, but also the dangers presented by bears, big cats and wolves. The tripwires were a simple yet effective way to gain an early warning of any potential threats.

They both chewed some jerky and then curled up on either side of the fire to see out the last few hours before dawn with some shuteye.

*

Luke opened his eyes to the sounds of shuffling and quiet humming as the first hints of dawn began to paint the sky with shades of pink and gold. The tune he didn't recognize, but the crackle, pop and sizzle of meat cooking over an open flame was familiar and he immediately started salivating as the aroma of the slow-roasting meat hit his nostrils.

Luke winced as he sat up, his leg reminding him of the trauma it had suffered.

"Damn! You've been busy, how long have you been up?"

"Not long."

"Rabbit?"

"No, a nice fat woodchuck. He was sitting at the edge of the clearing and having a nice, long, curious look at us." He pointed at the bow beside his bedroll. "I didn't even have to stand up."

When the game was roasted to Ragland's satisfaction, he broke the tender meat apart and passed Luke a plate. They ate silently, the need to fill their bellies outweighing the need for small talk.

"Thanks," said Luke, as he licked his fingers clean.
"For everything."

"Not a problem. How is the leg?"

"Stiff and sore."

Ragland nodded and reached over to his backpack. He rummaged for a few seconds before pulling out a small red, beaten-up cardboard box. He threw it to Luke.

"It's about six years past its expiry, but I reckon its fine."

Luke laughed.

"Sure, what's the worst that it can do, kill me?"

Ragland smiled.

"Maybe..."

Luke laughed harder and, unperturbed, greedily popped three Tylenol from the blister pack and washed them down with water.

Ten minutes later they had packed up and with a shared nod, they set off, the going much easier now that they could see where they were walking.

As the sun crested the horizon, Luke and Ragland reached a vantage point that offered a sweeping view of the surrounding area. From this elevated position, they could see the land spread out before them, a patchwork of forest and open fields.

Chapter 6

Isaac and Ben pedaled steadily along the 202, scanning the road ahead for any signs of the slavers and children. Mile after mile passed with no glimpse of their quarry and unease started to build as the afternoon wore on.

“We should have caught up to them by now,” Isaac said, finally voicing their shared concern. “Assuming they’re on foot, we should have at least seen something. A sign, anything.”

Ben nodded grimly. “I’ve been thinking the same. If they came this way, there is no way they could have gotten this far ahead of us on foot.”

He looked back over his shoulder at the way they had come. “I think we must have taken the wrong turn back in Hillsboro. They must have taken the Franklin Pierce.”

Isaac’s shoulders slumped as he realized Ben was probably right.

“Damn. I’d convinced myself they’d come this way. But if we haven’t seen any trace of them...”

He trailed off, not needing to finish the thought. Ben slowed his bike and stopped in the middle of the vacant highway.

“So, what do we do? Turn back and try to pick up their trail?”

Isaac considered it briefly, then shook his head. “No, that could take hours with no guarantee we’d find it. I say we push on to Catskill as quick as we can.”

“To set up an ambush?”

“Exactly,” Isaac confirmed. “If we haul ass, maybe we can still beat them there and lay a trap to get the kids back.”

Ben nodded. He looked determined.

“Right. We’re not out of this yet. Let’s pick up the pace and pedal like the devil himself is on our tails.”

The two men rode on, bent low over their handlebars, coaxing every last bit of speed from their leg muscles. The wrong turn had cost them time, but their resolve was unbroken. They would make it to Catskill first and face the slavers on their own terms. There was still a chance if they moved fast enough.

*

The sun was high and casting long shadows across the abandoned freight yard where the slavers had decided to make camp on the evening of the third day.

The day had been uneventful but tiring, especially for the younger children, and they had collapsed gratefully to the tarpaulin that Vincent had been forced to carry all the way from the overpass that morning.

Mason was checking the perimeter of the yard while Caleb gathered firewood. Chris kept watch over the children.

Though a similar age to Cade and Samuel, the young slaver carried himself with false bravado, his rifle held tightly across his chest. The children sat in a weary cluster; exhaustion etched on their dirty faces.

“Please, we’re so thirsty,” said Erin, her voice barely above a whisper. “Can we have some more water?”

Chris looked uncertain, his eyes flicking to the two men across the yard. “I... I don’t know. Mason said to wait until they get back.”

“Come on, man. Just a sip won’t hurt,” coaxed Samuel. When Chris still hesitated, he pressed on. “Mason will be pissed if we pass out from dehydration. We’re no use to him dead.”

The slaver chewed his lip, glancing again at the others before relenting.

“Alright, fine. But just a mouthful each.”

He reached for one of the water canteens propped nearby, keeping a wary eye on the children as he uncapped it.

One by one, they took a small sip, uttered quiet thanks, then returned to their places.

When Cade took the canteen last, his eyes met Samuel's in a fleeting, meaningful glance. Having chewed over Mason's threat throughout the day and talking in hurried conversations, they didn't think he'd go through with it, simply because it would represent too great a loss of potential payment from the Chinese broker to sacrifice one of them.

If the moment came when Mason and Caleb were out of sight, they'd make a break for it. They'd also decided that Chris was the weak link in the chain and their best chance of escape if they did it right.

Chris took back the canteen and secured the cap just as Caleb returned, his arms laden with kindling.

"I think it's getting too dark to scavenge up any more grub tonight," grunted Caleb, dropping the wood next to a ring of stones as Mason came over.

"Yep," the leader said. "Let's get the fire going. We'll hunt at first light and eat before we set out again."

Mason eyed the children coldly as he piled branches over the stones.

"No one caused any trouble I hope."

It wasn't really a question. Chris shook his head.

"No trouble at all."

Soon the slavers had a modest fire crackling. They settled around it, gnawing on the strips of jerky that Mason gave Chris to hand out. It was poor sustenance for the hours of walking they'd put in, but no one dared ask for more. After the meager meal was done, they huddled together against the deepening chill, their tired bodies wracked by hunger.

Caleb leaned back and belched.

"I need to take a dump."

Mason tossed a small spade his way.

“There’s a spot past those stacks of old railway ties. Bury it good, we don’t need any scavengers sniffing around tonight.”

As Caleb lumbered off into the darkness, Mason fixed Chris with a hard look.

“I’m going to backtrack and make sure no one is tailing us.”

“You think someone might be following us?” asked Cade, trying to keep hope out of his voice as he fished for information they might have missed.

Mason stopped in his tracks and fixed him with a glare.

“No, I don’t. There’s no rescue party coming for you little snotnoses, but I’ve learned not to take chances.” He looked back at Chris. “Don’t take your eyes off them for a second.” He shouldered his rifle and picked up a flashlight. “If I hear so much as a whimper, you have my permission to shoot.”

Chris swallowed hard and nodded. As Mason disappeared, he stood up and began circling the children as they sat at the fire, his rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Silence fell over the camp and Samuel and Cade made covert signals to the other children to be ready.

There was a bark in the distance. Chris jumped and turned in its direction, walking a few paces from the fire and peering into the dark. He heard the faintest sound of movement behind him and spun around to find Samuel and Cade on their feet. Behind them, Vincent was also rising, uncertainty written all over his face. The others still sat but were clearly on edge.

“Don’t even think about it!” Chris said, his voice pitching higher in fear. He leveled the rifle at them with trembling hands. “I’ll shoot, I swear!”

Cade’s eyes were hard, determined.

“No, you won’t. You don’t have the guts.”

He took a step forward. Chris's finger tightened on the trigger, but he couldn't bring himself to fire. In that moment of hesitation, Samuel suddenly burst from his position, driving his shoulder into Chris's chest.

The slaver fell with a startled cry, the rifle knocked from his grasp. Chaos erupted as Samuel and Cade grappled with Chris and the others sprang to their feet.

"Run! Now!" Samuel yelled.

A pale Vincent began herding the younger children across the yard and towards a gap in the chain-link fence. Max and Blake were moving after him, but Erin was sobbing, nearly paralyzed by fear until Peace took her hand and pulled her along.

Chris fought Samuel and Cade like a wildcat, punching and clawing at them. He landed a glancing elbow to Cade's head that made his vision swim for a second and he loosened his grip long enough for the slaver to twist free of Samuel and scramble to his feet, snatching the fallen rifle up.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. He swung the gun towards Cade as he swayed on his knees, his finger twitching on the trigger.

There was a quick movement behind him, followed by a heavy thud. Chris's eyes rolled upward as if he was trying to see who had hit him through the top of his skull. He collapsed to the ground, revealing Samuel holding a heavy piece of firewood, his eyes wild.

He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by a loud gunshot that cracked the air around them.

For an awful moment time was frozen, then Cade stumbled to his feet and gripped Samuel's upper arm.

"We have to go, now!"

They took off after the others.

"Freeze, you little bastards!" roared Mason, snapping off another rifle shot that whizzed over their heads.

Samuel and Cade were sprinting after the others, but to their horror, just as he was about to pass through the hole in the fence ahead of them, the terrified Vincent pulled up suddenly, knocking poor Max off his feet as he spun around, holding his hands up in surrender. As the others skidded to a halt behind them, Mason emerged from the darkness like a demon, cursing and yelling for Caleb, who just at that moment ran around the far end of the fence, pulling his jeans up one handed and waving the shovel as he stumbled towards them.

Erin screamed when Mason shot over their heads for the third time, and when Peace held her hands up too, Samuel knew the short-lived escape attempt was over. He and Cade reached the others and stood protectively in front of them.

Before they could move, the enraged Mason was upon them. He charged at Cade and slammed the butt of his rifle into his solar plexus. The wind gushed out of the boy's lungs explosively and he doubled over.

"Think you can escape me?" Mason roared, getting up in Samuel's face, spraying it with spittle. "I'll make you wish you'd never been born!"

Samuel was defiant and didn't drop his gaze. Mason's face contorted in rage.

"That's it! I warned you!" he roared, and turned, advancing on the huddled children. Vincent made a small noise in his throat and pushed Peace in front of him.

The children shrank back in terror as Mason grabbed Peace by the arm and pressed the rifle barrel hard under her chin. She winced but didn't cry out.

"I warned you. Now *you* have to make the choice," Mason growled at Samuel. "Pick someone to die as punishment."

Samuel shook his head, his defiance melting away.

"No, please. We won't try it again, I promise!"

Mason pushed the gun harder against Peace's throat, making her whimper.

“Choose now, or I’ll start shooting them one by one, starting with her!”

Samuel looked around at the terrified faces of his friends, his mind reeling. He’d taken a gamble and had lost, but surely, he wouldn’t have to choose which one of them had to die? Surely Mason would calm down.

“Choose!”

Samuel shook his head and took a step forward.

“I won’t do it. Kill me instead.”

Mason let out a chilling laugh.

“Oh no, that’s not how this works, boy. If you won’t choose, I guess I’ll just have to pick for you.”

He reached out a big hand and pressed it down on Peace’s shoulder.

“On your knees.”

Peace fell onto her knees, a solitary tear rolling from her eye.

“It’s okay Samuel...” she said as Mason put the muzzle of the rifle against her temple. The children began to sob and beg for her life.

Samuel’s will finally broke, and he held up his hands.

“Stop! I’ll do it, please, let Peace go!”

Mason paused, a cruel smile twisting his lips.

“Give Peace a chance, huh?” he said, referencing a song he remembered from the Before Times, one played by his parents in the loving home he’d once been a part of.

“That’s better,” said a version of Mason that his long dead parents would not have recognized. “Now choose, or she dies.”

Samuel’s throat went dry, his vision blurring with tears. How could he condemn one friend to save another? It was an impossible choice.

As Mason's grip tightened on the trigger, he began a countdown.

"One... two... three... you better not let me get to ten, boy..."

Samuel closed his eyes, unable to look at his friends as he made the decision. A life was about to be lost, and it was all his fault...

PART THREE: PURSUIT

Chapter 7

Luke and Ragland had been trekking through the wilderness for nearly two days, stopping only briefly for rest and meager nourishment. Fatigue weighed on them, but they pressed on, driven by their mission to rescue the children kidnapped by slavers.

As the afternoon sun beat down on the third day, they picked their way through a dense forest, ducking under branches and stepping over moss-covered logs. The trees rose like titans all around, obscuring the position of the sun, but Luke guessed they had a few hours before dusk.

“How’s the leg holding up?” Ragland asked, glancing back at Luke, who was favoring his right side.

“I’ve had worse,” Luke said with a pained smile, waving his hook in the air.

Ragland had been changing the bandages daily and seemed satisfied that the wound was healing nicely when he’d wrapped it that morning.

Healing it may have been, but the throbbing pain of the first day had only eased to a dull ache, and Luke was not looking forward to continuing once the Tylenol ran out.

They walked a little farther before Ragland held up a hand, his head cocked. “You hear that?”

Luke halted, listening. In the distance came the unmistakable sound of running water.

“A stream,” said Ragland. “Good timing, I’m almost out of water. Let’s refill our bottles and see if we can catch some fish. I’m sick of jerky, nuts and meat.”

“Sounds like a plan. If you catch ‘em, I’ll cook ‘em.”

“Deal.”

They altered course toward the inviting babble and soon came upon a clearing with a winding stream running through it. It was a reasonably deep creek but slow moving, and it narrowed to a shallow neck where the clear water

cascaded merrily over smooth stones before disappearing into thicker forest.

Kneeling on the mossy bank, they refilled their water and Luke washed days of grime from his face and arms. The cool water rejuvenated him, easing his fatigue. He stood watch with the rifle while Ragland took out his fishing line.

Before long, Ragland had snared a decent-sized trout with his crude pole. He rebaited the hook and cast again into a promising eddy.

“Nice catch old man,” said Luke, with a grin.

Ragland glanced at him but didn’t bite.

“I can still teach you young whippersnappers a thing or two...”

While Ragland fished, Luke’s eyes constantly roamed their surroundings, alert for threats. Something about this tranquil spot set his instincts on edge, though he couldn’t pinpoint why.

A twig snapped loudly upstream. Luke spun, rifle ready, but saw only a squirrel scampering up a tree. Ragland glanced over; his eyebrows raised.

Luke shrugged.

“Sorry, guess I’m a bit jumpy. Just a squirrel.”

Ragland chuckled.

“I’d say your jumpiness has kept us alive so far...”

He trailed off as his makeshift fishing pole was suddenly yanked so hard it nearly slipped from his grip into the stream.

“Whoa! Got a big one here!”

Ragland grappled with the pole, reeling in his catch with some effort. Whatever was on the other end was big and difficult to pull in.

Luke watched, amused, as Ragland wrestled with his catch. With a final heave, he hauled it onto the bank, where it

flopped onto the rocks.

Luke's laughter died in his throat. It wasn't a fish at all, but a dismembered human forearm and hand. The severed limb was grotesquely swollen and discolored. Savaged flesh clung to the exposed bones.

Ragland recoiled in disgust.

"What in hell-"

An earth-shaking roar split the air, so loud it made Luke's ears ring. He spun to see an enormous grizzly bear charge out of the bushes thirty yards upstream, heading right for them.

"Look out!" Luke yelled. He raised the rifle and fired at the oncoming beast. The shot went wide when the barrel slipped slightly on the curve of his hook, which he used to steady the barrel. The bang of the gunshot only seemed to infuriate the bear further.

Ragland was on his feet, scrambling away from the water. Luke planted himself between the bear and his friend. He fired again and struck the beast high on the right shoulder, but the raging animal barely broke stride.

At the last second, Luke dove aside as seven hundred pounds of claws and muscle barreled past in a blur. He hit the ground hard, the rifle knocked from his grip. Pain blazed through his wounded thigh.

The bear pursued Ragland, roaring bloody intent. The Drifter ran out of room and was finally cornered against a rocky outcrop beside the stream. Luke watched in horror as the beast reared up and swiped its massive paw at its trapped prey.

Ragland just managed to duck the lethal claws and draw his knife, but it was pitifully inadequate against the wild brute.

Luke spotted the rifle laying in the dirt and crawled desperately toward it, biting back cries as he dragged his injured leg, the wound ripped open afresh by his fall. He could hear Ragland yelling and dodging blows, but he knew he

wouldn't last long. Luke's fingers closed over the stock. He rose to one knee, taking frantic aim at the bear's heaving flank.

Before he could fire, a huge paw slammed into Ragland's side, sending him sprawling into the deeper water. Ragland promptly sank from sight.

"No!" Luke pulled the trigger, but the shot went wide again as the bear plunged into the stream after Ragland. Luke scrambled to his feet, agony ripping through him. He half-ran, half-fell down the rocky bank, wheezing through clenched teeth. When he reached the water's edge, there was no sign of Ragland or the grizzly in the current.

Suddenly, a dark shape burst from the water downstream. It was Ragland, desperately making his way to the far bank. Luke watched helplessly as the bear heaved itself out of the water barely two yards behind him, closing in fast.

Ignoring the screaming protests of his leg, Luke charged along the bank, yelling hoarsely. He couldn't just watch as Ragland was torn to pieces. His friend made the other side and scrambled up onto the slippery bank as Luke skidded to a stop, chest heaving. He raised the rifle with shaking hands as the bear pulled itself out of the water. Ragland slipped to his knees and a heavy claw swiped his back, sending him tumbling from sight beyond the rocks on the bank.

"Nooo!" Luke screamed.

At this range, he couldn't miss. He aimed at the beast's side, hoping for a shot into the heart, and pulled the trigger.

*

"Seven, eight..." Mason's countdown continued towards its inevitable end. Samuel's mind reeled in panic, unable to fathom making such a horrific choice. Mason shook Peace violently. "Pick now or she's the first to go! Nine...!"

Samuel closed his eyes, tears streaming down his dirt-smudged face. He had to buy them time, somehow. Voice cracking, he gave the only answer he could.

"I... I choose Vincent."

A wail rose from the children as Vincent shrank back in despair.

“What? I can’t hear you!” snarled the slavers’ leader.

“Vincent! I said, Vincent.”

Mason grinned triumphantly.

“Good boy, I knew you could do it...” He marched over to Vincent and grabbed him by the upper arm, dragging him away from the other children and forcing him to his knees.

“No, wait!” Samuel cried out. “Please, can you... can you take him out of sight?” He gestured at the younger children, their faces frozen in silent horror. “They shouldn’t have to see this.”

Mason considered this for a moment, finally deciding that overly traumatized slaves would be harder to cope with on the rest of the journey.

“Fine. Caleb, get Chris up. He let them get the better of him, so he can do the honors.”

Caleb looked uncertain.

“Boss, are you sure-”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Mason snapped. “Wake him the hell up. The warnings were given, now the punishment must happen.”

“Yes boss.”

Caleb poured water from a canteen over the youngest slaver’s face, and he spluttered awake, looking dazed and confused for an instant before clamping a hand over the back of his head as the pain of Samuel’s knockout blow registered.

“Get up!” Mason snapped.

Chris rose to his feet unsteadily.

“Sorry, they snuck up-”

“Yeah, yeah. I know what happened, dummy. Now you’re going to make it right.”

More aware of the younger prisoners, he leaned over and whispered into Chris's ear. The already pale boy became even whiter and looked like he was about to protest, but Mason's furious gaze made him think better of it. He gave a defeated nod and took the pistol that his leader held out to him.

"Now, you two," he turned to Samuel and Cade, "take the rest of them back to the fire and settle down for sleep."

"Nooo!" wailed Vincent as Chris stepped up with the gun pointed at him and told him to move it. "Don't leave me, Sam! Cade! Please!"

"I'm sorry..." wept Samuel, his arms around the shoulders of the weeping Max and Blake, ushering them towards the fire. Peace followed with Erin between them, the youngest of the three children. Cade, disbelief and shock evident on his face, took a step towards Mason.

"Please, you can't-"

The big slaver slapped Cade across the face and the oldest of the prisoners reeled.

"One more word and you join him! Chris, get it done."

Chris avoided their gazes, roughly pulling Vincent toward the trees. Cade, not yet given up, rushed over to Chris and Vincent.

"Please, Chris," he said, his voice low and urgent. "You don't need to do this. We won't try escaping again, I swear. Just let him go."

Chris faltered, uncertainty flashing across his face as he looked over his shoulder at Mason. He opened his mouth to say something, but Mason cut him off.

"That's it!" he yelled. He lunged and grabbed Max, pulling him from Samuel's grasp and putting a knife hard against Isaac and Indigo's son. "One more word and I slice this kid ear to ear."

Cade broke down in tears, finally defeated. He held up his hands. "Okay, okay! I'll stop..."

With a haunted look, Chris turned away and prodded the wailing Vincent. They headed towards the trees a hundred yards away as the rest were led back to camp. Halfway to the trees, Chris bent over and threw up. Only Erin saw it, but she had no idea if it was from the obvious concussion the slaver had suffered, or the horrible thing he was being forced to do.

The children sat down around the weakening fire and huddled close, listening in anguish to Vincent's fading cries and Chris's terse orders to keep walking. About three minutes after they were out of earshot, the crack of a single gunshot rang out in the distance, muted by the forest.

In the awful silence that followed, the children broke down, muffling their sobs on each other's shoulders. Erin buried her face in Peace's chest, her small body wracked with grief. Samuel stared hollowly at the ground, guilt threatening to drown him.

After a few minutes, Chris reappeared alone, refusing to meet their eyes. Mason put a hand on his shoulder.

"Good. That's a lesson for all of you. No more escape attempts or you'll be picking another to join him."

Chris shook off the hand of his leader and stomped to the edge of camp and picked up his water. Mason's eyes widened slightly at the small act of defiance, but other than that he let it slide.

"All right, you lot get some shuteye. Caleb, you take first watch."

The children clung to each other as darkness fell, taking comfort where none could be found. In the bleak hours ahead, they would need to find the strength to go on.

*

The bear reared up, a strange, agonized yelp escaping its jaws as it forgot about Ragland and spun around. Luke barely had time to comprehend that his shot had seemingly done little more than further enrage the bear, when it dropped to all fours and charged at him like a freight train.

Saliva dripped from its fangs; its eyes now fixed on Luke with primal hunger.

Luke squeezed the trigger again. This time it clicked uselessly. He dropped the rifle and with a lightning-fast movement, drew and threw one of his throwing knives as he began scrambling backwards up the shore. The blade embedded itself dead center in the bear's chest, but not deep enough to be fatal. The grizzly roared in pain but didn't relent its chase.

Luke knew his leg was bleeding profusely, but adrenaline prevented him from feeling too much as his long strides found dry ground and sprinted for the campsite. Even though it was injured, the bear was still closing, its harsh panting making a whistling sound in its lungs, which had been punctured by the rifle shot.

The thundering paws were almost on top of Luke as he leapt over Ragland's tripwire, diving towards his bedroll. The bear tripped the wire and triggered a cacophony of pots and pans, as Luke gripped the handle of his axe and rolled to his feet, raising his weapon with a roar of both fear and furious determination.

The bear skidded to a halt at this unexpected challenge.

It was a demonic sight. Blood bubbled from its nostrils and mouth, and the handle of Luke's throwing knife bobbed up and down in time with its labored panting. While he hadn't hit its heart, Luke's rifle shot had done fatal damage.

Everything now just depended on him staying alive long enough to see the bear's demise play out.

Overcoming its surprise at his prey's confrontational stand, the beast raised itself up onto its hind legs and roared again. Luke felt his insides turn to water at the sight of the towering grizzly, and he waited for it to make its move.

"Bear!" a voice called out from the direction of the stream.

Luke had just enough time to register that his friend wasn't dead, when the beast dropped to all fours.

“Bear!” came the call again, this time closer.

The grizzly ignored the calls. It only had eyes for Luke now, and, as its display of aggression hadn’t caused him to run, it charged at him.

Luke darted to the right and brought his axe down one handed as hard as he could. He hadn’t aimed, but the axe struck the bear on the back of the neck, and it skidded past him yowling in pain, with Luke barely able to hold onto his weapon. The bear sent a shower of embers into the sky as it slid through the remains of the campfire and Luke, sensing he only had one opportunity, ran after it, his axe swinging again as the beast struggled to regain its legs.

The next blow hit the wild creature in the shoulder, and it lunged sideways into Luke, knocking him onto his ass and sending the axe spinning from his grip. His head cracked against the trunk of a tree stump at the edge of their camp as the bear struggled back to its feet.

A dazed Luke raised his hook, ready to use it as a weapon of last resort as the bear turned in his direction. Instead of attacking though, the bear shook its big head as if trying to clear it. Blood and saliva showered Luke, and the smell of burned flesh mingled with the coppery taint of blood assaulted his nose.

The bear swayed and he watched in awe as it slowly eased itself down onto its belly, its breathing even more labored now. He heard a deep gurgling in its throat before a gout of dark red blood oozed from its mouth.

The grizzly raised its big head one more time before it finally dropped heavily onto the grass, its eyes staring at nothing. Luke’s vision swam, and he rested his head against the hard weathered wood of the tree stump as a shape materialized in his foggy peripheral. Somehow, against all odds, Ragland was still alive. And so was he.

The Drifter approached, bloodied and swaying but stubbornly upright, and put a hand onto the tree to balance himself.

“You’re alive...?” Luke mumbled the obvious. He blinked hard, focusing on his friend’s face.

Ragland gave a pained chuckle.

“You are too. Thanks for taking the heat off me—looks like we’re even now.”

Luke started to reply but a wave of dizziness made the words die on his lips. Ragland’s concerned face wavered in his vision before everything faded to black.

Flickering firelight roused Luke sometime later. He was lying on his back, his head ached, and his thigh throbbed fiercely beneath bandages. The sun had set, and stars peeked through the forest canopy above.

With a groan, he carefully pushed himself upright and looked around. He was beside a new campfire, over which Ragland tended a small pot as he sat with his back against the hulking shape of the dead grizzly. A blanket had been thrown over its head.

“Welcome back,” the Drifter said gruffly. “That was a close one. How’s your head?”

Luke gingerly felt the lump on his scalp. “Hurts like hell. But I’ll live. How long was I out?”

“The whole day.” Luke’s shoulders slumped. The encounter with the bear had cost them precious hours they couldn’t afford. Ragland shook his head, wincing as he adjusted his position. “Don’t beat yourself up. After that shit fight, neither of us was in any condition to travel. We’ve lost ten hours and some ground but with a hard day’s effort, tomorrow we can make some of it up.”

Luke couldn’t shake the disappointment and worry. Somewhere out there, Erin and the others were being dragged along by a gang of ruthless slavers and they’d lost nearly a day’s travel. But he knew Ragland was right—they had to rest and recover first, even if it was just for one night.

“How are you?” Luke asked.

“Sore and sorry.” He swiveled to the left, displaying his back to Luke. There were three long gouges in his coat, the edges rimmed with dried blood. “He broke the skin, but my all-weather coat stopped it being worse. To be honest, my bruised ribs hurt more.” He lifted up his shirt to reveal ugly blue and black splotches on his lean and pale torso.

“Ouch,” said Luke.

“Could have been much worse. For both of us.”

“I’ll say. So, what’s in the pot?” he asked.

“Well,” Ragland said, lifting the wooden spoon out and touching his tongue to it. “I managed to salvage one fish after our friend here ruined the party. I found some wild onions and potatoes and managed to drum up a bit of a stew.”

Luke caught a whiff of the delicious smelling concoction. His stomach rumbled loudly in response.

Ragland laughed.

“I take it that’s a vote of approval.”

“Sure is.”

With that, Ragland grabbed two tin cups and filled them with a beaten-up tin ladle. Luke accepted the steaming tin cup of stew and mumbled his thanks. He was done in no time, and the second cup went down just as quickly.

“Damn, that was good,” said Luke, rubbing his belly.

Ragland grunted and refilled their cups a third time. Luke began to protest but Ragland shoved the cup back into his hand.

“It’ll only go to waste if we don’t finish it.”

After dinner they broke out the whiskey again.

“Only one each,” said Ragland. “We’ll want clear heads when we set out tomorrow. I want to start moving an hour before dawn if you can manage it.”

“Definitely.”

When they bedded down an hour later, Luke stared up at the star-filled sky, drawing strength.

Hold on Erin. Daddy's coming.

*

The children trudged wearily along the cracked highway as dusk fell the day after Vincent's execution. Grief and despair had weighed heavily upon them after losing their friend so senselessly, and the hours of walking that day had seemed to drag on endlessly.

Samuel trailed at the back of the group, head low and shoulders slumped. The friends he'd laughed and joked with just days before, now seemed like ghosts he could scarcely recognize as they trudged along in front of him.

It was all his fault. It was his choice that had condemned Vincent. A choice forced by the ruthless Mason, but delivered in Samuel's own trembling voice, nonetheless. He replayed the scene in his mind endlessly, imagining countless alternatives where he could have saved Vincent and spared them all from this nightmare. Guilt gnawed at him.

But the brutal reality was that Vincent was gone forever, and Samuel would have to carry that shame until his last breath.

Up ahead, Cade glanced back, eyebrows knitting with concern at the sight of his friend. He slowed his pace until he fell into step beside Samuel.

"How are you holding up?"

Samuel shrugged; his eyes fixed on the ground.

"What happened wasn't your fault," Cade said. "We all know Mason gave you no choice. The blame is on him."

Samuel shook his head bitterly. "Doesn't matter. I still picked Vincent to die. I should have tried... I don't know, *something*. Anything else."

"You did everything you could," said Cade. "There was no right answer. Mason only wanted to hurt us."

“Well, he succeeded,” Samuel muttered. Cade rested a hand on his shoulder, but Samuel shrugged it off.

“Just leave me alone. Please.”

Cade surrendered with a sad nod and moved up to walk beside Peace instead. She immediately questioned him with her eyes, glancing back at Samuel.

“He’s taking it hard,” Cade said softly. “Blaming himself.”

Peace sighed, her gentle face filled with sorrow.

“It’s so unfair,” she said. “I’ll try talking to him too in a little while.”

She waited long enough for it to appear that they weren’t conspiring together, then fell back to walk next to Samuel, who pointedly ignored her presence. Undaunted, she matched his pace, deciding not to speak at all and simply provide steadfast company amidst the misery.

As the daylight faded, Mason finally called the group to a stop beside an abandoned farmhouse. It was a repeat of their first wretched night together. The slavers quickly secured the site then allowed the children a meagre meal.

Too heartsick to eat, Samuel sat apart from everyone against the farmhouse wall, poking at the dirt with a stick. Peace finished her food then approached, sinking down beside him.

For a long time, she didn’t speak, respecting his need for space. Finally, she said softly, “I know nothing can make this better. But I’m here if you want to talk. Or even just sit beside you, if that’s what you need.”

Samuel said nothing, but Peace sensed him listening. She leaned gently against his shoulder.

“This isn’t your fault, Sam. We’re going to get through this, together. Don’t shut me out, please. Let me help you carry this.”

To her surprise, Samuel responded by resting his head against hers. She wrapped an arm around him comfortingly as

he finally released some of the tears he'd been holding back all day.

Cade watched them from across the small camp, heart aching for his friend, but grateful they had Peace. They would need each other to make it through the dark times ahead.

All they had to do was survive long enough for help to arrive...

Chapter 8

Isaac and Ben pedaled steadily along the empty highway, focused intently on the road ahead. The morning had passed without event, just the hypnotic flow of the cracked asphalt ribbon unraveling beneath their bikes. As midday approached, Ben flagged Isaac down near a deserted gas station.

“Let’s take a quick break to consult the map and get our bearings,” he suggested, mopping sweat from his brow. “We must be halfway to Catskill by now.”

Isaac readily agreed. It was a hot day and the gas station’s shop would provide welcome shade. Leaning their bikes outside, they ducked into the dingy and dusty interior, fishing their map out.

Rows of plundered shelves lined the walls, mere husks of what had once been a bustling shop. Isaac and Ben cleared space on the counter and spread out the unwieldy but detailed map they’d picked up from the bicycle store.

“Remember when you could do this on a phone?” Ben said.

“I do. And music and movies.”

“And books! All that stuff seems like a dream now.”

Tracing their route with a finger, Isaac’s brow furrowed in thought. “Looks like we’re about two days out still, give or take.”

He did some quick calculations in his head. “We’re averaging a little over a hundred miles a day on the bikes. The slavers are on foot, so they’d be making thirty miles a day at most through this region.”

Ben followed his tracing of the remaining routes to Catskill. “Two days is plenty enough time to get there before them.” He met Isaac’s gaze. “So, what’s our plan when we arrive?”

Isaac considered for a moment, picturing the town laid out in his mind's eye. He'd never actually been to Catskill, but he knew it had a population of several thousand before the Fall. Now, from the intelligence reports the guys in Concord had shared in their last meeting, it was close to a thousand strong.

"First, we'll need to scout the perimeter and see exactly what we're dealing with. Then we'll try to pinpoint where they bring the children they abduct," he mused. "There must be some kind of holding area or a transit yard. Maybe cages?"

Ben's jaw tightened at the mention of cages, but he nodded. "Makes sense. Hopefully we can identify the most likely drop-off point, then choose an ambush site somewhere along the way."

"Exactly," Isaac confirmed. He checked his pistol with a determined glint in his eye. "We'll only get one shot at grabbing them before they enter town. So, there's no room for error."

"Agreed." Ben traced a finger along the roads leading into Catskill. "As much as I hate to say it, we may need to consider..." he hesitated for a second, before saying, "taking out the slavers, if they leave us no choice. Lucky there are only three."

Isaac's mouth set in a hard line. "I don't want to harm anyone if we don't have to. But you're right—if it comes down to them or the kids, it's no choice at all."

Ben nodded solemnly. After a moment, he asked, "Think there's any chance of getting backup from Albany before we reach Catskill? Extra guns could help."

Isaac considered it, then shook his head.

"By the time we reached them and got a group organized to come back, the kids will have already arrived at Catskill and be long gone. No, we're on our own for this one."

"Unless of course Indy and the rest organize a crew."

"If I know Indy, that's exactly what she's doing. But we can't rely on anyone they send finding the children before they get here."

"Yes, you're right. Well, we've faced worse odds before," Ben said, with a ghost of a grin. It faded as he glanced outside warily. "We should get moving again soon. Can't let our lead slip away."

Isaac refolded the map and tucked it into his jacket. "Yep. Let's keep up this pace."

Within minutes they were back on the bicycles, pedaling with renewed vigor. The miles raced by as they hurtled towards Catskill, each revolution of the wheels carrying them closer to ending the nightmare.

*

Of course, Isaac and Ben had no way to know it, but Indy had indeed been busy forming a rescue party the morning after they left. At dawn, she'd dispatched a messenger to Concord asking for help. The messenger had returned late that afternoon with good news. Daniel Bowman had agreed to send them four soldiers, and they would arrive in Manchester at dawn in one of the last two operating Humvees. The only downside was that only two of the Manchester people would fit, as it would be laden with reserve fuel.

One of the best achievements of the town settled by the remnants of the facility's population had been the rebooting of the small oil refinery outside of Concord. While it didn't produce a lot, it had enabled them to power generators and keep a small fleet of vehicles running while the rest of the eastern states fell back into the stone ages.

After much argument, and a combination of voting and drawing straws, it worked out that Paul and Indigo would be the two to accompany the soldiers.

True to Bowman's word, the Hummer arrived at the steps of the tower just as dawn tinged the eastern sky. Indigo and Paul were already waiting, and much to their surprise, it

was Bowman who stepped out of the driver's seat as three more men stepped out of the vehicle.

"Daniel? What are you doing here?" asked Indy, drawing him into a hug.

"No way I wasn't coming along when I heard what happened. Besides, I'm sick of sitting behind a desk," said Bowman, his face all business as he shook Paul's hand. "How are you guys holding up?"

"We're okay, I guess," said Paul. "Just worried sick."

"Yes, anxious," Indigo said.

"All right. Let's load up, you can brief me on the way. The sooner we start, the better."

Indigo felt a sense of relief as she climbed in beside Bowman. With this team, Ben and Isaac, and possibly Luke also on the trail, their odds of intercepting the slavers seemed much better than they had the night before.

*

The late afternoon sun filtered through the forest canopy, casting dappled shadows on the ground where Luke and Ragland trudged wearily. It had been a grueling day of travel as they pushed themselves to make up for time lost to the grizzly attack.

Both men bore the lingering effects of that near-fatal encounter. Luke still had sharp headaches from the blow to his skull, while his thigh, re-bandaged before they set out again, throbbed with each step. For his part, Ragland moved gingerly for the sake of his bruised ribs.

They had set out at dawn, leaving the carcass of the massive bear behind. Even if they had enough strength left to attempt harvesting it, neither of them was interested in trying grizzly meat with its known risk of parasites.

Ragland's makeshift bandages for Luke were holding for now, but the damage done to his existing wound in the struggle with the grizzly had completely reversed any healing it had done in the previous two days.

As the day wore on, Luke struggled more and more to keep pace with Ragland. The Drifter was like a machine, driven by sheer, hardened will. But even he was not invulnerable to fatigue and injury, and his pace seemed to slow in time with the waxing of the sun.

By late afternoon, Luke was pale and stumbling often. Without warning, his leg buckled, and he dropped hard to one knee with a pained hiss.

Ragland turned back and crouched beside his friend. “That’s it, we’re stopping for now.”

Luke shook his head stubbornly. “No, I can keep going...” But the unsteadiness of his own voice betrayed him.

“Like hell you can,” Ragland said bluntly. He pulled Luke’s arm over his shoulders and helped him over to a fallen tree to sit.

Too dizzy and exhausted to argue further, Luke stayed put while Ragland gathered some wood to start a small fire as the daylight faded. Soon he had a modest blaze going and Luke welcomed the rest and warmth as he rested against the tree.

Ragland opened his pack and dug out the meager medical supplies he had left. He checked Luke’s bandages, frowning at the splotches of fresh blood that had seeped through the material during the day. He began to remove the bandages, and Luke sucked in a breath as the dressing was pulled away.

It was a mess.

“That gash is trying to get infected,” he muttered. “Here, chew these.”

He passed Luke a few strips of White Willow bark he’d collected as they walked.

“Are we that desperate?” Luke asked, grinning.

“It’s White Willow bark. Good for pain relief and reducing inflammation.”

Luke nodded, impressed.

“Thought you studied law in the Before Times?”

Ragland grunted.

“That I did. Pretty much everything I’ve learned about survival has been from study after the Fall. Those first few years I raided libraries learning all I could about natural remedies and setting traps, what to eat, what not to eat, amongst a lot of other stuff. Guess you could call me a bush doctor/woodsman.”

“Well,” said Luke, holding up one of the strips.
“Thanks doc.”

He proceeded to chew the rough strip and made a face before washing it down with a mouthful of water from his canteen.

“Not exactly tasty...”

“Nope.”

Luke chewed and swallowed the rest.

“Sorry to be a burden.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for. It’s not like you shot yourself in the leg, and that big ole bear... well frankly, I’m amazed either of us is still breathing.”

Despite his light tone, worry creased the Drifter’s brow as he cleaned the blood away, inspecting the wounds on Luke’s thigh more closely, the edges of which were swollen and angry. The exertion of travel was taking a toll and preventing healing, but infection was the biggest concern. Fearing voicing his concerns would only discourage Luke further, he cleaned the wound silently, then pulled a small screw-top jar from his pack; it contained a golden-colored substance. Luke raised an eyebrow as Ragland unscrewed the top and scooped a glob out with his finger.

“What’s that? More of Dr. Ragland’s homemade medicine?”

The other man smoothed it onto the wound without missing a beat. Luke flinched.

“Anti-bacterial. Can’t take credit for this one. It was given to me by a friend.”

“Whoa! Hold the phone! The mysterious drifter has a friend?”

Ragland grunted as he began wrapping a fresh bandage around Luke’s thigh.

“You’d be surprised.”

“Oh? So more than one? Well, I need to know more. I mean, you know pretty much all there is to know about me.”

“That’s because you never stop talking,” Ragland growled, as he finished up and gently eased Luke’s leg away.

“True enough,” Luke laughed. “So, this friend who gave you the salve. Male or female?”

“Not getting into this right now, I’m hungry and unless you want to eat grass, I’m going to get us a rabbit.”

“Oh, she’s a female, ladies and gentlemen!”

Ragland suppressed an amused smirk as he bent to pick up his bow.

“Back soon...”

“What’s her name Joshua?!”

The Drifter didn’t answer. Luke grinned as he disappeared into the trees.

He was back within twenty minutes.

“What’s her name Joshua,” said Luke, poking the fire and his friend some more.

“Christ, you’re like a broken record.”

“Name?”

Ragland rolled his eyes as he began to pluck fur off the decent-sized rabbit he’d skewered. Luke had just about decided he’d leave it alone until their post-dinner whiskey, when Ragland growled something unintelligible.

“What was that?”

“Claire. I said, her name is Claire.”

The way he said the name made Luke decide to tread more gently.

“Nice name. So, she’s an apothecary?”

“Town doctor.” Ragland finished plucking and skewered the rabbit before beginning to turn it over the flames. His faraway eyes glowed orange in the firelight. “A town called Bakerstown.”

As it turned out, Ragland didn’t need a full belly or whiskey to do his share of the talking that night, and over the next few hours told Luke about his meeting with Kit and her rescue, along with the cannibal horde and the battle for Bakerstown.

Along with good memories, there was a lot of pent-up hurt and regret in the story. Luke felt that once he got started, it was cathartic for Ragland to get it all out of his system. By the time he finished, they were sitting back nursing full bellies and polishing off the last of the whiskey.

“That’s quite a tale,” Luke said, when he felt Ragland was finally talked out. “I’ve had some run-ins with cannibals myself. I haven’t seen these Zoms though, must be unique to Pennsylvania. They are mainly the younger ones, you say. From poor nutrition?”

“I think so. That and inbreeding. They breed together *and* eat human meat. Nothing good is going to come out of that.”

Luke nodded.

“Hopefully they stay south. Or eat the slavers.”

“Preferably both,” said Ragland. “I think I might hit the hay.”

“Me too.”

They settled down in their bedrolls and Luke turned onto his back, staring at the night sky. It was filled with more stars than he’d ever seen in the sky in the Before Times.

“You should go back for her,” he said, after a few minutes.

“What?”

“Claire. You should go back for her.”

“I haven’t said I won’t.”

Ragland’s voice had an edge to it, and Luke knew he had crossed a threshold into something that was deeply personal to the Drifter.

“Okay. I just know from personal experience that the love of a good woman makes this world...” His voice trailed off as he thought of Brooke. A wave of unexpected emotion washed over him at the memory of his first love, which was invariably followed by the pain of her loss. He then thought of Becky and felt a pang of guilt that he’d thought of Brooke first.

“You alright kid?” Ragland asked, sensing his upset.

Luke managed a strangled, “Yeah.”

That was the end of the conversation. Ragland closed his eyes, wondering if perhaps he shouldn’t just bite the bullet and go back to Bakerstown after this little adventure was over. Claire had asked him to come back after a year, but now, barely two months since he’d left, a year had begun to seem like an awful long time.

Some hours later, the snapping of a nearby twig roused Ragland from a deep and dreamless sleep. He was on his feet in an instant, ears straining toward the sound. His hand went to the knife at his belt. The noise didn’t repeat, but his senses remained on high alert. He started to think they were naïve for not taking turns at watch. Deep forest or not, the bear had proven there were dangers aplenty without other men being nearby.

He was alert for a full two minutes, waiting on his tripwire to be triggered, before he relaxed after deciding it had likely just been a small foraging animal.

Morning came sluggishly, the chill fall air slow to relinquish its hold to the emerging dawn. Luke awoke groggy and disoriented, the toll of his injuries sinking deep into his bones. On his back, he groaned as he raised himself to his elbows before the smell of strong coffee brewing over the fire hit his nose and began to revive him.

By the time Ragland pressed a hot tin cup into his hands, he felt almost human again. The coffee was bitter and black, but its warmth thawed his aching muscles and began to dissipate the fog in his mind.

“Thanks for the caffeine miracle,” Luke said. He flexed his wounded leg and shoulder cautiously. “I’ll be alright to get moving soon.”

Ragland gave a nod, turning his gaze westward where the rising sun was just cresting the tree line. Its rays set the autumn leaves aflame with color.

“Beautiful country out here, isn’t it?” the Drifter remarked. “Can almost make you forget what a ruin we humans made of things.”

“Well, not all humans. You’d have to lay the blame squarely on Communist China.”

Ragland shrugged.

“If not them, it would have happened some other way. Don’t you remember how bad it was getting?”

Luke followed his gaze, appreciating the splendor of the awakening forest.

“Yeah. I thought it was AI that would get us in the end... or nukes.”

After a cold but hearty breakfast, they set out again as the day brightened around them. Luke was unsteady at first but stubbornly ignored the pain, focusing everything on putting one foot in front of the other.

The terrain gradually smoothed as the morning passed. By midday, they had descended from the hills into lightly wooded valleys.

Around mid-afternoon, they crested a rise and Luke spotted tendrils of smoke in the distance. He halted, peering intently at the settlement nestled along the river below.

“I know this place,” Luke said. “There’s a small town here called Pinecrest, maybe a hundred folks. I stayed a night on my way east a while back.”

Ragland followed his gaze, considering. “Reckon they’d spare some medical supplies? We’re out of fresh bandages and if someone down there can stitch a wound, I recommend it.”

Luke pondered the question. The people had been amiable enough, wary but willing to trade when he’d passed through.

“It’s worth a shot,” Luke said. “Let’s see if they’ll welcome us again. With any luck, we’ll be able to get a bed for the night.”

Ragland clapped him on the back.

“That would be quite the treat. It’s been a while.”

With renewed purpose, they made their way down into the valley, following the smoke. It would just be a brief detour, Luke told himself, trying not to think about how far ahead Erin and the other children were.

Chapter 9

The setting sun cast an ominous blood-red glow across the overgrown landscape as the children were herded along towards Catskill. None felt the weight of despair more than Samuel, who trudged at the back of the group, eyes hollow and distant.

Vincent's senseless death, while not at his own hand, weighed heavier with each passing mile. While Mason had manipulated him into the awful choice, Samuel couldn't stop replaying the scene in his mind. There had to have been another way—something he could have said or done to save Vincent's life.

Up ahead, Cade glanced back frequently, his worry for his friend evident. Samuel had barely spoken or eaten since Vincent's execution. It seemed he wanted to waste away, consumed by guilt.

With Vincent gone and Samuel an empty shell, leadership now fell heavily onto Cade's shoulders. He knew the other children were looking to him for courage and hope. So, he buried his own grief deep within and walked with his head held high.

Seeing Samuel so broken tore at his heart, and another emotion began to rise to the surface. A simmering anger, white hot and visceral. He kept it in check, but Cade vowed that when he got the chance, he would make Mason pay dearly for both Vincent's execution and Samuel's pain. For now, though, survival had to come first.

As dusk fell, Mason herded the group toward an abandoned factory to camp for the night. The deserted building's ancient and ominous graffiti foreshadowed the children's own fate—leering skulls and desperate words left by others who had passed this way before.

Once camp was set, Cade tried again to reach his hollowed friend. Crouching beside Samuel, he gripped his shoulder firmly until the other boy finally met his earnest gaze.

“I know you’re hurting,” Cade said. “But we need you, Samuel. Don’t give up on us now.”

Samuel just stared through him, sunken eyes glistening with anguish in the firelight. Cade squeezed his shoulder harder.

“We’re getting out of this... together. But I can’t do this alone. Please Samuel, the others need you too.”

For a long moment, Samuel wavered, as emotions fought a battle across his face. Then, the faintest spark returned to his eyes as he gave an almost imperceptible nod. Relief washed over Cade, and he pulled Samuel into a fierce, brotherly embrace.

Over Samuel’s shoulder, Cade met Peace’s eyes, which glistened with tears. She smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

“Aww,” came a sneer from Caleb as they broke away from the hug. “Look at the two fags having a cuddle.”

Cade bristled and started to climb to his feet but was stopped by Samuel’s steady hand on his arm. That action told him more than anything that perhaps the old Samuel, steady and reliable, was back.

“Shut up and get them fed,” ordered Mason. He was just as exhausted as the children from the long trek in the hot sun that day and not in the mood for Caleb’s childish bullying.

An hour later, as Cade settled down to sleep, hushed voices from across the fire caught his attention. Mason and Caleb sat conversing in low tones, likely assuming the exhausted children were all asleep. Cade lay very still, straining his ears to listen. Chris was walking the perimeter, as Mason had designated him first watch.

“We should reach Catskill by noon in two days’ time,” Mason was saying. “No more day stops along the way.”

Caleb nodded and grunted around a mouthful of food.

“And you said Liu will have buyers waiting?” he asked when he’d swallowed.

“Well, this will be the first sale in two months,” Mason continued. “Pretty sure there’ll be plenty of buyers. Hopefully the bigger teams found slim pickings. The less competition on sale, the better. The two older boys and the girls should bring top dollar.”

Caleb grunted.

Cade’s stomach turned at their casual discussion of selling him and the others. He forced himself to keep listening.

“Chris has been acting weird and quiet since you made him execute the crybaby. You still trust him?”

“Yeah. Until he gives me a reason not to. It was his first kill, so I’m not surprised he’s skittish about it.”

“Pussy,” Caleb scoffed.

He kept listening, but the two men fell into conversation about the loss of their fellow slaver, someone called Steve. From the context of their words, it appeared that Steve had died not long after they had set out.

What a terrible shame, he thought.

Cade finally let his eyes drift closed, having committed the most vital information to memory: two more days of travel until they reached Catskill and the slave markets.

*

Indigo leaned over the map spread across the hood of the Hummer, tracing possible routes with her finger. They had stopped in a town called Keene to have a drink and check the map after an hour and a half of driving. While they drove, Indigo and Paul had fully briefed Bowman about the events that led up to the abduction of the children and the departure of Isaac and Ben.

“I have a feeling Isaac and Ben would have found their way to the 91 if they hadn’t caught up to them by here,” she said, pointing at the 10 that led down to meet the 91 near the town of Bernardston. “And maybe began heading south-west towards Catskill.”

Paul nodded. “Let’s start there. With any luck we can intercept them along the way.”

“Devil’s advocate,” said Bowman. “It’s possible the slavers went further west before turning south. Conceivably, they could follow the Hudson River all the way from Albany to Catskill if they wanted to stay off roads and avoid pursuit.”

Indigo blew air from her nose and bowed her head, the immensity of their task suddenly overwhelming her.

“God, they could have turned southward at any time. I wish Isaac had just waited until morning before taking off. Now we don’t know where *he* is, where the *children* are or *where* to start!”

Paul put a hand on her shoulder.

“It’ll be okay, Indy.”

“It will be,” said Bowman. “We have a vehicle, and we can afford to try a few different roads, then turn back to try alternatives if we need to. There is a limit to how far they could have gone on foot, so that gives us a huge maneuvering advantage. Let’s follow the 10 down to Bernardston and see what we see. If it comes up dry, we turn back and spend the night here, then follow the 9 further west.”

The certainty in Bowman’s voice seemed to reassure Indigo and they got back into the vehicle with her in the passenger seat navigating. Apprehension mounted as the miles passed with no sign of life, save the occasional deer or fox. Indigo gripped her rifle tightly, scouring the landscape for any hint of the children.

By midday, she could no longer contain her worry. “We should have come across something by now—tracks, an abandoned campsite, anything.”

Paul nodded grimly. “You’re right. I think Isaac must have taken a different turn. The slavers too, apparently. Whether they went the same way is anyone’s guess.”

In the driver’s seat, Bowman kept his gaze fixed on the road ahead. “Let’s give it a few more hours to be sure. We can backtrack before we camp in the evening if needed.”

But as the sun sank low, not a single shred of evidence had appeared. The mood in the Hummer was bleak as they stopped to consult the map. Paul gave voice to what they were all thinking.

"No question about it, they didn't come this way. We've wasted nearly a full day."

Indigo bit her lip anxiously. "What now?"

Bowman considered their options, face etched with concentration in the fading light. "We stick to the plan and head back to Keene, rest for the night and set out along the Franklin Pierce Highway further west."

They started out again and by the time they reached Keene the sun was setting.

Exhaustion weighed heavily as Bowman finally called for a brief rest stop. Indigo stepped out to splash some water on her face, frustration mounting. She'd been so certain they would intercept the slavers along one of the main routes. They decided to push on to a little town called Chesterfield before stopping for the night.

Back in the Hummer, Bowman tried to project a confidence he didn't truly feel. "First light, we'll start checking some of the backroads branching off the highway. There's still a chance we can pick up their trail."

But the next day brought only growing despair. Forays along the Franklin Pierce and short checks down one dusty rural lane after another proved fruitless. The landscape gradually shifted from wooded hills to more open farmland, but no clues emerged from the abandoned homesteads and overgrown fields.

By late afternoon, Indigo could barely contain her dismay. She angrily crossed out yet another empty road on the map.

"It's like chasing ghosts! Are you sure the tip about Catskill was even valid?"

"Yes, that's one thing we can be sure of," Bowman confirmed wearily. "We have to assume they've moved faster

than we thought and maybe drive further down the 91. If we see no sign, I say we head down to Catskill and set up an ambush on the two most likely routes in. I'm conscious of the fact that we're eating into our reserve fuel. We don't want to have to turn back to Concord to refuel."

Indigo didn't argue. Lying in wait seemed like a much more productive plan than trying road after road when so many routes and side routes were available. She couldn't help but think that Isaac and Ben would do the same if they had also failed to catch up in that first day or two.

They drove on through the darkness. It was quiet in the vehicle. Paul had dozed off and Indigo didn't blame him. Mile after mile of unfamiliar, overgrown road had a hypnotic effect. She folded the map and was about to tuck it down beside her seat to close her eyes when a figure, illuminated by the headlights, darted into the road.

Bowman slammed his foot down on the brakes, sending everyone lurching forward and coming to a stop barely five feet from the person that stood frozen in the middle of the road, hand raised against the blinding glare of the headlights.

"That's Vincent!" yelled Indigo.

Bowman and Indigo threw their doors open and Vincent, his eyes wide in terror, took off towards the trees to their left.

"No! Vincent! It's us!" Indigo called and ran around the vehicle as Bowman sprinted after the boy, tackling him just before he disappeared into the underbrush.

When Indigo arrived, Bowman had wrestled the big teenager into submission.

"It's okay, Vincent," he said to the whimpering kid. "We're friends. Look, it's Indigo. You know Indy, right?"

Vincent struggled again but settled when Indigo leaned over into his field of vision.

"It's me Vincent," she said, putting a hand gently on his brow. "You're okay now. You're with friends."

Bowman started to relax his hold, waving Paul and the soldiers back. It was important to let Indy calm the boy. He'd obviously been through an ordeal. His clothing was torn and stained, and his face streaked with dirt and blood.

"Water!" Indy called, as she helped the boy into a sitting position.

Paul, pale from his rude awakening, ran to the Hummer and returned with a canteen.

Vincent desperately gulped the water until finally Indy had to pull the bottle away from the boy's lips to make him slow down. By the time he'd had his fill, he had calmed enough for her to help him to his feet.

He squinted against the headlights, swaying unsteadily on his feet, and Bowman stepped in when he threatened to topple both himself and Indigo onto the road. In the safety of their arms, the boy suddenly released a torrent of tears and sobs, the fact that he was safe now finally sinking through his shock.

"Come on son, let's get you in the Hummer," Bowman said.

Once they were back in the vehicle, Indy covered him with a blanket and stayed by his side until they arrived in Brattleboro. She desperately wanted to ask him questions but knew it was not the right time.

In Brattleboro they found a motel on the outskirts of town and made camp in the biggest room. Bowman had his men set up their small gas stove and soon they dished up warm beans and bacon. The smell of the cooking food seemed to revive Vincent, and he came out of his fugue state to sit up and eagerly accept the plateful of warm food.

Bit by bit, warmth and lucidity returned to his eyes.

"You want some more son?" asked Bowman.

"Yes please, sir."

Bowman took his plate and returned with more beans and another rasher of bacon.

“After you finish that, maybe you can tell us what happened to you?”

Pain flashed in the kid’s eyes, but he took a breath and nodded.

“Good lad.”

When he was done, Vincent stared at his empty plate for a while, steeling himself to tell the expectant adults everything they wanted to know. When he finally began speaking, his voice was hollow.

He recounted what had happened at the lake and in the days of travel since. Indigo and the others kept their questions to a minimum but were able to confirm all the children were alive and that Max hadn’t been too badly injured, that he had just bled a lot from his bloody nose.

“He was okay the next morning after we stayed in the farmhouse.”

“Thank God,” said Indigo. “Do you think you can tell us what happened on the night of your escape?”

Vincent nodded.

“Well, we were camped for the night and Sam and Cade had been waiting for a moment when one of the slavers was on his own with us. Chris, the youngest. They fought Chris and the rest of us ran, me and Erin and the others. Then the leader started shooting. It was my fault. I panicked and stopped... I didn’t know where he was, but I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Indigo gripped his hand. “You were just trying to protect your friend. No one blames you.”

Vincent shook his head bitterly. “Mason said someone had to die as punishment. He... he made Samuel choose.”

Horror dawned on Indigo’s face as Bowman and Paul exchanged grim looks.

Vincent squeezed his eyes shut. “Samuel had to pick one of us to...” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Indigo quickly wrapped her arms around the shaking boy. “Samuel only did it because Mason forced him to. You were that evil man’s victim, not Samuel’s.”

When Vincent’s sobs subsided, Bowman spoke gently. “What happened after Samuel... made the choice?”

“Mason ordered Chris to do it because he screwed up when he was guarding us. I could tell Chris didn’t want to, but Mason forced him. He marched me into the trees, put the gun to my head. But I begged him not to. I said I’d disappear forever. After what felt like a long time, he lowered the gun and told me to run.”

“Thank God,” Indigo breathed. “How did you get all the way out here?”

“Just started running and didn’t stop,” Vincent rasped. “Followed any road I could find trying to get home to Manchester. Drank rainwater from puddles, ate berries. I don’t even know how long I’ve been going.”

Bowman leaned forward intently. “Vincent, do you remember what road you were traveling on when you escaped? Or any town names you passed?”

Vincent frowned, racking his memory. “We took a lot of back roads... I think one was called Old Church Road or something similar. But I’m not sure, I was in rough shape.”

Paul pulled out a map, looking for clues, as Bowman asked, “Which way did you walk once you got free?”

“East, I think. Just followed any road headed away from where we’d been. No idea where I was, I just moved on instinct.”

His eyelids were drooping with obvious exhaustion. Indigo gave his hand one last squeeze. “You’re so brave, Vincent. Rest now, we’ll talk more later.”

Bowman nodded. “You’ve given us some good leads, son. You’re very brave. As Indigo says, we’ll talk more tomorrow.”

As Vincent slipped into sleep, Bowman and Paul studied the map, searching for Old Church Road. The children were still out there, and Vincent had given them a lifeline. The hunt could continue.

Chapter 10

Luke and Ragland approached the outskirts of Pinecrest with caution. The small town was nestled in a valley between gently rolling hills. Tendrils of smoke rose from the chimney of one building in the middle of the town, but otherwise there was little sign of life.

Many of the buildings appeared abandoned, slowly being reclaimed by nature after years of neglect.

“Looks like things have taken a turn for the worse since I was here. If it wasn’t for that smoke, I’d have said it was abandoned completely,” said Luke.

As they crossed an old bridge on the edge of the town proper, both men’s senses remained on high alert even though Luke had passed through here before without incident. Their last encounter with strangers had nearly ended in tragedy and was followed quickly by the bear attack. If it wasn’t for the urgent need for medical supplies, they would have skipped the town altogether.

“I was hoping that was where the smoke was coming from,” Luke said, pointing to a red brick structure up ahead. “It’s where their town medic resided. Used to be a drugstore.” He looked around at the empty shops. “This place was barely hanging on even before I came through last time—couldn’t have been more than thirty folks here then. Looks like a lot less now.”

They approached the building cautiously. The front door stood ajar, and Ragland called out a greeting as they entered the gloomy interior. At first it appeared vacant, but then a young man emerged from a back room, holding a rifle. Luke guessed he was in his late teens. The youth eyed them suspiciously.

“I don’t know you two. State your business here.”

Luke held up his hand.

“Sorry to barge in unannounced. I’m Luke, I passed through here about a year back. This is my friend Joshua.

We're just travelers seeking some help from the medic."

"Name's Tyler," he said. "My brother Mark and I are all that's left here now. My sister..." His voice trailed off and he shrugged.

They didn't need words to comprehend.

"Sorry for your loss. I remember her, blonde hair and freckles, right?"

Tyler nodded, lowering his gun.

"She was nice. Helped me with a salve for blisters on my feet. Do you have anyone here that knows medicine like she used to?"

"I do. She trained me up good before the cancer got her."

"We're sorry to hear that," Ragland said gently. "If it's not too much trouble, could you take a look at my friend's leg? I've been treating it, but we're out of fresh dressings and I think it's on the verge of infection."

Tyler nodded, apparently having decided they were trustworthy, and motioned for them to follow him into the back room.

It was clearly being used as living quarters, with cots, clothes and cooking items scattered about. Tyler's brother turned out to be around eleven or twelve. The boy, Mark, watched them shyly from his cot, fiddling with a dog-eared paperback.

Tyler examined Luke's leg, frowning at the swollen flesh at the edges of the wound. "That's gotten infected. I'll have to clean it out and suture it. But we've only got local anesthetics, so you'll have to go through some pain."

Luke nodded resignedly. "I appreciate anything you can do. We've been on the road since it happened, so I haven't been able to heal."

Luke told Tyler of their encounter with the bear as he checked the wounds on Ragland's back. They had scabbed over but still looked painful.

“You’re lucky you were wearing thick clothes; the claws didn’t go to deep.” Next, he prodded Ragland’s bruised ribs then put on his stethoscope and placed the cold metal cup on his back. “Take some deep breaths in and out until I say stop.”

Ragland did as he was asked, thinking how funny it was that a kid of no older than sixteen was treating him.

“Lucky again! I don’t think he broke any, and definitely no punctured lung. Not much I can do for the ribs except wrap them for support, if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. Just concentrate on Luke.”

Tyler worked on Luke’s leg with a brisk efficiency, reminding Ragland of doctors in the Before Times. The thought reminded him of Claire and his eyes took on a faraway look as Tyler explained their parents had both been doctors and that his sister had shown a keen interest in medicine even as a kid. She had been seventeen when the Pyongyang flu had devastated North America and was already as knowledgeable as most qualified MDs. Despite Tyler’s youth, it was clear he had learned lots from her.

The local anesthetic took the edge off the pain, but when the stitching needle pierced his raw flesh, Luke gritted his teeth. As efficient as he was, it was over an hour before Tyler finished tending to his leg.

When Tyler tied off the final suture, Luke, who was dripping with sweat, let out a shaky breath. “Thank you. I know that wasn’t easy.”

Tyler gave a tired smile. “Wasn’t my best work, but it should hold up better now.” He handed Luke a small box of tablets. “Take these antibiotics till they are done, three a day with meals. And you should stay off it tomorrow. You’re welcome to stay here while you recuperate.”

Luke flexed his leg gingerly.

“Thanks. Unfortunately, we can’t rest. We’ll be moving on at first light, but I wish we had more to offer for your help. Can we chop firewood or do any repairs on the place before

the sun goes down?" he asked, looking at Ragland, who nodded.

Tyler considered for a moment. "Wood's running low. And there's always some repair work needing done. But you really should rest. I insist."

"Yes, you rest Luke. I'll take care of the wood chopping."

Luke tried to argue but Ragland cut him off.

"I'll handle it," he growled.

"Woodpile's around back," said Tyler. "Logs need some heavy chopping with a bigger axe to fit the stove. Holler if you need a break."

Ragland left the two and went out the back, where he found a messy pile of decent-sized logs that he was pretty sure would have been a struggle for the slender Tyler to split. He pulled off his shirt and got right to work. Not long into the task, he felt like the chore was just what his restless spirit needed. The rhythmic swing of the axe and the force needed to drive it through the wood felt cathartic. He soon fell into a focused rhythm.

An hour later the sun was low on the horizon. With a sheen of sweat on his bare torso and face, he had a decent stack of cut firewood. He placed the final cut log on the stack and then buried the axe in the chopping block as Tyler emerged from the building.

"Wow! Thank you so much. That will keep us going for months. I appreciate it."

"Not a problem."

"Come on inside and wash up, and I'll rustle us up some grub."

Once inside, Ragland washed up at a barrel of water, then Tyler showed them to a small room in the rear with two cots. Luke settled gingerly onto one cot and felt a surge of gratitude. This detour had been an unexpected blessing. Sleeping off the ground with a warm belly would help nourish

them to continue the search for Erin and the others in the morning.

After they dumped their belongings, they went back out to the main room and sat down at the small table where Tyler served them venison stew, hard tack and black tea a short while later.

The hot meal further restored Luke's energy and spirit. He wolfed it down eagerly.

"My compliments to the chef," Luke said with a grin.

Tyler ducked his head modestly. "Just something I threw together from our stores. It's nice having folks to cook for. Gets lonely with just my brother and me."

Luke studied the lanky youth as he gathered up the empty bowls. There was an unspoken sadness about him that went beyond his lost childhood. Luke suspected losing his sister and the weight of responsibility—caring for his younger sibling alone in this unforgiving world—had matured Tyler well beyond his years.

"How long has it been just the two of you?" Luke asked gently.

"Going on eight months now," Tyler said, eyes downcast. "People had been leaving for a while. A few left after my sister died, then it got worse when two died with rabies from a dog attack. No coming back from that, and it put a fear into the rest. The last of them headed for the cities. We buried our sister out back."

Luke explained that he was a Messenger and that Tyler, and his brother would be welcome in Manchester.

"We always need people with skills, and yours is the most important skill of all."

"Maybe. But it's a long way..."

"You're doing right by Mark. That's what your sister and your parents would have wanted, but you won't last long out here alone. Tell you what, when we're done with our...

mission, we'll come back this way and you can travel back with us if you want.”

Tyler managed a small smile.

“We wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“It’s no trouble. You don’t have to commit now. Think about it when we leave, it will be up to a week before we’re back if things go to plan, then you can give us your answer. Deal?”

He stuck out his big hand.

Tyler took it and they shook.

“Deal.”

“Great. Thanks again for the meal.”

“You’re welcome, get some rest. The place will be locked up tight so don’t be jittery. I’ll see you in the morning.”

In the room, Ragland gave Luke a knowing look from his cot.

“You’ve got a soft spot for strays, don’t you?”

Luke chuckled. “Takes one to know one. But you’re right, they remind me a lot of how Isaac and I started out.”

They both fell quiet. Luke’s thoughts drifted to Erin and the other children.

Ragland studied him for a moment. “For what it’s worth, I respect what you and your people have done in the cities. Most people are building walls, while you are actively looking for people to join you. Not many would go to such lengths.”

Luke met his gaze and shrugged.

“We figured it was the only way to grow and not end up like this place,” he said.

Ragland gave an approving grunt and rolled onto his side. Luke followed suit, mind still turning with plans and contingencies for the road ahead. Physical and emotional

exhaustion soon claimed him. Within minutes he slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

*

Morning came and the chill fall air seemed reluctant to relinquish its hold to the sun's warmth. Luke awoke groggy and disoriented, his various pains and aches seeming to sink deeper into his bones overnight. He rolled over and the faint waft of coffee brewing from the open door energized him enough to drag his ass out of bed. He padded barefoot out into the main room.

He found Ragland up and stoking the coals in a potbelly stove. The Drifter pressed a steaming tin cup into Luke's hands.

"Nothing like black coffee to wake the almost dead," Ragland rumbled.

Luke took a bracing sip, letting the bitter warmth thaw him. As the fog cleared from his mind, thoughts of Erin sharpened his focus. They'd caught up a few precious hours of the day they'd lost to the bear, but it wasn't enough, and the urgent need to be on the move swelled inside him.

"Should we get going?" Luke said.

Ragland's head suddenly tilted, and his right hand moved to the knife in his belt. The door to their right opened and a sleep tousled Tyler emerged with his brother not far behind. His friend immediately relaxed. Luke couldn't help but be impressed with Ragland's awareness.

"Twenty minutes," he said.

Tyler insisted they have breakfast before they leave.

"Don't worry, I'll be quick."

He fixed them some slices of buttered bread with a thick, salty cheese. Like the stew from the night before, it was a pleasant change in menu for the two who have been on the road so long.

They ate on the verandah, the bread and cheese washed down with more coffee. Ragland fixed his gaze westward

where the rising sun was just cresting the tree line, setting the autumn leaves aflame with color. Its light illuminated his weathered, thoughtful face.

“It’s beautiful country out here,” the Drifter remarked.

Luke followed his gaze, and nodded, not wanting to spoil the moment with words. He silently appreciated the splendor of the awakening hills and forests that surrounded them. Though nature had reclaimed much, its beauty endured.

“Back in a sec, nature calls,” Ragland excused himself.

“What happened to your hand?” asked Tyler’s brother, Mark.

Tyler elbowed him and Luke grinned.

“It’s okay, he’s just curious.”

He told an abbreviated story of how he lost his hand in the escape from Drake Mountain, ending with the deployment of the virus-laden drones before the destruction of the facility.

Tyler watched him with big eyes. “So that’s why they retreated west? Because we hit ‘em with another virus?”

“Yeah.”

“Yee ha!” he called and clapped. “A win for the good guys!”

“What did we win?” said Ragland, returning after a few minutes.

“Long story. I’ll tell you some time.”

Ragland eyed him.

“I look forward to it.”

“Oh, it’s a doozy!” said Tyler enthusiastically.

Luke and Ragland packed up their gear while Tyler prepared medical supplies for their journey. To Luke’s surprise, the young medic packed his bag with not just bandages, salves and more antibiotics, but also two precious doses of injectable local anesthetics.

“For emergencies,” Tyler said at Luke’s questioning look. “Been saving them. I reckon you two may have more need of them than us.”

Luke was touched by the generosity. “That’s real kind, Tyler. Hopefully we can repay you someday.”

“Well, we hope to see you on the way back,” Tyler replied, and nudged his quiet brother, who smiled shyly. “I think we already made our decision.”

Luke gave them both a high-five.

“Great! You won’t regret it.”

Their farewell was bittersweet. He would have liked to have taken them along, but Luke knew it was time to resume the chase, and they couldn’t afford anyone slowing them down until it was done.

*

That evening as the sun sank below the horizon, Isaac and Ben pedaled their bikes into the small town of Leeds, located just north of Catskill. They had pushed hard over the last two days, covering ground swiftly. The closer they got to Catskill, the more people they began to spy.

With Catskill less than ten miles away, they proceeded cautiously. This region seemed to have grown more populated as it became a hub of illicit activity centered on the slave market. To avoid contact, they kept off the main routes, moving only under cover of darkness.

“Let’s find a place to hole up till nightfall,” Isaac said in a low voice as they coasted down a side street past decaying homes. “Somewhere with a view of the roads leading south.”

They found a two-story house set on a hill at the edge of town. Its height and location overlooking the valley below made it an ideal spot to observe any arrivals along the highway to Catskill. Best of all, it appeared long abandoned.

Leaning their bikes inside the open garage, Isaac and Ben moved stealthily through the house to ensure it was unoccupied. Their footsteps echoed through dusty rooms

stripped of furnishings by scavengers. Satisfied it was deserted, they climbed the creaking stairs to the second floor.

The master bedroom's large window offered a sweeping view down the sloping yard to the highway entrance, where it passed beneath a crumbling overpass. Night was falling rapidly, cloaking the landscape in deepening shadows. For now, the road sat empty and still.

"We made good time," Ben remarked as he laid out the thin bedrolls they'd taken when they'd found the bikes. "Even if the slavers are pushing hard, I doubt they'd reach Catskill yet until the day after next."

Isaac nodded, his gaze fixed on the highway.

"We'll start scoping out the town and markets, I want to see exactly what's going on in this Catskill. When we have the kids back safe, it needs to be shut down. Hard." Ben looked at his friend; he hadn't heard that edge of steel in Isaac's voice for a long time. "That's for after though. When the time comes, we do this fast and smart. Grab the kids and get out. No unnecessary risks. Then we go home and plan."

"So, just to clarify, no heroics tomorrow, no matter what we see? No trying to take down the whole bloody market ourselves tomorrow, right?"

Isaac turned and looked at him with an eyebrow raised.

"It's just you sound pretty fired up, and we may see some things we don't like."

Isaac nodded.

"No heroics. For now, our priority is getting our kids back home safely."

After a solemn pause, Ben nodded, satisfied they were of one mind.

Isaac continued laying out the plan for the next day. It would have been nice to have Luke there with his tactical nous, but in the end the goal was simple. Reconnaissance, observation, and avoid detection.

Chapter 11

The next morning, Bowman and Paul poured over the map laid out on the motel lobby's front desk. Indigo sat with Vincent nearby, speaking in a gentle, reassuring tone. But despite her care, the boy seemed withdrawn and anxious.

Bowman traced his finger along the faint line indicating Old Church Road. It meandered through remote countryside miles from any major town.

"Could be dozens of little dirt lanes he mistook for that," Paul said, frowning. "Finding the right one will be pure guesswork."

Bowman nodded grimly. "Unfortunately, it's our only lead right now. Given the fuel situation, I think we'll just have to explore the most obvious route, and if we don't see any sign of them, continue to Catskill."

He turned his attention to Vincent. "Son, I know this won't be easy, but we need you to try and remember any landmarks you saw after escaping. Anything that might help pin down the location."

Vincent tensed, shaking his head adamantly. "I can't... I don't wanna go back there." His voice trembled. "Just let me stay here."

Indigo exchanged an anguished look with Bowman. She hated the idea of forcing the boy to relive the trauma he'd gone through, but there was no other way.

Bowman crouched to meet Vincent's fearful gaze. "I understand why you're scared to go back. No one blames you. But your friends are still out there, and we have to try and find them."

When Vincent just stared at the floor, Indigo added gently, "We won't let anyone hurt you again. But they need your help, Vincent. Can you try for their sake?"

The boy sat in tormented silence. Then finally he gave a small, reluctant nod.

“O-kay. I’ll try.”

They packed quickly, then loaded up in the Hummer. Vincent rode up front, nervously scanning the landscape as they started along the highway. Bowman tried to focus him with specific questions.

“When you got away, do you remember which way the sun set that night?”

Vincent thought hard. “On my right, I think.”

Bowman nodded. “Good, that confirms you went east. Now think, were there any major roads you crossed?”

Vincent’s face scrunched in concentration before he shook his head helplessly.

Bowman patted his shoulder. “No problem, you’re doing fine. Smaller details now. Remember any rivers, farms, even just a meadow or lone big tree?”

They drove the route slowly. Vincent hadn’t taken any turns from the road they’d been on and gradually began recognizing subtle landmarks—a twisted oak, an old barn. Each clue brought them incrementally closer to the spot where he’d escaped.

By late afternoon, however, Vincent was growing increasingly agitated. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t remember anymore,” he said desperately. “Everything looks the same now.”

Sensing his rising panic, Indigo tried to reassure him. “It’s alright, you’ve done really well. Let’s take a break.”

Bowman pulled over a few minutes later after they crossed a small bridge over a creek. They walked down to the shore of the creek to rest and refill their water. The sound of the burbling water seemed to ease Vincent’s frayed nerves somewhat, and he sat on the bank gazing vacantly downstream.

Indigo settled beside him. “I know how awful this is for you,” she said gently. “But we’re here with you. It’ll all be over soon.”

“Will it?” Vincent replied hollowly, eyes still fixed in the distance. “He put a gun against my neck... I thought I was going to die. Maybe I should have.”

Indigo’s heart ached for him. No child should carry such pain. On impulse, she reached out and took his hand.

“When I was about your age, I went through something terrible too. I was kidnapped and held captive.”

Vincent turned to look at her properly for the first time since they’d found him.

Indigo gave a sad smile and nodded.

“It’s how I met Isaac and Luke. They saved my life that day. So, I truly understand a little of what you’re feeling. It took me a long time to stop being afraid. But eventually, with help, I found a way to put it behind me.” She squeezed his hand. “You will too, Vincent. I promise.”

Vincent blinked back sudden tears, then surprised Indigo by throwing his arms around her in a fierce hug. All the fear and anguish he’d been bottling up seemed to pour out of him.

“I’m trying, but I can’t stop thinking about it,” he sobbed into her shoulder.

“I know, I know,” she soothed, holding him as he wept. “But it will get better, I promise.”

After a few minutes, when Vincent had cried himself out, he sat up and squared his shoulders with new resolve. “Okay. I’m ready to try again.”

Lifted by the breakthrough, they drove on as the afternoon waned. Vincent gradually became more animated, pointing out familiar markers that slowly painted a picture of the path he’d stumbled along in his traumatized flight.

Finally, at a lonely crossroads, Vincent sat bolt upright. “That’s it! The yard where we camped. And over there, that’s where Chris took me...”

Bowman’s pulse quickened. Could this be it? He turned the vehicle into the freight yard.

"There! That's where the campfire was. You can see it."

Bowman pulled up the Hummer near the cold fire and pulled over. As they got out of the vehicle, Vincent looked around, then grew very still, color draining from his face.

Bowman put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay, son?"

Looking as though he might be sick, Vincent took a few deep breaths. "Y-yeah. It's just... a lot to come back here."

Bowman and his men reconnoitered the area, while Vincent told Indigo and Paul exactly what had happened that evening.

"We tried to escape while Mason and Caleb were away from the camp. Nearly made it too, but they stopped us over there," he said, pointing at the break in the fence. "Mason grabbed Peace and was going to shoot her if Samuel didn't make the choice."

Indy saw Paul stiffen at the mention of his niece and put a comforting hand on his arm.

"So, no one else got hurt?"

"No. Not before I ran away anyway."

Bowman returned.

"We found prints in the mud over there, plenty of them. Looks like they continued west along this road. Were you always on the road Vincent?"

"No sir, sometimes he made us walk in the woods, but always close to the path of the road."

"Okay." He turned to Indigo. "Well, we are a day and a half behind. I say we continue west, then turn south on the 91 even if we see no sign of them."

"Makes sense."

They had a quick meal then drove on, every last person in the Hummer on high alert for any sign of the party they were pursuing.

*

Luke and Ragland took one last look at Pinecrest as they crested the rise that morning. With their bodies nourished, and Luke's wounds sutured and wrapped tightly, they were ready to resume the chase.

"That worked out well," said Ragland.

"Sure did. I owe that kid."

Luke set a brisk pace, ignoring the dull ache in his thigh, and Ragland matched him stride for stride, knowing it was pointless asking Luke to slow down.

As the sun climbed overhead, Luke estimated they were less than two days out of Catskill if they kept up this pace. They stopped briefly for lunch, then moved on again.

By early afternoon, the landscape changed as the hills gave way to flatter wooded plains. In the distance, Luke spotted a weathered signpost marking the New York state border. It filled him with bittersweet nostalgia to be crossing into New York again after so long away. He recalled family trips to the Big Apple when he was young, dazzled by the towering skyscrapers and neon billboards. He wondered what it was like now.

They pressed on as the sun dipped lower, weariness setting in as the day waned. The woods gradually gave way to open fields lined with crumbling stone walls, remnants of the farms and homesteads that once dotted this countryside.

Luke studied the terrain with a practiced eye. "We should come to the Hudson soon if we keep southwest," he told Ragland. "Then we can follow the river right into Catskill."

Sure enough, within the hour the trees fell away, and they caught sight of sunlight glinting off broad waters in the distance. As they drew nearer, the mighty Hudson came into view, flowing southward through the vibrant patchwork of autumn hills.

They soon reached an isolated beach covered in smooth round stones washed up over years of the river's

tireless passage. As Luke refilled their canteens, Ragland scouted the shoreline until he found a secluded clearing tucked under riverside willows.

“This’ll make a good spot to camp,” Ragland called. Luke joined him and nodded in approval at the sheltered site.

“Well chosen,” Luke said. “No wonder you’ve survived solo out in the wilderness so long—you have a real gift for this.”

Ragland gave a modest shrug as they slung down their packs. “Just got accustomed to keeping my eyes and ears open. A useful skill to cultivate these days.”

They soon had a modest camp established. It was warm and they decided they wouldn’t risk a fire. New York was by far the most populous state in the After Days and they didn’t want to draw any unwanted attention.

In the fading light, they finished a meal of hard tack and jerky that Tyler had supplied them when Luke heard a familiar but long unheard sound overhead. He looked at Ragland, whose eyes had widened, and they both sprang to their feet and ran out from under the cover of the trees and onto the shore, looking up into the sky.

It was Luke that spotted the jet first and jabbed a finger at the winking lights in the sky. Though just a small, dark silhouette against the vivid sunset sky, Luke recognized the distinctive shape.

“It’s a passenger jet!”

“Maybe.”

“Has to be Chinese. How crazy is that? We’re living the apocalypse and there they are taking joy rides overhead.”

“Let’s hope that’s all it is,” Ragland muttered, brows drawn together. “Don’t need them stirring up trouble out here again.”

They watched until the plane disappeared over the western horizon before returning to their makeshift camp. Neither spoke much after that. Both men were exhausted from

their walking that day, and spying the plane left them both feeling disconcerted.

Slumber did not come easy for Luke. For the first time in days, his mind turned from Erin and the other children to the plane. Where had the flight originated? Canada? Or from further afield. Maybe Europe? That thought led to another long unanswered question—what had happened to the rest of the world? Had the UK and other western powers been left unscathed by the Pyongyang flu?

If so, they had certainly not intervened as far as he knew. If they had protested the attack, were relations now normalizing enough to resume flights? The possibility left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He let it alone after a while. Too many questions and no answers meant a person could go crazy dwelling on them.

When he finally fell asleep, Luke's dreams were filled with elusive figures he was never quite able to catch up to.

Chapter 12

Dusk slowly settled over the forest, the last slanting rays of sunlight filtering through the canopy in hazy beams. Becky added a few more branches to the campfire, building up the flames as the group of refugees gathered around its warmth. The smell of roasting rabbit, caught earlier that day, filled the air, eliciting grumbles of hungry anticipation.

Becky rotated the spit, ensuring their hard-won prize was cooked evenly. As de facto leader of this beleaguered band, she felt it her duty to see their basic needs were provided for on the long road to Manchester. It was a heavy responsibility, but one she was determined to see through, as Luke would have.

When the meat was at last ready, she divided it into modest portions on the mismatched tin plates they carried. It was a meager meal, but a welcome respite from days of foraging on whatever nuts, roots and berries the woods provided. The group ate gratefully, faces gaunt and worn, but spirits lifted by full bellies.

As they settled in for the night, Becky volunteered for the first watch. Perched on a fallen log, rifle resting across her knees, she gazed at the rising moon through breaks in the branches. Despite her best efforts to remain upbeat, inner turmoil gnawed at her constantly, thoughts of Luke and Erin never far away from the front of her mind.

She glanced over at the huddled shapes around the fire, taking comfort from their slow breathing. At least these people could rest easy now, after surviving such pain. Her shepherding had seen them this far safely, and one more day of travel should see them home in Manchester.

The forests of New Hampshire were notoriously still at night, so when a faint droning hum reached Becky's ears, she instinctively froze, every sense straining to identify it. Animals didn't make such continuous sounds, and human voices carried differently on the wind. She rose slowly, rifle raised, peering upward through the trees.

There—a flicker of movement, gone again. Becky swept her flashlight beam in a wide arc across the trees under the night sky as the droning grew louder. Nothing.

Around the campfire, her companions still slumbered peacefully. Becky stood up on shaky legs when she realized what the sound was. As if in a trance she walked away from the camp and the trees and looked skyward. There was no mistaking the jet, its navigation lights flickering and winking as it passed high overhead.

Becky watched it move across the sky, feeling lightheaded. It was the first aircraft she had seen since the Fall over a decade ago. She'd thought the sky would remain empty for the rest of her days. Yet the implications of this event were as frightening as they were fascinating.

Her adult companions began to stir, roused by the unusual noise. They gasped and pointed into the sky, and Becky did her best to calm them, insisting it was nothing to worry about for now. Inwardly though, her mind raced with questions. She yearned to tell Luke, to get his take on what this might mean for the frail equilibrium they'd all carved out.

When it had disappeared, Becky continued to gaze up at the now-empty sky. She felt unsettled but found its passing had also rekindled a small spark of hope. Maybe it wasn't of Chinese origin? Perhaps they weren't as alone or forsaken as she'd come to accept.

*

In the dilapidated cabin they called home, Liam and Ethan Prescott passed a jar of moonshine back and forth as they sought relief from the day's boredom. The twins had lived this way for years, holing up in the woods of upstate New York with their older brother Jackson. Civilization held no appeal to the rough trio, and they preferred to keep to their violent, self-reliant and opportune ways.

Liam took a long swig of moonshine then let out an enormous belch. "When's Jackson gettin' back with some grub? I'm starvin'!"

Ethan shrugged lazily from where he sat cleaning his rifle. “Could be hours still. You know he won’t come back ‘til he gets something.”

Their brother was the best hunter among them. He wouldn’t return to the cabin empty-handed, even if it meant spending all night tracking a deer through the woods.

Liam grumbled incoherently and tipped the jar for another gulp. He was about to pass it back when static suddenly crackled from their two-way radio.

“Jackson? That you?” Ethan grabbed the radio just as Jackson’s excited voice blurted through the speaker.

“Get movin’ boys, we got fresh meat! Saw a military-lookin’ vehicle go past, headin’ towards town. Least four men. They look like they mean business, so they’ll have guns. And I can’t swear it, but I think I saw a woman too. Haul ass and get that roadblock set up! Shoot the men, but if there is a girl, don’t touch a hair on her head.”

The twins froze for a split-second, exchanging a hungry look. Then they exploded into action, nearly crashing into each other in their haste to grab rifles and gear. This could be the first decent prize to come their way in months.

“We’re on the way!” Ethan radioed before they charged from the cabin towards the dirt track that led to Stockport Road.

The twins hustled through the woods, jeans snagging on brambles as they took the winding path at reckless speed. When they reached the road, panting heavily, they began wrestling the pre-cut logs they had stored there into position, stretching them across the narrow lane to form a barricade.

It was an ideal spot for an ambush. The deep drainage ditches flanking the road would provide good cover. They’d done this before to waylay travelers for supplies, but never nabbed such a high-value target.

After double-checking the barricade was secure, Ethan radioed, “In position!”

“Good, they’ll be on you any second.”

The brothers had sunk into the ditch on the south side of the road to wait, rifles at the ready. The underbrush was high enough to conceal them completely from view. Adrenaline spiked through Ethan's system, setting his hands trembling faintly. He lived for these moments, the thrill of hastily laid traps and wild risks.

Liam flashed a wolfish grin next to him, seeming to read his thoughts. It had been too long since they'd had a woman around to entertain themselves with. The notion put an eager gleam in Liam's eye.

In the distance, the low rumble of a large engine began growing louder, churning through the late afternoon air. Ethan nudged his brother and nodded towards the bend in the road where the vehicle would first appear. "Get ready, here they come!"

As the engine noise swelled, the blunt snout of a vehicle finally came around the curve. For a beat or two, Ethan didn't think the driver would see the barricade, but at the last second the Hummer skidded to a hard stop just yards from the barricade, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Now!" Ethan yelled. The twins vaulted from cover and began firing at the windows on the right side of the vehicle. One of Liam's shots took a man in the head and there was muffled shouting from inside.

Ethan shot another in the shoulder as his gun swung towards them. The element of surprise had been exhausted and doors on the other side of the Hummer burst open as armed occupants evacuated and began returning fire.

The twins ducked down behind a log and the shots whizzed harmlessly over their heads.

"Drop your weapons and come out with your hands up!" yelled Liam. He was answered by a burst of automatic gunfire that shredded the top of the log they were hiding behind. Both men swore, hunkering down lower.

"Did you see how many?" Ethan whispered.

"Four or five, I think."

“Shit! Where is Jackson, we’re going to need him if they’re all armed.”

“Drop the guns or the next one drops you!” said a gruff voice behind them.

The twins froze in disbelief, their ambush ruined before it even began. The man’s tone of cold confidence made it abundantly clear he wasn’t playing games. This hadn’t gone to plan at all.

“Very slowly, both of you drop your weapons and put your hands behind your head.”

Ethan risked a glance at their radio but resisted reaching for it. No sense letting this hardened soldier hear Jackson’s voice too and know their exact numbers. For now, they were on their own. They both put their hands behind their heads as the man rushed forward. He cracked Ethan on the back of his head with his rifle butt and roughly pulled Liam to his feet by the neck of his jacket and swung him around as his brother moaned on the ground.

Bowman’s gaze was fierce as he shoved the still hot muzzle of his gun under the scruffy man’s chin. Liam’s eyes widened in fear and something else. Surprise. The man in front of him had graying hair. He was at least forty.

“You shot two of my men, you have exactly ten seconds to tell me what I need to know.”

Back at the Hummer, Bowman’s remaining man had opened the bullet-riddled doors and was checking on his fellow soldiers. Paul, Indigo and Vincent were on the other side of the vehicle waiting for the all-clear from Bowman.

Liam’s guts twisted as he realized how badly they’d miscalculated. These were no hapless travelers to be easily cowed and looted. The man in front of him was wearing US military fatigues and he and his brother had possibly just killed two of his men.

Bowman’s voice was deadly quiet. “Is it just you two? Or are there more?”

“N-no, just us,” Liam managed.

The leader stared him down, as if gauging his truthfulness. In those endless seconds, Liam sensed their fate balancing on a knife's edge. The man's stony expression offered no clues.

The old man glanced up to his man at the Hummer. The soldier looked back at him and shook his head. Bowman's face transformed into a mask of seething rage. His jaw clenched so tightly that the veins on his temples throbbed visibly.

Liam saw death in those eyes.

Bowman's finger squeezed the trigger, just as the brother on the ground beneath them, driven by desperation and survival instinct, thrust a knife he had pulled from his boot upwards into the soldier's groin.

Bowman's gun slipped as he reeled away, and his shot took off Liam's ear instead of his head. The soldier's ears rang with the man's screams of agony, and he quickly brought his gun to bear on the one who had stabbed him and was now scrambling to his feet with the bloody knife and murder in his eyes.

His second shot took the man between the eyes, but before he could take more than a wobbly step after the now earless thug, the roar of a diesel motor drowned out all else. Helpless to even yell a warning, Bowman, who didn't realize that the knife had severed an artery, watched in horror as a rusty, shoddily armored F100 pickup screamed around the bend and plowed into the rear of the Hummer, crushing Bowman's remaining man in a vice of hot metal and sending the vehicle careening forward at an angle—straight into the civilians.

"Nooo!" Bowman yelled, slipping in his own blood as he attempted to run to them. On his hands and knees, he tried to get up as his field of vision narrowed, almost like an old black-and-white television screen being switched off.

The last thing he registered was a big man with thin, straggly hair putting the muzzle of a shotgun against his forehead.

Chapter 13

Indigo was shocked from unconsciousness by the thunderclap of a nearby shotgun blast. Closer, the hot ticking of cooling metal was accompanied by soft moaning. She turned her head only to meet the open, sightless eyes of Paul, her friend's legs and torso crushed under the collapsed wheel arch of the Humvee.

She clapped a hand over her mouth to suppress the moan of distress.

Oh, Paul!

Something heavy lay across her left leg. It was Vincent. He was bleeding heavily from the temple, dazed and moaning.

“Fucker shot my ear off!” someone screeched from the other side of the wreck.

“Well, he’s dead now Liam, so shut the hell up till we make sure they’re all dead!”

“Where’s Ethan!?” sobbed the other voice, apparently already knowing the answer.

“He’s dead.”

Liam began to cry in earnest.

Indigo knew time was of the essence now. She quickly scrambled out from under Vincent and began to try and drag him closer to the wrecked Hummer.

“Vincent,” she whispered, desperately. “You have to be super quiet. Get close under the truck and pretend you’re dead.”

The dazed boy winced as she tugged at him, and she saw that his left hand was hanging at an unnatural angle.

“Please Vincent, I know it hurts. Just try.”

Footsteps and voices were closing in on the other side of the vehicle, and with two desperate heaves, she pulled the boy, who had mercifully lost consciousness, under the wreck

so that only his leg and torso were visible, and then scrambled out.

She crawled over to Paul, finally allowing emotion at his loss to the surface, and cried softly as she brushed her hands gently down over his eyes to close them.

“Watch yourself,” said a voice, now near the front of the wrecked Hummer.

Indigo kissed Paul’s forehead and wobbled to her feet just as a big man with a shotgun appeared, followed by a second man, who was slightly shorter with bad teeth. He was weeping and had a bloody hand clamped over his ear.

“You killed them, you bastards!” Indigo sobbed, not needing to fake the grief and anger that threatened to overwhelm her. She charged at the big man in front.

He laughed and stepped to the side holding his weapon out of reach, effortlessly sweeping her up with his free arm.

“Easy girl!” he said, gripping her tightly. He gave a cursory glance over the bodies. Both men had been crushed under the truck. “Aww, don’t worry, we’ll look after you.”

She punched him in the side of the head, and he threw her to the ground and put a boot on her chest.

“Liam, tie her hands behind her back. She’s a feisty one.”

“Don’t have no rope,” the twin said miserably, his hand still nursing the wound where his ear had been.

“In the truck, dummy! And don’t be all day.”

Indigo stopped struggling. Her ploy had worked. She just had to hope Vincent didn’t wake up and make noise before they took her wherever they were taking her.

Liam rummaged through the bed of the battered pickup, letting out a string of curses as he searched for something to bind the girl’s hands.

“Come on, we ain’t got all day!” Jackson yelled impatiently.

Finally, Liam's hand closed around a coil of fraying rope. He pulled it out and stalked over to where the girl lay pinned under Jackson's boot. Her eyes were hard with defiance as Liam roughly hauled her up and wrenched her arms behind her back. He looped the rope around her slim wrists and cinched it tight.

"There, that oughta hold her." Liam gave the rope a sharp jerk to emphasize his point.

Indigo winced as the coarse fibers dug into her skin but didn't make a sound. Jackson nodded in approval.

"Good. Now let's load up and get out of here in case there are any more soldier boys coming this way."

Jackson headed towards his truck, the girl stumbling along in front of him. Indy took in the carnage, the sight of Bowman's body shocking her anew. Liam brought up the rear, pressing his blood-soaked hand against the mangled remains of his ear to try and staunch the flow of blood.

He'd never felt more miserable in his whole life. He'd lost his beloved twin brother. The person he'd never spent a waking hour apart from in his entire nineteen years. As distraught over the death as he was, that gaping hole in his life hadn't even fully sunk in yet, because the pain of his missing ear was so horrific. It throbbed like a knife blade through his head with every heartbeat.

Jackson pushed the girl down, so she was sitting on the road.

"Don't move or I'll shoot your nose off."

Indigo nodded. It was best to be compliant until she could find a way out of the mess she was in.

Approaching the truck, Jackson heard a low constant hiss in the engine bay, along with a small amount of steam leaking from the reinforced grill at the front.

"Don't fucking tell me..." he grated before yanking open the driver's side door. He leaned in and turned the key. The engine whined and coughed but didn't catch. Swearing under his breath, Jackson tried again with the same result.

“Damn it all, now the piece of shit won’t start!” he fumed, slamming a fist against the steering wheel. He popped the hood and Liam shuffled over to open it, adding to his woes by burning his fingers in the process. After a minute he slammed it back down in disgust.

“A metal rod pierced the radiator and smashed the fan motor. Gonna need a lot of work.”

Jackson spat out a string of expletives. Apart from the obvious prize of the beautiful woman, this day was going from bad to worse.

He scowled as he considered their options. The cabin was a mile’s hike through rugged woods. He was damned if he was leaving the deer he’d killed for bobcats or dogs though.

“No choice but to walk it,” Jackson finally growled. “But I’m taking a leg off that deer for you to carry.”

Liam began to moan but Jackson cut him off.

“You want to eat tonight!?”

After a quick, efficient butchering, he slung the bloody hind leg over Liam’s shoulders and, making sure Indigo was watching him, bent over and wiped his hands on one of the dead soldiers. Tears filled her eyes, and she turned away.

“We’ll come back for their guns tomorrow. Good haul.”

He pulled Indigo to her feet and gave her a shove down the dirt track leading away from the road. “Get movin’.”

She shot him a scathing look but started walking, hands still bound behind her back. Jackson followed close behind, rifle held at the ready. Liam brought up the rear, straining under the weight of the animal’s hind leg, his blood flowing freely and mingling with that of the deer as it spattered onto the track.

They set off into the woods as the sun sank on the horizon. Jackson kept a brisk pace, eager to get the girl secured before full darkness fell. The path twisted through stands of oak and maple, past mossy boulders and fallen logs.

Near the end of their hike, he noticed the girl's steps becoming more uneven, her shoulders slumping with fatigue. He jabbed her in the back with the tip of his rifle.

"Keep moving, unless you want me to drag you the rest of the way."

Indigo stumbled but kept walking, breathing in labored puffs. She knew she was suffering from a concussion and obviously shock too, but she was determined not to be carried by the murderous thug. A few times her foot caught on rocks or roots protruding from the path, and she nearly fell, barely managing to catch herself. Behind, Liam's steps faltered too as pain and blood loss wore him down.

Finally, the slumped roofline of the cabin came into view through the trees. Jackson breathed a sigh of relief. Home, and not a moment too soon.

He marched the girl up onto the rickety porch and shouldered the door open. The interior was dim, illuminated only by shafts of fading sunlight piercing the grimy windows. He shoved the girl towards the small bedroom in back.

"Get in there. Don't even think about trying anything."

As soon as she was inside, he slammed the door and shot the bolt home. It was a sturdy oak door with a heavy crossbeam. She wasn't going anywhere.

Liam dropped the meat in the kitchen and staggered over to their kitchen table, collapsing onto one of the mismatched chairs with a groan. Fresh blood still seeped from his wound.

Jackson shook his head. "Let me get a fire going, then I'll see what I can do about patching you up."

He soon had a blaze crackling in the pot-bellied stove they used for heating. Once the flames were hot, he grabbed a stainless-steel spatula from the kitchen and held the flat end of it over the fire. The scent of scorched metal soon filled the cabin.

After several minutes the spatula was glowing red-hot. Jackson pulled it from the flames, the metal hissing and

smoking.

"No," whined Liam, jumping from the chair and pushing it between him and his brother.

"I know it's gonna hurt like a bitch, but it'll stop the bleeding and stop it getting infected," he told Liam. "I need you to be brave, little brother. Okay?"

"Can't you just cover it with bandages?"

"No. I need you to be a man, Liam! It'll only hurt for a little while. I promise."

Apparently reassured by the kind, calm tone, unlike the one his volatile brother normally used when speaking to him, Liam nodded.

"Good, now sit in the chair and look out the window at the sunset."

The pale and sweating Liam did as he was told but couldn't help crying softly as Jackson approached with the glowing kitchen utensil.

Jackson gripped the other side of his head with his free hand, then pressed the searing metal against the ravaged flesh of his brother's ear. The blood-curdling shriek split the air as his flesh sizzled. The stench was nauseating.

After what seemed an eternity, Jackson pulled the spatula away. Panting and whimpering, Liam slumped forward in his chair, unconscious.

In the bedroom, Indigo flinched at the agonized screams, bile rising in her throat when the odor of burning flesh reached her nose. She sagged back against the wall, mind racing as she tried to think of some means of escape. But trussed up as she was in this remote cabin, the situation seemed hopeless.

Exhausted by the day's events, she deliberately avoided thinking about what the men might have planned for her, and eventually slid down the wall. As the one small, grimy window darkened with the fall of night, she closed her eyes and fell into an exhausted sleep.

When she awoke, Indigo was surprised to see it was morning. Somehow, she had been left unbothered and had slept right through the night. She tested the ropes on her wrists, but there was no give.

She sagged back against the wall, her sleep-refreshed mind now churning over escape scenarios. All of them involved her being untied; until that happened, she was helpless.

The next hour passed in agonizing limbo until she heard the creaking of floorboards and low conversation in the other room. At last came the sound she both craved and dreaded: the door's lock sliding back. She looked up as Jackson entered.

"Rise and shine, hottie. Time to have some fun. Well, breakfast first, then fun."

He gripped her upper arm then hoisted her to her feet. She stood tense as wire, weighing her options. Make a break for it or be passive and wait? She chose the latter but met Jackson's dark gaze with a steel in her own eyes.

Jackson's mouth curved in a predator's grin. Before she could react, he swept her legs out from under her with a swipe of his boot, sending her crashing to the floorboards. Her head cracked painfully on impact.

"You got spirit, I'll give you that," Jackson remarked casually, as if discussing the weather. "But it won't help you none. You belong to me now. Now, get up!"

He pulled her to her feet again and pushed her towards the door.

"Oh, what about your brother? Won't he have something to say about that?" she asked loud enough that the other man would hear.

Jackson simply laughed.

"No, he won't, will you Liam?"

"No sir, Jackson," the younger brother said from the kitchen. They entered the main room where he was spooning

what looked like stew into three bowls on the bench. Unbidden, her stomach began to growl at the delicious aroma.

The older man guided her to a chair at the table and took the one next to her as his brother brought the bowls over.

“Smells good Liam, thanks for cooking it,” said Indigo.

He smiled weakly as he placed the steaming bowl in front of her and set a spoon by it. He had a long bandage wrapped around his head and wounded ear so many times that it gave his head a misshapen aspect. Pain was etched on his pale face and his eyes were puffy from the battering he’d taken.

One of the ideas she’d come up with when she awoke was to try and drive a wedge between the brothers, but the defeated look in his eyes told her it was a forlorn hope.

“Eat up,” said Jackson.

“How do you propose I do that with my hands tied behind my back?” she asked sarcastically.

He responded by cuffing her temple with the back of his hand hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

“Watch your tone missy. Liam, untie her.”

Liam shuffled over and unraveled the ropes.

Knowing she’d need all the strength she could muster in the next few hours, she mumbled her thanks and picked up the spoon. She began eating the stew. It tasted as good as it smelled, but she suppressed the urge to wolf it down and instead ate slowly.

“That’s the spirit,” said Jackson, with a shark-like grin. Then, mirroring her own thoughts, but for vastly different reasons. “You’re gonna need all your strength.”

Indigo had stretched her meal out as long as she could, but eventually Jackson had lost patience and ordered her to stand up before she’d finished. He gripped her arm and guided her towards the front door into the yard. He had forgotten, or maybe thought it wasn’t necessary, to tie her hands again.

She felt a surge of adrenaline at the oversight and did her best to control it. She had one shot at avoiding what would inevitably be a harrowing experience and possibly death at the hands of a man who was no more than a savage.

Jackson kicked the door open and pushed her out, still holding her upper arm before pulling her to a halt.

“You stay inside until I’ve finished,” he said to his brother, who had made to follow. “I’ll call you when it’s your turn. In the meantime, clean up this shithole.”

Liam, still downcast, nodded briefly and met Indigo’s eyes before he pulled it closed. She couldn’t be sure, but Indigo thought she saw a flash of pity in that gaze.

Jackson guided her down the steps and into the yard and started pushing her towards an old mattress that sat by a firepit. Around the pit were mismatched chairs and empty beer bottles and cans scattered on the ground.

Indigo scanned the yard and surrounding woods, searching for a way out or for anything she might be able to use to escape. Her gaze landed on a shed tucked against the tree line fifty feet beyond the firepit. Tools and assorted junk were visible through its open door.

That was her target. Now she just had to get away from him long enough to grab something to use as a weapon.

They were halfway across the yard when Indigo abruptly dropped like a stone. Jackson stumbled, caught off guard by her sudden dead weight. In the same instant, Indigo scissored her legs, sweeping Jackson’s out from under him. He crashed down with a bellow of rage.

Not wasting a second, Indigo leapt up and sprinted for the shed.

“Get back here!” Jackson roared, already gaining his feet.

Heart pounding in terror, Indigo tore across the yard and briefly considered running straight into the woods. She dismissed the idea just as quickly. These men had guns and

were familiar with their surroundings. No, she had to end this. Now.

She ran into the shed and began frantically rooting through dusty bottles and tools. Her hand closed on something promising—a rusted hatchet.

Heavy footsteps approached as Jackson lumbered towards the shed. Indigo burst out swinging, startling him to a skidding halt. She brandished the axe in front of her.

“Back off, asshole!”

Jackson quickly got over his initial surprise, and snorted.

“That won’t save you, girlie.”

He lunged at her, and Indigo swung wildly. The blade grazed his forearm where the bone is closest to the surface, and he fell back with a hiss of pain.

“You’ll pay for that,” he spat.

“Not today buddy. Now I’m going to walk away and-”

“Liam! Fetch my shotgun!” he screamed, interrupting her.

Indigo’s mind raced. She couldn’t hold them off if Liam brought out a shotgun. She had to run. If she could just make it across the clearing...

The door of the cabin rattled open, and Indigo glanced towards it. It was the distraction Jackson had been waiting for. Without uttering a sound, he charged at her. Indigo felt the breath whoosh out of her as his shoulder struck her chest. She was launched into the air and sent crashing to the long grass, the rusted axe flying from her grasp.

Her vision swam as the shadow of her assailant loomed over her. She tried to raise her head as he straddled her, but he grabbed her chin and balled his other hand into a fist, raising it.

Indigo squeezed her eyes closed and pictured Isaac holding their son as she waited for the knockout blow. An

instant later, a loud burst of gunfire shocked them open in time to see Jackson arch his back in agony, his surprised face staring into the sky before he toppled onto her, his final hot breath over her face, causing her to gag.

There was a yelp of anguish from the direction of the cabin and the sound of rushing footsteps before another burst of gunfire rent the air.

“Stop or I’ll shoot you too,” yelled a determined voice.

Indigo pushed the heavy body off her and struggled to her feet as Vincent approached, an automatic rifle aimed at Liam. The brother, with his head heavily bandaged hadn’t made out what Jackson had yelled about the shotgun and had rushed out of the cabin without it. He now stood with his empty hands high in the air.

Vincent, face set with determination, ordered him to lie face down on the ground.

Indigo, noting the way the gun trembled in his one-handed grip, put a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Vincent. Great job. I’ll take it, if you like?”

He nodded and handed the weapon to her. It was clear that the kid was still in pain from the violence the afternoon before, with blood streaking his face and his broken wrist displaying unpleasant shades of purple and green. To make matters worse, he now had a burn on the back of his forearm—the very arm he’d broken and had to use to support the gun while aiming.

“What are we going to do with him?” Vincent asked, pointing at Liam, who had succumbed to a fresh bout of weeping over another fallen brother.

Indigo felt no sympathy for him.

“Nothing,” she said, then addressed the man on the ground. “Listen to me very carefully Liam. We are going to wash up but one of us will be watching you at all times. If you so much as move a hair, we will shoot you in the back, understand?”

He nodded.

“I said, do you understand?!”

“Yes!”

Indigo nodded to Vincent, who followed her as she headed inside.

Thirty minutes later they emerged, most of the blood and grime washed from their faces and arms. Indigo had torn an old shirt into strips to bandage Vincent’s wrist tightly and had then fashioned a sling from a faded pillowcase.

Liam was exactly where they had left him. She stood over him with the automatic rifle slung over her shoulder and the shotgun in her hands. Vincent had a threadbare backpack on his back which Indigo had packed with meagre supplies and some water she was able to pilfer from the cabin.

“We’re leaving now Liam. I want you to stay on your stomach until the sun is high in the sky. If you come after us, I will shoot you in the face, got it?”

“Yes Ma’am. I promise I will. I mean I won’t... I - I won’t come after you!”

“Good.”

With that, she nodded to Vincent, and they made their way out of the yard. With the loss of Bowman, his men and the Hummer, there was now no way to meaningfully continue the hunt for the children. That fact, coupled with Vincent needing medical attention for his arm, prompted Indigo to make the difficult but inevitable decision to turn for home. It was now up to Isaac and Ben to bring the children back.

*

Isaac and Ben lay prone in the overgrown field, spying on the gates of Catskill in the bright sun. The Englishman nudged Isaac with his elbow and when he turned his head, pulled out a small pair of brightly colored binoculars from under his shirt.

Isaac’s eyes widened.

“Where the H did you get those?”

Ben grinned.

“Bike shop, along with the bedrolls. They’re more toys really, but they do work.”

“Amazing,” Isaac said, accepting them gratefully and focusing them on the town below.

At some point, walls had been built around most of Catskill. It was uneven, and rough, but looked to be about ten feet tall at its lowest points and was constructed of what looked like anything the inhabitants could get their hands on. In the section they were viewing, they could make out cars, bricks, wire, rocks, and furniture.

The gate was as wide as the main street and was open but well-guarded.

“Looks like they’ve got armed people on the walls too,” Isaac murmured, adjusting the focus. “I count maybe five men that I can see, all with rifles, but they’re fairly spread out.”

Isaac noted the way the men paced along the top of the walls with an air of bored routine. His gaze went back to the gate. A steady stream of scruffy, dangerous-looking people passed in and out, some on foot, some on horses or horse-drawn wagons. From their vantage, it was impossible to guess the town’s population, but the activity suggested it was thriving.

“We need to get inside to scout. I want to see where they keep the kids they abduct, in case we miss them on the way in,” Isaac said. “But we’ll never get past that checkpoint without a damn good story.”

Ben chewed his lip in thought before replying. “What if we pretend to be new slavers looking to join up? New blood coming in to seek opportunity.”

Isaac considered it. The lie could certainly gain them access, but it was risky. If their story didn’t hold up under scrutiny, things could go bad very quickly. But without connections inside the town, they were short on options.

“Alright, we’ll try it,” Isaac decided. “Just follow my lead if they start probing too deep.”

After hiding most of their gear under leaves, they made their way onto the road and walked casually towards the front gate. Isaac adopted a cocky swagger as they approached, mentally prepping the details of their cover story. He figured that the ability to exude dangerous confidence was going to be critical.

One of the guards, a burly boy of about eighteen with a crewcut, waved a woman through with her donkey then headed their way as Isaac and Ben drew near.

“That’s far enough,” he grunted. “State your business in Catskill.” His flinty eyes looked them up and down suspiciously.

Isaac met the guard’s gaze and kept his body language relaxed. “We’re here to join up and hunt slaves,” he replied. “Came up from New York City looking for work.”

The guard considered them critically. “Oh yeah? What makes you think we need more slavers?”

Isaac shrugged as if the question bored him. “Heard you’ve been moving into New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Also heard the Chinese want more. We figure supply and demand means you do...”

“You hunted before?”

“We’ve done our share. Bagged plenty of game.”

“This ain’t gutting deer we’re talking about here,” the guard scoffed.

“Even better,” Ben added with a cruel smile. “More fight in the ones that can scream and beg.”

Isaac kept his face neutral and nodded.

The guard considered them another moment before finally stepping aside and waving them through. “Ask for Liu at the fighting pits. He’s always looking for new blood.”

“Will do,” Isaac replied. He hid his disgust at the mention of fighting pits as they strode through the gates into Catskill.

The winding streets had a sinister, oppressive feel. Hostile-looking people eyed them with suspicion from doors and alleys as they passed. They were deep in the lion’s den now, surrounded on all sides. One misstep could spell disaster.

“Where do you think they’ll be holding the kids when they get here?” Ben murmured, tense as a drawn bowstring. “We need to locate that before anything.”

Isaac scanned the buildings cursorily as they walked. “My guess would be close to the fighting pits if we assume that they are using slaves for that particular sport.”

They followed Main Street deeper into town, feigning the casual interests of newcomers taking in the sights. Along the thoroughfare, many of the original buildings survived. A mix of homes and residential buildings and living quarters above dusty businesses. Many repurposed stores displayed tools of violence rather than trade, but interspersed with those were eateries and bars.

The number of people began thickening the further along they got, and raucous laughter from up ahead drew their attention. Ahead, a large building stood. It was bordered by plywood and chain-link fences nearly ten feet tall and topped with razor wire. The jeering and sounds of celebration seemed to carry from the rear of the ominous structure.

“I’ll bet money that’s the place,” Isaac muttered. “Let’s slip down that side alley and try to get a peek inside.”

Hugging the shadows, they crept along the alley trying to find a gap in the fence. They didn’t, but about halfway down, Isaac spotted a small dirty window a few feet up. He gave Ben a leg up so he could see over the top of the fence and into the window. Ben gripped the top of the chain-link panel, pulling it down and craning his neck to peer within.

Isaac heard his friend’s breath catch sharply. “What do you see?” he asked in a tense whisper.

When Ben looked down, his face was like stone, eyes blazing with fury. “Cages filled with kids and adults. This is it.”

“Let’s walk around the perimeter,” Isaac said, easing him back down. “We know where to hit them now when the time comes.”

Ben simply nodded, bottling his rage in silence. They crept along towards the rear where the laughter and conversation carried. Here the noise of the crowd was deafening but the chain-link fence was covered in burlap sacking and all but impossible to see through.

“Rip his goddamn head off!” someone roared as more voices were raised.

“The fighting pits?” Ben asked. His question was punctuated by a scream of pain and the deafening roar of the crowd.

Isaac nodded grimly.

“Let’s get clear out,” Isaac urged, sensing Ben’s desire to do violence matched his own. He gripped his friend’s shoulder firmly. “We’ll make these bastards pay soon. But not today.”

They continued around the perimeter until they came to the main entrance of the building. Now they could clearly see the main arena, which was essentially a big open-air square adjacent to the buildings the slaves were housed in and surrounded on three sides by bleachers. A tunnel through the middle bleacher led to the slave holding area.

As they made their way past, they took in the carnival-like atmosphere, disgusted that people who had lived through so much would be entertained by such a horrible sport and the trade behind it.

Main Street was more crowded than it had been even ten minutes earlier, and fifty yards further along, the street narrowed into a bottleneck heaving with people.

Isaac pointed to a side street.

“Let’s go down there, we can turn right onto the laneway that runs parallel to Main behind these buildings.”

“Great idea.”

The sun now hung low in the hazy sky, casting long shadows. Ben and Isaac moved swiftly down the side street and turned into the quieter lane, their footsteps echoing off the rear of the dilapidated buildings. Now that they knew the location of the slave pen and had a more concrete understanding of what awaited their children if they didn’t rescue them, they felt an urgency to get out of Catskill.

The laneway narrowed, and in the distance, they saw where it ended abruptly, truncated by the crudely constructed wall that ringed the town.

For a moment Isaac thought they might have to turn back, when he spotted the entrance of a dark alleyway twenty feet from the dead end.

“There!” said Isaac. “That should take us back to Main Street just before the gates.”

“Yes!” said Ben.

They rushed towards the opening and ran headlong into two figures coming the other way. All four stopped abruptly just avoiding a collision, but only Ben and Isaac wore identical looks of horror.

Two Chinese soldiers stood in front of them, rifles slung casually over their shoulders, one with a harsh-smelling cigarette dangling from his lips. The smoker laughed, while his friend swore in what Isaac recognized immediately as Mandarin.

“What’s the hurry lads?” asked the one with the cigarette, in a clipped British accent. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and blew smoke skyward.

Both were shocked, but Isaac was the first to gather himself.

“Sorry! We were hoping to see a slave fight before they finish up.”

As if to emphasize his point, the distant crowd erupted in a raucous cheer.

“Do you hear that, Isaac?” Ben asked, hiding his own British accent with a terrible American one. “We’re missing all the fun.”

“Ahh, don’t worry, the main event won’t start till an hour after sunset, and it will go late. Our boss is the guest of honor.”

He stepped aside to let them pass while his stern friend gave his best impression of an Easter Island statue.

“Oh, great, thanks!” said Ben, slipping between them and moving on. He didn’t realize that Isaac wasn’t following until he heard him speak.

“Oh, who’s your boss?” asked Isaac, his tone friendly.

“General Hao.”

“Oh. Haven’t heard of him.”

“Yeah, he’s a big deal,” he finished his cigarette and threw it onto the ground before stomping it out with his boot. “He was the commander of our western forces during the invasion. Cigarette?”

“Come on, Isaac,” interrupted Ben. “We’re missing all the fun.”

Isaac held up his hand. To Ben it wasn’t clear if the upraised hand was meant for him or to pass on the offered cigarette.

“Wow, that *is* a big deal. Why is someone so important here in this shitty little town?” Isaac asked, feigning puzzlement.

The friendly soldier opened his mouth but was interrupted by a stern stream of Mandarin from his partner. The soldier rolled his eyes at Isaac.

“Sorry, we’ve got somewhere to be. Enjoy the fights you two,” he said, and followed his friend who had stomped off.

“Thanks,” said Isaac, walking on and catching up to Ben who had moved off with some urgency as soon as the interaction was over. They were almost to the end of the alley when a voice behind them yelled, “Stop!”

Ben and Isaac froze. They turned slowly, tense and ready for confrontation.

The chatty soldier was walking towards them, his open hand extended with something glinting in his palm. His rifle was still slung over his shoulder.

“Oh, my knife,” said Ben, in the fake American accent.

“You dropped it,” he said. “Be careful, you never know if you’ll need it in this place, it’s pretty rough.”

“Righto. Thanks!” said Ben, grasping it.

The soldier didn’t let go and gazed at him intently.

“Where are you from?” he asked Ben. “I haven’t heard anyone say ‘righto’ since I left England in 2016.”

“Oh, I’ve been all over the place since the Fall,” Ben blurted. “But I grew up in Canada, hey.”

“Oh, cool,” said the soldier, releasing the knife. “Well, see you around.” Ben pocketed the knife and mumbled another thank you as they parted ways.

When he and Isaac emerged onto Main Street, Ben stopped and leaned against a wall, blowing out a long sigh.

“That was close!”

“Canada, *hey?*” said Isaac, grinning. “And what was that accent? You nearly got us caught.”

Ben pushed away from the wall.

“Oh, *I* nearly got us caught? What was with the twenty questions for the bloody Chinese soldiers?”

Isaac laughed and put a hand on his shoulder. “All jokes aside, that was close. I can’t believe we ran into Chinese soldiers and lived to tell the tale.”

“Yes, the sooner we get out of here the better.”

“Um, about that—change of plans...”

Chapter 14

A thin fog hugged the surface of the Hudson River as Luke and Ragland broke camp. After a brief breakfast, they continued following the riverbank south, keeping the broad waters always in sight to their right.

Though the going was slower with the uneven terrain, Luke preferred it to risking the roads. This region had become more populated with unsavory types drawn by Catskill's illicit activity. The river and its surrounds would be a much safer conduit to the town.

By midday, the sun beat down intensely. They took a short rest in the shade of an ancient oak, drinking water sparingly. Ragland checked Luke's sutured wound, nodding in approval.

"Looks like it's knitting nicely, I should be able to remove the stiches in couple of days. The penicillin seems to have done the trick too—no sign of infection."

"Great," said Luke. "Although, I might have a couple of more wounds by then."

It was meant as a joke, but Ragland grunted, unamused.

"I'm going to take a looksee ahead while you pack up."

When he returned, his weathered face looked pensive.

"Looks clear. We should reach a town called Hudson later today. It was a modest place before the Fall, a couple thousand folks maybe. If there is any sign it's inhabited now, we should go wide around it."

Luke considered this. "That's less than twenty miles from Catskill. We might be better off waiting near Hudson, then taking the backroads in from there tomorrow."

"Not a bad idea," Ragland agreed. "We'll need to pick an ambush point somewhere before the bridge into town." He glanced meaningfully at Luke's leg. "Somewhere we can

intercept them without having to give chase. I passed by Catskill about a year after the fall, I wanted to see the Big Apple. I'm thinking we hide in wait at the junction of the 23b and 23 before it leads east and then over the bridge into town. Theres an old gas station there, but plenty of thick wood around it.”

He sketched a crude map in the dirt, marking the junction. Luke swallowed the question he wanted to ask about New York, and studied it, eyes glinting.

“That could work. If we do it well enough, we'd see and hear them coming well before they reach us.”

“Exactly,” Ragland said. “If we leave before dawn, we can get set up in position and wait.”

Luke clapped his shoulder firmly. “Then that's the play. Let's get moving again—plenty of ground still to cover.”

They continued on through the afternoon, the sun dropping towards the western hills at their backs. At times the riverbank narrowed, forcing them to cut inland through dense woods before returning to its shore. The fading light and increasingly rugged terrain slowed progress.

Finally, near sunset, they spotted a cluster of buildings on the far bank—the outskirts of the town of Hudson. Ragland led them away at an angle, not wanting to come too close. Full darkness had fallen by the time they made camp in a secluded glen. A tiny fire was risked to cook a small turkey Ragland has shot earlier.

As they ate, an air of anticipation hung over the campsite. They were so close now to the end of their mission. Of course, a multitude of things could go wrong, and many scenarios rushed through Luke's mind. Not the least of which was the fear that the Slavers had crossed the Hudson earlier.

“You don't think they could have crossed further north, do you?”

Ragland shook his head.

“Unlikely. There was only one crossing between here and Albany. The Castleton-on-Hudson Bridge, and I know for

a fact it's out of action. Someone blew it up.”

“Oh... the Albany guys?”

“Maybe. Doesn’t really matter. Unless they found a boat or swam, they have to cross at the Rip Van Winkle.”

Luke nodded, mentally crossing one unwanted scenario of his list.

“Good. So, we end this tomorrow, one way or another,” Luke said at last into the silence. “I’m only leaving one of two ways. With our kids, or in a body bag.”

Ragland held his gaze for a few seconds then nodded.

“Never thought I’d ride into battle with the likes of you when we first met,” Ragland said with a ghost of a smile. “But for the record, I don’t plan to see either of us in a body bag.”

Luke grinned. “Likewise, old timer. Just try and keep up tomorrow.”

The light-hearted banter couldn’t mask the gravity they both felt though. The next day would bring either salvation or tragedy. Jokes could not ward off that reality.

PART FOUR: CONVERGENCE

Chapter 15

Ben stared at Isaac in dismay. “You can’t be serious! It’s too dangerous to stay here now that we’ve been seen.”

But Isaac’s expression remained resolute. “We have to find out why a Chinese general is visiting Catskill. It could mean they’re planning something major out here again.”

He gripped Ben’s shoulder. “Go on back to our hideout like we planned. But I’m staying to see what more I can learn about this Hao.”

Ben vehemently shook his head. “Absolutely not, I won’t leave you alone. We’ll come back another time if needed, but right now we should get clear.”

Isaac stood firm. “There might not be another chance like this. I’ll stay hidden and sneak into that fighting pit event tonight. Could be our best shot at intel.”

Seeing Isaac wouldn’t be deterred, Ben threw up his hands in exasperation. “You’re a fool if you think that plan isn’t riddled with holes. What if you’re caught?”

“I won’t be,” Isaac said simply. “Have a little faith.”

Ben ran a hand through his hair in frustration as he tried to think of another angle. “Even if you learn something useful, how will you get the word back safely? Coming here was risky enough without...”

“Ben. I need you to trust me on this. If they are planning something, like another invasion, getting advance warning could save a lot of lives. I’ll be cautious.”

Ben wrestled with indecision. His instincts screamed that this was a terrible idea, but he knew how stubborn his friend could be. Once Isaac’s mind was set, there was no swaying him.

“Bloody hell,” Ben muttered. “You’re sure about this?”

Isaac nodded. “I am. Now go on back while there’s still daylight left. I’ll be back by midnight.”

Ben still hesitated, every fiber of his body protesting at leaving his friend alone.

"I don't like it one bit," Ben said. "But I know that look of yours well enough by now." He clasped Isaac's hand tightly. "Don't make me regret leaving you here."

Isaac managed a faint grin. "When have I ever let you down?"

"Just don't take any chances. You know the real reason we're here."

With a final troubled glance, Ben slipped into the crowd of people moving along Main Street, quickly disappearing from view.

Alone now, Isaac wasted no time, wanting to be safely ensconced near the arena before darkness completely fell. He wound his way through back alleys before circling back onto Main Street, where he found a grassed area populated by people eating and drinking. The green space was about half an acre and from the look of it had been reclaimed by knocking down a row of buildings.

He weaved his way towards the back, his stomach growling at the smell of the cooked meat sticks a lot of the people were chowing down on. Near the rear he found a low stone wall, probably the foundations of whatever building was there in the Before Times and sat down.

It was nearly dark and even though the picnic area or whatever they called it was lit by evenly spaced bamboo torches, he thought he'd be inconspicuous enough to avoid attention. Nearby a mother of no more than twenty was sitting on a picnic blanket with a small boy. It was an incongruous sight considering what was happening barely a block away.

A young man appeared carrying four skewers of cooked meat. He looked warily at Isaac, who smiled and gave a small wave. The man smiled back before sitting down on the blanket and handing a skewer each to the woman and the child.

The smell of their meal was delicious, and Isaac realized he hadn't eaten in hours. He didn't know what passed for currency in this town but given the trade that was happening, he assumed it was Chinese Yuan, of which he had none.

The boy put down his meat half-finished and began playing with a ball that looked to be made from tightly bound rags. Before long he lost control of the ball, and it rolled away from him and came to rest between Isaac's feet.

"Ronnie!" the father said. "Be more careful."

"It's okay," said Isaac, picking up the ball and tossing it into the boy's hands. "Good catch!"

The kid laughed and threw it right back to him. This went on for a few minutes before Ronnie got sick of it and went back to his half-chewed skewer.

"Not eating?" asked the father, apparently put at ease by Isaac's kindness to his son.

"No," he said, patting his pockets. "No money."

"Oh, have this," the father said, picking up the skewer he'd placed on some tissue. "I bought one too many."

"Oh no, it's okay. I'm fine."

"Please," said the mother. "It'll go to waste if you don't. Right, Jake?"

Jake nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course."

Isaac accepted the morsel.

"Wow, thank you, that's very kind of you."

Some small talk followed, with Isaac being as cagey as politeness would allow. All he disclosed was that he'd traveled from another town to watch the fights. It turned out they were there to watch the parade in honor of the general's visit as it made its way through the streets to the arena.

“You’re welcome to watch it with us,” the woman, whose name was Alice, said.

Isaac had already decided it was time to move along.

“Thanks anyway, but I want to go and get my seat for the fights.”

“Oh, I thought you didn’t have any money?”

Damn it! Isaac thought to himself.

“Oh, you have to pay?”

“Yeah, two yuan.”

“Oh. I guess I won’t be attending after all.”

Alice looked at her partner and dipped her head towards Isaac. The father gave an imperceptible shake of his head, to which the woman gave him a look with raised eyebrows. It was a universal look that most husbands and fathers would know well.

“Well,” said Jake, reaching into his pocket. “I went to the daytime sessions and actually won a big bet. Here, our treat.”

He looked around warily before holding out his hand and depositing two silver coins in Isaac’s palm.

“Jake, I couldn’t. You’ve already been so kind.”

“It’s fine,” said Alice. “He won a lot more than that.”

“Shh!” Jake hissed, looking around warily.

“Okay, well thanks then. I really appreciate it. You guys are very generous.”

In the distance a roar went up along with music and the faint sound of cymbals crashing. Abruptly, the people around them began to stand and move closer to the street for a better view of the parade as it approached. A second later, fireworks lit up the night sky. Isaac found himself craning his neck in wonder as the brilliant bursts of color and light painted intricate patterns across the canvas of the night sky.

It had been more than a decade since he had last witnessed such a spectacle, and the memory of those long-lost celebrations as a child with his family flooded back to him.

“You better go now,” said Jake, standing with his arm around Alice, Ronnie tucked in between them and looking at the sky in wonder. “Once the parade is over, there’ll be a rush for seats.”

“I will.” He stuck out his hand and shook Jake’s firmly. “Thanks again, not many people are as kind as you guys these days.”

He weaved his way through the crowd lining the street in the direction of the slave market and arena feeling re-energized by the unexpected interaction.

The walk to the arena was slow, and the crowd grew as he neared the square that held the arena and slave quarters. Isaac kept his head down, avoiding eye contact even though the chances of him being singled out were probably minuscule.

The laughter and shouting from the people already inside was raucous, and the line for entry was already about a hundred deep. He queued at the rear and looked around as he inched towards the guards at the door accepting coins for entry. They were big and rough looking locals, but he felt more comfortable with them than he would have if they’d been Chinese soldiers.

Isaac kept his head down as he reached the guards, handing over the two coins. They waved him through without a second glance. Inside, the arena was packed and raucous and he was thankful he hadn’t left it any longer. The air inside was hot and thick with jeers, shouts and smoke.

Isaac scanned the packed stands and spotted an elevated box draped in red fabric. A handful of Chinese soldiers stood around it, their uniformed discipline standing out starkly against the backdrop of the unruly crowd. He made his way up the stands to an empty seat in the back row with a good view of the box.

Ten minutes later, a man in an elaborate military uniform, presumably General Hao, entered the arena to the cheers of the crowd. Isaac thought it surreal that just eleven years after their homeland was conquered, that some survivors of the Fall, even if they'd been children, would cheer one of the enemy's generals. He was flanked by four guards, including the two soldiers that Isaac and Ben had encountered earlier.

A trumpet was blown as the general entered his box and took his seat. After a pause of about a minute, there was movement in the tunnel that led back to the slave holding area and a bare-chested man entered the ring to await his opponent. He was lean and wiry, and covered in tattoos and scars. He prowled the perimeter of the pit like a caged tiger while the crowd hurled abuse.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Introducing The Knife! Catskill's finest slave fighter, undefeated in twenty-one bouts." The man punched a fist into the air and nodded cockily as he circled the dirt ring. "And his opponent this evening, General Hao's champion, The Beast of Beijing!"

Isaac sat forward in his seat. He had expected this to all be slave on slave fighting but, for the first fight at least, it appeared to be a different match up altogether. Another figure, this one a huge slab of a man, entered the ring. He was stone-faced and didn't acknowledge the booing crowd. Isaac guessed he must be at least six and a half feet tall and a solid 280 pounds. Isaac noticed a flurry of activity in the betting ring adjacent to the fighting ring.

A bell rang, signaling the start of combat. The lean fighter struck first, feinting left before slinging a heavy jab into the giant's right side. The big man didn't even flinch, but he was deceptively quick and slammed a vicious elbow downwards, catching his opponent across the cheekbone. The crowd roared as the lean fighter crumpled to his hands and knees before desperately trying to scamper out of reach.

Isaac watched the ensuing violence with a detached distaste. He had no stomach for such brutality, but the bloodthirsty spectators around him loved it. The giant pressed

his advantage, raining crushing blows upon his dazed opponent. Soon the other man lay unmoving in an expanding crimson puddle. Medics dragged him unceremoniously from the pit as the big man beat his chest once and saluted to the general's box.

Isaac watched General Hao's box, not the carnage below. The general sat impassively next to another much more animated man in a business suit. He guessed this was Liu, the man the guard at the gate had told him to talk to about joining the slavers. After the first bout, both men seemed to lose interest in the fighting but continued talking.

When the next fight between two much smaller slaves ended, Isaac slipped from his seat and made his way down to a standing area closer to the box.

The smoking soldier noticed him approaching and gave a nod of recognition.

"Fancy seeing you here," he said, holding out his hand.
"How are you enjoying the entertainment?"

Isaac shook it.

"It's living up to the hype. I'm Isaac, by the way."

"Jonathon," the soldier said, looking past him. "Where is your Canadian friend?"

"He had an early night, a little too much beer I think." Able to see Jonathon's eyes better in the light of the arena than he had in the alley, his glassy look made him think the soldier might also have had a few too many beers. "The general must take these fights pretty seriously?"

The soldier laughed. "Oh, he's serious alright—about profiting from them. And not just the fighting but the slave trade. The slaving rackets out of Texas make him a lot of money and he's aiming to take over operations here too, and Mayor Liu is all for it because it means more money and gold for him."

Isaac kept his face impassive, glad the soldier couldn't possibly know his heart was racing. This intel both eased and confirmed his fears. While it wasn't a possible invasion, the

worst scenario, the fact that a Chinese general aimed to expand the already brutal black market slave trade in Catskill into something more organized, was disturbing.

“So, Beijing is backing the expansion of his business empire, eh?” Isaac said, trying to sound casual. “Can’t blame a man for ambition.”

“Oh no, no, no,” the soldier said and lowered his voice. “Any trade or travel in the quarantine zone—that’s what they call greater Albany and everything else east of the Hudson—is strictly prohibited.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that.”

“Hey, do you fancy a drink when I’m off duty? It’s good to chat with someone in English and who isn’t a blockhead,” he said, nodding surreptitiously at his burly partner who was scanning the crowd diligently a few feet away.

“Nah, I’m pretty beat. Will probably only stay for one more bout. Appreciate the offer though Jonathon, are you around tomorrow?”

“The general’s chopper will be collecting us at noon.”

“Oh okay. Well maybe next time. I better get back to my seat, before the next fight starts,” Isaac said. “Enjoy the rest of the night!”

“Okay, you too.”

Isaac slipped away and headed towards the stand he’d come down from. Now that he had the intel he’d been seeking, he wanted to get out of Catskill as soon as possible, but he knew he couldn’t just make a beeline for the exit. He navigated his way back up the steps and glanced back. The soldier was still looking his way, a curious expression on his face.

Shit, thought Isaac, realizing he might have raised the soldier’s suspicions with his hasty departure.

There was movement down in the pit and the soldier glanced away. A new fight was starting. A lean, feral-looking

woman with a shaved head circled a heavy-set male fighter carrying a spiked club. Isaac glanced back despite himself as the bell clanged again. The woman feinted left then dove right, trying to get inside the arc of her opponent's weapon. She managed to rake her clawed fingers across the man's face before dancing away. He didn't seem fazed, shaking the blood from his eyes before advancing.

The woman timed her next strike perfectly, waiting until the club was fully committed, then sliding underneath the blow. This time her hand came away holding a dripping handful of entrails. The club fighter bellowed in agony, hands clutching his ruptured stomach. The crowd exploded at the gruesome sight as the woman stood upright and displayed the bloody straight razor in the palm of her hand.

Isaac tore his eyes away. He had no desire to see the gory ending. His head swam with the implications of what he'd learned and right now, his only aim was getting out of this hellish place and back to Ben with the chilling news about the general's plans. He glanced back but the soldier was nowhere to be seen. Nor was his friend.

Isaac quickly began weaving along the rows of seats, much to the annoyance of the other patrons. When he got to the end, he dashed down the steps and hastily made his way to the exit.

He kept his head down as he emerged into the chaotic nighttime streets, taking a quick look over his shoulder. He couldn't see anyone following him. The crowds from the earlier parade had dispersed but Liu's Catskill patrols were everywhere.

Isaac infiltrated the crowd. His progress was slow and tense, but the throng of people helped keep him hidden and if he *was* being pursued, they would have a difficult time tracking him. He made his way towards the walled outskirts of town.

He decided that slipping out through the gate would be less than optimum. If in fact the soldier's suspicions had been raised, he might head to the gate or ask questions of the guards

there. Isaac would prefer him to think that he was still in the town.

That meant the only option was going over the wall under cover of darkness. Isaac had spied rope ladders cached around the perimeter during the day's scouting. Ben had suggested that they were in case of a fire and the need of evacuation.

Isaac thought that if he could retrieve one undetected, he could scale the wall at an unguarded section. It would be risky climbing with no spotter, but the alternative was possibly being detained or killed trying to leave via the gate.

Isaac realized his hands were shaking slightly as he crept along in the shadows. He was unarmed except for a knife in his sock, and one mistake would mean disaster. The thought of getting his vital intel back to Ben kept him focused.

After painfully slow progress, Isaac reached the crumbling residential section he and Ben had explored earlier. The buildings helped conceal his movements as he circled the town's edge. Before long, he spotted one of the rope ladders, hidden under debris in a narrow alley. Isaac hesitated, listening intently for any sounds of approach before darting from cover to retrieve it.

The ladder was coated in grit, but the rungs still felt solid. Isaac slung it over his shoulder and danced through the shadows until he reached a dark, unguarded section of the wall.

He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly to calm his pounding heart. Then he cast the grappling end of the ladder as high as he could. It caught securely on the first try. He gave an experimental tug, then began to rapidly scale the rungs. In under a minute, he vaulted over the top and dropped low, scanning for any sign of movement.

Isaac stuck to the shadows as he ran to the trees at the side of the road leading away from the gates of Catskill. He took one last look at the town before turning and melting into the shadows, heading for their hideout.

*

The children were roused from their fitful slumber by Mason yelling, “Rise and shine!” Bleary-eyed, they rose and went through the familiar routine—relieving themselves, eating a paltry breakfast scraped from the slavers’ dwindling stores, and the dread of another day’s march sinking into their hearts.

On this morning, Mason and his men seemed energized, speaking in lively tones about being on schedule. Cade listened closely as he ate, alert for any snippets that might reveal useful information.

“We’ll push them hard today,” Mason was saying. “I want to reach Kinderhook by sundown. We can camp there overnight and be at Catskill’s gates by noon tomorrow.”

“Got it, boss,” Caleb replied around a mouthful of food. “Home stretch now, eh? Payday tomorrow!” His ugly laugh made Cade’s skin crawl.

Mason turned his attention to repacking his gear, and Cade risked whispering to the others. “Sounds like we’ve only got today and tomorrow.”

Once inside the slaver town, their chances of escape became even more remote than they were now. Samuel nodded, but Cade could tell there was a reluctance about him. The price they’d paid for their last escape attempt had been a heavy one, and when it came to it, Cade thought he might have to take the lead this time. He knew Sam wouldn’t let him down once the move was made though.

As the group prepared to move out, Mason approached Cade. He’d already decided that Samuel was a whipped dog, but the bigger one still seemed to have some fight in him.

“Don’t get any stupid ideas,” the slaver warned. “We’re too near the end now. You try anything, and I’ll gut one of the young ones in front of your eyes.”

Cade suppressed a shudder at the casual threat. Keeping his gaze lowered, he gave a small nod of compliance. Satisfied, Mason strode off to take the lead.

“He’s right you know,” Samuel muttered hollowly after the leader was out of earshot. “It’s hopeless now.”

Cade turned to his friend as they fell in line. “There’s always hope, Sam. We just have to be ready when our chance comes.”

Samuel just shook his head, trudging forward under the weight of despair. Cade met Peace’s eyes. Thankfully, he saw fire in them that mirrored his own.

As the day wore on, no chance for escape presented itself. The barren countryside offered little cover, so the children plodded on, exposed beneath the baking sun. Hunger and thirst wore them down, until even Peace struggled to keep young Erin moving forward.

When they finally stopped to rest and drink at midday, Cade found himself next to Peace. Her face was streaked with dust and worry lines no girl her age should have. But her eyes retained their kind spirit.

She gave Cade’s hand a small squeeze.

“Samuel is still struggling,” she said sadly, glancing to where their friend sat staring at the ground. “He seemed okay for a while, but he’s withdrawn again.”

“I know,” Cade replied heavily. “He still blames himself for Vincent. And Mason’s threats to do it again terrify him. It’s down to us. If we can start something, I know he’ll join in.”

Peace leaned a bit closer, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if we try tonight. When Chris is on his watch. I could distract him by telling him I have to go to the bathroom. I’ll tell him I’m afraid to go off in the dark alone, then you and Sam could get the jump on the other two while they’re sleeping.”

It was risky, but Cade thought it could work. “Alright, let’s tell Sam the plan as we walk. Chris is usually first watch, so we’ll make our move when we’re sure the others are asleep.”

Mason was always watchful of the two oldest boys when they were together, so they decided Peace would tell Samuel of the plan.

“It’s too risky!” Samuel hissed.

“We have to try, Sam,” Peace urged. “This is our last hope. I can’t let Erin or the boys be sold by those monsters without trying.”

Samuel agonized, darting glances towards their captors. Finally, he gave the faintest of nods. Peace squeezed his wrist and mouthed ‘thank you’.

The day dragged on in agonizing slowness. Hunger and thirst gnawed at them by the time they finally, just before dusk, reached the outskirts of the town of Kinderhook.

After camp was set up and another scant meal eaten, the children huddled around the small fire while Mason and his men drank and chatted nearby.

One by one the children slipped into restless sleep. Cade lay tense, watching for any sign their captors were ready to bed down, but they had changed up their routine and late into the night, Caleb still sat sharpening his knife and Mason casually cleaned his pistol while they let Chris sleep.

Of course, they would keep a close watch tonight, so near to their payoff. He met Peace’s eyes then Samuel’s. Both shook their heads imperceptibly. Cade’s heart sank. Their chance had slipped away as quickly as it came. Exhaustion finally claimed him, the weight of despair like a smothering cloak.

*

Exhaustion also weighed on Isaac as he trudged the last mile to the house serving as their hideout. His clothes were soaked with sweat, and every muscle ached. But the sight of the familiar line of houses gave him a second wind.

Ben was asleep sitting against the wall of the upstairs bedroom whose window served as their lookout, when Isaac shuffled inside. He stirred at the sound of footsteps, jerking awake and grabbing for his knife.

“Easy, it’s just me,” Isaac said hoarsely.

“Jesus, Isaac,” Ben gasped, scrambling up to pull him into a quick fierce hug. “You’re a damn fool for staying, you know that? I was worried sick.”

Despite his fatigue, Isaac managed a wry half-grin. “Missed you too, buddy.”

Ben watched him collapse onto the bed.

“Lucky you’re alive.” Ben handed him a canteen and smiled. “I would have killed you if anything had happened! Did you learn anything?”

Isaac took a long drink before recounting everything he’d seen and heard in Catskill. Ben listened intently, eyes widening at the news of General Hao’s plans.

“We have to get word to the other cities when we get back.”

Isaac nodded wearily. “We will. We need to strike before he gets a real foothold. Right now, Catskill is just people from this side taking advantage, but if Hao plans to take over, he will no doubt bring soldiers and weapons, even if it isn’t sanctioned. If that happens, I think we lose our chance.”

They sat in silence for a while, both absorbed in thought. Finally, Ben spoke up.

“We stick to the original plan then. Ambush the slavers on their way to Catskill. Hit them fast and get away clean with the kids.”

Isaac rubbed his face, trying to push through the cobwebs of exhaustion. “Yeah. We’ll possibly have to lay low afterwards, in case word gets back to Catskill and the general takes an interest. But that depends on when they come through; he will be gone by noon.”

Ben nodded. “Once we have them, we’ll swing west hard, then veer north at Springfield on the 91. Should throw them off. Pity we don’t have bikes for everyone, it will be a long march.”

He studied his friend with concern. Isaac was swaying where he sat, barely keeping his eyes open. “Get some rest. I’ve already had some beauty sleep, so I’ll take first watch.”

Isaac didn’t have the energy to argue. He shucked off his jacket and was asleep almost before his head hit the mattress. As Ben quietly inventoried their weapons and gear, his mind churned over the revelations Isaac had brought back.

Eventually, he pushed the information and its ramifications from his mind. All of that would have to wait until they’d accomplished their mission and returned home safely with the children.

Chapter 16

At dawn, Cade awoke to Caleb roughly kicking his leg.
“Rise and shine, slaves! Market day!”

Bleary-eyed, Cade sat up and met Samuel’s defeated gaze across the camp. No words were needed. Their plan had died stillborn, and there was no sign of help from Manchester.

“Line up, people!” called Mason, jovially. “If you’re good, I’ll spare you a whipping.”

They set off towards Catskill in grim silence. Erin wept quietly while the rest stared numbly at their feet, resigned to whatever nightmare awaited them,

The children trudged wearily along the road in the early morning sun, knowing it was only a matter of hours before they would be sold into slavery. Two hours after they set out, they passed a faded sign reading ‘10 miles to Catskill’.

“Not long now, boys!” Mason said, a new vigor in his stride. He looked over his shoulder at their captives. “Speed it up you lot.”

Caleb whooped.

“Yeah baby, can’t wait to have a cold beer at the Stag after we get rid of these brats.”

He gave Max a shove, causing him to stumble. “Speed it up, boy.”

Samuel and Cade both bristled but a furious Max surprised them by sticking his middle finger up at the slaver.

Caleb chortled at his defiance.

“Better not do that to your new masters after they buy you—they’ll chop that finger off and make you eat it!”

Once everyone had retreated into the quiet monotony of the walk, Cade drifted closer to Samuel and Peace.

“We have to try one last time,” he murmured urgently. “Time is running out. If they get us into that slaver town, we’re all screwed... even death would be better.”

Samuel's jaw tightened. His will had hardened with resolve over the last twenty-four hours. They were heading for a life of captivity and who knew what else. They had to make a stand.

"Okay. Let's do it."

"Peace and I came up with a plan last night." Cade began to quickly outline the idea they'd brainstormed when he had woken deep in the night and found Peace awake too. "We wait until we are getting close to this bridge they talked about. So close to their goal, I figure that's when they'll be the least watchful. Peace will pretend she hurt her ankle and fall down. When one of them checks on her, you and I will make our move."

Samuel nodded. It wasn't much of a plan, but given they were out of time, it was the best they had.

"Break it up you two," said Mason, over his shoulder. "Cade, move up near me."

"You give me the signal when you think the time's right," Peace whispered into Cade's ear as he passed her.

*

The pre-dawn air held a biting chill as Luke and Ragland broke camp. After a brief cold meal, they set off through the woods skirting the town of Hudson. Luke took the lead and set a brisk pace, wincing slightly at the twinges from his leg wound but not slowing. Urgency drove him on.

Within a couple of miles, they struck the old 23 highway leading towards Catskill. It was still mostly clear, though brush encroached at the edges. Without discussion they stayed off the crumbling pavement but weaved through the trees that edged it.

They encountered no one on that short march as the sky brightened towards dawn. Animal life stirred around them, oblivious to their passing, and Luke drew strength from the beauty of the quiet morning. He would need every scrap of focus and discipline for the coming confrontation.

Eventually the thick scrub they'd followed along the 23B thinned out and Ragland slowed to a halt before mopping his brow and pointing ahead through the trees.

"See that gas station? There's our spot. It's right at the junction and behind it is a stand of trees where we can set up a hide. Beauty is, multiple routes converge onto the 23 here before it heads towards the Rip Van Winkle Bridge. If they're not already on the other side of the Hudson, they *will* pass by us. We can just follow this scrub deeper and all the way behind the gas station without breaking cover."

"Perfect," Luke agreed. "Let's get set up."

They picked their way through the trees, the sound of crickets and other insects loud in their ears. They found a nice hiding spot offering a clear line of sight up the 23 and after having water, began to make their preparations. Luke scraped away fallen leaves and flattened the undergrowth while Ragland cut branches to craft a blind.

Soon they had an effective observation post established, completely camouflaged from the road. Ragland settled in and checked the tension of his bowstring then laid out his seven remaining arrows. Luke was a silent, brooding presence beside him. His pistol was fully loaded with no spares, and he had unclipped his axe and rested it within easy reach.

The waiting game began.

After the first hour, Luke's leg cramped up. He climbed to his feet and stretched it as best he could.

"You, okay?" Ragland asked.

"Yeah, just walking it off. Too long in one position."

By mid-morning their patience was rewarded by the first sign of life. A lone figure came around the bend and headed towards the bridge. Luke stiffened and Ragland's hand on his shoulder steadied him. This was just a solo traveler. Still, Luke's pulse quickened, the tension he felt rising with every passing second.

The morning passed at a crawl. Every distant noise or snapping branch twisted his gut with anticipation. But all proved false alarms. The 23 remained empty save for occasional solitary travelers.

Around noon Ragland silently handed Luke some jerky and a canteen. He accepted both with a nod, not interrupting his vigil as he ate and drank, his eyes constantly raking the road for any hint of movement.

Another hour crawled by. Luke chewed his lip, resisting the urge to shift positions yet again. Patience had never been his strong suit, even before the Fall. Now it was agony.

Finally, a sound cracked the afternoon stillness that snatched his full attention—an engine. Clearly a diesel, but a very sick sounding one. Luke felt Ragland tense beside him. They traded a taut look and then picked up their weapons of choice. Ragland nocked an arrow and Luke picked up his pistol.

Seconds later an old flatbed truck rumbled into view and turned towards where they lay in wait. Luke's heart seized when he spotted at least a dozen men, women and children on the back of the slow-moving truck. Four armed men were on the back guarding them and in the cab was a driver and another man in the passenger seat. While they watched, one of the men on the back of the truck kicked a girl of about six away when she tumbled against him after losing her balance on the unsteady deck of the flatbed.

Rage engulfed Luke and he tensed, ready to spring from the hide. Ragland gripped his gun hand and pushed it down, putting his shoulder in front of Luke. Jaw clenched, he ignored Luke's furious gaze and remained that way until the truck was well past their position.

Only when the sounds had faded completely did Ragland remove his restraining hand. Luke rounded on him, eyes blazing.

"Why'd you stop me? We could have taken them out, freed those people!"

Ragland's face was regretful but resolute.

"That's doubtful. They had six men, four on back and two in the cab. If you'd gone out on that road, they would have tried to run you flat or worse, crashed the truck and killed most of the prisoners on the back. Our aim is to rescue your daughter and the other children Luke, for now we need to focus on that."

Luke glared at him, chest heaving, but said nothing. Ragland's logic was sound, however little he liked it. With a growl of frustration, he turned back to the road.

"You're right. Sorry.... thanks for keeping a cool head."

"It's fine," said Ragland. "I get it."

They went back to their surveillance, neither in the mood for conversation.

*

As the group of captors and captives advanced along the winding road, thick with oppressive vegetation, an air of dread hung in the stifling atmosphere. Samuel's thoughts drifted to the encroaching wilderness and how the overgrown scrub had transformed the two-lane road into a claustrophobic corridor, making it almost inconceivable for two vehicles to pass in opposite directions.

Suddenly, Erin's voice sliced through the oppressive silence. "I think someone's coming."

Mason raised his hand, signaling everyone to halt, and tilted his head, listening intently. Over the symphony of insects and birds, Samuel too caught the distant rumble—the unmistakable sound of an engine.

Mason wasted no time, snapping orders at his two men. "Get them to the side," he barked urgently.

Chris and Caleb swiftly herded the captives into the dense tree line, their guns trained on the group, ensuring compliance. "Don't try anything," Caleb warned, his eyes never leaving the captives, while Mason stationed himself at

the road's edge with his rifle resting casually in the crook of his arm, facing north.

For a fleeting moment, Samuel dared to hope that help was on its way from Manchester. However, when an old, decrepit flatbed truck rumbled into sight, black smoke billowing from its exhaust, his hope curdled.

The truck's pace slowed as it neared Mason. He raised his hand in a half-hearted wave, and the driver returned the gesture before rumbling past. The sight of captive men, women, and children on the back of the truck, their eyes filled with curiosity and despair as armed slavers stood over them, was harrowing.

"Looks like Benny got a good haul," Mason muttered darkly. "Come on, get them moving."

The group rounded the next bend, and Cade exchanged meaningful glances with Samuel and Peace. As the forest's grip began to ease, the road sloped down toward a gas station roughly two hundred yards away.

Cade nodded to Peace and mouthed the words, "It's time."

Peace nodded, her heart racing. Cade and Samuel moved into position. Cade, being the larger of the two, inched closer to Mason at the front. Samuel found his place on the outside left, next to Caleb, who, busy picking his nose, remained blissfully unaware of the impending chaos.

Peace faltered, clutching her ankle and letting out a convincing cry of pain. She stumbled and fell to the ground, writhing in feigned agony. Her performance was so convincing that even the captors were momentarily taken aback.

Mason, startled by the sudden commotion, turned to the rear. "What happened?" he demanded.

Caleb, still oblivious to the imminent threat, leaned in closer to get a better look as Chris at the rear went to help the girl up. Several things happened at once. Lightning-quick, Samuel lunged at Caleb, grabbing at his gun as he tackled him to the ground. In a flurry of limbs and desperation, the gun

went off before Samuel managed to disarm him. Screams erupted from the other children as Cade made his play, charging at Mason and driving him into the undergrowth, where they tumbled down an embankment and out of sight.

His helping hand on Peace's upper arm, Chris froze in indecision as all hell broke loose. She took advantage of his momentary hesitancy and punched him hard in the groin as she scrambled to her feet and screamed "RUN!" to the other children. She rushed over to them, ushering Max, Blake and Erin into the trees, ignoring the young slaver's ineffectual calls to stop.

*

Isaac and Ben had been watching the road since dawn. The morning had passed with no sighting of the children, and Isaac was restless. He nearly bounced into the ceiling when they spotted the truck coming off the bridge, heading in their direction.

He put the binoculars to his eyes,

"Not ours," he said bitterly. "Definitely slaves headed to the market, though."

"So many of them..." Ben replied, his voice tight.

After it had passed, Isaac hissed in frustration. It was well after midday now and the hours were stretching interminably.

"Surely it won't be too much longer," his friend said.

"I can't bear this, Ben. What would you say to making our way back across the bridge to wait near the big roundabout? There is some high ground on the western side that would give us plenty of warning."

"Should we use the bikes?"

"I think it's worth the risk. Given that's the first vehicle we've seen in weeks, we'd be awfully unlucky to strike another before we make it across, and we can outrun anyone on foot that might want to give us trouble."

"Alright, let's do it."

Ten minutes later they'd packed their gear and were wheeling their bikes out onto the road.

Chapter 17

Barely five minutes after the slaver truck passed by Ragland and Luke's hide, shouts and gunshots erupted nearby, the sudden chaos cutting through the dense forest like a knife. The sound jolted them into immediate action.

Without a word, they abandoned their hidden position and sprinted through the woods toward the commotion. Branches cracked underfoot, and leaves rustled as they pushed their way through the underbrush. Another gunshot rang out and Luke's heart pounded in his chest as they drew closer.

A small figure burst through the undergrowth in front of him and Luke lowered his pistol quickly.

"Blake! Over here," he called, as a man's voice in the distance roared something unintelligible from the direction of the road, the sound punctuated by another gunshot.

Ragland hung back, half hidden behind a sapling, his bow at the ready as Blake rushed into his Luke's arms, crying in relief.

"I got you buddy, where are Erin and the others?"

Even as he spoke the words, two more figures appeared. It was a distraught Erin, mothered through the undergrowth by Peace. Tears sprang to Luke's eyes as Erin ran madly towards him, literally jumping into his embrace. He hugged her tightly, but as tender as the moment was, time was of the essence.

"Where are the others?" he asked Peace, lowering Erin to the ground.

"Sam and Cade are back fighting the slavers," she panted, fighting for breath. "I lost Max."

Luke's heart sank. There was no way he was leaving without his best friend's son. With a determined look, he turned to Peace and the two younger children.

"Quickly, follow me," he said, striding to Ragland's position.

The Drifter came slowly out of the shadows, his arrow still nocked, but now pointed to the forest floor. The children hesitated.

“It’s okay. This is my friend Joshua.” He looked at Ragland. “I need you to keep them safe while I find the others. You know what to do if...” he trailed off when his eyes fell on Erin.

“Got it,” said Ragland. “We’ll wait for you at the hide.”

Luke nodded before bending down and hugging Erin again briefly.

“I’m going to find Max and the other boys, do everything Mr. Ragland says, okay?”

Erin nodded and reached out to grasp Peace’s hand.

With a final, protective glance at her and the others, Luke turned and sprinted back into the underbrush. Ragland’s face twisted into what was meant to be a reassuring smile as he looked at the children. Unfortunately for him, those rarely used muscles didn’t quite have the effect he hoped, and both of the younger kids squeezed in closer to Peace.

“Come on,” he grated, as his face resumed its customary grimace. “Follow me. As fast as you can.”

*

Luke’s progress slowed as dense vegetation and tangled underbrush conspired against him. He couldn’t shake the feeling of urgency and dread, knowing that Max and the others were still in danger. Another gunshot, closer but still distant, served as a grim reminder that the threat was still high.

Suddenly, a rustling in the bushes ahead caught his attention. Luke’s grip on his pistol tightened. His instincts, honed through many years of traveling in post-America, kicked in and he advanced stealthily on the source of the noise.

Suddenly, between trees and a tangle of underbrush, a large man, bleeding profusely from a gash in his forehead,

appeared. The man had a tight hold on a smaller figure. It was Max. Luke's heart thudded as he raised the pistol.

“Stop!”

The man froze in his tracks, not having seen Luke until he called out, and pulled the boy hard into his torso.

“Don’t fucking try anything!” spat the desperate man, putting the long blade of the knife hard against Max’s throat as his eyes fell on Luke.

Luke immediately held out his free arm, the hook where his left hand should have been glinting in the dabbled sunlight, the gun held loosely in the other.

“Easy, don’t hurt him. Just let him go, okay?”

The man licked blood from his lip as he weighed up the situation. Luke didn’t like the calculating look in his eyes.

“Alright. I’ll let him go. But I want your pistol in exchange.”

*

Back on the road, Samuel tried to get a bead on Chris, who had retreated behind a rusted shipping container that was half covered by bushes on the eastern side of the road.

After he’d disarmed Caleb, the thug had sprung away and pulled a knife and come for him again, apparently not believing the kid who had appeared so depressed and troubled over the last few days would shoot him. He’d been wrong.

The surprised look on his slack face was a testament to his misjudgment. Samuel was stretched out on the ground behind him, using his body as a shield. He’d been forced to take cover when Chris, who had been unable to shoot the fleeing children, finally overcame his shock and began firing at him.

“Chris,” he called. “It’s over. I don’t want to kill you, but I will if you don’t surrender.”

“Oh, sure you won’t! I saw what you did to Caleb. I’m not an idiot.”

“Caleb kept coming for me. You saw that.”

This was greeted with silence.

“Come on Chris. You know it’s over. Look, I’ll stand up and put my gun on the ground, so you know I’m not going to shoot you.”

Knowing he was taking a gamble, but confident in his ability to read people, Samuel stood up slowly, holding the gun held with both hands, one on the stock and one on the barrel. He saw Chris peeking cautiously around the corner of the container.

“See?” he said and bent over, placing the rifle on the asphalt.

After a second, Chris came out, his weapon pointing at Samuel. Diana’s son held his breath, wondering if he’d misjudged the other teen after all, when he finally lowered his rifle.

“I’m not giving you my gun,” he said, with steel in his gaze. “But I’m done. I’m going to walk into town. Don’t try and stop me.”

“I won’t,” said Samuel, as the teen stuck to his side of the road and continued past him without another look.

Samuel shook his head and picked up the gun, running quickly to the place where Cade and Mason had disappeared from view.

As he descended the embankment, his breaths came in ragged bursts. His mind raced, grappling with the tense encounter with Chris and the overwhelming urgency of finding the others. The slope was treacherous in the dimness of the heavy scrub, and he stumbled a couple of times before reaching the bottom.

It was silent and dark, and a sense of foreboding settled over him as his eyes adjusted and he scanned the surroundings. He bit back a cry when, a few yards away, he spotted Cade. His friend was motionless, a bloom of blood on his chest and a pool of crimson spreading on the leaves and sticks beneath him.

“No, no, no,” Samuel whispered, his voice barely audible above the rustle of the leaves. He rushed over and knelt beside Cade, his hands trembling as he reached out to touch his friend’s still warm throat. There was no pulse. Memories of their shared struggles and moments of camaraderie flooded his mind, as tears ran down his cheeks.

“Cade,” he murmured, his voice choked with emotion. “You can’t be gone. We were supposed to get through this together.”

With a heavy heart, Samuel placed a gentle hand on Cade’s forehead, as if to bid a final farewell to the companion who had been like a brother for so long, and recently a pillar of strength in the darkest of times.

“I’ll find him, I’ll find the bastard and make him pay, I promise,” Samuel vowed, his voice tinged with the fire of rage that was igniting inside his skull.

He stayed a moment longer with his fallen friend, and then rose to his feet, wiping the tears from his eyes. His resolve hardened, and he followed the trail of blood—a somber path that led him deeper into the trees.

*

Ben and Isaac had picked up the pace when they heard gunshots in the distance. They sped across the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, weaving around dead cars and potholes in the road surface. They came off at full speed and pedaled like madmen until they came to the roundabout, then hooked left heading as fast as they could towards the junction with the 23. Another gunshot spurred them on.

*

Ragland had barely settled the rescued children into the hide when the young boy, Blake, pointed east at the road leading from the bridge across the Hudson.

“That’s my dad and Uncle Isaac,” he said, in a matter-of-fact way.

Ragland’s eyes widened at the sight of two men riding hell for leather along the 23 from Catskill.

“Oh my God! It is them!” blurted Peace.

Before Ragland could stop her, she burst from the hide and ran through the shorter bushes and weeds towards the road, waving her arms madly.

“Uncle Ben! Uncle Isaac! We’re here!”

Ragland stood with his bow held loosely in case the children were mistaken. When the two men screeched to a stop and dismounted, Peace flew into their arms, hugging them quickly before pointing back to Ragland’s hide. They left the bikes where they were and briskly followed her to the hiding place.

They both eyed Ragland warily as he stepped out, his bow and arrow left on the ground behind him. Ben rushed past the stranger and scooped Blake up in his arms, squeezing him in an enormous bear hug.

“My name’s Ragland,” The Drifter said, holding out his hand to Isaac. “Luke’s told me all about you.”

Isaac shook his hand briskly. “Where is Luke? And Max?”

Ben put Blake down. “And Sam and Cade?”

“Uncle Luke went looking for them,” said Peace.

“Which way?”

Ragland pointed.

“Come on Ben,” said Isaac.

Ben went to follow him, but Blake gripped his hand and pulled.

“Don’t go Dad, please.”

Ben looked down at him then back at Isaac, who had paused.

“Stay,” Ragland told the Englishman. “I’ll come with you; I’d rather be on the move.”

With a smooth motion, he scooped up his bow and ran off, giving them no chance to argue.

“Thank you,” called Ben.

Isaac followed, struggling to keep up as the big man moved swiftly through the trees.

Chapter 18

Samuel walked about a hundred paces before he heard voices ahead of him. He slowed his pace and began to pick his way quietly through the trees, the trail of blood thinning but still visible.

“Alright. I’ll let him go. But I want your pistol in exchange.”

It was the hateful voice of Mason, but who was he talking to?

As silent as he’d ever been in his life, the boy crouched and moved forward, keeping to the shadows.

“What guarantee do I have you won’t just shoot us?”

Samuel’s eyes widened. *Luke!*

There was no time to ponder how Luke had come to be there, but relief flooded through the boy, followed immediately by trepidation at his negotiation with the evil slaver.

“Oh, there’s no guarantee,” sneered Mason, making the most of his leverage. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

Samuel, his footsteps dampened by the heavy pine needles on the forest floor, dashed three yards to another tree where he could now clearly see the scene before him. Luke was twenty feet distant. Mason was about twelve feet away, his back to Samuel, and bent over someone shorter, with a knife to their throat.

After a few seconds of thought, Luke spoke.

“Alright. But a warning. I have a friend with a bow and arrow trained on you. If you renege on the deal, he’ll shoot you where you stand.”

Samuel looked around but couldn’t see any sign of anyone else. Apparently neither could the slaver.

“*Sure, you do, friend,*” Mason scorned. “Something tells me we wouldn’t be in this discussion if you did. But you

have nothing to worry about. I'll let him go, scout's honor."

Luke's jaw tightened and Samuel willed him not to trust the slaver.

"Let's do it then. I'll walk halfway to you and put the gun on the ground. Then I'll walk back here. Then you let Max go and he'll walk over to me. When we walk away, you can pick up your gun."

The slaver nodded. "Do it."

As Luke cautiously began his approach, Samuel's heart raced in his chest. Whether the slaver planned to keep his promise or not, there was no way he was letting him get away with what he had done to Cade. He looked at the gun he was holding, knowing it was useless.

He couldn't risk using it while the slaver had Max. He quickly scanned the forest floor around him and spotted a hefty, fist-sized rock nestled between the thick roots of the tree behind him. He darted across the space between the trees, placing his gun on the ground and frantically digging around the stone with his fingers and pulling it free before turning back.

Luke neared the halfway mark, as Samuel crossed again to the tree he had originally hidden behind. Luke carefully lowered the pistol to the ground and began to step backwards to his starting point.

"Your turn," he said, coming to a standstill.

The slaver didn't release Max. Instead, he kept the knife at the terrified kid's throat and began to shuffle forward with him.

"What are you doing?" asked Luke, his voice an octave higher.

"Relax, I'll let him go when I have the gun."

Samuel stepped out from behind the tree and trod lightly after the slaver. Luke's only reaction to the sudden appearance of Samuel was a slight widening of his eyes.

“That wasn’t the deal,” he said, raising his voice to cover Sam’s approach.

The slaver laughed triumphantly as he reached the gun and gripped Max’s hair, pulling sharply and exposing his pale throat.

Samuel rushed forward and with all his might swung the rock in a sideways arc, collecting the slaver’s temple as he began his slicing motion. The slaver crashed sideways, taking the boy with him as an arrow whistled through the air where his face had been a millisecond before and embedded itself in a sapling twenty feet away.

Chaos ensued as Luke rushed forward just as Ragland, nocking another arrow, and Isaac burst from the trees. Before they could reach the scene, where a screaming Max, bleeding from a shallow cut on his neck, was trying to get out from under the slaver, Samuel fell on Mason and smashed the rock over his head a second time and raised it again, ready to strike a third blow.

Luke gripped his wrist. “He’s dead, Sam!” he said as Max extricated himself from the dead grip of his tormentor and ran to his father.

Samuel sobbed in rage, trying to shake Luke free so he could strike again. The man was struggling to hold him, but finally wrestled the boy into a tight hug, turning him away from the body.

“Shh, Sam. He’s done. You did it, you saved Max.”

*

Ben kept an arm wrapped firmly around Samuel’s shoulders as they made their way through the forest, putting distance between themselves and the bloody scene behind them.

The boy was quiet now, grief at the loss of Cade sweeping away the rage that had consumed him when dealing with Mason. It was a grief shared by Ben of course, who along with Diana had raised Cade as their own since the battle of Manchester.

Blake was also distraught at the loss of Cade, who had been just as much an older brother as Samuel. Peace walked alongside him, comforting him as best she could.

Luke and Ben flanked both them and the other children, keeping them moving steadily away from danger as Ragland guided them from the front.

When they'd gone about a mile, Ragland steered them towards the sound of running water. Soon the Hudson River came into view through the trees up ahead. Ben gave Samuel's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Let's rest here a minute and get our bearings," Ragland said gently.

The ragtag group settled on the riverbank in weary silence. After a moment, Isaac cleared his throat.

"I know we're all still processing what has happened over the last week, but I want to tell you how proud we are of you. All of you." His gaze moved over the dirty, exhausted faces of the children. "You survived something terrible with courage and stood by each other when it mattered most. You're survivors and warriors."

The children managed faint smiles at the praise. Erin shuffled over to nestle against her father's side, and he wrapped an arm around her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"How did you find us?" Samuel asked hoarsely, finally lifting his eyes.

Luke gestured to Ragland who stood stoically nearby, having tactfully held back as they reunited. "My friend Joshua here helped me get to you. I couldn't have done it without him." Ragland gave a nod of acknowledgment. "Looks like your stepdad Ben and Isaac were on the case too, though."

Ben made to say something, but his eyes suddenly welled with tears, the loss of Cade too fresh for him. Isaac put a supportive arm around his shoulder.

"I wouldn't have made it without Ben. It was his idea to use bikes. If we hadn't had them, there was no way we

could have made it here in time.”

“Everyone must be worried sick back home,” Ben said finally. “We should make plans.”

Luke pondered their situation as he idly stroked Erin’s hair. “Until we are well away, we should stay off the main roads. We don’t know what sort of blowback there might be once that other slaver spills the beans about what happened. Are they organized enough to come after us?”

Isaac and Ben looked at each other.

“Yes. Not only that, but I also gathered some disturbing intel. I won’t tell you in front of the kids, but it’ll be best if we get as far away as possible, and as quickly as possible.”

There was a brief silence as they pondered this. It was broken by Ragland, who decided to take the lead given the emotional state of the other men.

“I think we should follow the river north for a bit, then cut west once we’re well clear of Catskill and pick up one of the backroads leading north. Luke, it means we won’t be able to keep your promise to Tyler and his brother. Once the children are back home in Manchester, I’m happy to go and fetch them.”

Luke nodded. As much as he wanted to keep his promise to pick up the medic and his brother on the way home, he knew the priority was getting the children home as quickly and with as little risk as possible.

“Can we rest first?” Peace spoke up in a small voice that reminded them how young they still were. The other children’s faces echoed her plea. The non-stop tension and marching over the last week had exhausted them physically and emotionally.

“Not just yet, we’re still too close,” said Ragland, before anyone else could answer. He looked up at the sky. “Give me two hours, and then we’ll make camp for the night and eat. Have some more water now, and we’ll move out.”

None of the Manchester men protested; Ragland's plan made perfect sense and they were happy to let him take the lead while they shepherded and cared for their traumatized children.

When Ragland called time in a clearing by the shore two and a half hours later, the kids slumped to the grass in relief. Ben and Luke began gathering wood for a fire while Ragland disappeared with his bow.

Isaac cleaned the wound on Max's neck and coated it with the salve Ragland had pulled from his pack.

The sun was sinking below the western hills by the time they had a modest camp established, the crackling fire washing them in warmth and flickering light as they ate the fat rabbits that Ragland had skewered.

As darkness settled over the camp, Luke sat with one arm around Erin, her head resting against his chest as she succumbed to exhaustion. The other children were likewise curled up near the flames, the day's events having drained them completely. Only Samuel remained awake, staring hollowly into the fire across from Isaac.

Luke met Isaac's gaze. "Why don't you and Ben take the first rest," he suggested quietly. "Ragland and I will stand watch tonight."

Isaac nodded. The chance to close his eyes even briefly was sorely needed. He settled near the children, soon slipping into a light, troubled sleep.

As the night deepened, Luke kept vigil beside the fire, axe resting across his knees. The events of the day churned endlessly through his mind... finding the children against all odds, only to discover they'd lost Cade so senselessly.

Ragland's movement nearby drew Luke from his brooding thoughts. The Drifter approached and quietly handed him a steaming mug.

"Just water, but it's hot," Ragland rumbled.

Luke accepted the mug gratefully. "Thanks. How are you holding up after all this?"

Ragland settled on the ground beside him with a soft grunt, gazing into the flames. “It was a bloody business back there, I’m just glad we reached them in time.”

Luke nodded, taking a sip. “It’s funny, when I snuck up on you that first time, who’d have guessed we’d end up here.”

The hint of a smile touched the older man’s weathered face. “The After Days make for strange bedfellows. But you’ve proved yourself an okay sort of guy. Despite your nonstop jabbering.”

Luke chuckled softly. “You love my jabbering, don’t deny it. It’s how I got you to finally spill about this mystery woman of yours, didn’t I?”

Ragland simply glowered into the fire, and they fell into silence as they sipped the warm water.

“I’d kill for some whiskey right now,” said Luke finally.

“You and me both.”

“What are your plans after this?”

Ragland was silent so long that Luke thought he wasn’t going to respond. “I’ll let you know after I help you all home safe.”

Luke nodded.

“Thank you, Joshua,” he said, his voice choking with unexpected emotion. “For everything.”

Ragland grunted uncomfortably.

Luke laughed, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Don’t ever change, Joshua,” he said, patting his friend’s shoulder before climbing to his feet to wake Ben and Isaac for their watch.

*

They set out the next morning after a breakfast of nuts and berries Ragland had gathered before dawn. They saw no signs of pursuit that day or any other day for that matter.

During their five-day trek, Isaac and Ben disclosed what they had discovered in Catskill and placed it high on their agenda of things to address when they arrived back in Manchester.

Mid-morning on the sixth day of walking, they approached Manchester on Amoskeag Street.

“Look!” yelled Peace. “It’s the tower!”

The other children cheered excitedly, even Samuel. There were hugs and claps on the backs between the men.

“We made it,” said Isaac.

Chapter 19

They quickened their pace as they crossed the bridge into the eastern part of Manchester. They hadn't even finished crossing when people started appearing around the corner and rushing to them. Obviously, the spotter on duty had seen them and raised the alarm, because as they drew nearer to the heart of the small community, people began emerging to see what the commotion was.

Cries of joy went up when they recognized the lost children and crowded around the group. After a few minutes of yelled greetings and more claps on the back, the crowd separated to let them continue over the bridge.

Becky came sprinting from the tower entrance with Elizabeth's hand clutched in hers, the girl squealing "Daddy!" when she spotted Luke.

Luke's heart swelled at the sight of his girls. He swept Elizabeth up in his arms and pulled in Erin as Becky collided with him, the small family hugging each other fiercely amid happy tears.

The other parents were not far behind. Ben, who had arms around both Samuel and Blake, was nearly tackled by Diana. There were hugs and tears all round as the children were reunited with her. They only broke apart when Diana realized Ben was sobbing. She looked around.

"Cade?"

Ben shook his head, unable to say the words. Samuel, also overcome with emotion, smothered his mother in a tight hug.

"Oh, poor Cade..."

Isaac looked around for Indy, and finally spotted her fighting her way through the crowd, making a beeline for him and Max. She flung her arms around his neck.

"Thank God, you brought him home safe," she breathed. Over her shoulder, Isaac spotted Ava clutching Peace

protectively.

Indigo finally released him and bent over to inspect Max more closely. Her son looked thinner and was scuffed and bruised.

“Where’s Paul?” he asked.

Almost reluctantly, Indigo straightened. Tears filled her eyes even as, a few feet away, Peace began to wail with grief.

“He’s dead,” was all she could manage.

“Oh no...”

Isaac took both of them in his arms again. It had been a long time, but death had again been visited upon them. Another of the founding members of their group lost. He heard Luke swear somewhere behind him, and knew he too had been told the news about Paul.

Amidst the reunions, and the sadness at the news of those they’d lost, Samuel suddenly froze, eyes wide. There, hanging back from the crowd and standing with his mother, was Vincent, arm in a sling but very much alive. Shock rooted Samuel to the spot, unable to comprehend how his friend had survived.

“Vincent...? How?”

Vincent hurried over, a mix of emotions on his face. “Chris let me go that night instead of killing me,” he explained. “Then Indigo and everyone found me.”

Overwhelmed, Samuel embraced him fiercely. The guilt and pain over Vincent’s apparent execution now lifted and replaced with amazement and joy. Any residual doubts he had about letting Chris walk away also dissipated.

As the initial euphoria of reunion dissolved into retrospection, the crowd parted and the leadership group, along with Ragland, who had been introduced to Indigo and Diana, made their way back to the tower.

“What happened to you?” Isaac asked Indy, tenderly touching her bruised face. “Were you with Paul? Who found Vincent?”

“Not here. Let’s get you all inside. We have plenty of time to debrief...”

Epilogue

When Isaac rose late the next morning, sunlight was streaming through the big plate glass windows. The apartment was quiet. He took a moment to process what he'd learned the night before about the rescue attempt that had been doomed by the dumb luck that crossed their path with that of a bunch of psycho hillbillies.

The loss of Paul and Bowman left a dark hole in their collective hearts. Bowman's death was also a strategic blow, not only for Concord but for them in Manchester too. They'd have to get word to Concord as soon as possible and hope that whoever took over Bowman's role as leader would also be such a staunch ally.

Sighing, he crawled out of bed and went into the kitchen, where he found a note on the wooden countertop.

Figured you needed to sleep in. We've all taken the kids downstairs for breakfast. Join us when you wake up!

Love

Indy xx

PS good to have you home.

Isaac had showered the night before, so he just pulled on jeans, a t-shirt, and a fresh pair of sneakers before heading for the door. He found their core group in the old cafeteria. The kids and Luke's friend Ragland were nowhere to be seen.

He was greeted happily enough by everybody but could easily sense the sad undertone that he knew would take a while yet to dissipate.

"I'll get you some eggs. Here, take my seat," said Indy.

"Where are the kids?" he asked as he sat down.

"They're all outside playing," said Luke. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Where's your friend?"

“The mysterious Mr. Ragland isn’t really an indoors kind of guy. He’s gone to explore Manchester.”

After he finished eating, they went their separate ways, with Isaac, Luke and Ben heading outside to check on the children. They found them in the square, laughing and horsing around on the play equipment of the big playground they had set up in their second year in Manchester. Samuel and Vincent were in the shade, quietly talking to each other as they supervised the younger children.

The three men sat down at a picnic table. In the distance, Joshua Ragland emerged from a side street onto Elm. Luke waved to him, and The Drifter changed course and headed towards them.

“So,” said Luke. “What do we do about Catskill?”

Isaac gazed into the distance, his steel-blue eyes hardening before turning back and regarding them seriously.

“What do we do? We go to war...”

The End

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