

The Last of Us

A Novelization

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ORIGINAL STORY BY NEIL DRUCKMANN

***To Dawn,
My Editor, My Everything***

Prologue

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Austin, Texas

Sarah awoke from her light sleep as she heard her father come in through the front door of their home, talking on his cell phone. A warm evening breeze followed him in as she felt the soothing comfort of the refreshing air across her face and the welcomed company of her father. She knew within seconds it was one of those days that he had brought work home with him, judging by the tone in his voice.

“Tommy, I... Tommy. Tommy, listen to me. He’s the contractor okay? I can’t lose this job. I understand... let’s talk about this in the morning, okay? We’ll talk about it in the morning. Alright, goodnight.” As Joel hung up the phone and turned on the lamp next to the couch, Sarah welcomed her father with a yawn and a tired smile. “Scoot,” Joel gestured to the other side of the couch with his hand, dropping his phone on the table and seating himself next to his daughter. He let out a long sigh and rested his head on the back of the couch.

“Fun day at work, huh?” Sarah asked.

“What are you still doing up, it’s late.”

“Oh crud, what time is it?” Sarah spun around to look at the wall-mounted clock as it read 11:50 pm.

“It’s way past your bedtime,” Joel stated without bothering to look back at the clock, his eyes barely open.

“But it’s still today,” Sarah replied with a smile, as she rolled off the couch and reached around its side.

“Honey, please not right now,” Joel insisted. “I do not have the energy for this.”

“Here,” Sarah held out a small box in front of her father’s face.

“What’s this?” Joel’s eyes opened a bit wider as he reached for the box.

“Your birthday!” Sarah replied with a wide smile.

Joel held the box and examined it for a moment before opening it, revealing a brand new wristwatch inside.

“You kept complaining about your broken watch, so I figured... you know.”

Joel removed the watch from the box and fastened it around his wrist.

“You like it?”

“Honey, this is...”

“What?”

Joel placed his ear to the watch and tapped on it a few times. A look of concern appeared on his face.

“It’s nice, but I... I think it’s stuck. It’s not-”

“What? No, no, no, no.” She anxiously grabbed Joel’s wrist to see if her father’s birthday gift was broken. She watched the second hand continuously ticking away. She raised an eyebrow and shoved his wrist away, returning to a lying position on the open part of the couch as she let out a mocking laugh.

“Where did you get the money for this?” Joel asked, admiring his new gift.

“Drugs. I sell hardcore drugs.” Sarah responded.

“Oh good.” Joel reached for the TV remote on the table in front of him. “You can start helping out with the mortgage then.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you wish.”

A short while passed as Joel and Sarah watched TV together before he noticed that his daughter had fallen asleep next to him. He cradled Sarah in his arms and carried her up the stairs into her room and laid her on the bed, taking a moment to brush aside the hair draped in her face. “Goodnight, baby girl.”

*

The phone on Sarah’s nightstand rang, waking her from her sleep. She picked up the phone in a sleepy haze, wondering who would be calling at such an unreasonable hour.

“Hello...?”

She heard the familiar voice of her uncle, but she sensed panic behind his breathless voice.

“Sarah, honey, I need you to get your daddy on the phone.”

“Uncle Tommy? What time is it?” Sarah felt a knot forming in her stomach.

“I need to talk to your dad right now. There’s some-” The line went dead.

“Uncle Tommy? Hello?” The line went dead. She hung up the phone and got out of bed. The uneasy nature of the call and the sense of fear in Uncle Tommy’s voice made her want to see her father right away. Sarah shuffled toward her bedroom door. “What was that all about?” she muttered to herself, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she opened the door into the hallway. Sarah rounded the corner, passing the bathroom door on her left. She eyed the dim, pulsing light of a TV escaping through the cracked door of Joel’s bedroom. “Daddy? You in here?” but her father was nowhere to be found. “Where the heck are you?” Sarah turned to face the TV, the Channel 2 news was broadcasting. A brunette female reporter was live at the scene of a building that was partially engulfed in flames.

“It appears that what we initially reported as riots seem to be somehow connected to the nationwide pandemic. We’ve received reports that victims afflicted with the infection show signs of increased aggression and-”

Sarah immediately recalled something that the reporter spoke of. Earlier that morning, while eating breakfast with her father, Joel was reading the morning copy of the Texas Herald. The headline read: *ADMITTANCE SPIKES AT AREA HOSPITALS! 300% INCREASE DUE TO MYSTERIOUS INFECTION!* Sarah was ignorant of the meaning behind the headline, as any twelve-year-old girl would be to national news. She eyed a group of armed, uniformed men abaft to the reporter, between a security barricade and the building set aflame. Another official came into view from the right, barking orders at the others.

“We need to move everybody out of here now. There’s a gas leak. Hey- Move, Get out of here!” The reporter turned back to the camera to continue her live report as the incident unfolded.

“There’s some commotion coming from behind-”

“Lady, get the hell outta here right-”

A bright flash erupted from the building; the live news feed cut to static as Sarah heard and felt a large explosion from outside. She turned and looked out the bedroom window to see a large plume of smoke rising into the air. *What is that?* Her question was answered with a second explosion, this one even louder, which was followed by an orchestra of car alarms and barking dogs. The house shook and the windows rattled. Sarah felt a chill run down her spine, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Fear began to consume her. “Dad!?” She headed out the bedroom toward the stairs and began her descent. “Dad?” she called out again, her fear increasing with each step. At the foot of the stairs she witnessed three police cruisers race down the street, sirens wailing and lights flashing, heading in the direction that would take them towards downtown Austin. She turned left, through the living room, into the kitchen area. *What is going on?* From the living room, she heard the sound of a cell phone vibrating against the

countertop. She saw the light of the screen illuminate a small area of the kitchen that she hurried over to in hopes of finding answers regarding her father's whereabouts. The screen read 2:15 am, with 8 missed calls and two text messages from Tommy. The first message read: "*Where the HELL are you? CALL ME!*" and the second reading: "*On my way.*" Sarah set the phone down and headed towards Joel's home office. The disturbing sound of a yelping dog was heard from the neighbor's home, causing her to gasp in fright. She continued into her father's office, entering only moments before a breathless Joel burst in from the back yard, breathing heavily. He turned around, firmly shutting the plate glass door and locking it behind him.

"There you are," Sarah said.

"Sarah," Joel looked at her, his eyes wide as she had ever seen them. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Sarah responded both relieved and confused.

Joel immediately turned to his office desk and pulled out a plastic gun case from the drawer that held his Taurus M856 .38 Special. "Has anyone come in here?" he frantically asked as he began to load bullets into the cylinder of his gun one by one, as fast as his fingers would allow him.

"No, who would come in here?" Sarah asked with a voice full of concern.

"Don't go near the doors. Just...Just stand back there," Joel continued to load the gun, his hands visibly shaking.

"Dad, you're kind of freaking me out," Sarah said, backing away from the plate glass door. "What's going on?"

"It's the Coopers," referring to their neighbors. "Somethin' ain't right with 'em, I think they're sick."

"What kind of sick?" Sarah asked.

Before Joel could answer, a man flung himself against the plate glass door and let out a beastly snarl. Joel backed away while he watched the door, unable to make sense of the situation. "Jesus... Jimmy!"

"Dad?" Sarah cried out.

"Honey, c'mere, c'mere." Joel grabbed Sarah's arm and shielded her behind him. Jimmy slammed his body against the plate glass in an attempt to smash the door. Joel took his eyes off the door briefly to look back at Sarah and give her a moment of reassurance, before he turned his gaze back towards the door. "Jimmy!" The glass gave out as Jimmy flung himself through the door; shards scattered across the room while his body fell onto the floor. "Jimmy, just stay

back!” he raised his revolver at the bloodied, snarling neighbor; his feral eyes locked on both of them. “Jimmy, I am warning you!”

“Oh my god...” Sarah watched in disbelief from behind her father, her knees violently shaking.

“Don’t!” Joel gave a final warning to Jimmy as charged right at them. He pulled the trigger, firing a round through Jimmy’s throat. Sarah shrieked in terror as Jimmy fell to the floor, clutching the wound and gasping for air.

“Go, go!” Joel pushed Sarah out of the office back into the living room, glancing over his shoulder to ensure Jimmy was no longer a threat. He turned back towards Sarah and dropped to a knee to comfort her.

“You shot him....” Sarah whimpered, looking Joel directly in the eyes.

“Sarah,” Joel met her eyes, placing his free hand on her arm in an offering of serenity.

“I saw him this morning,” Sarah said, still trying to make sense of the situation.

“Listen to me, there is something bad going on. We have got to get outta here, do you understand me?”

Sarah nodded, horrified by the droplets of blood covering her father’s face and shirt, a faint metallic scent filling her nostrils. “Yeah.”

A car horn blared from outside the house and headlights poured through the front windows into the living room.

“Tommy... c’mon, c’mon,” Joel instructed in a soft voice, trying to maintain a placid demeanor and keep Sarah as calm as possible. He gave a final look over his shoulder to make sure Jimmy was still motionless and led Sarah by the arm toward the exit. He opened the front door, stepping onto the porch. Tommy was circling around the front of his white SUV to check on the status of his brother and niece.

“Where the hell you been? You have any idea what’s goin’ on out there?” Tommy asked, hoping for answers.

“I got some notion,” Joel opened the passenger side rear door for Sarah and helped her in. “C’mon baby, go on in there.”

“Holy shit. You got blood all over you...” Tommy looked Joel up and down.

“It ain’t mine. Let’s just get outta here.” Joel shut the door behind his shaking daughter.

“They’re saying that half the people in the city have lost their minds.”

“Can we please just go?” Joel opened the front passenger side door and climbed in.

“Some sort of parasite or somethin’,” Tommy circled back toward the driver side door. “You gonna tell me what happened?”

“Later,” Joel responded, his mind solely focused on the safety of his daughter.

Tommy shifted the SUV into reverse and peered over his right shoulder. “Hey, Sarah. How you holdin’ up, honey?”

“I’m fine,” Sarah replied quietly, with a slight tremble in her voice. Tommy shifted the vehicle into drive and started down the dark street. She shifted to the middle of the back seat so that she could get a clear view through the windshield. “Can we hear what’s on the radio?”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Tommy responded, as he switched on the radio. He hoped to find some answers about the madness that was consuming Austin. He persistently flipped through the radio stations but was fruitless in his efforts. The sound of static filled the car until he turned it off. “No cellphone. No radio. Yeah, we’re doin’ great. A minute ago, newsman wouldn’t shut up.”

“They say where to go?” Joel asked.

Tommy tried to remember what the news reported earlier, his eyes fixed on the road. “He said, ah.... Army’s puttin’ up roadblocks on the highway. No gettin’ into Travis County.”

“That means we need to get the hell out. Take 71.”

“71, that’s where I’m headed,” Tommy slowed to a stop at a T-intersection. More police cruisers flew past, sirens blaring. He turned right, in the direction of a sign pointing towards San Marcos.

“Did they say how many are dead?” Sarah asked, leaning forward between the seats.

“Probably a lot,” Tommy responded. “Found this one family all mangled inside their house.”

Joel looked at Tommy and placed a hand on his arm. “Tommy, enough,” he felt that Sarah had seen and heard enough violence for one night, or a lifetime.

“Right, sorry,” Tommy replied, shifting his attention back to the road. He turned a hard left at a sharp bend. The three of them all looked at the sight of a grey sedan that was unable to make the same sharp turn; it smashed headfirst into a nearby tree.

Joel sighed. “Jesus Christ, how did this happen?”

“They got no clue,” Tommy answered. “But we ain’t the only town. At first they were saying it was just the South. Now they’re going on about the East Coast, the West Coast...” A burning farmhouse came into view as they rushed down the road, smoke rising into the night sky. “Holy hell... that’s Louis’ farm. I hope that son of a bitch made it out.”

“I’m sure he did,” Joel unconvincingly replied.

“Are we sick?” Sarah asked, now turned around, unable to steer her eyes away from the conflagration.

“No. No, of course not,” Joel answered.

“How do you know?”

“They said it’s just ah, people in the city,” Tommy informed. “We’re good.” He took another right at a stop sign, the farmhouse slowly faded from an inferno to an ember smothered by the suffocating gloom of night.

“Didn’t Jimmy work in the city?”

“That’s right, he did,” Joel assured Sarah. “We’re fine, trust me.”

“Alright.”

A stranded couple and their young child appeared in their headlights on the side of the road as the car continued down Red River Street towards Highway 71. The man wore a flannel shirt and a baseball cap. He turned towards the intense gleaming of the high beams. Tommy began to slow the vehicle as the man waved his arms in the air, signaling for help. *HEY!*

“Let’s see what they need,” Tommy said.

Joel glared at Tommy. “What the hell do you think you’re doin’? Keep drivin’.”

“They got a kid, Joel.”

“So do we.”

“But we have room,” Sarah added.

“Keep drivin’, Tommy.”

HEY! STOP! STOP!

Sarah turned back towards the fading cry for help while she watched the man and his family disappear into the night.

“You ain’t seen what I seen,” Joel said staring straight ahead. He turned his unblinking eyes towards Tommy. “Someone else’ll come along.”

“We shoulda helped them,” Sarah managed to speak over the lump in her throat.

Tommy veered left onto East 30th Street, approaching St. David’s Medical Center. An ambulance sped by, almost sideswiping the SUV. As the sound of sirens began to fade into the distance, the sound of a low flying helicopter filled the void of temporary silence. “Oh, this is bad.” The SUV approached a convoy of cars at gridlock for miles leading to the on-ramps of I-35. “Everyone and their mother had the same damn idea.”

Joel frantically tried to conjure up a new idea. “Well, we could backtrack and-”

The driver side door of the car directly in front of them flew open; a man in a grey hoodie stepped out, screaming at the line of endless cars before him.

HEY, WHAT THE FUCK! LET’S GO!

A man in a blue hospital gown emerged from the darkness of St. David’s parking lot, sprinting towards the screaming man in the hoodie. The man in the gown reached him in a flash, tackling him against the car, and throwing him to the ground.

“Holy shit...” Tommy stared in shock as he watched a man savagely beaten to a symphony of car horns.

The savage man’s blue hospital gown was now splattered with blood. A woman in an identical blue gown spawned from the darkness and collaborated in the beating; snarling and growling as their arms thrashed the helpless man.

“Turn us around,” Joel instructed as calmly as he could.

Tommy continued to look straight ahead, frozen in fear. “Oh my God...”

Joel shook Tommy by the arm, interrupting his trance. “Tommy!” He continued to stare at the vicious beating before his eyes. “Tommy!”

The berserk man in the blue gown looked up into the SUV’s headlights and met Tommy’s eyes with a glare of his own. He charged toward the vehicle in bloodlust, leaving the hooded victim to his female counterpart. The site of immediate danger was enough to bring him back to his senses.

“Holy shit!”

Tommy threw the SUV into reverse and cut the wheel hard to the left, shifting back into drive. The force of the acceleration threw Sarah back into her seat, causing a nauseous feeling in

her stomach. The infected man threw himself against the vehicle with a loud thud, leaving a smear of blood against the rear driver window as they sped away.

“What the fuck just happened!?” Tommy asked no one in particular, sweat dripping down the side of his face. “What the fuck just happened!?” he repeated, this time louder. “Did you see that?”

“Yes, I saw it,” Joel responded, his voice was masked in a false sense of composure. He speculated on what just happened outside of the hospital and what happened in his own house just a short time ago. He could see the similitude between the man in the blue gown and Jimmy; the crazed look in their eyes, the snarling from their twisted mouths, and their animalistic behavior.

“Goddamn,” Tommy muttered to himself, gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckle intensity.

Joel pointed at an approaching street on the left. “Turn here, turn here.”

Tommy turned the steering wheel, his hands nearly slipping from the sweat in his palms. A large wave of panicked civilians ran towards the vehicle, flooding both lanes of the street. “No, no, no, no...” Tommy endlessly repeated to himself. “Come on people, move!” Tommy continued to inch forward, laying on the horn as the panicked crowd flowed past the SUV like a river of chaos.

“What are they runnin’ from?” Sarah asked, despite having an idea after witnessing what just happened moments ago.

“Just get us outta here,” Joel ordered.

“I’m tryin’,” Tommy responded, careful not to run anyone over amidst the panic of the people. An overturned camper sat in the middle of the street, making the situation increasingly tense. He maneuvered the cumbersome vehicle around the camper, almost running over a man in a grey dress shirt in the process. The man glanced at Tommy for a brief second and continued on his way. The car making contact with the man was enough for Tommy to keep his SUV stopped for a brief moment.

“We can’t stop here Tommy,” Joel gritted his teeth and placed his hands on the dashboard, urging the vehicle forward. More people kept flooding in from the other side of the camper that obstructed the road and Tommy’s view.

“I can’t fucking drive through ’em, Joel!”

“Then back up then!” Joel roared.

“They’re behind me too!”

The seemingly endless wave of people temporarily subsided, leaving a window of opportunity to circumvent the overturned obstruction. Joel frantically pointed directly ahead. “There. There! There!”

“Hold on!” Tommy forcefully pressed his foot on the gas.

“Go!” Joel yelled, veins protruding from his neck.

The SUV bypassed the camper and sped forward, narrowly avoiding a small handful of people on the other side. Tommy continued to accelerate out of the congestion and found the open road again. A wave of relief washed over everyone as they continued their trek towards Highway 71. They raced towards a green light at an upcoming four-way intersection. The vehicle passed under the light as a set of blinding high beams that belonged to a blue pick-up truck approached from the left.

“Look out!” Sarah shrieked, bracing for impact.

The truck smashed directly into the driver side of their SUV. Sarah could feel bits of glass spray into her face, and she felt weightless as the vehicle left the ground. Everything in her world went black.

*

Sarah awoke inside the destroyed SUV that lay on its side, her head pounding and ears ringing. A sharp, intense pain shot through her right leg as the smell of gasoline filled her nostrils. The world around her was filled with the sounds of car horns and the terrified screams of people running for their lives. “Dad?” she called out in fright, forcing herself to move.

Joel was unconscious in the passenger seat with Tommy nowhere to be found. Sarah climbed over the seat and began shaking her father in an attempt to wake him. His warm skin gave her relief knowing that he was still breathing. “Hey, hey!”

Joel’s eyes slowly crept open to the blurry bedlam of reality. “What...?” Joel shook his head, trying to regain his senses, his sight beginning to readjust. The faint, familiar sound of snarling gave him the boost of adrenaline he needed to clear the mental fog. He peered through the fractured windshield. The blue truck that had smashed into them lay still under a utility pole in front of a pawnshop; its front end was completely smashed in. An infected had gotten into the cab of the truck, beating and ripping at the driver. The vehicle shook from the violence inside as dazzling sparks showered onto the roof of the truck from the loose electrical wires above. The whole scene filled Joel’s eyes with an image as surreal as he had ever seen. He looked back up at his daughter, pushing her hand back with his bloodied arm. “Get back baby, get back,” gesturing her to return to the rear of the ruined vehicle. He raised his leg, placing his right foot on the windshield. “Look, I’m okay.” Joel slammed his foot repeatedly into the windshield to clear an exit. He grunted and his teeth ground together as he delivered one swift kick after another to the

weakened glass, until it finally gave way, sending fragments onto the street. He readjusted his position so he could crawl through the opening he made, his forearms dragging through the broken glass that littered the pavement. People continued to run through the street as Joel emerged from the destroyed vehicle. He propped himself up on all fours and made it to his feet. He took a deep breath, turning to help his daughter out of the wreckage. That's when the combined sound of growling and rapid footsteps filled his ears. A powerful thrust drove Joel backward into the wreckage of the SUV. He instinctively juted out his forearm to create distance between himself and the bloodthirsty infected that was desperately clawing at him. His bloody face was just inches away from Joel's. Rancid breath flowed from a mouth full of broken teeth, as it growled and snarled relentlessly. He struggled to break free, eyes wide with terror.

A figure in red appeared from the darkness. He let out a cry as he sent a brick across the head of the infected man, sending him to the ground. Tommy looked down at him, breathing heavy, then back at Joel, still leaning against the wreckage of his SUV. Their eyes met his, wide with shock.

"Dad!?" Sarah cried out from inside the vehicle.

Joel knelt down to the opening he left where the windshield used to be, extending his arm towards Sarah.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here. Come on, gimme your hand."

Sarah grabbed onto her father's hand as he pulled her from the wreckage. She got to her feet and began to collapse to the ground, her father's strong hands were the only thing keeping her standing.

"What is it?" Joel asked in concern.

"My leg hurts," Sarah whimpered, her face wincing in pain.

"How bad?"

"Pretty bad."

Tommy scanned the surrounding environment, watching people flee, trying to formulate a new escape plan. He backed towards Joel and Sarah, keeping his eyes up to watch for threats. "We're gonna need to run."

Joel didn't like what he heard but he knew it was the only option. A bad situation had become even worse with no vehicle and Sarah unable to walk. He pulled out his revolver with five remaining rounds from the back of his waistline and placed it firmly in Tommy's hands. "You keep us safe."

“Come on baby,” Joel scooped Sarah into his arms as Tommy raised the revolver up, peering over Joel’s shoulder to ensure his blind side was clear. “Now hold on tight.”

“Okay.”

Tommy and Joel hurried down the street among the crowd. Screams of panic came from every direction, and the road was overlaid with wreckage; abandoned cars, ambulances, fire trucks, and police cruisers were among them. Their legs carried them as fast as they could.

Tears welled in Sarah’s eyes. “Daddy, I’m scared.”

The destructive incursion of the infected created pandemonium across the city. The warm evening air was replete with the inharmonious screams of the wounded accompanied by the growling and screeching of the infected that flooded the streets. Desultory gunfire could be heard, mixed with the sounds of squealing tires, car horns, and cries for help. An immense explosion from a nearby gas station sent a concussive blast that sent flames reaching toward the sky. Suddenly the summer breeze was rich with the smell of gasoline and burning flesh.

Sarah was overcome with shock, fear, and sadness as the human torches burned around her.

“Don’t look, Sarah, keep looking at me, baby. We’re gonna get out of this, I promise.”

Tommy and Joel continued running as fast they could, the streets feeling more congested and tumultuous as they pushed onward. Sarah alternated her gaze between the surrounding turmoil and her father’s determined look. Her hands grew numb as her nails dug into Joel’s shoulders as she hung on for dear life.

Tommy and Joel eyed a large pack of infected before them, and yet the hysterical crowd continued to run into the peril.

“We have to get off the street!” Joel yelled.

An alley on the left showed promise.

“This way, through the alley!” Tommy hurried through, waving his arm in a gesture to follow. Watching his back for infected with a ready trigger finger, he moved towards the gate of a chain link fence, holding it open for Joel. “Go!”

Joel hastened down the alley, breathing heavy. Every muscle in his body ached, and his eyes stung from the sweat. He stumbled and nearly fell, knocking over a trashcan. The sound alerted the attention of an infected from a nearby kill deeper in the alley. Joel extended his arm in defense, as the infected violently lunged at him. He desperately turned his body to protect Sarah. Tommy rushed to his brother’s aid, delivering a kick to the attacker’s ribs and knocked him to the ground. He wasted no time in following up with a bullet to its head. The surrounding

alley walls intensified the echo of the gunfire. They continued ahead with Tommy leading the way, his weapon at the ready.

“We’re almost there. We’re almost there, baby,” Joel assured his daughter.

They continued down the dark, narrow alley. Infected savagely ripped at a nearby chain-link fence in a parallel alley. Some infected were climbing the meager obstruction, which looked like it could give way at any moment. The alley came to a dead end; the only means of advance was a door on the right that linked a bar to its outdoor patio. Tommy and Joel made a dash for the door as Sarah clung desperately to her father. The sounds of infected inched closer and closer. Tommy opened the door for Joel and slammed it behind them.

Tommy held the door shut with all his weight as the mob of infected forced themselves against it in relentless pursuit. “Get to the highway!” he yelled, looking back at his brother.

“What?”

“Go! You got Sarah! I can outrun ’em.”

“I will meet you there,” Joel said as he started for the front door of the bar.

“Uncle Tommy!” Sarah cried out.

Tommy used all his strength to keep the door shut as the infected continued to relentlessly pursue their prey. “Hurry!”

Joel threw his shoulder into the front door of the bar, bursting through. The Montopolis Bridge could be seen about a mile south. A dark, narrow, dirt road lay before them in the same direction. The dying screams of a man being torn apart by a horde of infected on the other side of the parking lot gave Joel no time to explore other options. He made a run for the road.

“Daddy, we can’t leave Uncle Tommy!”

“He’s gonna be fine,” Joel struggled to speak.

Joel hurried down the dirt road, dust kicking up with every step. The pathway was hilly, circumscribed by large boulders and barren trees. The small, but constant changes in elevation were beginning to take their toll. His pace slowed as his legs, arms, and neck ached in pain. Despite his distress, his paternal instincts continued to drive him forward. With each step, it seemed like the cries of the infected encroached from the darkness.

“We’re almost there,” Joel managed to say softly between heavy breaths.

Sarah struggled to speak through the crippling fear she felt. “They’re getting closer.”

An overturned ambulance came into view, its horns blaring. A gurney hung halfway out of the back, appearing in sync with the flashing of the emergency lights. An infected paramedic was pinned under the toppled vehicle, struggling to free himself. His fingers clawed at the dirt. The footsteps and wailing of the infected seemed as if they were right on Joel's heels.

A strong beam of light suddenly blinded them both, followed by a short burst of gunfire. Joel instinctively fell to the ground as the shots screamed overhead. The bullets made a sharp sound as they cut through the air above, ripping into the flesh of the pursuing infected. Joel heard five or six bursts of fire before a long pause. The bright beam of light directed itself back at Joel and Sarah on the ground.

"It's okay baby, we're safe," Joel looked his daughter in the eye, scooping her back into his arms as he got to his feet. "We're safe." Joel looked for the light source, which was lowered towards the ground. A soldier stood in the middle of the road, outfitted in a MOPP suit and gas mask. "Hey," Joel called out taking a step forward.

The soldier raised his left arm in the air. "Stop!" he ordered.

Joel continued forward. "We need help, please. It's my daughter. I think her leg is broken."

"Stop right there!" the soldiers muffled yell could be heard through his gas mask as he raised his M4 service rifle at Joel and Sarah, blinding them in the strong beam of light.

Joel took a few steps back as he realized the severity of the situation. He looked at his injured daughter, then back into the light. "Okay... we're not sick," he urged in a calm voice, trying to ease the tension.

The soldier lowered his rifle slightly as he reached for his shoulder-mounted radio. "Got a couple of civilians in the outer perimeter, please advise."

Joel stood in silence as he waited for the soldier to let them through. He could not clearly make out the incoming radio chatter from the distance he stood.

"Daddy, what about Uncle Tommy?" Sarah asked. Her eyes remained fixed on the soldier before them.

He looked at his daughter, her head resting on his shoulder. "We're gonna get you to safety and go back for him. Okay?" he said as calmly as possible, but uncertainty lingered in Joel's voice.

"Sir, there's a little girl..." Joel overheard the soldier say into his radio. Joel's teeth ground together in unease thinking of Sarah's life hanging in the balance of a soldier's orders.

“But... yes sir,” the soldier released the button on his radio. He slowly lowered his hand from the radio to the foregrip of his rifle. Joel was alarmed by the reluctance in the soldier’s body language.

“Listen, buddy, we’ve just been through hell,” Joel took a step forward towards the soldier, in an attempt to reason with him. “Okay, we just need-

The strong beam of light flooded into Joel and Sarah’s eyes.

“Oh, shit...” Joel took a step back and began to turn to run away when a burst of gunfire rushed towards them. The force of the impact sent them reeling backward, discharging Sarah from Joel’s arms. They tumbled down a small hill that bordered the road, separating from each other. Joel slid to a stop and rolled onto his back, the world spinning in dizzied distortion. Footsteps quickly encroached on his position, and a beam of light poured back into his eyes. He raised a hand to block the light while making one final plea for his life.

“Please, don’t...”

The soldier’s finger slid from the receiver onto the trigger. A loud bang that rang through the night sky followed.

Warm droplets of sticky blood sprinkled on Joel’s face as the soldier fell to his side, his gas mask filling with blood. Tommy emerged from the darkness with Joel’s revolver pointed at the soldier’s body. As he closed the distance to his brother, a panicked Tommy lowered the gun and looked past Joel. A faint whimper could be heard a few yards away.

It only took a moment for the horror to set in. After everything happening so fast, Joel finally realized he was unharmed from the soldier’s fire on top of the hill. He got to his hands and knees and crawled as quickly as he could over to his daughter. “Sarah!” He knelt beside his daughter, her arms favoring her midsection. Sarah’s breathing was rapid and panicked. Tears ran from her unfocused eyes, as she stared into the starry night sky. A dark red spread across her grey t-shirt.

“Move your hands baby,” Joel said with tears welling up in his eyes as he searched for the wound. Sarah’s hands reached for her father’s face as she continued to struggle for breath. Her weak cries of pain felt like knives in Joel’s ears. “I know baby, I know...” Joel pressed firmly on the centermost area of the wound. He tried everything in his power to slow the bleeding. Sarah let out another sharp cry of pain. “Listen to me, I know this hurts baby.... You’re gonna be okay baby, stay with me.” He placed a hand around the back of Sarah’s neck, drawing her closer to him, while his other hand remained pressed upon the wound. She continued to breathe hard and fast, but her cries became softer and softer. “I know, baby, I know it hurts.” Tommy stood a few feet away with a look of shock on his face. “Come on baby, please... I know... I know...”

Sarah's deep, heavy gasps began to fade to quiet, shallow breaths. Her father cradled her in his arms. The grip on her father's hand became limp; her eyes were open but staring at nothing.

"Baby... please..." Tears flowed from Joel's eyes, as he rocked back and forth with his forehead placed against his daughters. Sadness and anger swelled inside him. "Don't do this to me, baby, come on." Joel began to choke on his words, and the tears that flowed from his eyes dripped onto his daughter's lifeless face. "Please God, no, no, God please... don't do this."

Summer



Chapter 1

Summer 2033

Boston, Massachusetts

Joel awoke from his nightmare to the sound of knocking at the door. A dim light penetrated the boarded-up windows in the dusty, desolate apartment. He sighed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he shifted to the foot of the bed. The knocking continued as he sleepily made his way to the door, rubbing his beard as he groaned. “I’m coming,” he said in a gruff voice. He shuffled through the barren kitchen area, clearing the phlegm from his throat. He released the deadbolt and opened the door. Tess stood outside, with a familiar scowl on her angular, gaunt face. A fresh welt swelled under her right eye. Joel groaned as she casually strolled through the door.

“How was your morning?” she asked as she moved into the kitchen area. Her sleeveless plum colored blouse and faded blue jeans were dirty and worn. Joel shut the door behind her and followed her into the kitchen. Tess began to pour herself a glass of bourbon from the nearby shelf. “Want one?”

“No, I don’t... want one.” Joel had an uneasy feeling in his gut that Tess was bearing bad news.

Tess tightened the cap back onto the bottle and took a deep breath. “Well, I have some interesting news for you.”

“Where were you, Tess?” Joel asked. He didn’t approve of her taking jobs without being informed first.

Tess paused for a moment, giving Joel a piercing stare. “West End District.” Joel rolled his eyes and let out a grumble as Tess sipped on her drink. “Hey, we had a drop to make.”

Joel grabbed a small rag off the countertop and approached her. “We,” he said. “We had a drop to make.”

Tess took another sip of bourbon and set down the glass. She grabbed the rag from Joel’s hand. “Yeah well, you wanted to be left alone remember?” she said, giving Joel a dirty look. She adjusted the blue bandana that held her messy hair in place and dabbed the rag on the welt under her eye.

“So, I’ll take one guess,” Joel took a few steps back into the kitchen area, and placed his hands on the countertop, facing away from Tess. “The whole deal went south, and the client made off with our pills, is that about right?”

Tess gave a patronizing laugh and took another sip of her drink. She lowered the rag from her face. “Deal went off without a hitch.” She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a small handful of cards. “Enough ration cards to last us a couple of months, easy.” She threw the cards down on the dusty table and turned back towards Joel who was now facing her, with a subtle grin on his face.

“You want to explain this?” he pointed to his own eye where Tess had a swollen abrasion. Joel was unalarmed by the small amount of damage to Tess’ face, but the fresh swelling suggested a recent conflict.

Tess shrugged. “I was on my way back here, and I got jumped by these two assholes, alright?” She rubbed at the area again with the rag. “Yeah, they got a few good hits in, but... look, I managed.” She took a seat on the small tabletop.

He gave her an unsatisfied look. “Gimme that,” he grabbed the rag from her hand. He cupped Tess’ chin with one hand and gently wiped the cut with his other. “Are these assholes still with us?”

Tess gave Joel a charming smirk as she looked into Joel’s brown eyes. “Now that’s funny.”

Joel turned her face side to side looking for additional damage. “Did you at least find out who they were?”

Tess was annoyed with the onslaught of questions. “Yeah, look, they were a couple of nobodies, they don’t matter,” She swatted Joel’s hand away from her face and stood up. “What matters is that Robert fucking sent them.”

Joel froze. “Our Robert?”

“He knows that we’re after him. He figures he’s gonna get us first.”

Joel paced back to the kitchen countertop, throwing the rag down. “That son of a bitch, he’s smart.”

“No,” Tess said, the smirk reappearing on her face, walking to the other side of the countertop. “He’s not smart enough. I know where he’s hiding.”

Joel perked up and gave her a look of skepticism. “Like hell you do,” the Texan accent thick in his voice.

Tess moved around with a satisfied look on her face; her lean, strong body was postured with pride. “Old warehouse in Area 5, can’t say for how long though.”

Joel stepped towards her, his head nodding up and down in agreement. “Well, I’m ready now. Yeah?”

Tess turned towards the door before Joel could pass her. “Oh, I can do now.”

They stepped outside into the humid summer afternoon. The rancid smell of rotting trash, stewing in the sun for weeks, filled Joel’s nose. Boston had become a place where man and nature were in a stalemate. Trash littered the streets and most of Boston’s brick buildings still stood. Grass began to grow wildly through the cracks in the pavement, and weeds slowly crept up the sides of buildings, shrouding the underlay of colorful graffiti. It appeared as if nature had synthesized the cordyceps brain infection twenty years prior, in an initiative to reclaim what was once taken.

Uniformed marksmen patrolled the rooftops. The soldiers were remnants of what was left of the US Army, now placed under the command and jurisdiction of the Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA). Eyes were always watching the streets from the rooftops, and the city was littered with checkpoints every few miles. Still, the 1,700 square miles of urban Boston was too large to survey every square inch, giving a lot of space for a black market and resistance groups to quietly operate.

“The checkpoint’s still open,” Tess said, turning to face Joel.

“Only got a few hours left until curfew,” Joel replied, knowing the city-wide curfew went into effect at 6 pm.

“We better hurry up then.”

They started up the street, passing by two people having a conversation next to a dumpster. It pertained to the latest work duty draft that FEDRA had issued. One of them was visibly upset about their work duty outside the perimeter wall.

Joel had never been drafted for work duty and didn’t care for the idea. He knew of the dangers of working outside the perimeter wall of the North End Quarantine Zone that ran along North Washington Street and Cross Street, blocking civilian access to the Charlestown Bridge and the Fitzgerald Expressway. His work as a smuggler had taken himself and Tess out there many times. The area outside the perimeter wall was officially named the ‘Buffer Zone’, but was commonly referred to as ‘No Man’s Land’. The area was continuously patrolled, but there was no shortage of infected lurking out in the sprawling urban wilderness.

Joel and Tess continued down the small side street out to Hanover Street, where the rations distribution center sat on the opposite side. Military Humvees rolled past as a recorded message boomed through the city's PA system.

'ATTENTION. CITIZENS ARE REQUIRED TO CARRY A CURRENT ID AT ALL TIMES. COMPLIANCE WITH CITY PERSONNEL IS MANDATORY.'

Two armed guards stood outside the rations distribution center. Tess pointed over at them. "Look at that. Ration line hasn't opened yet. Must be running low again."

A frail-looking woman approached the guard. "Hey, how much longer?"

"Lady, when the rations arrive, we'll open the door, alright?" the soldier responded, rolling his eyes in annoyance.

Joel and Tess continued up the road. Sweat soaked through Joel's soiled green flannel shirt; the sweat seemed to bring life to the old dirt and bloodstains that covered it. Everywhere they looked there were uniformed US Army soldiers and FEDRA police. FEDRA did all they could to rule Boston with an iron fist, but the plethora of Firefly graffiti that covered the city walls spoke of the war that raged within the city walls. Most of which consisted of the Fireflies' emblem, or their motto, *'Follow the Light'*.

The Fireflies had formed as a result of the government-mandated police state. Their mission objective intended to shift power back into the hands of the people. Joel and Tess had loose ties with the group, smuggling weapons and medical supplies in and out of the city for pay and favors. Tommy had joined the Fireflies for some time while living in Boston, but separated from them for personal reasons and fled west a few years back. The Fireflies had had success in other parts of the country by overthrowing FEDRA operated quarantine zones but had not achieved similar success in Boston. Tension had been especially high with the recent execution of six Firefly members.

Joel and Tess made their way farther up Hanover Street toward the Area 5 checkpoint. A small crowd of people stood and watched as a FEDRA raid took place behind a tightly guarded barricade. Heavily armed police stood between the small gaps in the barricades, while FEDRA personnel adorned in white hazmat suits dragged a handful of civilians from a condemned building. Three of them were positioned along the building's wall, on their knees with their hands behind their heads, as a fourth person was being roughly escorted out of the building.

"I said get down!" the man in the hazmat suit shouted, shoving the civilian out the door.

"I didn't do anything wrong!" the civilian pleaded, struggling to break free of the armed personnel's grip, as the others looked on nervously.

One of the men in the hazmat suits sent the butt of his rifle across the lower back of the civilian, while the other soldier pushed him down to the ground and pointed a rifle in his face.

“Hands on your fucking head, do it,” his voice was muffled by a gas mask.

The civilian did as he was instructed, interlocking his hands behind his head as he faced away from the men in hazmat suits. The police coldly guarded the barricade without looking back at the scene behind them. One of the hazmat personnel turned to the other. “Alright, scan ‘em.”

The man pulled out a handheld body scanner, a device developed after the initial outbreak that could instantly detect infection within a person by detecting cordyceps spores within the skin and hair follicles. He held the scanner to the back of the man’s neck, the body scanner followed with a sharp beeping sound.

“He’s clean.” They shifted left to the next person in the same position, bringing the scanner up to the back of the civilian’s neck. The scanner made a sound identical to the last one. “Clean.” They moved to the next person on the left and brought the scanner up to the back of the woman’s neck. This time the scanner made a buzzing noise rather than a beep. “Got a live one.”

“No..,” the woman pleaded as one of the armed men pushed her head violently into the pavement, the other keeping the sights of his rifle aimed directly at her head.

“Shit, hold her down!”

“I’m not infected, it’s wrong, the scan is wrong, please!” she desperately pleaded as one of the armed hazmat personnel slung his rifle around his back and retrieved a syringe out of a medical kit strapped to his thigh.

The man holding the woman down looked up. “Do it.” The other man knelt down and plunged the syringe into the woman’s neck. Both men in hazmat suits quickly moved away as the woman began to have violent convulsions, foam overflowing from her mouth. Within seconds the spasms ceased and she lay still with her unfocused eyes blankly staring into nowhere. The civilian to her right gazed in horror down at her body. One of the men in the hazmat suits directed his rifle at him. “Eyes forward.”

“Alright, she’s down.” The other man said as they moved to the fourth and final person in the line. He raised the scanner to the back of the man’s neck, but before he could scan, the civilian knocked it from his hands with one quick swipe.

“Fuck this!” he yelled as he got to his feet in an attempt to run away.

“Stop!” both FEDRA hazmat workers yelled, quickly firing their weapons into the man’s back as he attempted to flee.

“Holy shit, holy shit!” a kneeling man cried as he watched his friend gunned down in front of him.

“Shut up! Consider yourself lucky. That’s what happens when you hide in a condemned building.” The hazmat worker approached one of the armed police guards at the barricade. “Call the cleanup crew.”

The officer spoke into the radio attached to his vest. “We’re through here. Gonna need two bags and two more for the box.” He looked up at the ever-growing crowd of spectators. Most of them were staring at the man who was gunned down. A pool of blood began spreading out from under him. “Alright people this isn’t a show, keep moving along.”

Joel and Tess continued along, indifferent to what they just witnessed. The world had become a bleak and dangerous place since the outbreak, and neither one was a stranger to heartbreak, sadness, and violence. “Seems like more people are gettin’ infected,” Tess said, solemnly looking up at Joel, walking with her arms crossed.

“That just means more people are sneakin’ out,” Joel responded in a gruff voice, running his hand through his beard.

They turned the corner approaching the checkpoint that connected Area 4 to Area 5 South, adjoining Hanover Street to Richmond Street. The checkpoint was heavily guarded with Humvees spread throughout. Gunners were mounted on the .50 caliber machine guns atop each vehicle’s roof. Water barriers were set up every few yards as roadblocks to ensure no vehicles could enter the entry control point at threatening speeds.

Two FEDRA guards were engaged in a conversation regarding the recent clashes with the Fireflies.

“They fuckin’ lynched ’em,” the female guard spoke from atop a Humvee, positioned behind the mounted machine gun.

“The entire squad?” the other guard leaned against the driver side door, taking a drag of his cigarette.

“Yeah. The way I heard it, they lined them up in the street and cut ’em up. Retribution and shit. We ever lose this place to the stragglers, that’s what’ll happen to us.”

“That will never go down here. Any straggler even looks at me the wrong way, I put his ass down,” he dropped his cigarette to the pavement and smothered it under his boot.

“I’m sure that’s what they thought at every other QZ before riots broke out,” she ran her sleeve across her forehead, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“It’s those goddamn Fireflies. They keep stirring the population up. We put an end to them. That’s how you solve this shit.”

“We agree on that.”

“I got us all new papers,” Tess said, as they approached the security guard at the end of the entry control point. “They shouldn’t give us any static up there, just play it cool.” A large military truck was being waved through the checkpoint as they approached, black exhaust spewing into the humid afternoon air.

The officer at the checkpoint wore a standard blue FEDRA police uniform, with black boots, black gloves, black tactical vest, and a black riot helmet. “Let me see your ID’s,” he ordered. Joel and Tess handed him their IDs. He looked them over carefully, matching their faces to the photos on the ID cards. “What’s your business here?” he sternly asked.

“Got the day off, visiting a friend,” Joel casually responded.

“Alright, move on through,” The guard handed Joel and Tess their IDs.

“Thanks,” Joel responded, accepting his ID. The guard stepped aside, allowing them to pass through.

A sudden, deafening explosion rocked the checkpoint area. Flames and smoke reached for the sky from the military truck that had previously passed through the checkpoint, parked about forty meters away. Joel and Tess stumbled backward, covering their eyes from the bright flash of the detonation. The guard quickly slammed a steel-barred door shut, closing the checkpoint. Gunfire began to pour out of nearby windows. Bright golden tracers flashed and dazzled as twilight fireworks.

“Go, get outta here!” the guard yelled as he ran towards the nearest cover he could find. FEDRA troops scrambled into position as the sound of gunfire filled the air from every direction. “Fireflies!

Tess grabbed Joel by the arm and pulled him towards her. “Joel, come on, let’s get outta here!” They sprinted back towards the way they came from, ducking into a condemned building across from where the FEDRA raid had taken place moments ago. The explosion caused the area to clear out in haste by the living, but the dead remained stiff and still on the pavement. Tess gave a quick look inside the building for any FEDRA troops. “Looks like the coast is clear, c’mon.” Joel followed, shutting the door behind him. The monotonous voice of authority spoke over the speaker system.

‘ATTENTION. CHECKPOINT 5 IS NOW CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. ALL CIVILIANS MUST CLEAR THE SURROUNDING AREA IMMEDIATELY.’

Tess took a moment to catch her breath, pacing back and forth with her fingers interlocked on the crown of her head. “Fuck... so much for the easy route,” she made her way further into the building, Joel right on her heels. “They’re gonna close all the checkpoints. We’re gonna have to go around the outside.”

“Outside the wall?”

“Or we could just let Robert go.”

“Cute,” Joel snorted as they continued their way down the dark hallway.

The building had a moist, moldy smell. The sound of dripping water echoed off the walls of peeling paint and graffiti. Further down the winding hall, Ben sat in a plastic lawn chair. Ben was an acquaintance to Joel and Tess, usually providing information on FEDRA activity, or an extra set of eyes in exchange for guns, ration cards, or whatever Joel and Tess could provide in return.

“Hey,” Tess raised her hand in a welcoming gesture. “How’s the east tunnel looking?”

“It’s clear. I just used it, no patrols.” Ben wiped the fluid running from his nose with the sleeve of his shirt as he walked alongside Tess. “Where you off to?”

“Gonna pay Robert a visit,” Tess responded with her normal scowl.

“You too?” Ben asked.

“Who else is looking for him?” Tess asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Marlene. She’s been asking around, trying to find him.”

“Marlene? What do the Fireflies want with Robert?” Noticeable concern was present in Tess’ voice as she found out the leader of the Fireflies was after Robert as well.

Ben let out a fake laugh. “You think she’d tell me?”

“Well, what did you tell her?”

“The truth,” Ben turned his head and spat onto the dirty floor. “I got no idea where he’s hiding.”

“Good man,” Tess gave a subtle smile. “You stay out of trouble, alright? Military is gonna be out in force soon.”

“Yeah, see you around.” Ben turned around and headed back towards where they met.

Tess and Joel continued down the hall. She stared at the floor for a moment and shook her head before looking up at Joel. “Marlene lookin’ for Robert? What do you make of that?”

“I don’t like it,” Joel kept his eyes straight ahead as if expecting to see Robert around the next corner. “We better find him before the Fireflies do.”

Tess pulled out a key ring from her back pocket as they rounded the next corner, and she plunged a key into the lock of the first door on the left. Tess swung the door open to a spacious, nearly empty room. Tess and Joel had rooms like this spread throughout Area 4 of the quarantine zone, a place to lay low when needed. Typically, the room would be occupied by a trusted acquaintance. They had little trouble finding a willing informant in exchange for a roof over their head and a few extra ration cards. William sat on one of the two battered couches that occupied the room, a wad of tobacco shoved into a corner of his lower lip.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” William brought a paper cup to his lips to spit in, some of the dark, viscous liquid dripping down into his beard.

“Shit’s stirring up out there,” Tess adjusted the bandana in her hair and placed her hands on her hips. “How we lookin’ over here?”

“It’s been quiet,” William set the cup next to a bevy of empty bottles on the floor. “No signs of military or infected.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Joel made his way toward an old wooden entertainment center against the wall. It held a small TV, a row of rotting books, and a cluster of empty beer bottles. He pressed his shoulder into the dusty wood and pushed, some of the bottles dropped to the rickety floor. A concealed doorway lay hidden behind the entertainment center. Joel gave a welcoming gesture with a small smile, and he ushered Tess through the opening.

“Y’all take it easy out there,” William gave a courteous nod as Tess and Joel passed through.

An eight-foot drop led to a network of tunnels that had been dug following the military occupation of the city. Used mainly by smugglers and Fireflies, the tunnels interwove with the sewer networks and underground paths that connected different areas of the city. It led to exits outside of the perimeter wall.

Tess grimaced as the foul stench of the tunnels filled her airways. “God this place reeks. They need to watch what they throw away down here.”

The location they dropped down to was close to one of their primary staging areas of operation. A small generator hummed loudly in the dark just a few meters ahead. Tess flipped a switch on the wall and a flickering light illuminated a nearby room. The room resembled a workshop, filled with tool chests and workbenches. It had maps, shipping manifests, and military pamphlets covering the walls. Joel gazed at the military pamphlet that explained the evolution of

the infected; he had read through it many times before. It was very common to come into contact with infected outside the perimeter wall, and it was never to be taken lightly.

Despite a media blackout ordered by the United States government, more and more information had surfaced on the nature of the cordyceps fungal outbreak that took place twenty years ago. The mutated strain of *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis* supposedly originated on a farm somewhere in South America. The sudden nature of the incident drew debate whether it was purely an evolutionary phenomenon, or possibly a sophisticated biological weapon designed by terrorists or some government organization. Others believe it was punishment for the sins of man, ripped right from the pages of Revelations.

That tragic night in Austin introduced Joel to the first stages of infection. Once the cordyceps spores infect the bloodstream, it viciously attacks the brain. Mycelium grows inside the brain tissue while brain cells rapidly die, erasing the infected person's memory and rational thought. Madness shortly follows. What haunted Joel the most was the glowing red eyes of the infected. The mycelium attacks the visual cortex, causing blood vessels to rupture in the eyes. Other than the bright red eyes, the infected appear completely human during the first week of infection.

Though little humanity remained after the first forty-eight hours of initial exposure to the parasitic fungus, the infected would still feel severe pain as the body attempted to resist the spreading infection. Howls and screams of pain often filled the air outside the thirty-foot wall that separated the QZ from the urban jungle of Boston. The infected would attack non-infected on site with zealous aggression, driven only by the instinct to spread the spores that infected them. Most horrifying of all, the infected possessed a very primitive form of communication, and would commonly attack in small packs. 'Runners' were the common name given to these infected, complimenting their fast and agile movement.

As time goes on, the infection strongly roots itself in the host's nervous system. More drastic transformation follows: plates of fungus bloom from the host's eyes and nose, the body's skin abrades into a rotting coat of scales and blisters. The blossom of fungus destroys what remains of the eyes, leaving the host blind, frenzied, and void of any remaining humanity. While no longer able to see, speak, or smell, the infected rely on echolocation for navigation. 'Clickers' are named after the clicking sound they use to hunt for prey. While less agile than the less mutated runners, they pose an even greater threat due to an infectious bite.

"Let's grab our gear, our backpacks are still here from last time," Tess approached the workbench and opened her bag, retrieving her freshly sharpened butterfly knife and M1911 pistol. She withdrew the magazine and pulled the slide back, inspecting its condition. Although it was not freshly cleaned, she was satisfied with its functionality. She slammed the magazine back into the magazine well and sent the slide forward. She tucked the knife and pistol into the back

waistline of her jeans. Joel grabbed his Colt Defender off an adjacent workbench and released the magazine. He inspected it and drove it back into the magazine well.

“Not a lot of ammo,” He racked a .45 caliber round into the chamber.

“Well, make your shots count,” Tess said with a face of stone, sliding her arms through the straps of her backpack. She bounced on her toes, letting gravity do the work to adjust it into a comfortable position.

Joel slid the pistol and his survival knife into his belt and fastened a small emergency flashlight to his backpack. He grabbed a gas mask off a nearby wall, checked the filter cartridge, and threw it in his bag, along with a few rolls of bandages, and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. He slung the backpack over his shoulders and gave Tess a nod of approval, reassuring her he was ready for anything the world outside the wall threw at them.

They made their way deeper into the network of tunnels, coming to a ten-foot high wall marked with a yellow painted brick among the rows of red.

“Alright Texas, boost me up,” Tess directed as she eyed the wall.

Joel placed his back against the brick wall and planted his feet shoulder width apart, bending slightly at the knees. He interlocked his fingers and brought them to level with his waist.

“You ready?” Tess asked, giving her legs a quick stretch.

“Yes ma’am,” Joel replied.

Tess bounded and leaped, her foot landing in Joel’s strong hands. His legs and biceps strained and flexed as he gave Tess the boost she needed to reach the ledge to pull herself up. She extended a hand down and pulled Joel up to her side. A large, moldy door covered the hole that led to the outside world above. Tess slithered through the small opening as Joel lifted the door straight over his head. Tess followed by holding the door up, letting Joel slip through.

The two emerged into the remnants of an old diner. They made their way towards the front exit outside into the buffer zone. While there was some overgrowth inside the quarantine zone, the grass outside the QZ was knee high. Weeds and vines choked the old, lopsided, brick buildings. Bombs were dropped on the city in the early stages of the outbreak as a futile attempt to contain the infection. Small, murky ponds formed in craterous scars of the past. Dandelion seeds and pollen danced in the warm summer air where a bustling society once prospered.

“Be careful,” Joel warned Tess. Although the infected did not often utilize the element of stealth in their attacks, every now and then they could be hard to spot amongst the dense foliage.

“When am I not?” she responded.

Joel let out a small laugh. “Is that a trick question?”

Joel and Tess walked the pathless desolation of weeds, broken glass, abandoned vehicles, and knee-deep potholes. Navigation outside the wall proved treacherous and troublesome, directing their major smuggling operations through the inner harbor.

“Haven’t been out here in a while,” Joel muttered.

“It’s like we’re on a date,” Tess responded, with a slight tone of sarcasm.

“Well, I am the romantic type,” Joel winked at her.

Tess gave a half smile and brushed some stray hair behind her ear. “You have your ways.”

Their destination was a section of the perimeter wall located at what was once the Armenian Heritage Park. The most direct way to their destination led through a large bombed out restaurant. Ivy crawled alongside the brick and seeped into a gaping hole in the side of the foreboding entrance.

“Ladies first,” Joel made a gesture toward the entrance with a smirk.

“Lady? You must be thinking of someone else,” Tess responded sarcastically, making her way toward the entrance.

Joel gave a glance at Tess’ posterior and let out a small laugh. “It’s all relative.”

They made their way into the spacious, near empty quarters, their flashlights leading with a dim, pale light. Damp, rotting tables and worn furniture littered the dining area, the bar completely emptied. Paint peeled from the walls, a moldy smell filled the air. Though they could not see the rat infestation, their scratching came from within the dilapidated walls.

“Do you think Robert still has our guns?” Tess asked.

“For his sake... he better,” Joel could feel his fingers flexing in and out of a fist, angered by the very thought of the rival smuggler.

Tess glanced back over her shoulder. “Look, once we get our merchandise back, it should be easy to unload.”

“Speaking of merchandise, when’s that next shipment due?”

“Well, we’re meeting Bill next month, more pills and lots of ammo supposedly,” she stated. The last delivery from Bill was rich with useful goods: painkillers, liquor, blue jeans, toilet paper, and beef jerky.

Tess froze in place and stuck her arm out to warn Joel of danger ahead. The air in the kitchen was a thick yellow cloud. “Hold up. Spores.”

They reached into their bags, retrieving their gas masks. Joel placed the mask on his face and tightened the straps. He placed his hand over the filter cartridge to check for a seal. Joel gave Tess a nod of approval, and they made their way into the kitchen. After just a few steps, Joel eyed a lifeless body. Fungus grew from different orifices of the desiccated corpse, spores pluming into the air.

“There’s our culprit,” Joel stated, his voice muffled by the gas mask.

Tess shined her flashlight at the corpse and quickly examined it. “Body’s not that old. Better keep your eyes and ears open.”

If a person died during initial infection in lieu of becoming a runner, their body would be used as a breeding ground for the parasitic fungus. The first forty-eight hours would determine if the infected would survive. The fungus would feed on the nutrients and water inside the newly deceased. Within two weeks, the fungus would begin to grow from the body, creating a spore colony.

They continued through the thick yellow fog. Violent fantasies involving Robert ran through Joel’s mind. Beating him senseless, stabbing him, choking him, burning him alive even seemed within reason. *That sonofabitch has fucked with us for the last time. He is going to fucking die today.* Joel snapped out of his trance as a hand grabbed at his ankle. He swung his leg aside and drew his pistol at the threat. “Jesus! Watch it! Watch it!”

The eager, grabbing hands did not come from a runner, but a man. A man in a gas mask lay pinned under a toppled refrigerator unit. Desperate, panicked gasps for air were muffled by his gas mask as his arms flailed at Joel’s boots in urgency.

“Help me,” he coughed. “My mask broke. Don’t... don’t leave me to turn... please.”

Joel looked down in pity and holstered his pistol. He didn’t have the ammo to spare, but retrieved his survival knife from his belt and plunged the blade into the side of the man’s neck. Blood flowed freely from the wound; fading choking sounds could be heard from behind his mask. His body lay still and silent in a pool of blood.

Joel’s jaw tightened at the site of his violent act of mercy. He wiped the blade across his jeans and slipped it back into his belt. Tess stared silently, then turned toward the exit. They emerged out into the daylight and fresh air. They removed their gas masks and stuffed them back into their backpacks. Tess breathed deep and gave a rare smile as the sunlight washed over the clammy skin on her face.

“Ahhh... some fresh air. That’s the one thing I love about the outside. I fuckin’ hate the smell of the city.”

“Why don’t you ask Bill to get you some of them air fresheners,” Joel’s accent and manner of speech sometimes made him sound as if he never left Texas. While his accent made him sound unsophisticated at times, Tess respected his cunning more than anyone else in the QZ.

“Hey, if they weren’t expired, that’d be a good idea.”

They made their way through Armenian Heritage Park, just south of the perimeter wall bordering Cross Street. The smuggler’s tunnel was located between Gate 4 and Gate 5. The tunnel would empty them into Area 5 of the QZ, just east of Commercial Street, where they could continue their hunt for Robert. The tunnel was concealed with a wooden pallet, camouflaged by tall patches of weeds and ivy. Tess shifted the pallet to the side and they made their way through, making sure they left the hidden entrance as concealed as before.

The hole in the wall led them behind an empty warehouse that sat in a cluster of other abandoned warehouses. They both kept a sharp watch for patrolling soldiers as they headed north towards the marketplace. The high demand for Bill’s shipments had bought them some reliable connections amongst the vendors.

“You know he’s expecting us,” Joel said, as sweat dripped from the tip of his nose and down the side of his face as they continued their brisk pace in the humid summer afternoon.

Tess kept her eyes straight ahead. “Well, that’ll make it more interesting.”

Joel let out a snort of a laugh as they continued north, the marketplace coming into view. The marketplace was an agglomeration of vendor stands and small shops, selling anywhere from tools, spare parts, and toiletries. One vendor bred and sold pit bulls and German shepherds, both puppies and full-grown dogs. It was a feasible location to buy assorted drugs, bathtub spirits, and firearms if you knew the right man. Gambling and prostitution were no stranger to the hotbed of activity and was conducted in plain view, while bare-knuckle boxing and dog fighting matches drew a heavy crowd.

The marketplace was loud and lively that afternoon. Vendors openly wielded knives, baseball bats, and pipes to defend their products from thieves. The shops were mostly stands of displayed merchandise, while some operated out of gutted out vans and old school buses. Barking dogs and profanity was usual to the ear as people bartered, traded, and gambled. Joel and Tess cut northeast through the crowd to the outskirts of the busy marketplace. The powerful stench of body odor and spoiling food filled the air, causing their eyes to water. Tess eyed one of her informants, Malik, smoking a cigarette in a nearby alley. She casually approached the dark-skinned man, retrieving a small stack of ration cards from her back pocket.

"I'm looking for Robert," Tess peered out of the corners of her eyes for any of Robert's men as she held the ration cards discreetly at waist level. "He come through here?" Malik took a drag of his cigarette and grabbed the ration cards from Tess' hand and shoved them in one of the pockets of his tattered jeans.

"Half an hour ago," he answered, nodding his head eastward down the alley. "He went back to the wharf. He's there now."

Tess gave Malik a wide, wicked smile and continued down the alley. Joel kept a straight, serious face, although his mind was filled with exuberant thoughts. Months of searching for Robert had finally paid off, and now they knew he was hiding out in a warehouse on the Commercial Wharf. They were informed that the wharf was usually crawling with Robert's men, but it was always very difficult to confirm exactly where Robert was in the past. Joel and Tess both knew they would be heavily outnumbered, but they may never have this chance again. The pair continued down the alley, leaving Malik to his business.

Joel and Tess marched eastward across Atlantic Avenue to the wharf entrance. Three of Robert's men were stationed there, sitting on wooden crates, smoking cigarettes, and talking loudly. All three men rose to their feet as Joel and Tess boldly made their presence known. "Here we go," Joel muttered under his breath as Robert's men confronted them. Both parties stood still and stared at each other in silence for a brief moment.

"Let us through," Tess said in a cold, calm tone.

"You guys need to turn around and head back if you know what's good for you," the henchman standing in the middle of the three responded, his pointer finger tapping the receiver of his pistol.

"Our beef isn't with you," Tess replied, shaking her head. "We just want Robert. You don't want to do this."

"Turn the fuck around, and leave now," the leader demanded.

Tess began to grind her teeth in irritation. "I'm not going anywhere without Robert."

The man waved a gun at Joel and Tess, trying to intimidate them. "Bitch, I will bash your skull in unless you turn around and get your dumb ass outta here."

Joel and Tess turned and looked at each other. Joel nonchalantly shrugged as if he had no better solution to the situation. "Fuck this," Tess said as she quickly drew her pistol from her waistline and fired a round directly into the head of the taunting leader. Blood, brain, and skull fragments exploded from the exit wound left by the .45 caliber round, as his lifeless body fell onto the pavement with a wet thud.

The roaring gunshot triggered Joel's instincts. He took cover behind a nearby crate and drew his pistol. *I only have five rounds to work with.* Tess fired three rounds in the direction of Robert's men and heard a piercing shriek of pain come from their direction. She took cover as the last remaining man returned fire. Joel fired a round from his Colt Defender at the target, but it skimmed harmlessly off the crate Robert's henchman used as cover. A follow-up shot caught him in the gut. Blood flowed from his mouth, as he fell to his knees, and then face down on the pavement. Joel blinked intensely to flush the sweat that had dripped into his eyes.

"Nicely done, Texas," Tess let out a nervous laugh, as she adjusted the bandana in her hair and emerged from cover.

"You too." Joel breathed heavily, coming down from the rush of adrenaline. Joel and Tess had been in multiple firefights in the past, and even though brushes with death became common in their line of work, the dance with death became no less frightening than the last. They continued by the dead man to the two dying ones, moaning in pain and bleeding out. Joel and Tess grabbed the guns that lay on the ground next to the dying bodies and threw them in their bags. They left the thugs to die under the unforgiving summer sun. *No reason to waste the ammo.*

"How the hell does he get all these guys anyway?" Joel asked as they cautiously continued into hostile territory.

"If Robert's good at one thing, it's writing blank checks," Tess responded with her usual scowl.

Onward they pushed, staying close to the warehouse walls along the wharf, watching for terrain to use as cover and concealment. The salty smell of Boston's inner harbor filled their nostrils as flocks of seagulls sang their seaside song overhead. Sporadic groups of Robert's armed men patrolled the wharf, most too drunk or distracted by conversation to be fully alert. Joel and Tess could overhear snippets of conversation; some discussed the recent execution of a small group of Fireflies or rumors about the next shipment of contraband, but most of it involved the topic of pussy. Tess quietly led the way to a warehouse on the southern-most pier of the wharf; it was Robert's last known siting according to her source. The sky began to reflect a more colorful tint. It was still a few more hours until sunset, curfew would be coming into effect sooner than they would have liked.

"There's our boy," Tess pointed to the warehouse as the base of the pier. "Cocky sonofabitch is holed up in the back office." She gnashed her teeth as she wiped a fresh layer of sweat from her forehead.

"Let's go wrap this up," Joel nodded in approval.

They carefully moved closer to the warehouse, weaving in and out and in between massive cargo shipping crates, watching and listening for Robert's inattentive patrolmen to stroll past on their predictable routes. Into the warehouse they went, stacks of smuggled cargo lined the inner walls and small single engine boats took up space on the main floor. The warehouse smelled of salt and rust, the lighting dim and gloomy. Two guards lingered by the door leading to the back office; both of them were armed with pistols. One thoughtlessly paced back and forth while the other sat in a rickety metal chair, staring at the ceiling. The dim lighting of the warehouse gave Joel and Tess the opportunity to slowly and carefully move through the shadows, creeping closer to the unsuspecting guards without being seen. The seated guard retrieved a small flask from his pocket. His face scrunched as he took a sip and passed it to his pacing companion.

Joel and Tess moved within striking distance at separate flanking positions and waited for their opportunity to act. *Patience*, Joel chanted over and over in his head, crouched as still as a gargoyle. Minutes later, the waiting was interrupted by the muffled sound of gunfire from outside. Unintelligible, faint screams could be heard, just enough to direct the guards' attention to the front of the warehouse. Joel sprang from behind a stack of crates, driving his knife into the neck of the heedless guard. A river of blood poured from the gash, the guard's screams reduced to gurgles as he fought for breath, clutching the wound as he fell to the floor. The other guard fired a wild, panicked shot at Joel, missing wide. The other guard caught a bullet in the head from Tess' M1911 before he could get off another shot. The guards were disposed of, and their presence was no longer a secret. More sporadic gunfire could be heard outside of the warehouse.

Joel's heart was nearly beating out of his chest as he drew his pistol. He deftly turned the door handle, mindful to expose as little of his body as possible in the doorway. A bullet greeted him as a sharp snapping sound of a diminutive sonic boom filled his ears as the bullet passed, a universal greeting for an unwelcome guest.

"Get back! Get the fuck back!" Robert screamed in fear, firing a follow-up shot, and then another.

Tess savored the fear in Robert's voice. She spied around the corner to get a look at the rival smuggler. Sweat dotted his forehead and dripped down his flat nose. His eyes were wide with terror.

"We just wanna talk Robert," Tess taunted.

"We ain't got fuckin' nothin' to talk about!" Robert screamed from inside the office, as he crouched behind his desk for protection.

"Put your gun down!" Tess demanded from behind the doorway, her hands tightly gripping her pistol.

Robert followed with another shot that crashed into the doorframe. The dry, clicking sound of an empty chamber resonated as his gun ran out of ammo. Joel and Tess swiftly filed through the door, closing in on their target. Robert threw his empty gun at the intruders in desperation. Joel swatted the gun out of the air like a bothersome fly as he closed in; a glare that could cut diamonds was fixed on his prey.

“Go fuck yourself!” Robert flung open the exit next to him and fled, but was quickly run down by a stronger and faster Joel. A series of right hands pummeled Robert’s face before he was pulled up to his feet. Blood flowed from his broken nose down into his paper-thin mustache, past his busted lips, into his patchy facial hair. Tess strolled over, and ran her hand through Robert’s hair; she yanked back on his short ponytail. Robert began to shake in fear as Tess pressed her pistol under his chin, her finger resting on the trigger.

“Hello, Robert,” Tess said with a mischievous grin.

Droplets of blood flooded his mouth as he spoke. “Tess, Joel...” His eyes nervously darted back and forth between them. “No hard feelings, right?” Robert’s eyes winced in pain as Tess began to pull harder on his greasy hair.

“None at all,” Tess replied in a calm, sarcastic tone. Joel released his grip from Robert’s shoulder as Tess released his hair. He took a few steps back, placing his hands on his knees as he took a series of deep breaths. He spit a wad of sticky blood onto the floor and ran a hand through his hair. He gave a small smile.

“Alright, let’s talk.”

Tess pointed her pistol at Robert’s right knee and pulled the trigger. Robert fell to the floor, clutching his knee in pain as he let out an ear-piercing shriek of pain. Joel’s ears rang from the gunshot and the scream. Tess smiled in sadistic fulfillment as Robert squirmed on the floor, whimpering like a wounded animal.

Tears flowed from his eyes, diluting the blood on his face. “Goddammit!”

Joel leaned against the wall with his arms crossed as he let Tess take the lead. She lowered her pistol as she began to pace circles around the smuggler like a stalking vulture. Robert’s eyes rapidly darted between Tess, Joel, and his obliterated knee.

“We missed you, Robert,” Tess spoke in a calm, quiet tone.

“Look, whatever it is you heard, it ain’t true, okay?” Robert sniffled as he struggled to get out the words. “I just want to say-

Tess stopped pacing directly in front of Robert and looked him directly in the eye. “The guns. You wanna tell us where the guns are?” She menacingly loomed over him, casting a long shadow.

“Yeah, sure, but... it’s complicated, alright?” Robert looked at the ground, unable to maintain eye contact with Tess’ burning stare. “Look, alright, just hear me out on this. I gotta-

Joel left his spot on the wall to deliver a swift kick to Robert’s face. He fell on his back, moving his hands from his knee to his face. Joel abruptly slammed his boot back down onto Robert’s knee with a sopping crunch. He screamed, returning to a seated position, his attention directed back to his knee.

“Fuck!” he screamed, as tears flowed from his eyes and blood from his nose. “Stop! Stop! Stop!” he begged.

“Quit your squirming,” Tess ordered as she crouched to eye level with Robert. Joel’s boot continued to apply pressure to Robert’s knee, sending shooting pain throughout the smuggler’s leg, his eyes began to roll back in his head. “You were saying?”

“I sold em’!” he screamed. The pain was loosening his tongue.

Tess gave Joel a look of disbelief and looked back down at Robert. “Excuse me?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” Robert pleaded quickly. “I owed someone.”

“You owed us,” Tess hissed with a tongue of ice. “I’d say you bet on the wrong horse.”

“I just need more time, just gimme a week!”

Tess’ jaw flexed in irritation as the look in her eyes intensified. “You know, I might’ve done that if you hadn’t tried to fucking kill me.”

“C’mon, it wasn’t like-

“Who has our guns?” Tess’ voice amplified as she became increasingly irritated.

Robert stuttered and choked on his words, unable to answer as he desperately avoided Tess’ eyes like a guilty dog. “I can’t... just give me a couple of days.”

Joel’s boot returned to Robert’s knee, the pressure causing him to let out another shriek of intense pain. Tess brought her face within an inch of Robert’s, her teeth clenched. “Who has our fucking guns?”

Robert delayed for a moment before he spoke, trying to overcome the wave of pain flowing through his entire body. “It’s the Fireflies. I owed the Fireflies.”

Tess gave Joel an incredulous glance before returning her gaze to Robert. “What?”

“Look, they’re basically all dead,” Robert reasoned with them. “We can just go in there and finish ’em off. We get the guns, what do you say?” His head nodded up and down in

agreement with his own plan. Joel and Tess stood over the smuggler with expressionless looks on their faces. “C’mon, fuck those Fireflies, let’s go get ’em!”

Tess turned to Joel and rolled her eyes. “That is a stupid idea.” She raised her pistol and fired two rounds into Robert’s head, blood splashing on the wall as he slumped back to the floor. A moment of silence passed, Joel let out a long sigh.

“Well, now what?”

“We go get our merchandise back,” Tess suggested as she stepped over Robert’s body.

“How?”

“I don’t know, we explain it to them,” Tess’ eyes went blank, and Joel could see that she didn’t truly believe in her own plan. “Look, let’s go find a Firefly.”

“You won’t have to look very far,” A silhouette emerged from the office doorway and into the light. The figure of a slim black woman in her late thirties appeared, slightly hunched over. She gripped a pistol in her right hand, her left hand clutching a wound on the right side of her abdomen. She wore tan corduroy pants with brown boots and a thin crimson zip up hoodie covered by an unbuttoned denim jacket.

Joel leaned in to whisper into Tess’ ear. “There you go, it’s Queen Firefly.”

Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies, eyed the two smugglers, expecting answers. “Why are you here?”

“Business,” Tess responded, unfazed. She shot a look at her bloody hand covering what appeared to be a gunshot wound. “You aren’t looking so hot.”

Marlene dismissively glanced down at her wound and looked around the room. “Where’s Robert?”

Tess extended her arm and gestured at the lifeless body at her feet lying in a pool of blood.

Marlene shook her head and let out a small laugh of disbelief. “I needed him alive.”

“The guns he gave you, they weren’t his to sell. I want them back.”

“It doesn’t work like that Tess.”

“The hell it doesn’t.”

Marlene took a few steps toward Tess. “I paid for those guns. You want ’em back? You’re gonna have to earn ’em.”

Tess paused and glanced at Joel. He ran his hands through his beard as he contemplated the situation. All he could muster was a slight shrug.

Tess turned back toward the wounded Firefly leader. “How many cards are we talking about?”

“I don’t give a damn about ration cards,” Marlene replied, shaking her head. She paused for a moment. “I need something smuggled out of the city. You do that, I’ll give you back your guns and then some.”

Joel folded his arms across his chest and took a step forward next to Tess’ side. “How do we know you got ’em? The way I hear it, the military’s been wiping you guys out.”

“You’re right about that,” Marlene looked off to the side, trying to brush off the gravity of the current situation. “I’ll show you the weapons.”

“Search the area!” A commanding voice could be heard in the not so far distance. The military had begun to swarm the area.

Marlene’s body language suggested a sense of urgency. “I gotta move, what’s it gonna be?”

“I wanna see those guns,” Tess followed behind Marlene, with Joel right behind her.

“Then follow me.”

Chapter 2

Summer 2033

Boston, Massachusetts

Marlene, Tess, and Joel slithered through the alleys and abandoned buildings of the wharf, back to the main streets of the Quarantine Zone. Marlene set the pace, moving quickly despite the noticeable wincing of pain spelled across her face as she continued forward. She led the two smugglers up a fire escape ladder to a roof of a nearby building, avoiding the inevitable swarm of FEDRA troops that were inbound. As the night grew closer, the orange-amber glow of the approaching twilight radiated a surrounding fiery glow of the dull brick buildings. The broken Boston skyline began to swallow the setting sun behind dilapidated towers beyond the perimeter wall. The trio moved from rooftop to rooftop when a large explosion erupted a few blocks away. The building shook underneath their feet as a cloud of flames and smoke rolled towards the sky.

“Holy shit, is that your people?” Tess asked Marlene.

“What’s left of them,” Marlene answered. “Why do you think I’m turning to you guys?” She wiped a thin film of sweat from her forehead. “This way.”

They continued across the rooftops. Marlene remained in front while Joel and Tess followed closely behind.

“So why now?” Joel broke the brief silence, his mind itching with curiosity.

Marlene’s head turned over her shoulder with a look of gloom on her face. “We’ve been quiet. Been planning on leaving the city, but they need a scapegoat. They’ve been trying to rile us up.”

“Looks like they did.”

Marlene was annoyed by Joel’s comment. “We’re trying to defend ourselves.”

They continued west toward the setting sun for another mile until Marlene led them through an open building window adjacent to the roof they were on. They moved down a stairway through the dust and cobweb-encrusted building until they reached the street level. The color in Marlene’s face began to pale as her pace began to slow. Joel looked around to get his locational bearings. The perimeter wall was just south of their whereabouts, the blockaded Charlestown Bridge within view up ahead.

“Hey, how you holding up?” Tess asked.

“I’ll live,” Marlene responded. “I’m running on fumes, but I’ll make it. Not much further now.”

The citywide intercom echoed through the air, announcing the onset of curfew. Marlene picked up the pace with what strength she could muster, moving through a cramped, graffiti-covered alley. She retrieved a ring of keys from her pocket and unlocked a door leading to a kitchen of an abandoned restaurant. She staggered and collapsed to the floor, the door swinging open into the main dining area. Joel rushed to her aid as Tess looked back to ensure they had not been followed.

“Hey come on now, get on up,” Joel encouraged Marlene with a soft but firm voice. He slid Marlene’s right arm over his shoulders and helped her to her feet.

“Get the fuck away from her!” a shrill voice wailed from the other side of the room. Joel saw a small figure rushing towards him.

Tess stepped in front of Joel, grabbing the arm of a young pre-teen girl armed with a switchblade knife. She grunted as she wrestled the blade out of the girl’s hand, surprised by the strength of the juvenile.

“Let her go,” Marlene ordered as Joel helped her to her feet. The young girl stopped resisting. Tess waited a brief moment before letting go of her arm.

Joel set his eyes on the young girl. She dressed in a faded crimson t-shirt with an image of a tropical beach over a black long sleeve undershirt and worn blue jeans. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Joel released Marlene to stand on her own strength. “You’re recruitin’ kind of young, aren’t ya?” he asked.

“She’s not one of mine,” Marlene insisted, her face grimacing in pain despite the cool tone of her voice.

The girl moved swiftly toward Marlene when she noticed her wounded abdomen. She folded the blade of her knife and shoved it into her back pocket. “Shit, what happened?” she asked as she escorted Marlene by the arm to a nearby booth. Tess scouted around the room while Joel closed the door behind them.

“Don’t worry, this is fixable,” Marlene assured the young girl, looking deeply into her green eyes. “I got us help,” she let out a sigh before she continued. “But I can’t come with you.”

The girl stood for a moment, shaking her head side to side. A look of disbelief washed over her face. “Well, then I’m staying.”

“Ellie, we won’t get another shot at this,” Marlene explained.

Joel moved from the door toward Marlene as he felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to rise. “Hey, we’re smuggling her?”

“There’s a crew of Fireflies that’ll meet you at the Capital building at sunrise.”

“That’s a dangerous area,” Tess added.

“You’re capable,” Marlene insisted. “You hand her off, come back, the weapons are yours. Double what Robert sold me.”

Joel paced nervously around the dining area, a knot that had formed in his gut, tightening in unease. “Speaking of which, where are they?”

“Back in our camp.”

Joel crossed his arms and let out a grunt of dissatisfaction, shaking his head.

“We’re not smuggling shit until I see them,” Tess declared.

Marlene paused, organizing her thoughts. “You’ll follow me,” she directed to Tess. “You can verify the weapons, I can get patched up.” With her arm resting on the booth’s table, she pointed a finger at Ellie. “But she’s not crossing to that part of town.” Her eyes shifted to Joel. “I want Joel to watch over her.”

“Whoa, whoa, I don’t think that’s the best idea.”

“Bullshit! I’m not going with him!”

Marlene lifted an arm in protest of Joel and Ellie’s dissent. “Ellie....”

“How do you know them?” Ellie was visually frustrated but showed restraint and respect as she spoke to the Fireflies’ leader.

“I was close with his brother, Tommy. Said if I was ever in a jam, I could rely on him.”

“Was that before or after he left your little militia group?” Joel asked, his voice brimming with condescension.

“He left you too,” Marlene quipped. Tension filled the air in a lingering silence. “He was a good man.”

Tess approached Joel and leaned towards his ear. “Look, just take her to the north tunnel and wait for me there.” Her voice was cool and flat.

“Jesus Christ...” Joel flung his head back and sighed as he realized no matter how much he disagreed with the plan, no one could present better options.

Tess gave a subtle grin. “She’s just cargo, Joel.”

“Marlene...” Ellie tried protesting one last time.

“No more talking, you’ll be fine,” Marlene winced in pain as she dragged herself out of the booth and to her feet. “Now go with him.”

“Don’t take long,” Joel ordered to Tess as he took a step towards the front door. He looked back at Ellie. “And you – stay close. Let’s go.”

Ellie took one final look at Marlene, grabbed her backpack off the floor, and followed Joel out the door.

The last remnants of daylight rapidly faded with the bustling sounds of the QZ. Residents shut themselves in for the evening in accordance with the curfew. A cool breeze blew in from the bay, washing over Joel as he emerged back outdoors. The smuggler led the young girl southeast towards the staging ground of the north tunnel. The overgrowth in the area flourished; pavement, concrete, nor brick could restrain nature’s reclamation.

Joel’s knowledge of the streets and alleys bordering the perimeter wall aided him as he led Ellie to the rear of an old, unremarkable apartment building. A closed dumpster sat at the base of a partially destroyed fire escape, acting as a stepping-stone. Joel climbed up to the fire escape platform, and he turned to offer Ellie a helping hand. They climbed a single story of stairs and entered through an unlocked door. The inside of the building offered nothing new in terms of sight, sound, and smell as other unoccupied buildings in the QZ. Dust and filth covered rotting walls of mold and peeling paint, the hallway floors littered with garbage and broken glass from smashed windows. They made their way down the long, narrow hallway.

“This tunnel, you use it to smuggle things?” Ellie asked.

“Yep.”

“Like illegal things?”

“Sometimes.”

“You ever smuggle a kid before?”

“No, that’s a first. So what’s the deal with you and Marlene, anyway?”

“I don’t know. She’s my friend, I guess.”

Joel found it hard to accept that as a real answer to his question. “Your friend, huh? You’re friends with the leader of the Fireflies. What’re you, like, twelve?”

“She knew my mom, and she’s been looking after me. And I’m fourteen, not that that has anything to do with anything.”

Joel turned to ascend another set of stairs. “So where are your parents?”

“Where are anyone’s parents? They’ve been gone a long, long time.”

“Hm. So instead of just staying in school, you just decide to run off and join the Fireflies, is that it?”

“Look. I’m not supposed to tell you why you’re smuggling me if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Joel adjusted his backpack while stretching his neck. He arrived at the top of the stairs and led Ellie down another narrow hallway.

“You wanna know the best thing about my job? I don’t gotta know why. To be honest with you, I could give two shits what you’re up to.”

“Well great,” Ellie snarked.

Joel pushed opened the farthest door on the right to a near-empty apartment. Only a few wooden chairs, a small throw rug, and a worn couch occupied the main room. The room was lightly illuminated by the glow of the lights atop the perimeter wall.

“This is it,” Joel stated as he closed the door behind Ellie. He walked over to the couch brushing off the dust and dirt covering the worn cushions, and he dropped his backpack to the floor. He sprawled out on the couch, letting out a yawn. Ellie stood by the door with a confused look on her face.

“What are you doing?”

“Killing time,” Joel answered with closed eyes.

“Well, what am I supposed to do?”

“I’m sure you will figure that out.”

Ellie looked around the room for something that could keep her occupied. She walked by Joel and noticed the shattered face of his wristwatch. “Your watch is broken.”

Joel sleepily opened one eye and looked at Ellie for a moment before shutting it again. He fell back into a light sleep.

*

Joel awoke to the sound of falling rain and the dim glow of the perimeter lights.

“You mumble in your sleep,” Ellie sat by the window watching the falling rain. “I hate bad dreams.”

Joel sat up from the couch and rested his face in his hands, trying to rub the sleep away. “Yeah, me too,” He got up and joined Ellie at the window to peer outside.

“You know, I’ve never been this close to the outside,” Ellie directed her view over the perimeter wall, past the edge of lights and into the darkness. Outside the QZ, Boston was an amalgam of city and wilderness. “Look how dark it is. It can’t be any worse out there, can it?”

Joel lit a match, kindling a small flame for a lantern. “What on earth do the Fireflies want with you?”

Tess emerged through the door before Ellie could answer Joel’s question. “Sorry it took so long, soldiers fuckin’ everywhere.”

“How’s Marlene?” Ellie impatiently asked.

“She’ll make it,” Tess gave a reassuring nod of the head. She turned her attention to Joel. “I saw the merchandise, it’s a lot.” The all too familiar mischievous smile formed on her face. “Wanna do this?”

“Yeah,” Joel reluctantly agreed with a sigh.

They all moved to an adjoined room. Tess took a moment to peer out of a nearby window to study the surrounding terrain. She calculated the most effective means of completing the job.

Joel approached her, keeping his voice down. “Don’t you think it’s a bit strange that they’re having us do their smugglin’?”

“Marlene wanted to do it herself,” Tess responded. “We weren’t their first choice or their second for that matter. She’s lost a lot of men. Beggars can’t be choosers.” Tess moved away from the window.

Joel gave a lethargic shrug. “Yeah, let’s just hope there’s someone alive to pay us.”

Tess moved to the corner of the room containing a dusty, empty bookshelf. She pushed it to the side revealing a hole approximately six feet high and three feet wide. She led them through and down a winding stairway leading to the basement. Joel moved to a nearby gas-powered generator and started it with three pulls of the chord. The light on a nearby lift sprang to life. The three entered and began their descent into the underground tunnel that burrowed under the perimeter wall. The tunnel was narrow with a short ceiling but big enough for all three to navigate. Tess led the way, her flashlight pointing forward to illuminate the pitch-black channel.

“Who’s waitin’ for us at the drop-off?” Joel asked Tess.

“She said that there are some Fireflies that have traveled all the way from another city. The girl must be important,” she glanced back at Ellie. “What is the deal with you? You some big-wig’s daughter or something?”

Ellie let out a small laugh from behind the two smugglers. “Something like that. How long is this all going to take?”

“If everything goes as planned, we should get you to them in a few hours. Ellie, once we get out there, I need you to follow our lead and stay close.”

“Yeah, of course,” Ellie agreed, sounding a bit nervous.

They reached the end of the tunnel. Joel took the lead and climbed up the short ladder using his strength to push away the moss-covered board that concealed the entrance to the tunnel of the outer perimeter wall. He cautiously looked around for any patrolling troops. Two flashlights could be seen about fifty meters ahead. “Hold up, there’s a patrol up ahead.” He stood on the ladder, only revealing as much of himself as it took to keep an eye on the patrols. A minute later, the two lights moved far away and faded from view. Tess and Ellie followed him up the ladder when he gave the all clear. The rain continued to relentlessly fall as Joel covered the tunnel entrance.

Ellie’s eyes grew wide as the group moved along the perimeter wall. “Holy shit... I’m actually outside!”

Their plan was simple: Stick together, head south along North Street to Congress Street and take a right on State Street. This would bring them to the Boston Capital building, where they would rendezvous with a unit of Fireflies. They had barely made their way down North Street before two strong beams of light surprisingly blinded them. The female voice was strong and commanding, even behind the muffled sound of a gas mask. Joel and Tess both knew they were at a major disadvantage, and lifted their hands above their heads in surrender. Ellie mimicked their movements and remained silent.

“Don’t do anything stupid!” The voice commanded as the beams of light moved in closer. “Turn around! On your knees!”

They turned away from the voice and dropped to their knees, hands high in the air. The rain ran down their faces into their eyes and mouths, the wet pavement ground into their knees. They gazed upon their own kneeling shadows on a nearby brick wall.

“You scan ’em, I’ll call it in,” the female FEDRA trooper instructed her partner.

“Alright,” the subordinate agreed.

“This is Ramirez at Sector Twelve. Requesting pickup for three stragglers.. Understood.”

The male FEDRA trooper retrieved his body scanner and approached Tess on the far right. He held the scanner to the back of her neck.

“Look the other way. We can make this worth your while,” Tess offered with a cool and calm demeanor.

“Shut up!” The trooper ordered, pulling the scanner from her neck after it emitted a single beep. “I’m getting tired of this shit.” He approached Joel next, the scanner in one hand and a pistol in the other. He roughly shoved the scanner up to the back of his neck. A single beep gave the all clear to move to the third straggler. He held the scanner up to Ellie’s neck. “What’s the ETA?” he turned his head slightly to ask his superior.

“Couple of minute-”

In an instant, the man let out a sharp cry as he felt a cold, wet blade driven into the meat of his thigh. Ellie’s hands showed extraordinary dexterity as she drove her knife into the troopers’ leg while she attempted to pry the gun from his hands. He quickly overpowered the young girl and delivered a swift strike to her face. He pointed the pistol at Ellie as she fell flat on her back, but Joel was immediately upon him, tackling him to the ground. A stray shot fired from his pistol into the night sky as he was wrestled to the ground. Ramirez drew her sights on Joel, trying to find a clear shot. Before she could pull the trigger, she found herself on the receiving end of Tess’ M1911. The bullet ripped through her skull, causing her body to flaccidly fall to the ground. Amidst the chaos, Joel was able to overpower the remaining FEDRA trooper, shooting him multiple times with his own pistol.

Ellie crawled to a nearby wall and pressed her back against it, shaking in fright. Her breathing was heavy and fast, her eyes wide with shock. Rain flowed down her hair and face. “Oh fuck...FUCK! I thought we were just gonna hold them up or something!”

Tess grabbed the body scanner off the ground. Her face twisted in bewilderment when she gave it a look. “Oh, shit...look.” She tossed the scanner over to Joel.

Joel glanced at the display screen. In big, bold red letters POSITIVE flashed on the screen. “Jesus Christ,” Joel growled as he turned to look at a frightened Ellie pressed against the wall. He turned back to Tess. “Marlene set us up? Why the hell are we smuggling an infected girl?” The two closed in on Ellie and stood above her while she was still huddled on the ground.

“I’m not infected!” She pleaded.

“No? So was this lying?” Joel tossed the scanner to Ellie’s feet.

“I can explain!”

“You better explain fast,” Tess grew irritated and her grip tightened around her pistol.

Ellie rolled up the right sleeve of her soaked undershirt. "Look at this!" A large scabbed bite mark was ingrained into her inner forearm, just above the wrist.

Joel waved his hands in disgust at the girl. "I don't care how you got infected."

"It's three weeks old!"

"No. Everyone turns within two days, so you stop bullshitting!" Tess chided.

"It's three weeks, I swear!" Ellie's eyes darted between Joel and Tess. "Why would she set you up?"

Joel and Tess stared at one another, rain crashing to the Earth. All that could be heard was the roaring thunder surrounding them. Joel's head began to shake back and forth in disgust. "I ain't buying it."

Beams of distant light cut through the darkness as FEDRA Humvees approached from the west.

"Shit, Tess, run!" Joel ordered and began heading south, farther into the darkness. Tess scrambled over to Ellie, dragging her to her feet and shoving her in encouragement. They ran as hard as they could further into the ghost city of Boston, towards the capital building, hoping to lose their pursuers. It wouldn't be long before FEDRA found their own dead and searched for the killers. They counted three vehicles converge on the area where they were recently held up by the FEDRA troopers.

Joel ran as hard as he could in his heavy, soggy boots. Only flashes of lightning across the sky lit his way; his flashlight would give away his position. Strong beams of light could be seen as he looked over his shoulder as FEDRA troops spread out in their relentless search. He looked around and quietly called out for Tess and Ellie, but there was no response. His stomach turned as the sound of sporadic gunfire could be heard between the roar of thunder. It was impossible to determine who was shooting who... or what. Joel carefully watched for any movement during every flash of lightning, hoping to find his partner and his cargo. He slowly continued to head south at a slow pace, his eyes scanning for anything and everything.

The rain beat down on the roofs of all the dispersed abandoned vehicles in the decimated city. Civilian vehicles, police cruisers, military Humvees, even tanks were left abandoned to be eaten by rust. Craters, both massive and small, littered the ground. They were filled with debris and a profusion of stagnant water. The roads were all but destroyed, leaving behind massive pits and uneven elevation. The once proud buildings making up the skyline of Boston now hunched and leaned to the side.

Joel spotted a small, shadowy silhouette moving through the streets accompanied by the sound of splashing footsteps. He quietly called out. A small, scared voice responded. He hurried

to Ellie, grabbed her by the arms and looked her up and down. Ellie looked up at Joel, her eyes wide with fright as rain poured down her face.

“Are you alright? Where’s Tess?” Joel asked, switching his gaze between Ellie’s face and the surrounding area.

“We got separated. We ran after you but lost sight of you. We were trying to get back on your trail when we heard clickers. I fucking panicked and took off...”

Joel began to look around in consternation when two bursts of light appeared in rhythm from the west. They both stood silent and still, watching, waiting. Two more bursts of light appeared in front of the old city hall building. They moved quickly and quietly, Joel never letting go of Ellie’s arm. A rush of relief washed over both of them, as Tess came into view.

Tess welcomed them as if what happened was just a normal day’s work. “Well, that was fucking intense,” she laughed to herself. “Ellie, don’t ever fucking run off like that again.”

Ellie was short on words and nodded in agreement. They had a few hours left until sunrise, and the Capital building was very close. They decided to rest inside the city hall building, use the time to dry off, lay low from the pursuing FEDRA troops, and possibly catch a quick nap. City hall was gutted from the inside, but provided the means for shelter for the time being.

“Look, what is Marlene’s plan here?” Tess asked Ellie as she sat down next to her, removed her bandana and wrung out the water, creating a small puddle on the floor. “Let’s say we deliver you to the Fireflies, what then?”

“Marlene... she... she said they have their own little quarantine zone,” Ellie replied, shaking from the chill of her soaked clothes. “They have doctors there, still trying to find a cure...”

“Yeah, we’ve heard that before, huh, Tess?” Joel cynically chimed in.

Ellie gave Joel a frustrated look and continued, “And that... whatever happened to me is the key to finding a vaccine.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Joel rolled his eyes.

“It’s what she said.” Ellie insisted.

Joel got back to his feet and beamed down at Ellie. “Oh, I’m sure she did.” Joel could not shake the feeling of being set up by Marlene to smuggle an infected kid.

“Hey, fuck you, man!” Ellie climbed to her feet, unintimidated by Joel’s not-so-subtle feelings towards her. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Me neither,” Joel took a step towards Ellie. “Tess, what the hell are we doing here?”

Tess tied her bandana to her head and returned to her feet. “What if it’s true?” she asked.

Joel froze and took a step back. “I can’t believe-”

“What if, Joel? I mean we’ve come this far, let’s just finish it.

Joel grabbed Tess by the shoulder and led her out of the hearing range of Ellie.

“Do I need to remind you what is out there?” Joel growled as he pointed to the front entrance. Tess glanced back at Ellie and then back to Joel.

“I get it.”

Chapter 3

Summer 2033

Boston, Massachusetts

Tess and Ellie stood lookout by a shattered, ivy entangled window while Joel sprawled out on the dirty tile floor, his hands folded over his chest, his backpack acting as a pillow. The storm had started to disperse as sunrise drew closer. The screech of clickers and moaning of runners could be heard from deeper inside the city. Tess rolled up Ellie's sleeve to get a more intimate look at the bite mark on her forearm. She turned her forearm back and forth and side to side to get a look from every angle possible. A sliver of light peeking through the dissipating clouds was enough for her to get a decent look.

"So do you really think you are the key to a cure?" Tess asked as she examined the scabbed, scarred teeth marks. She had never seen anything like it. Tess had come across multiple people who have been bitten in the past, and they showed signs of turning well before the bite would show any signs of healing.

"Well, that's what Marlene believes at least," Ellie responded.

Tess shook her head in disbelief. "Well, how were you bitten?" she asked. "I mean you must've been somewhere you shouldn't find an infected in the zone."

"Yeah. I'd sneak out. I was in this military boarding school."

"You'd sneak out?" Tess' eyes widened in surprise.

"Yeah, you know, explore the city. I was in the mall when I ran into infected." Ellie spoke as if she remembered every last detail of that moment.

"That place is completely off limits. How the hell did you get in there?"

"I... had my ways. Anyways, one of those- what you guys call runners, bit me. And that was that."

"I see..." Tess continued to stare at the scar, still trying to wrap her mind around what she was looking at. "Were you with Marlene when you were bitten?"

"No. I went to her for help afterward."

Tess let out a small, dry laugh. "Knowing her, I'm surprised she didn't shoot you."

“She almost did,” Ellie responded with a giggle of her own. “I hope she’s alright.”

Tess rolled down Ellie’s sleeve. “I told you, she’s gonna be fine,” she reassured her.

The shroud of night began to loosen its grip as the sun began to ascend over Massachusetts Bay, gradually illuminating the overgrown city. Ellie sat with her wide eyes as she watched the sun creep over the gnarled skyline, briskly dispelling the darkness. Joel let out a long, drawn-out yawn and got to his feet as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He tossed his damp backpack over his shoulders and joined Tess and Ellie by the window to watch the colorful sunrise.

“Well, is that everything you hoped for?” Joel asked with squinted, bloodshot eyes.

Ellie gave a lazy shrug. “Jury’s still out. But man, you can’t deny that view.”

Tess got to her feet and threw her backpack over her shoulders, Ellie followed suit. The time had come to make their move to the capital building. Tess poked her head out the front entrance and took a look around, and looked back at Ellie and Joel. “Look, we’re almost done. Stay focused, let’s move.”

They arrived in front of the capital building within minutes. The capital’s tarnished and dulled copper dome faintly reflected the morning’s fresh rays of light. The red brick exterior and ivory pillars were partly masked by ivy and bellflower that grew within the walls. The front lawn and front steps had been completely overgrown, but the building looked as if it had been lucky enough to avoid any direct hits from past aerial bombardments.

“I’m glad Marlene hired you guys,” Ellie said as they climbed the soggy, mossy steps to the front entrance.

“What do you mean?” Tess asked.

“I know you guys are getting paid for this but- I’m trying to say thanks.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Tess let a small smile.

Joel glanced at the statues that flanked the steps to the left and the right. Befouled statues of Horace Mann and Daniel Webster stood tall, majestic, and proud; while the rest of humanity had been brought to its knees by the cordyceps outbreak. The names of these men bore no familiarity or importance to Joel, but he could not help but think of times before the outbreak.

Tess pulled open the front door and was frozen by what she saw. The floor of the capital building lobby was a littered mishmash of bodies, shell casings, and gore. Tess could count five bodies that bore the Firefly insignia on their sleeves lying motionless, soaking in pools of their own blood alongside the bodies of three clickers. The lobby smelled of gun powder, blood, and

decay. Chunks of fungal plate bathed in the pools of shallow sticky crimson that spread across the floor.

“No.... no, no, no!” Tess screamed, her cry echoing through the lobby. She rushed over to the body of the nearest Firefly, hoping for any sign of life at all. There was no pulse, no sign of breathing, just blank open eyes that looked towards the heavens. Joel inspected the other bodies but knew it was a fruitless effort.

“What happens now?” Ellie asked, frozen in place by the front door. Neither Tess nor Joel seemed to be able to formulate a proper answer for her.

Joel approached Tess and stood above her while she frantically searched the body. “What are you doing, Tess?”

“Maybe they.... maybe they had a map or something to tell us where they were going.” Tess’ breath quickened, her normally calm demeanor replaced with signs of panic.

“How far are we gonna take this?” Joel dauntlessly asked.

Tess sprang to her feet and looked Joel straight in the eye. “As far as it needs to go!” she roared in response. She returned to searching the body then looked up at Ellie, still frozen in place. “Where was this lab of theirs?”

“She never said,” Ellie left her place and timidly made her way toward Tess and Joel. “She only mentioned that it was someplace out west.”

Joel took a look around and knew it was over. The team of Fireflies had been wiped out, the job was a bust. He had thoughts of returning to the quarantine zone and hand back Ellie over to Marlene. If they wouldn’t get their guns in return, so be it, this wasn’t worth their lives. “What are we doing here?” he demanded, looking down at the frenetic Tess. “This is not us.”

“What do you know about us?” Tess returned to her feet, shaking her head. “About me?”

“I know that you are smarter than this.” Joel hissed, his teeth grinding.

“Really? Guess what, we’re shitty people, Joel. It’s been that way for a long time.”

“No, we are survivors!” Joel snarled, his hands clenching into fists.

“This is our chance-”

“It is over, Tess!” The two stared at each other in a moment of silence. Joel took a breath, “We tried. Let’s just go home.”

Tess’ jaw loosely hung open as tears began to well in her eyes. “I’m not... I’m not going anywhere. This is my last stop.”

Joel gave Tess a blank look and shook his head. “What?”

“Our luck had to run out sooner or later.” She averted her eyes from Joel and began to pace around.”

Confusion spread across Joel’s face, he was not used to seeing his partner acting like this. He reached out for Tess’ arm. “What are you going on about?”

“No!” She thrashed her arm away until Joel released his grip, tears began to freely flow from her eyes. “Don’t touch me!”

“Holy shit,” Ellie’s eyes gaped open as she realized what was happening. She pointed a trembling finger at Tess. “She’s infected.”

Joel turned to Tess, her eyes fixed on the floor, her jawline trembling. He slowly began to step back from her as the color ran from his face. His whole body felt numb, his stomach turned, he felt his whole world turn upside down in an instant. The expression on his face was equal parts confused, horrified, and sorrowful.

“Joel-”

“Let me see it,” he whispered.

“I didn’t mean for this-”

“Show it to me,” he demanded.

Tess locked eyes with Joel as she tugged on the collar of her damp blouse. A raw, swollen bite mark present on her right collar bone.

“Oh Christ,” Joel blurted as he felt himself gag. The thought his longtime partner being taken away made him nauseous. The room began to spin, his ears rang. He gazed at nothing as he continued to step back on wobbly legs.

Tess briskly walked over to Ellie and rolled up her sleeve to expose the bite mark on her arm and pointed directly at it. “This was three weeks. I was bitten a few hours ago and it’s already worse.” She led Ellie closer to Joel so he could get a better look at it. “This is fucking real, Joel,” Joel briefly glanced at the scar then turned away, his thoughts in a complete state of denial. “You’ve got to get this girl to Tommy’s. He used to run with this crew, he’ll know where to go.”

“No, no, no,” Joel resisted, pointing his finger right into Tess’ face. “That was your crusade. I am not doin’ that.”

“Yes, you are!” Tess raised her voice and stepped closer to Joel. Her hands caressed Joel’s face, her voice changing from commanding to begging as more tears flowed from her

eyes. “Look, there’s enough here that you have to feel some sort of obligation to me,” she pointed back at Ellie. “So you get her to Tommy’s! I-”

Ellie overheard the sound of heavy military vehicles bouncing down the ruined road and come to a screeching halt outside the building. FEDRA troops, adorned in their blue and black tactical gear piled out of the two Humvees and a troop transport truck. An officer stepped out of the front passenger seat of the middle vehicle and began barking orders. Ellie quickly poked her head out the entrance to take a quick glance. She reeled back and quickly alerted Joel and Tess that their pursuers had arrived. They were all overcome with the feeling of dread and panic. Tess had been infected, and a sizable squad of FEDRA troopers was right outside.

Tess faced the door, took a deep breath and turned back to Joel with an intense look in her eyes. “I can buy you some time, but you have to run.” She released the magazine from her pistol and examined it to determine how many rounds she had remaining. She slammed the magazine back into the magazine well.

“What, you want us to just leave you here?” Ellie uttered in shock.

“Yes,” Tess responded, her voice returned to her calm, sure tone.

“There is no way that-” Joel began.

“I will not turn into one of those things!” Tess looked deep into Joel’s eyes. For a moment, it felt like the fabric of time had ceased to exist, giving them one final moment to themselves. “Come on, make this easy for me.”

Joel glanced over Tess’ shoulder toward the front entrance. “I can fight.”

“No, just go!” Tess placed her hands on Joel’s broad chest and gave him a strong shove away from the entrance. Tess’ eyes turned to fire and stared sharply at Joel. “Just fucking go.”

Joel stared back at Tess. His heart was racing and his mind was spinning, his fingers and toes were numb. He felt frozen in place. Ellie’s eyes darted back and forth between the two, waiting for instruction.

“Ellie,” Joel finally managed to speak, pointing toward the rear of the building.

Ellie understood and quickly made her way next to Joel. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean for this.”

“Get a move on,” Joel ordered, but he still couldn’t bring himself to look away from Tess. Ellie made her way to the back end of the lobby. Joel slowly stepped backward. He bent over one of the Firefly’s lifeless bodies and pried a bolt-action rifle from his rigid fingers. The rifle was sticky and covered in blood, but appeared in working condition. He finally managed to

turn away from Tess in pursuit of Ellie, his fingers gripping his newly acquired rifle in such rage that he felt he could crush it to splinters.

Tess watched as Ellie and Joel both disappeared out of the back of the lobby. She took a deep breath and faced the building's entrance.

A commanding voice amplified by a megaphone could be heard at the base of the building's steps. "We know you're in there! Drop your weapons and come out with your hands up!"

Tess felt her teeth grind and her trigger finger twitch as she brought her weapon to the ready.

*

"What the fuck? I can't believe we just did that," Ellie said as they scrambled through the back of the capital building. "We just left her to die."

"Stop," Joel ordered as he pulled back the bolt and ejected an empty shell casing of his new acquired Winchester Model 70. "You stay close to me, we have to move."

Joel led Ellie and kept a fast pace. FEDRA troops were bound to storm the capital at any moment, and they both knew Tess' final stand would not keep the pursuers at bay for long.

The interior of the capital building was grey, dusty, and dull, but in surprisingly good condition. The paint was faded and peeling, bed sheets covering what remained of the once quality furniture that adorned the once busy halls. They kept their footsteps and voices as quiet as possible, as the vast openness of the building created an echo that carried.

Joel and Ellie both flinched and turned back as a symphony of gunfire erupted behind them from the entrance. Bursts and single shots roared from the main hall, along with screams of horror and pain. They continued to run until they reached the rear of the building.

"What're we doing Joel? How are we going to get out of here?" Ellie was short of breath, but there was collectiveness in her voice. Joel couldn't help but slightly admire Ellie's ability to refrain from panic and impulsive actions for someone her age.

Joel knew he had to make a decision. Even in the rare chance that Tess took down a handful of FEDRA troops, they still could not make a stand against those who remained. Fleeing was their only option, but to where? He knew that if they returned to the QZ, they would be hunted relentlessly. There were many ways in and out of the city, but one misstep could cost them their lives.

"Stay close," Joel reminded Ellie as he led her to an emergency exit. Both their eyes squinted in pain from the transition from the glooming decay of the capital's interior to the

luminous rays of the morning sun. Joel quickly dropped his backpack and retrieved his gas mask, and clipped it to his belt. He slung his backpack over his back and picked up his rifle and looked south.

“Ok Ellie, here’s the deal,” Joel spoke as he took a series of deep breaths and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “We need to head to Park Street Station at the old Boston Common. We can get underground and follow the Red Line out of here. It’s going to be tough, but we can make it. I’ve taken that route before.”

Ellie silently shook her head in agreement, her eyes wide and alert. He led her through the wreckage of Court Square to Tremont Street and quickly headed south. Ellie continued to look back in relief of the absence of pursuing troops, but their pace would not slow. Joel unclipped his gas mask from his belt and fitted it over his face, checking for a seal as they neared the entrance to Park Street Station. They descended into the dark, algid subway. As they continued further into the subway they were welcomed by a thick cloud of brown-yellow spores. Joel looked down at Ellie through the bug-eyed lenses of his gas mask.

“How the hell are you breathin’ in this stuff?”

“I wasn’t lying to you,” Ellie responded as she continued to catch her breath from the sprint from the Capital building.

“We got lucky. FEDRA must have assumed we held up and hid somewhere in the Capital building and limited their search to there.” Joel said as they continued into the station towards the tracks. “You have any food with you?”

“I have a few snacks in my bag, why?” Ellie asked.

“Might want to have a bite,” Joel suggested, his voice muffled by the gas mask. “We got a long walk ahead of us.”

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They both squinted as their eyes adjusted to the afternoon sun as they emerged from the dark corridors of the subway to the surface of Alewife Station. They could feel their clothes stick to their skin from the suffocating humidity. The subway may have been dark and rich with cordyceps spores, but the cool climate of the underground made the walk more bearable.

Joel took a seat and removed his sticky, sweaty gas mask. Ellie cautiously stood a few meters away, as Joel had been near silent throughout the entire trek through the aphotic tunnels of the old Red Line. She could feel that Joel was given the time to think about all that had happened during the long walk, and the absence of Tess was starting to take its toll. His body slouched while he sat, his fingers pressed into the corners of his eyes.

Ellie tried to break the long silence. “Hey, look, about Tess... I don’t know what to-”

Joel shook his head and raised a hand in the air, gesturing Ellie to stop what she was saying. “Here’s how this thing’s gonna play out. You don’t bring up Tess – ever. Matter of fact, we can just keep our histories to ourselves. Secondly, don’t tell anybody about your condition. They’ll either think you’re crazy or they’ll try to kill you. And lastly, you do what I say, when I say it. We clear?”

Ellie stood and listened, with her hands on her hips. She tried her best to maintain eye contact with Joel, but her eyes often drifted to the ground. She could not help but feel a sense of guilt and shame as if somehow she had been at least partly responsible for what had happened to Tess. “Sure,” she responded, nodding her head.

“Repeat it,” Joel ordered.

Ellie took a deep breath and raised her eyes back to Joel. “What you say goes.”

“Good,” Joel snorted, with a look of reluctant approval. He retrieved a map from his backpack and studied it for a moment. “Now, there’s a town little ways north of here. We follow Route 2 for a few more miles to get there. There’s a fella there that owes me some favors. Good chance he could get us a car.”

“Okay,” Ellie solemnly responded as she nervously pulled on her fingers, cracking her knuckles.

“Let’s get a move on,” Joel ordered, gesturing Ellie to his side as he turned north.

Chapter 4

Summer 2033

Lincoln, Massachusetts

Joel filled their water bottles while Ellie removed her shoes and socks and waded knee-high into the reservoir just west of the intersection of Route 2 and I-95. He watched her giggle and splash like a carefree child as he dropped iodine tablets into each of the bottles.

“Don’t get too excited now,” Joel called out from the reservoir’s bank, packing the water bottles back into his bag. “We don’t exactly have time for a swim.”

“That’s okay,” Ellie replied as she waded back to the bank. “I don’t know how anyway.”

“Seriously?” Joel raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“Well, the QZ didn’t exactly have a community pool where I could learn how.”

“Point taken.”

They moved southwest from the reservoir into the woods. Ellie’s eyes were open with awe. She had seen the face of nature poking through and laying claim to the human environment of brick, concrete, and asphalt, but never seen nature in its true form; wild, untamed, filled with plants and animals completely alien to her. The sights, smells, and sounds were completely foreign and wondrous. It was a rare occasion that Ellie truly felt like a child of her age. Her first walk through the woods was filled with a chorus of bird calls and glimpses of wild animals. A family of deer grazed a short distance away. Despite the sensory overload, Ellie’s mind drifted back to reality.

“Why don’t you just take me back to Marlene?” Ellie asked.

Joel answered Ellie’s question with a question of his own. “If she was up to the task, why’d she drop you off on us?”

“Well, maybe she’s better now,” Ellie replied.

Joel shook his head. “Kid, I don’t mean to upset you, but your friend’s chances of survival weren’t too high to begin with.”

“She’s a lot tougher than you think,” Ellie insisted.

“It don’t matter,” Joel sighed. “Because I doubt I could get either one of us back into the city in one piece. Trust me, I wish there was some other option.”

The sun began to set on the western horizon as they came to a hill overlooking the town of Lincoln. Ellie giggled with joy as fireflies danced through the air, landing on her arms and hands. She found comfort in the thought there existed such a creature that lived to create small pockets of light in the unforgiving darkness. They made her reflect on Marlene and the other Fireflies that were still fighting back in the quarantine zone.

Joel scanned over the small, silent town for any signs of activity. No sounds or movement could be detected, except for a plume of smoke drifting into the sky from the center of town. “That you, Bill?” he quietly muttered to himself.

“Where do you usually meet him?” Ellie asked.

“Huh?” Joel didn’t realize Ellie overheard him talking to himself. “Different places.”

“You’ve never been here have you?” A small smile appeared on Ellie’s face.

“I know this is where he lives, but no. I ain’t never been here, personally.” Joel admitted.

Ellie joined Joel by his side and looked at the town bathed in the vivid colors of the setting sun. “And that smoke, you think that’s him?”

“Sure as hell better be,” Joel concluded.

They descended the hill and made for the center of town. Joel led the way with his rifle drawn, his eyes darting in every direction. Everything in Lincoln was considerably more spread out than the dense, urban landscape of the QZ in the heart of the city. Joel felt vulnerable trekking through such a foreign, open environment. The alleys, sewers, and tunnels were the means of getting around the city, not just strolling out in the open.

Ellie kept a few paces behind Joel, keeping on the lookout for any movement. “So, let’s say we get a car from this buddy of yours. Then what?”

“Well, then we go find Tommy,” Joel answered.

“Marlene said he’s your brother.”

“And more importantly, he was a Firefly,” Joel added. “He’d know where to take you.”

“Oh, okay.” Ellie nodded.

“He lives far from here, which is why we need a car.”

Some of the sights of Lincoln were similar to that of the Boston QZ. Grass and weeds sprouted from the asphalt, moss, and ivy engulfed the older brick buildings, and layers of paint peeled away from the abandoned residential homes. A plethora of abandoned government, police, and civilian vehicles littered the street collecting rust. The roads were in much nicer condition than those of Boston, as Lincoln was exempt from the military bombing runs at the early stages of the outbreak. Joel and Ellie both took notice of the mandatory evacuation notice signs that were posted throughout the town. Residents of Lincoln and the rest of Middlesex County were evacuated in October of 2013 to the nearest quarantine zone, presumably Boston.

“This place is very quaint,” Ellie spoke as they continued deeper into the heart of town.

“Quaint?”

“Well, I don’t know, how else would you describe it?”

“Empty,” Joel replied with no hesitation.

“Yeah, that would be another way.” Ellie reflected on all the new experiences of the day. Leaving the relative comfort of the only home she had ever known and seen the outside world for what it was. She never would have guessed how quiet it was outside the walls. While both FEDRA and the civilian populace of the quarantine zone made use of the available infrastructure in the city, these buildings and homes were completely vacant. What used to be general stores, restaurants, and music shops all stood empty and desolate, artifacts of a past age of mankind.

Ellie’s reminiscence was interrupted by the faint sound of clicking. A lone clicker aimlessly shuffled and stumbled from between two nearby houses. She froze in place as Joel slowly and silently readied his rifle, his eyes fixed firmly on the rifle’s front sight. His finger slid from the receiver to the trigger. He breathed deeply and prepared to exhale when he was thrown off balance. A spontaneous, loud boom and a flash of light from the clicker’s position caused Joel to stumble and Ellie to fall to her knees. Joel’s ears rang and his stomach turned from the force of the explosion. Small bits of flesh and fungal plate rained from the sky and fell with soft splatters all around. Ellie grabbed at her abdomen, clearly shaken by the force of the blast while Joel paced in small circles trying to shake off the mental fog from the concussive blast.

“Wha-, what the hell was that?” Ellie groaned.

“That,” Joel began before letting out a series of coughs and gags. “That would be one of Bill’s traps.”

Ellie struggled to her feet and began to regain her composure. “Your friend a bit paranoid, maybe?”

“That’s putting it lightly.” Joel resumed his path west through the unfamiliar town, more alert than when they first arrived. He did not like the feeling of being so out in the open with an

unknown amount of infected nearby. Joel knew that the infected here were more likely to be clickers than runners. Lincoln was not the place where people were continuously coming and going, whoever has been infected here had been infected since the early stages of the outbreak. And if clickers weren't enough to worry about, one of Bill's hard to distinguish traps could also be their undoing.

"So what's the deal with this guy?" Ellie asked, sticking tightly to Joel's side.

"Well, he helped us smuggle stuff into the city. He knows how to find things." Joel answered.

"Let's hope we don't blow up trying to find him."

The pillar of grey smoke appeared closer and closer as they carefully navigated their way through town. The occasional screech of infected could be heard far in the distance, the only real sound that carried throughout the otherwise hushed ghost town. Joel and Ellie spotted countless trip wires and open bear traps scattered about as they ventured deeper into the quagmire of danger. Corpses of the infected lined the streets, accompanied by the familiar smell of death. Their bodies rotted in the intense summer heat as dense swarms of flies hovered above the bodies of some, crows pecked and ripped at others. A muffled explosion was heard somewhere to the north as vibrations could be felt under their feet.

"Now listen," Joel began. "Bill ain't exactly the most stable of individuals. So, when we get there, you let me do the talkin'. You understand?"

"I understand." Ellie nodded in agreement.

"We gotta be clear on this," Joel insisted. "He don't take kindly to strangers. Bill's a good guy, he just definitely needs some time warming up to you, that's all."

As night drew closer, the shrieking of infected began to fill the air at a more frequent rate. Joel spotted a warehouse ahead. He gave some thought and decided to cut through rather than go around and risk a route of an unfamiliar alley. Tripwires would be near impossible to spot in the darkness. The ground of the warehouse was littered with broken glass and assorted, compiled junk; parts for cars, rusted pipes, tools, and kitchenware, musical instruments. They tiptoed through the sprawling clutter as Joel led the way, carefully scanning the area with his flashlight.

A refrigerator crashed to the ground on the other side of the warehouse. Joel's heart leaped into his throat as his body was violently jerked upward by his foot. His inverted body dangled helplessly six feet from the ground, a rope gripping around his right ankle. His head pounded as he felt all the blood rushing to it. His eyes regained focus as the dizzy spell faded. He scanned the warehouse to try to make sense of what had just happened. He looked down to see Ellie staring up at him with an incredulous look on her face.

“What the hell just happened?”

“It’s another one of Bill’s stupid fucking traps!” Joel replied loudly, trying his best to contain his frustration and maintain some composure. He pointed his finger to direct Ellie’s eyes to the felled refrigerator across the warehouse. “There, that fridge, it looks like a counterweight. Cut the rope and it will bring me down.”

Ellie nodded and carefully made her way across the warehouse. She scaled the refrigerator and reached into her pocket for the knife. She unfolded it and began to saw away at the thick, tense rope. They both froze in silence as the unwelcoming sound of infected shrieked, screeched, and clawed outside of the warehouse walls. Ellie busily got back to work on the rope as the sound of striking and clawing could be heard on the other side of the walls. Blind, vicious infected tried to find a way in, drawn by the sound of the commotion inside. Joel frantically tried to get his bearings and gain control of his rifle, knowing that it would be a matter of time before one of them found a window or some other way in.

“Fuck!” Ellie yelled in frustration as the knife slipped from her hands and tumbled to the floor below. She frantically dismounted the refrigerator to reclaim the blade, the handle slick with sweat. She rescaled the counterweight and went back to work; the noise outside the warehouse growing in volume, as more infected arrived at the scene. The sound of shattering glass at different ends of the warehouse signaled that the clickers had begun to find their way inside. Ellie vigorously cut at the rope until it gave way, and Joel fell to the ground, clanging amongst the bric-a-brac.

“Look out!” Ellie cried as a clicker breached one of the windows and tumbled through in a blood-crazed frenzy. Joel struggled to his feet, his entire body hurting from the awkward landing. The clicker turned towards Joel, drawn to the location of where the loud fall took place. It rushed at him, stumbling through the junk on the ground. Joel fumbled the rifle as it rushed forward, letting out an animalistic hiss through rows of hideously deformed teeth. Its head suddenly and silently jerked back as a rod-shaped projectile pierced the fungal plates of its face, penetrating deep into its skull.

They turned to the eastern end of the warehouse. There stood a short, stout man adorned in a gas mask. He wore an olive drab army jacket under a load-bearing vest and a white checkered shemagh draped around his neck. His brown combat boots were old and worn; his woodland camouflage pants were covered in black and red stains. He gripped a bow firmly in his hands; a quiver of arrows and a large machete were strapped to his back.

“Get off your ass and on your feet!” the man ordered, beckoning to the side entrance in which he emerged from.

Joel and Ellie moved as quickly as they could across the warehouse and out the exit that the man led them through. The door led them outside to a man-made corridor that connected the

warehouse to another street. The corridor was lined with double-wide trailers on each side parked in long rows to create high barricades to deter the infected. Claymore mines and other improvised explosives lined the outside, in the case that the infected tried to climb over. The cries of the infected did not cease as they doggedly pursued their prey.

The corridor led to a laundromat that they passed through into an alley that led to a low ceilinged building. The man in the gas mask fastened the locks on the entrance door, a combination of deadbolts and chain locks.

“Man, that was close,” Ellie paced around catching her breathe. The man in the gas mask directed his attention from the locks and made his way towards her. She began to back nervously into a corner. “Hey, uh... thanks for the heroics and all, “I’m Ellie.” She extended her hand in a welcoming gesture. The man extended his hand in return, quickly slipping an end of a pair of handcuffs around her right wrist and the other end to a pipe running alongside the wall. “What are you doing!? Joel!” Ellie felt the panic rising in her throat.

The man removed his gas mask to reveal a face with a stubby facial hair that covered multiple scars on his cheeks caused by clawing or slashing. His dark, shoulder-length hair was slicked back to stay out of his eyes.

“Hey, Bill what are you doing?” Joel moved to mediate the situation and attempted to calm him down. Bill quickly drew a pistol from his drop-leg holster and pointed it at Joel while Ellie violently thrashed to free herself from her restraints.

“Turn around and get on your knees!” Bill ordered Joel. His eyes showed no fear; his body language showed no hesitation.

“Let’s just calm down a second,” Joel reasoned, raising his arms in a non-threatening manner. Bill raised the pistol from Joel’s chest to his head and repeated the command. Joel reluctantly obeyed and turned around with his fingers locked behind his head. Bill drove his foot into the back of Joel’s knee to hasten the process. Joel felt the cold muzzle of the pistol against the back of his head. “Let’s just take it easy now.”

“Don’t fucking test me!” Bill commanded. He moved Joel’s head around, scanning every inch of skin on this neck and forearms. “Any bites?” he asked.

“No.”

“Anything sprouting?”

“No, goddammit, I’m clean!” Joel barked, his voice filled with annoyance and agitation.

“If I see so much as a twitch....”

Ellie struggled until the pipe loosened from the wall. She pulled and tugged until it was free. She took the pipe in hand and swung, landing a blow across Bill's right arm while he was preoccupied with Joel. A loud, dull thud of metal on flesh and bone filled the room as Bill fell to the ground with a cry of agony. Ellie raised the pipe over her head to deliver another blow when Joel sprang to his feet and grabbed the pipe, stopping Ellie from delivering a follow-up strike. He pulled the pipe from her hands.

Bill climbed back to his feet, his face wincing in pain. A barrage of colorful vulgarity spewed from his mouth as he walked off the pain.

Joel pointed the pipe at Bill. "You done?"

"Am I done!?" Bill's voice was filled with rage and disbelief, his face was red as a cherry. "You come into my house, you set off all my traps, you damn near break my shootin' arm," his eyes moved from Joel to Ellie. "Who the fuck is this punk and what's she doing here?"

"I am none of your goddamn business, and we're here because you owe Joel some favors!" Ellie declared, unintimidated. She raised her hand, the handcuffs dangled from her wrist. "And you can start by taking these off!" Joel's eyes widened in surprise by Ellie's intensity as he placed a hand on her shoulder to provide restraint."

Bill turned away from the furious eyes of Ellie and paced around the room, still gripping his arm in pain. "I owe Joel some favors, is this some kind of joke?" he mocked as he grabbed the curved, Kukri machete from his back and placed it on a nearby table.

"I'll cut to the chase," Joel said. "I need a car."

Bill grabbed a mill file from the table and ran it along the sinister-looking blade. "Well it is a joke," his attention focused on sharpening his blade. "Joel needs a car. Well if I had one that works, which I sure as hell don't, what makes you think I would just give it to you? Huh? Yeah sure Joel, go ahead, take my car! Take all my food too while you're at it!"

Ellie's face twisted with annoyance. "By the looks of it, you could lose some of that food."

Bill raised the machete from the table and pointed it toward Ellie. "You listen to me you little shit--"

Joel grabbed Ellie by the shoulders and guided her further away from Bill.

"No, fuck you!" Ellie spat, as she glared at Bill over Joel's shoulder. "You handcuffed me!"

Joel's grip tightened on Ellie's shoulders as he looked into her eyes with matching intensity. "I need you to shut up, alright?"

Ellie sighed and shook off Joel's grip. She turned away from Bill and looked about the room. Joel went back to Bill to continue their conversation.

"Whatever favors you think I owe ya, it ain't worth that much." Bill ran the mill file across the blade again.

"Actually, Bill, they are."

Bill paused in silence for a moment. "Well, it don't matter 'cause I don't have a car that works."

"But there is one in this town."

"Parts," Bill corrected. "There are parts in this town."

"Meaning that you could fix one up."

Bill sighed and continued on his blade for a few more moments. He wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve and leaned on the table deep in thought. "Alright," he began. "If I'm gonna do this, there's some gear I'm gonna need." He pulled a hand-drawn map of the town from his pocket and spread it across the table. Ellie joined Bill and Joel as they carefully studied the map.

Bill pointed at the north end of the map. "It's on the other side of town, and you need to help me gather them. Then maybe I can put something together that runs," Bill took a long look at Joel then returned to the map. "But after this, I owe you nothin'." He retrieved a small key ring from his vest and placed it on the table in front of Joel.

"That's fine," Joel agreed as he picked up the keys. He inserted the handcuff key on the ring into the handcuffs fastened around Ellie's wrist and removed them. "Couple days from now we'll probably be dead anyway."

"Good," Bill said as he grabbed his machete from the table. "Follow me, the whole goddamn town is booby-trapped, best stay right on my ass."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "Can't miss it."

Bill led Joel and Ellie up through the stairwell to the roof of his safe house, bathed in the tinge of moonlight. Crickets and grasshoppers orchestrated their nocturnal calls, filling the air with a pleasant, peaceful tune. The roof of Bill's safe house was connected to the roofs of neighboring buildings that connected to others. The whole town was completely interconnected from rooftop to rooftop with makeshift bridges made of wooden planks, ladders, and sections of chain link fence.

“Can’t believe you agreed to this bullshit, Bill,” Bill said to himself sarcastically, loud enough for Joel and Ellie to hear behind them. “What you shoulda done was just left them back there.”

Ellie’s face turned sour and turned to Joel as they crossed over a row of boards to the neighboring house. “You weren’t kidding about him.”

“Yeah, he’s one of a kind,” Joel replied cracking a smile as he readjusted his backpack to a more comfortable position.

“So what kind of trouble are you in?” Bill directed the question towards Joel but kept his eyes and flashlight forward. “Where the hell’s Tess?”

“It’s a job. A simple drop off.” Joel replied.

“What are you delivering?” Bill asked. “That little brat?”

Ellie let out a fake laugh. “Fuck you too.”

Bill laughed so hard that he stopped for a moment to regain both his breath and composure. “Y’know, I hope you know what you’re doin’.” He ran a finger under his eye to wipe away the tears of laughter.

“Are you fucking kidding me with this guy?” Ellie shook her head.

“So, where we goin’, Bill?” Joel asked, directing focus back to the task at hand.

“My other safe house. But this one is more of an armory.”

“Wait,” Ellie said. “I thought we were gonna fix up a car?”

“We?” Bill sharply turned his head in Ellie’s direction. “You know how to fix a-”

Joel gave Bill a menacing stare that stopped him mid-sentence. Bill turned his attention forward and continued. “It’s like I said, what I need is on the other side of town. Now, that side I don’t ever go to cause it’s filled with infected. So we’re gonna need more guns.”

Bill led them over a ladder that connected the top floor bedroom window to another second story window of a house with a red slanted roof. They passed through the hall and followed a set of stairs that led down to the ground floor. Joel froze and held Ellie by the shoulder as a sharp cry from an infected could be heard from a neighboring room. Bill poked his head into the dining room of the derelict family home. An infected struggled and thrashed in a mesh of Concertina wire that lined the room.

“So,” Bill began as removed his machete from its sheath. “You didn’t answer my question about Tess. I mean I thought the two of you were inseparable.”

“She’s busy,” Joel replied as Bill approached the tangled infected.

“Yeah, sure, busy.” Bill raised his machete over his head and delivered a downward slash to the neck of the infected. “Sounds to-,” he slashed again, the crunch of the machete cutting through the cervical spine reverberated from the walls. “-me like there might be trouble in paradise.” He smiled as he hacked at the neck again. The head tumbled to the floor.

“Yeah, somethin’ like that.” Joel watched the dark, tainted blood drip to the floor, pooling around the severed head.

Bill opened the front door of the house. A small shopping plaza sat across the street, the parking lot filled with abandoned, rusted vehicles.

Ellie pointed to the parking lot. “So... why don’t you fix one of these cars?”

“Oh my god, you’re a genius!” Bill mocked, his voice saturated with sarcasm. “I mean the whole time, why on earth hadn’t I thought about fixin’ one of these cars?”

“Okay,” Ellie replied, giving Bill a sharp look. “Don’t be a dick.”

Bill decided to cut the kid a break and give her a straight answer. “Their tires are rotted and their batteries are dead. I can’t even begin to think what the inside of the engine blocks looks like. Only ones making new car batteries are the military.”

A small pack of four clickers darted from behind the small shopping plaza, homing in on Bill’s voice. His eyes widened as he took his bow in hand and slid an arrow from its quiver. Joel swung his bolt action rifle from his back and pointed it at the pack of inelegantly sprinting infected while Ellie took cover behind a car. Bill released the first arrow, whistling through the air straight into the chest of one of the infected. Joel pulled the trigger, feeling the vigorous push of recoil against his shoulder. He gripped the bolt and pulled it back, ejecting the smoking brass cartridge into the air, and slammed it forward, chambering another round. He pulled the trigger again, and again. Another arrow cut through the air, landing directly on target. Three of the infected lay still while the last one aimlessly crawled along the ground, letting out a weak clicking sound from its throat as its jagged teeth clacked together. Bill routinely removed his machete from its sheath to finish the job as he mumbled to himself something about checking the barricades again later.

Joel lowered his rifle and swung it across his back shoulder and let out a long, drawn-out sigh of relief. “You picked a hell of a place to hole up, didn’t ya?”

Bill looked down at the infected squirming on the ground that reached out for his foot. “You know, as bad as these things are, at least they’re predictable.” He dropped to a knee and forcefully pushed the tip of the blade deep into the neck of the clicker, then looked back up at

Joel. "It's the normal people that scare me. You of all people should understand that." He pulled the arrows from the freshly dead, wiped the tip with his shirt, and slid them back into the quiver.

"What does that mean?" Ellie asked as she examined the bodies of the infected.

Joel nonchalantly dismissed the question.

Bill led them east for a quarter of a mile to a nearby church courtyard, moving slowly and carefully through the dark, heavily trapped area. They soon came to a cellar door that Bill unlocked with one of the many keys he possessed. They descended into the dark, musty cellar. "Here we are," Bill welcomed as he lit a match and guided the flame into a nearby lantern, illuminating the room in a soft, dim glow. He turned to Ellie and gave her a firm look. "You, don't touch anything." He turned to Joel. "Close the door behind you."

Joel looked around the room and concluded that Bill correctly described this safe house as more of an armory. Assortments of handguns, shotguns, rifles, and explosives lined the walls. Boxes and crates of every ammo type imaginable were neatly sorted by caliber and type of round. Ellie stared in disbelief as her lower jaw hung loosely, her eyes reluctant to blink.

Joel loaded boxes of .45 and .308 ammo into his backpack, along with some gun cleaner and extra rags. He looked over his shoulder and saw Ellie removing a handgun from the wall that resembled a gun show showcasing. She tilted it and rotated it around, esteemed by the power in her hands. Joel cleared his throat to get Ellie's attention and shook his head in disapproval.

"What?" Ellie blurted. "I need a gun."

"No, you don't." Joel's tone was of that of a parent.

"Joel, I can handle myself," she pleaded.

"No."

Ellie stomped her feet in frustration and returned the weapon to its place of origin. "Fine, I'll just wait around for you two to get me killed!"

Bill looked up at Joel from the shotgun he was inspecting in its case on the floor. "This goes on record as the worst fucking job you've ever taken."

"It's up there." Joel sighed.

Bill plucked the shotgun from its case and rose to his feet. "How in the hell is Tess okay with this suicide mission?"

"It's actually her idea."

Bill placed the shotgun on the table next to where Joel stood. “Really? Well then, the broad’s not as smart as I thought she was.” Joel turned from Bill to hide the anger and sorrow that suddenly welled up inside of him thinking of Tess. Bill began to take apart the shotgun to inspect and clean the parts inside. “Seriously, you gotta take that kid back to where ya found her.”

Joel took a seat at the edge of the table, running his hand through his salt and pepper hair. “Bill, I can’t just take her back.”

“Then send her packing, let her find her own way.” Bill continued cleaning the shotgun. “Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, I had somebody that I cared about. It was a partner. Somebody I had to look after.” Bill tossed a rag to the side and began loading shells of buckshot into the ammo tube, shaking his head up and down as if agreeing with himself about something. “And in this world, that sort of shit is good for one thing. Getting’ ya killed. So you know what I did? I wisened the fuck up, and I realized it’s gotta be just me.

Joel sat at the edge of the table, struggling to find any words to justify the situation he found himself in. “Bill, it ain’t like that.”

“Bullshit, it’s just like that.” He directed his eyes from Joel and spied Ellie rummaging through a stack of old books and magazines that had been salvaged around town. “Hey! What did I say to you when we walked down the steps? What did I say?”

Ellie stepped away from the stockpile of literature. “I’m just fixing your stupid pile.”

“Don’t touch!” Bill bellowed across the room.

Ellie smiled and replied with the salute of a middle finger.

“Goddammit,” Bill muttered. “You keep babysitting long enough and eventually it’s gonna blow up in your face.”

Joel rose from the table, his eyes readjusting to focus after staring off into space listening to Bill’s lecture. “Bill, can we please just get on with it?”

“Here,” Bill tossed the shotgun to Joel. He grabbed another shotgun off the wall and quickly loaded it. “Let’s get on with it then,” his voice filled with mockery. “But before we go, I got somethin’ I gotta show ya.”

“Whatcha got?” Joel asked as he admired the quality and condition of the Mossberg 500 resting in his hands. The gun was well cleaned and lubricated, the metal had a fine shine and the wood finish of the stock and fore-end was well polished. The weapon had a newly cleaned smell to it, and the action flowed smoothly as he brought the fore end back and forward, chambering a 12-gauge shell from the magazine tube.

Bill led Joel to a corner of the armory where a wooden crate sat upon a waist level shelf. “New toys from the toy box,” Bill smiled. They were filled with what looked like homemade grenades.

Joel examined what appeared to be old, rusty metal cans that had been packed with explosive powder and shrapnel, with a fuse woven through a small hole drilled into the sealed top. His eyes widened with disbelief and excitement, he knew Bill had a knack for building all sorts of improvised weaponry, but this was quite a creation. Joel knelt, removed his backpack and began reorganizing his bag to make room for as many as he could.

“Those things will shred through anything, I packed them with all sorts of nasty shit; razor blades, bits from broken shears, broken glass, nails, screws, bits of wood, you name it. Got yourself a lighter?”

Joel shoved his hand in his pocket and flashed a worn, silver zippo lighter and put it back into his pocket. “So we got shotguns and grenades,” he spoke as he began loading the bombs into his bag one by one. “What the hell are we doing with them?”

Bill crossed his arms and leaned back against the shelf, lustfully admiring the explosives. “Well, every few weeks this military caravan rides through town. I assume they’re out looking for supplies. I mean, you’d be amazed at the shit they overlook.” Joel managed to fit five bombs into his bag and slung the backpack over his back and returned to his feet as Bill continued. “Anyway, a few months back they were rolling through and they got overrun by a horde of infected. They were all over the truck; it plowed right into the side of the high school. It’s still sitting there with the battery in it.”

“So we take that battery and we put it in another car,” Joel deduced.

“Bingo. I wanted to get it, but it was dangerous with all the infected in that part of town. Bill looked Joel up and down and gave a heavy breath out of his nostrils. “But fuck it, Joel needs a car.”

“What if it’s damaged?” Joel asked.

“Nah,” Bill replied with no concern in his voice. “Those trucks are like fucking tanks. It’s just sittin’ there, trust me.”

Joel wiggled around as he adjusted to the recently added weight of his backpack. “This might actually work.”

Bill nodded his head and made his way to the stairs, where Ellie lingered and admired all the weapons, ammunition, literature, and other miscellaneous goods neatly organized about the armory. He passed by, refraining from eye contact. “Kid, I swear to god, if you took anything-”

“Hey, man. I don’t need any of your shit. Trust me.”

“Joel, you are keeping an eye on her, right?” Bill asked, looking back over his shoulder as he continued towards the stairs leading up to the main floor of the church.

“Like a hawk,” Joel replied, annoyed by the tension between Bill and Ellie. He followed Bill up the sturdy wooden steps, Ellie trailed a few feet behind.

The stairs led them up to the well-preserved sanctuary of the church. Ellie gawked in amazement of the view. The fresh golden light of dawn poured in through stained glass windows, shining a myriad of colors that bathed the room in a soft, angelical radiance. A humble altar adorned with tall white candles stood at the center of the back wall before a backdrop of a large golden cross that stood under a circular window superimposed with another cross. Two more brilliantly colored windows gave the means of basking the altar in the same magnificent illumination that blanketed the rest of the sanctuary. Despite the minimal stockpiles of supplies sitting against the walls, two worn mattresses, one of which neatly made the other one bare. The church pews were pushed to different sides to barricade the entrances. The room felt like a pre-outbreak relic. A place frozen in time and fought back the always encroaching hands of nature; the same hands that turned entire cities into fossilized footprints where humanity once stood upon, utterly unchallenged.

Joel took a moment to take it all in. “Nice place you got here.”

“Well if you got anything to confess, this’d be the place to do it.” Bill’s voice bounced and echoed throughout the high ceilinged room as he continued towards the rear of the church. He gently placed his hand on the altar and fell silent in prayer. He raised his head. “Alright, time to sack up.”

Chapter 5

Summer 2033

Lincoln, Massachusetts

Bill led them through the rear exit, out into the graveyard. He faced east towards the rising sun and pointed, shielding his eyes with his other hand. The church sat upon a small hill, giving enough elevation to spot the scoreboard of the high school's football field.

Ellie watched the sunrise as Joel and Bill analyzed the terrain between the church and the school, determining the quickest, safest routes to travel. Her stomach turned as an unfamiliar, rancid smell wafted through the gentle morning breeze. She turned to her right and began to gag when she spotted a small pile of infected bodies stacked upon a pile of ash about fifteen meters away. The bodies had been burned and charred, but some flesh remained for the maggots. She turned from the small pile of ruin and regained her composure.

Bill placed his hands to where the weight of his load-bearing vest sat upon his shoulders. "Past that gate leading out of the graveyard, it's all new to me."

Joel silently nodded and turned towards Ellie. "There's gonna be infected all over the place, gotta stay as quiet as possible." Ellie signaled in agreement.

Bill led them east through the thick vegetation of the graveyard. The gravestones had been devoured by weeds and moss, while others were so filthy that the names were illegible. Joel found the silence refreshing as it made the fatigue from the journey easier to cope with. Bill and Ellie had been exchanging words since the moment they had first set foot in the safe house. They passed through the metal gates of a stone wall that separated the graveyard from a residential neighborhood. Disembodied moans could be heard sporadically throughout the neighborhood as they weaved their way in between and through houses, moving as quickly and carefully as possible. Bill and Joel kept their shotguns pressed tight against their shoulders, their eyes darting back and forth and up and down in a tense caution. Infected were all around, wandering aimlessly through the streets and abandoned homes. Joel felt the silence between all of them shift from a soothing luxury to a necessity for survival.

Joel shuffled to Bill's side and whispered in his ear. "How much farther, Bill?"

Bill spoke through clenched teeth. "We're gettin' close now. We're gonna have to be quick about it. Go in, grab the battery, get the fuck out. I don't want to get trapped over there."

They came to a house within fifty meters from the high school parking lot, surveying the terrain as they peered through a windowless frame. The pits of their stomachs turned and twisted in dismay as they watched a sea of infected mindlessly wander an overrun government checkpoint and staging ground. Abandoned school buses lined the parking lot, each labeled with the names of New England cities that other quarantine zones were located; Boston, Hartford, Providence. Through the disarray of buses and mindless infected, they could see their objective, the military truck with its front end burrowed into the wall of the school.

“What’d I tell ya?” Bill quietly pointed towards the military truck. “There’s that truck, sticking outta the school right there.” He nodded to Joel and made his way to the front door of the house. They all made their way through the front door of the house and into the street as they quietly made their way towards the parking lot. They took cover behind one of the buses in the parking lot’s outer perimeter where Joel unslung his backpack and started foraging through it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bill looked at Joel in confusion.

“Ellie, find me something light I can throw that will make some noise, a glass bottle if you can find one, even a rock or a brick will do,” Joel ordered before redirecting his attention to Bill’s question. “It’s too dense here, there’s no way we can make it through this unnoticed, no matter how quiet we are. We need to be smart about this.”

“What’d you have in mind?” Bill asked.

Joel dug two of the bombs from his bag and handed one to Bill. “We gotta lure them into a tight group,” Ellie handed Joel an empty beer bottle that she found a few feet away and listened to Joel’s plan. “I’m gonna throw this bottle in the opposite direction of the truck, the infected will all swarm to the sound. Once they gather in mass we toss the bombs, blow as many to hell as possible and we make a break for the truck. We’ll be compromised, but by the looks of things that’s pretty much inevitable.” Bill rubbed his chin as he thought about the proposition and nodded in agreement. Ellie looked at Joel and also gave him a confident nod.

Joel took a deep breath as he tightly gripped the bottle and lobbed it high into the air. The bottle soared and crashed twenty meters away. Alerted screeches and groans filled the air as a horde of clickers thronged to the shattering sound. The first clickers to arrive dropped to the ground and violently clawed at the shards of glass, pus and saliva spraying from their twisted mouths as they attacked the perceived threat. Other infected continued to swarm to the area of commotion.

Bill pulled the lighter from his pocket and lit the fuses to both bombs and handed one to Joel. Ellie’s breathing became fast and heavy as she covered her ears and pushed her back firmly against the bus, anticipating the imminent explosions. They waited momentarily for the fuses to burn shorter then heaved the bombs into the sea of infected. The ground shook, the bus they used as cover budged a few inches from the concussive blast. Joel grabbed Ellie’s arm and pulled her

from the ground as small bits of flesh, bone, and fungal plate gently rained on top of them. Bill emerged from behind the bus amidst the chaos of the simultaneous blasts, his shotgun raised to his shoulder with his focus fixed on the front site as he made directly for the military truck. Joel dragged Ellie until she regained her sense of bearing and hurriedly followed behind on her own two feet.

Wounded infected screeched and hollered as they crawled and writhed across the parking lot, many lost limbs in the blast. Bill and Joel opened fire into the remaining infected that stood in their way through the maze of buses, continuously loading shells into the ammo tube as they made their way closer and closer to their precious battery. They were within a few yards of the truck when more moaning and screeching could be heard from right outside the school parking lot. While the blast of the bombs may have wiped out most of the infected within the parking lot, the sound drew the attention from other nearby infected. They flocked to the chain-link fence of the staging ground perimeter, clawing furiously to get while others made an attempt to climb, getting caught in the Concertina wire that laced the top of the fence. More and more infected rushed toward the fence, piling on and pushing forward until the fence began to show signs of giving way.

“It’s not gonna hold!” Ellie yelled.

Bill furiously pushed and pulled on the locked entrance closest to the truck. He hastily made his way around the corner to look for an alternative route and spotted a low sitting window. “Over here!”

Joel and Ellie rushed towards Bill’s voice as the fence bulged toward them from the mob of infected pushing further and further into the security fence with no regard for their own well-being, relentless and instinctual. Bill slid open a window and guided Ellie through. He followed in behind her as the fence gave way and a wave of infected rushed in. Bill struggled through the narrow opening as Joel fired into the throng of infected in hopes of at least slowing them down.

“Joel, get in here!” Ellie yelled and extended her hand out the window.

Joel made for the window, throwing his shotgun through and dove headfirst through the opening. His upper body was through when he felt the weight of an attacking infected land square on his back. He violently threw his elbows behind him to fend off the attacker while Bill and Ellie frantically tried to pull Joel to safety. Ellie quickly pulled the knife from her pocket and drove the blade into the body of the infected. It sprang back in surprise as dark, putrid smelling blood dripped from the blade and down her hands. Bill pulled Joel through the window and grabbed his shotgun from the ground and stuck the barrel into the clicker’s face and pulled the trigger. The loud bang was followed by a shower of dark mist and chunks of fungus. Ellie quickly slammed the sliding glass window shut and helped Joel to his feet.

Infected bashed on the window while others tried to force their way through the chained doors that Bill tried to open just moments ago. Joel reloaded his shotgun and kept eyes on both entrances. “Make it fast, Bill!”

Bill popped open the hood of the military truck as Joel and Ellie pushed a cart of tools in front of the fragile window to create a barricade and buy them some time. “What’s the story, Bill?” Joel asked with urgency as his attention continued to shift from one entrance to the other.

Bill stood over the open hood of the truck, his face ran white and his stomach turned. “It’s empty.”

“It’s what!?” Joel was incredulous and ran next to Bill’s side to see for himself.

“It’s fucking empty!” Bill repeated in a panicked voice.

“Well, what now then Bill, where to? What do we do?” Joel demanded as Ellie summoned as much strength as she could to hold the tool cart against the window.

“Anywhere but here!” Bill shouted at Joel and opened the door opposite of the chained door.

Joel turned around and grabbed Ellie by the shoulders. “Get ready to haul ass, c’mon!”

Bill led them deep into the empty, locker-lined hallways of the high school as the infected continued to fight their way inside. “We are gonna need to sneak out the back, that’s our only way.” They could hear the doors and barricades giving way behind them as they tried to create as much distance as possible with what time they had. Their flashlights illuminated a path through the long, dark hallways of the school as the haunting sound of pursuing infected echoed through the corridors.

They made their way into the gymnasium at the rear of the school. They pushed a large rack of wrestling mats in front of the double doors to barricade themselves in. Ellie fell to her knees and gasped for breath as Bill hunched over and vomited. Joel wiped the sweat from his face and froze in fear. A large silhouette moved from the shadows of the locker room adjoining the gym.

They froze in their tracks as a hulking monstrosity entered the gymnasium. The miserable groans and high-pitched screeching of lesser infected were replaced by a rumbling growl that shook the bleachers. The monstrosity stood over seven feet tall and weighed over five hundred pounds. Its rounded, colossal body was covered in thick layers of armored fungal plates and large vesical spore sacs hung from its body like swollen tumors. Rather than bits of fungal growth protruding from a malformed human skull, the fungus grew in a symmetrical, flower type bloom on the top of its head. The eyes, nose, and ears of a once human face were completely absent. Only a mouth filled with misshapen teeth remained of what was once a human body.

The beast trudged forward and uttered a growl that rivaled a diesel engine. Bill and Joel hurriedly fired at the beast in fear and confusion as Ellie frantically crawled under the bleachers in hope of relative safety, shaking as she pulled her knees to her chest in comfort. The blasts of the shotguns turned into deafening roars in the closed walls of the gym. The massive brute continued its charge forward through the wall of buckshot. Chunks of fungal plate sailed into the air and the thick, gooey, yellow-brown substance that spilled from its flesh covered the gymnasium floor. They unceasingly fired as they retreated back, feeding more shells into the ammo tubes. The beast started to accelerate towards them, indifferent to the gunfire. It lowered its shoulder and smashed into Bill, sending him flying through the air and crashing into the bleachers. He let out a sharp cry of pain from the impact and rolled to the floor, writhing in pain. Joel tried to create distance between himself and the beast when it swung one of its massive arms at Joel, knocking him off balance onto the floor. He managed to sit up and take aim at the monstrosity but failed to pull the trigger before two gargantuan hands wrapped around his skull. He felt one of the monster's hands squeezing on the top of his head while he felt the fingers of its other hand burrow into his lips and grip his lower jaw as it growled like a feral predator. Joel desperately tried to pry away the gigantic hands with his own, but the pressure on his head felt like a hydraulic press, scrambling his thoughts. The beast gripped harder on the top of Joel's head and pulled harder at his bottom jaw. Joel let out a scream of resistance as he desperately tried to wiggle free, but the pressure continued to increase. His vision began to grow dark and his ears began to ring as he started to succumb to the immense pressure.

Joel felt the beast's grip suddenly loosen to the sound of a shotgun blast. His vision began to return to clarity. Bill fired another shell into the back of the creature's head. The symmetrical floral pattern of fungus that substituted for a skull blew apart shell by shell, disorienting the behemoth, causing it to lose its balance. Joel could not tell if the beast was genuinely hurt or just stunned as it heavily fell to the floor, the ground shaking from the impact. He wasted no time to capitalize on the opportunity. He scrambled for his shotgun and stood above the wounded beast, forcefully shoving its barrel straight into its mouth. Joel fired every shell in the ammo tube in succession, not letting up until the gun was dry. The creature lay on the gym floor motionless, its body filled with holes and its head resembling a basket of smashed fruit.

Joel locked eyes with Bill who gripped his ribs in pain. The two men looked at each other from a few feet away, but their eyes stared a thousand yards beyond. Joel's head pounded from the applied pressure, the smell of spore saturated pus, blood, and sulfur in the air caused him to gag. He fell back to the floor and sat next to the massive carcass that lay there, motionless and silent. Bill quietly took a seat on the bleachers, dropping the shotgun next to him. Ellie emerged from the bleachers with red, swollen eyes that insinuated crying.

"What the hell was that thing?" Ellie screamed in hysterics, wiping her eyes.

Joel sat upright, breathing deeply as he blankly gazed at the floor below him. "He's been infected for a long time, well over ten years. We call 'em bloaters."

“Bloaters... got it.” Ellie responded, her jaw trembling as she tried to regain her composure.

Bill winced in pain as he grabbed his shotgun and rose from the bleachers to his feet. “I hate to interrupt your little biology lesson, but can we get the fuck outta here, please?”

A warm breeze blew in across the gym from an open window atop the rows of bleachers. They made their way up the bleachers and climbed through the window, out to the back of the school. They made their way through a hole in the perimeter fence and emerged back into another residential neighborhood filled with empty houses. They entered one of the homes to take a moment’s rest. Joel dropped his backpack and sat down on an old, worn couch. He rubbed his temples in an attempt to alleviate the pain that lingered from the immense pressure applied by the bloater’s overpowering grip. Bill leaned silently against the wall. Ellie excused herself from the room to use the bathroom.

Joel looked up at Bill with weary, bloodshot eyes. “What now?”

Bill slowly paced back and forth, a look of frustration upon his face. “Somebody had the same idea. They stole my shit.”

“Well, then what the hell is plan B?” Some strength began to return to Joel’s voice.

Bill turned and looked deep into Joel’s eyes and pointed back in the direction of the school. “You ought to be thankful you’re still drawing breath. That was plan A, B, C, all the way to fucking Z. And furthermore, tell Tess that she can take this job-”

Joel sprang to his feet and firmly pushed his fingers into his Bill’s chest. “Don’t you fucking bring Tess into this! She has nothing to do with this!”

“She can shove it up her-”

“Guys!” Ellie’s voice could be heard from the neighboring room, a hint of fear was in her voice.

Bill and Joel stopped exchanging words and entered the living room from where Ellie had called out. An emaciated, decomposing body hung lifelessly from the ceiling. Bill coldly stared at the body as it dangled and swayed from the light breeze that flowed in from the broken windows. Ellie quietly slipped out of the room.

“Jesus...” Joel muttered under his breath. He looked over and noticed that Bill’s attention to the corpse remained uninterrupted. “What? You know this guy or something?”

Bill felt a lump in his throat, but his face remained expressionless. “Frank.”

“Who the hell is Frank?” Joel asked, looking the body up and down.

Bill pulled out his blade and approached Frank's body. He grabbed a handful of the bright red Hawai'ian shirt adorned with golden palm trees. "He's the only idiot that would wear a shirt like that." He cut the rope and the body collapsed to the floor with a dull thud. Bill looked upon the body of his partner, tears beginning to well in his eyes while his lip quivered. Bite marks were visible on the arms.

"I reckon he didn't want to turn so he..." Joel stuttered.

"Yeah, I guess not." Bill solemnly nodded in agreement. A river of conflicting motion flowed through Bill as he struggled to remain calm. "Well, fuck him."

Joel spotted a note on a nearby table. "Bill, I uh... found this note over here..."

Bill grabbed the note from Joel's hands and began reading.

Bill,

Well, I doubt you'd ever find this note because you were too scared to ever make it to this part of town. But if for some reason you did, I want you to know I hated your guts. I grew tired of this shitty town and your set-in-your-ways attitude. I wanted more from life than this and you could never get that.

And that stupid battery you kept moaning about- I got it. But I guess you were right. Trying to leave this town will kill me. Still better than spending another day with you.

Good Luck,

Frank

Bill choked back tears as he finished reading the letter. "So that's how you feel..." he whispered to himself as he crumpled up the letter and threw it to the ground. "Well, fuck you too, Frank. Fuckin' idiot."

The sound of a car engine attempting to turn over caught the attention of both men as they made their way through the house and into the garage. Ellie sat in the driver seat of a battered pick-up truck with an extended cab. Patches of rust were blotted amongst the faded blue paint. She turned the key again and again as she welcomed Joel and Bill with a smile. "Look what I found! It's got some juice in it."

Bill stepped to the front of the truck, popped the hood and looked inside. "That's my battery! That fuckin' asshole." He gripped the hood and slammed it shut. "Get out," he ordered Ellie.

She reluctantly slid down from the driver's seat. Bill took her place and turned the key with similar results. He groaned as he realized how close the truck was to start with each turn of the key. He placed his hands on his forehead in frustration. "Battery's drained but the cells are alive."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we push it, get it started and the alternator will recharge the battery," Bill explained as he got out and looked the truck up and down for any other potential problems.

"Is that your guess?" Joel looked at Bill with uncertainty painted across his face.

Bill became visibly irritated from Joel's continuous questioning. "Look, you wanted a plan B; this is as good as it gets."

Ellie moved next to Joel and looked up at him. "What're you thinking?"

Joel paused in a moment of thought and nodded to himself in agreement. "Thinkin' you drive and we push."

"Jesus, that's more of my stuff." Bill sighed under his breath as he gazed at the small pile of weapons and ammunition in the corner of the garage. He tossed Joel a box of unopened shotgun shells that were neatly stacked in the corner. He slowly rose to his feet and leaned back against the hood of the truck and continued to stare at the pile of weapons. "So what? You just... just gonna steal my shit and run off? Is that it, Frank?"

Joel slipped the box of shells into his backpack and checked on Ellie who sat behind the steering wheel. He saw that Ellie nervously shifted around in her seat, but a small smile crept across her face as she familiarized herself with the gears and pedals.

"You gonna be okay with this?" Joel asked in a soft, calming voice.

Ellie's fingers tightly gripped the steering while she bounced around in her seat. "Yeah, not a problem." They locked eyes for a moment.

"You're doin' a good job," Joel reassured her as he lightly drummed the roof of the car with his fingers. "I figure you should know that."

Ellie nodded. "I won't let you down with this."

Joel and Bill took some time to give their weapons and quick cleaning and checked their ammo inventory while Ellie remained in the driver seat. Upon finishing, Joel positioned himself behind the truck while Bill moved to the garage door.

He opened it and looked over his shoulders. "Alright, put her in first," he instructed Ellie.

“Already did it,” she assured him.

Bill took a quick look outside and joined Joel at the back of the truck in preparation to push. “Just keep your foot on the clutch and when we get to roll...”

“I know how to pop a clutch!” Ellie interrupted.

Bill’s face began to turn red. “How the hell do-? Y’know what, I don’t care. Just don’t fuck this up.”

They pushed the truck from the cool, dark garage into the afternoon sun. They pushed as hard as they could and let the truck coast down the modest decline of the driveway.

“Now! Hit it!” Joel called out.

Ellie took her foot off the clutch as the engine failed to sputter to life.

“Perfect,” Bill sarcastically called out. “Great job kid!”

Joel gave Bill a harsh scowl. “Bill, you’re not helping.” He wiped his forehead with his sleeve and took position behind the truck again. “Ellie, we’re gonna give it another go, stay focused!” He began to push and Bill promptly took up position next to him and pushed as hard as he could. The truck was harder to push on the flat road than the slightly sloped driveway as they gave it all they had. The faint snarls and screeches of nearby infected fueled their progress with fear and urgency.

Keep Pushing. Keep Pushing. Joel’s mouth was dry and his eyes burned as sweat dripped down his face. His legs and arms fatigued with every step forward. Bill’s face was blood red as his breathing became deep and heavy.

“You have really fucked my day up, you know that, Joel?” Bill grunted between breaths.

Ellie gripped the steering wheel with excited, nervous enthusiasm as she could see the road begin to slope downward thirty meters up the road. “We gotta go faster!” she yelled. She rocked back and forth in the seat impatiently as her heart skipped a beat when she felt the rolling of the truck come to a halt. In the rearview mirror, she noticed that Joel and Bill had abandoned their pushing duties to fight off a small wave of infected blindly chasing them down the road. The air once again was filled with the chaotic sounds of gunfire as the bodies of the small group of infected fell to the hot pavement.

They slung their weapons to their back and quickly took position behind the truck. They knew that the sound of gunfire attracted infected like a moth to a flame, and more would follow. Inch by agonizing inch the truck made its way closer and closer to the shallow decline that could be their salvation. They pushed with all their strength until they made it and gave one final shove down the declivity.

“Alright, Ellie, start it up!” Joel called out as gravity did its thing.

The rear lights of the truck flashed as the engine sputtered to life. The combustion of the engine roared to life, sounding sweeter than any music Joel had ever heard. “You hear that, Bill?” A large smile formed on his face as he gave him a backhand to the arm and hustled down towards the truck.

Bill struggled to catch his breath as he followed behind Joel. “Yeah, well,” he gasped. “That means the infected hear it too. Let’s get in the fucking truck.”

Joel made it to the bed of the truck and hopped in, with Bill following closely behind him. “Go! Go! Floor it!” Joel yelled as he banged on the rear window with his fist. Ellie slammed down the clutch, shifted into first gear and began to speed away down the road as the second wave of infected emerged from behind the neighborhood homes. Joel watched as the humanoid figures become smaller and smaller in the distance as they drove towards safety.

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Bill slammed his fist into the side of the truck as they chased the sunset to the town’s outer limits. “Alright, this’ll do! Stop!”

Ellie lightly pressed the brakes as the truck rolled to a stop. Her arms and legs had just stopped trembling from the rush of adrenaline she had experienced only a short time ago. Bill quickly hopped out of the truck and took a look around. Ellie looked back at Joel, still seated in the truck bed. He returned Ellie’s glance with a shrug.

“Just keep it running,” Joel ordered Ellie. She responded with a smile and a thumbs up. Joel hopped out of the truck and stood next to Bill.

“That girl nearly got us killed,” Bill said with spite in his voice.

“You gotta admit,” Joel began as he ran a hand up the side of his face through his beard. “She did hold her own back there.”

Bill let out a dry laugh and began to walk away. “You ain’t gonna make it.” He walked away a few more yards and dropped his backpack to the ground. “Oh, I almost forgot.” He opened his pack and rummaged through it before tossing something to Joel.

“What’s this?” Joel asked, examining the long, rubber tube in his hands.

“You’d be amazed at how many cars still got gas in ‘em.”

Joel took a second look at the hose and nodded his head. “Appreciate it.” He took a deep breath. “Look, Bill, about your buddy back there... that’s a tough deal.”

Bill silently looked at Joel with an expressionless face, but his eyes were a dam that held a flood of emotions at bay. “We square?” he asked.

Joel solemnly lowered his head in a modest display of respect. “We’re square.”

Bill nodded and turned his head west towards the chromatic twilight of dusk. “Then get the fuck out of my town.” He picked up his backpack and walked away without looking back.

Chapter 6

Summer 2033

Schoeneck, Pennsylvania

Warm, steady rain fell from the ashen grey sky as the truck sped down the empty, open lanes of Interstate 76. Joel's eyelids felt like curtains of osmium as he sat back in the driver seat. The downpour drummed steadily on the roof of the car as nature whispered its tranquil lullaby into his ears. It had been a long drive from Lincoln; exhaustion had begun to set in.

"Oh, man!" Ellie complained from the back seat.

Joel quickly sat up in his seat and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He gazed into the rearview mirror to look back at Ellie. "Hey, what happened to sleeping?" he asked.

Ellie sighed and leaned forward next to Joel with an open comic book in her hands. "Okay, I know it doesn't look like it, but this here is not a bad read." She held up the copy of *Savage Starlight* so Joel could get a good look at the cover; a bearded admiral and a female cyborg seated in the cockpit of a spaceship. "Only one problem," she continued as she flipped to the final page. "Right there. To be continued!" The final page displayed a female pilot laying on the ground, wounded and aiming a pistol at a looming shadow that stood over her. Ellie closed the comic in frustration. "I hate cliffhangers."

"Where did you get that?" Joel asked.

Ellie paused for a moment and averted her eyes from Joel to the window. "Um, back at Bill's. I mean, all this stuff was just lyin' there!"

Joel groaned and settled back into his seat. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, followed by a mischievous grin appearing on his face. "What else did you get?" he asked.

Ellie smiled widely and excitedly rummaged through her backpack. She fetched a small cassette tape from her bag and handed it to Joel up front. "Here. This make you all nostalgic?"

Joel looked at the tape in disbelief and let out a small laugh. "Y'know, that is actually before my time." He grabbed the Hank Williams tape from Ellie's hand and slid it into the cassette player. "That is a winner though," Joel eased back into his seat as "I'll Never Get Out of this World Alive" emanated from the car's speakers.

Ellie intently listened to the song for a few moments and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, better than nothing," she said. She reached back into her backpack as Joel rested his head on his

hand, losing himself in the music. “Oh!” Ellie called out. “I’m sure your friend will be missing this tonight.” Joel nonchalantly gave a grunt of agreement as Ellie pulled a magazine from her bag. “Um-hum!” she hummed as she thumbed through the pages of the magazine. “Light on the reading, but it’s got some interesting photos.”

Joel looked back into the rearview mirror to see Ellie flipping through a pornographic magazine, they type accommodating to the gay. “Hey!” he scolded as he reached back and tried to grab the magazine from her hands. Ellie deftly pulled away and out of the reach of Joel’s arm. “Now Ellie, that ain’t for kids,” he shifted his attention back to the road.

Ellie turned the magazine vertically and let the centerfold piece tumble out and unfold. “Whoa!” she cried out. “How... how the hell would he even walk around with that thing?” She shoved the image of a man with a sizeable erection directly into Joel’s field of view. He swatted away the image like a bothersome fly.

“Get rid of that!”

She pulled the magazine back out of Joel’s reach. “Hold your horses,” she said as she started flipping through the pages again. “I want to see what all the fuss is about. Oh....,” she stopped turning the pages. “Why are these all stuck together?”

Joel cringed in the front seat.

Ellie burst out laughing and slapped his seat. “I’m just fucking with you.” She rolled down the window and tossed the magazine out. “Bye-bye, dude.” She rolled the window back up and moved up to the front side passenger seat alongside Joel. “You know what?” she asked.

Joel gave Ellie a look of suspicion. “What?”

Ellie relaxed and reclined her seat a bit. “This isn’t that bad,” she said as she turned the stereo up.

Joel smiled and nodded, enjoying the moment. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep, alright?”

Ellie protested the notion. “I’m not even tired.”

Chapter 7

Summer 2033

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Ellie woke to the shifting feeling of the decelerating truck. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and turned to see a concerned Joel, leaning forward over the steering wheel. He was trying to get a better look at the road ahead. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he quietly mumbled under his breath and turned the music off. Ellie sat up straight and joined Joel looking out the windshield as the truck continued to slow to an eventual stop.

“Well, perfect.” Joel groaned as he examined the road ahead of him. Interstate 376 became an impassible mess of derelict cars clogging the highway shortly after entering the city limits.

Ellie let out a drawn-out yawn and stretched her arms over her head. “Now what?”

Joel studied the surroundings, trying to formulate an alternative route. He gave a long look in the rearview mirror. The highway behind him lay open and bare, a tempting invitation to turn back and find an alternative route. His eyes shifted to the nearby off-ramp, leading into the heart of the city. His eyes darted back and forth between the two options as his fingers tapped nervously on the steering wheel. “Screw it,” he said as he shifted the truck into gear and headed for the exit ramp.

He drove slowly through the city streets as Ellie shifted in her seat, taking in the sights of the unfamiliar city. Although different in certain ways, Pittsburgh reminded her of Boston. The streets seemed to be row after row of abandoned buildings decorated with smashed windows and crude graffiti. Ivy grew up the sides of the walls while weeds and grass sprouted from the concrete. Her attention was directed to the front of the truck as Joel quickly hit the brakes.

A lone man limped into the street, hunched over, clutching his ribs. He wore a filthy, sleeveless hooded sweatshirt with the hood up, tattered, grimy, jeans and worn work boots. He raised a hand above his head to signal for their attention while his other hand nursed his ribs as he slowly began to shuffle towards the truck. “Please... help...,” he called out in a strained voice. The man’s arms were fully adorned with tattoos that covered his dark skin.

Ellie nervously fidgeted in her seat. “Holy shit,” she whispered under her breath. She turned to Joel, his eyes fixed on the man, unblinking. “Are we going to help him?”

Joel fastened his seatbelt while keeping his eyes locked on the man. “Put your seatbelt on, Ellie.”

“Help me!” the man called out.

Ellie felt her heart begin to beat out of her chest for the first time since Massachusetts. “What about the guy?” she asked frantically.

“Oh, he ain’t even hurt,” Joel growled as his fingers tightly gripped the steering wheel and his foot pressed firmly against the gas pedal. The tires angrily screeched as the truck raced forward. The hooded man in the street quickly corrected his posture and reached for his rear waistline. He let out a loud cry and aimed a pistol at the truck and opened fire. Bullets screamed through the truck’s windshield, spraying tiny bits of glass into Joel and Ellie’s face as tiny sonic booms sharply snapped by their ears. Joel’s foot remained forceful on the gas as they cowered in their seats to avoid the oncoming barrage of bullets. They felt a forceful thud at the front of the truck as the man’s body rolled up onto the hood and slammed into the windshield before sliding off and falling to the pavement below. More men, armed with knives, pipes, and baseball bats emerged from behind cars and surrounding buildings, racing toward the truck. A stray brick flew in from a balcony above, smashing through Ellie’s window, landing in her lap. She turned and looked out the newly smashed window, her eyes wide with fear as a large bus, modified to resemble an automotive battering ram rushed down a perpendicular street directly at the truck. A small squad of armed men sprinted behind the bus like infantry following a tank into a siege. Ellie raised her arms in defense and screamed as the bus crashed into the truck, T-boning into the truck bed. The tires shrieked on the pavement as the truck spun out of control and crashed into the front of a nearby building.

Joel woke moments later; his body and head throbbed in pain as he continuously blinked trying to wash the fog from his eyes. A dull pain rippled through his body as he shifted in his seat. He turned to see Ellie, who was also coming to her senses.

“I’m okay.... I’m okay,” she assured Joel.

“Then get out quick,” Joel commanded through gnashed teeth. He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door.

Ellie unbuckled her seatbelt as well and swung open the door. The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps was followed by a pair of dirty, scarred hands reaching into the truck, grabbing at Ellie. She violently thrashed in the man’s arms as she felt herself being pulled from her seat. Joel desperately tried to grab for Ellie’s flailing feet and pull her back into the illusionary safety of the truck.

“Let go of me, you chickenshit!” she screamed, clawing at the man’s dirty face.

Joel managed to grab a hold of Ellie's leg and hold on tight before another set of hands appeared from behind him and grabbed a handful of his thick, dark hair and pulled forcefully. Ellie's leg slipped from his hand as she was violently pulled from the vehicle.

"Joel!" she cried out in fear as she began to be carried away.

Joel's hair remained firmly in the grasp of his attacker as he was pulled from the truck and thrown to the ground. He was quickly pulled back up and dragged across the room lined with empty food shelves when his head was viciously slammed through a sliding glass door of a dusty, empty refrigeration unit. Glass shattered and fell to the ground, breaking into smaller pieces. Joel felt his head being forced down as he instinctively gripped the door, resisting the exertion of the attacker. A large shard of jagged glass stood erect from the base of the door, its keen point drawing closer and closer to Joel's face. The monolithic shard glinted in Joel's eyes, beckoning him into death like the honed fingers of the grim reaper. He resisted with all the strength he could muster as he swung back with his elbow, striking the man directly in the face. The attacker stumbled backward in a concussive daze. Joel quickly grabbed the aggressor and tossed him down face first into the gleaming glass razor that stared him in the face only seconds ago. The man flailed on the ground, clutching his throat. He fruitlessly tried to stop the streams of blood that escaped his throat and pooled on the floor as his screams of pain rendered as wet, bubbly gurgling.

His attention directed back to the ruined entrance of what Joel realized was an old convenience store. Ellie continued to thrash in her attacker's arms as he dragged her toward the exit and into the streets. She bit down on the man's exposed forearm, causing the assailant to momentarily loosen his grip. He shook his arm and quickly followed with a strong backhand, knocking Ellie to the ground. He quickly examined the bite mark before bending over and wrapping his hands tightly around Ellie's throat. Joel moved like lightning as the man began to choke the life from the young girl he was contracted to protect. He delivered a swift kick to the man's head, causing him to release his grip and topple over. He grabbed the back of his neck and dragged him to a nearby countertop, slamming his face into it repeatedly. Flesh and bone met the countertop until the man's facial features were no longer recognizable, only bloody pulp, fragments of bone, and assorted teeth. Joel continued to breathe heavily through clenched teeth as the attacker's body went limp and fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Ellie violently coughed as she pulled herself off the ground onto her hands and knees. "Motherfucker!" she cried out between deep breaths.

Joel grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. "Come on," he said. Ellie staggered but was able to stand on her own two feet. Joel hurried back to the truck and grabbed both of their backpacks.

Ellie's heart nearly beat out of her chest. "What is wrong with these guys?"

“Catch your breath,” Joel ordered in a hurried tone. He tossed Ellie her backpack before swinging his around his back. “We’re leaving.” He grabbed the rifle from the back seat and slung it around his back and took the shotgun in hand.

Ellie agreed without hesitation, quickly sliding her arms through her backpack. She looked over her shoulder to see a small squad of men taking position outside of the store. “Watch out!” she warned as the men began to open fire. Bullets sprayed into the building, some passing so close to Joel that he could feel the heat from the passing round. They stayed low, moving from cover to cover as they scrambled for the rear exit.

Joel returned fire with the shotgun to cover Ellie as she forced open the rear exit. The door let out an aching cry from its rusted hinges under the chorus of gunfire. They pushed into a back alley, moving farther away from the streets flooded with violent pursuers. They quietly moved from one alley to another, listening for the voices of the hunters. The fading sounds of gunshots became less frequent as they distanced themselves from the ambush. The network of alleys came to a large steel roll-up door covered in anti-FEDRA graffiti. Joel quickly bent down and lifted the door enough to form a small space that Ellie was able to slip through.

“There’s some pretty gnarly stuff in here,” Ellie called out from the other side of the door.

Joel’s back and forearms strained as he kept the door open at thigh level. “Ellie, just see if you can get it propped open with something!”

She gripped the chain pulley tightly to keep the door propped as Joel slid under the heavy steel door. Ellie slowly let go of the chain and the door shut behind them. He got to his feet but remained bent at the waist as he caught his breath. The air smelled and tasted as foul as anything he had ever experienced.

“You okay?” Joel asked.

“Yeah,” Ellie raised her finger, pointing across the room. “Look.”

Joel stood up straight and scanned the room. It was an empty mechanic’s garage converted into a makeshift morgue. Naked, decomposing bodies lay upon stainless steel work tables. Most of them looked as if they met a violent death, ranging from shooting, stabbing, burning, and blunt force trauma. His cough turned into a gag as he took in the morbid imagery.

“Fucking hunters,” he growled. “This could have been us.”

Ellie grabbed a single shoe from an immense pile of shoes and looked it over before throwing it back. The room contained piles of dirty, bloody clothing thrown into disheveled heaps; presumably stripped from the dead.

She solemnly looked at the pile of shoes. "I don't think these people were infected. That's a lot of people who didn't make it."

"I knew I should have turned that damn truck around," Joel muttered shaking his head in disgust.

Ellie shrugged her shoulders. "We lived."

"Barely," Joel quipped as he eyed a door on the other side of the room. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

Ellie nodded in agreement as Joel took the lead and led her through the door. It led to an indoor stairwell. Ellie broke the short silence as they ascended the stairs into the unknown.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"About the ambush."

He let out a small sigh. "I've been on both sides."

"Oh," Ellie was silent for a moment; the echo of footsteps in the stairwell was discernible while bereft of conversation. "So, you killed a lot of innocent people?"

Joel grumbled under his breath as they came to the top of the stairwell. He opened the door and entered without looking back at Ellie.

"I'll take that as a yes," she murmured.

"Take it however you want."

The door led to a narrow series of filthy hallways lined with garbage bags and soiled mattresses that leaned against the sooty brick walls. They quietly passed through them to another door, which led to the rooftop. They shielded their eyes to the welcoming sight of the sun. The fresh air purged their lungs of the rot and decay of the building's interior. Joel used the elevation to get a new point of view of the city; and most importantly, determine an escape route. He called Ellie to his side and pointed across the city towards the bright yellow arches of the Fort Pitt Bridge beyond a corridor of high rise buildings.

"Alright, there's the bridge, that's our way out of here."

*

Joel could feel the sweat permeate through his clothes as they took refuge inside the husk of what was a gaudy hotel. His body felt heavy as he slumped to the floor, retrieving a bottle of

warm water from his bag. He offered Ellie a drink before taking a large swig for himself. It had been a perilous day navigating through the city, tactfully maneuvering around FEDRA checkpoints that were manned by the hunters who took the city for themselves. The stresses of bypassing the urban maze of checkpoints and roadblocks in the unforgiving heat had taken its physical and mental toll; all the while staying out of sight of the watchful eyes of packs of bloodthirsty hunters.

While exploring the city, Joel regarded Pittsburgh as the antithesis of the Boston Quarantine Zone. While Boston was a fascist order, Pittsburgh was anarchic chaos. Desiccated husks in military uniforms swung lifelessly from trees and light poles throughout the city; their eyes pecked and devoured by crows while piles of bodies were slovenly stacked at sites where firing squad executions had taken place. At times they moved close enough to overhear snippets of conversation between some of the hunters. The way they referred to people attempting to pass through the city as “tourists”, how they took joy in hunting them down. How they would toy with them, rape them, how they relished the thrill of the hunt. But to Joel, there was little importance on who controlled the city. He who possessed the power was the variable, but violence was the constant.

Ellie wiped her forehead with her sleeve as she scanned the gutted lobby of the hotel. It was decrepit and barren, yet the spacious interior of the lobby with its mighty ivory colored pillars and faded crimson paint lined with tattered golden drapes remained fossilized relics of its former opulence. Soiled marble tile flooring was submerged under an inch of stagnant, slimy water. A small coffee shop was tucked into one corner while a bar that had been picked clean was located on the other far end. The scene provided a dusty window that peered into its luxurious antecedent. Although an empty shell of its former standing, Ellie was still awestruck.

“Fancy....,” she muttered under her breath, turning her eyes towards Joel. “Ever stay in a place like this? Before it all went to shit, I mean.”

Joel slowly rose to his feet, brushing himself off. He turned his head towards the center of the lobby. “No, no, this is too rich for my blood.”

“Oh. I bet it was nice,” she rose to her feet alongside Joel.

Joel kept his shotgun at the ready as they made their way up through the hotel. The ascent proved to be a maze-like as the city outside. Hallways and stairwells were made unpassable, clogged with stacked furniture and office supplies. Bullet casings, food wrappers, and empty water bottles littered the floor; evidence of a former hunter staging ground or base of operation. They moved silently, well aware of the possible hunter presence elsewhere in the hotel. Floor by floor they ascended, unsure of what lay behind each corner. They exhaustedly made their way through the upper floors to the top floor en route to the rooftop. The sun peered in through the porous roof, glistening off the thick film of slimy water that covered the floor, now up to their shins. The water damage was so prevalent that some of the walls had rotted through and

crumbled, leaving the floor more open than the narrow halls of the previous floors. Joel froze and signaled Ellie to do the same. Faint voices carried from farther down the hall. A moment later a man stepped out from a room at the far end of the hall, lighting a cigarette. Joel fired the shotgun without hesitation, dropping him at the end of the hallway. He quickly pushed a resisting Ellie back through the door of the stairwell they had emerged from.

“Stay in the stairwell and stay low!” he ordered, demanding obedience.

Joel slammed the door behind him and stormed back into the hallway, searching for any cover that he could find. He heard heavy footsteps moving from different points throughout the floor, honing in on the sounds of splashing as the men spread out. He poked his head out from the rotting doorway of a numbered room and took aim down the hallway. He fired another shot as a man darted across the hallway, narrowly missing the target. Panicked cursing, screaming and threats of death now came from the far end of the hall. He tucked back into the room and chambered another shell into the ammo tube when he realized that no gunfire had been returned in his direction. The splashing footsteps crept closer down the hall from all directions. Joel aimed down the hallway again, firing at a hunter creeping down the hallway, knife drawn. The body was sent sprawling back down the hall by the force of the shot.

Joel quickly chambered another shell and moved down the hallway on the offensive. He pointed the barrel into each room he passed. A hunter rushed out from two rooms up and was met by a wall of buckshot. He quickly moved further up the hallway, eager to finish the job. He felt his foot slip from under him where the floor sagged under the weight of the water, forming a crevice as deep as a punch bowl. The warped wood flooring was slick with algae, throwing him off balance. The shotgun fumbled from his fingers as he fell to the floor. A hunter rushed from a nearby doorway and grabbed the stock of the shotgun just as Joel reached out and grabbed the barrel. The hunter pulled with all his strength and pulled the weapon from Joel’s failing grip. The haggard-looking hunter fell backward as he lost his balance during the struggle. The hunter’s hands scrambled to regain control of the shotgun as Joel reached into his waistline, retrieving his pistol and taking aim. His trigger finger proved quicker than his adversary, sending a round through the hunter’s bare chest.

A muscular hunter appeared from an adjacent room, sending his heavy boot across Joel’s jaw. The room spun as his head splashed and inundated into the shallow pool of water he had just slipped in moments ago. In a daze, he raised his pistol at the hunter, but another swift blow to his face forced him back as the pistol fell from his limp fingers. The hunter’s hands gripped Joel’s head and forcefully shoved his head underwater. Joel’s arms thrashed as he struggled to free himself from the suffocating grip of the hunter’s massive hands. One bandaged hand pressed down on the side of his face like a hydraulic press, while the other hand’s fingers constricted around his throat.

Joel blindly threw a punch, stunning the man for just enough time for a breath of air before being forced under the water once again. His hands flailed wildly, desperately, blindly searching for the pistol. His fingers grazed the pistol's grip amidst the frantic search, pushing it further away, just out of reach. His ears rang and the watery blur that filled his eyes began to darken. His mind felt light. A sudden bang, the grip around his throat loosened.

Joel shot up from the shallow pool of water, desperately gasping for breath. Water dripped from his nose and mouth as he violently coughed. He quickly wiped the slimy water from his eyes and shook the blockage from his ears. He raised his eyes to see Ellie, with the pistol nervously shaking in her hands. Her eyes were unfocused; her breathing frenzied as smoke flowed from the pistol's muzzle and dissipated into the air. She lowered the pistol and snapped back to reality as Joel rose to his hands and knees, dripping water.

"Man... I shot the hell out of that guy, huh?" a sense of shock in her voice.

Joel climbed to a knee before slowly standing on his own two feet. "Yeah... you sure did," he groaned.

Ellie found a nearby table and sat down, staring at the ground with the pistol still in her hands. "I feel sick."

Joel looked around before he walked over to Ellie and snatched the gun from her hands, slipping it back into his waistline. "Why didn't you just hang back like I told you to?" he growled.

Ellie raised her eyes from the floor to meet his. "Well, you're glad I didn't, right?"

Joel shook his head. "I'm glad I didn't get my head blown off by a goddamn kid."

"You know what?" Ellie blurted rising back to her feet. "No! How about, hey Ellie, I know it wasn't easy! But it was either him or me, thanks for saving my ass! You got anything like that for me, Joel?"

Joel stood over Ellie in silence, their eyes burning holes into one another. He broke eye contact first, shaking his head. "We gotta get going." He grabbed the shotgun out of the water and slung it over his back before starting down the hallway.

Anger and resentment swam beneath the surface of her words. "Lead the way."

They made their way through the door that accessed the roof. They stepped cautiously, avoiding the holes scattered throughout. Scaffolding was attached to the side of the hotel, where a makeshift sniper's nest was nestled in the corner neighboring the fire escape. Joel signaled Ellie to stay low as they ducked into the snipers next to scout the ground below. A small group of armed hunters patrolled the Liberty Avenue checkpoint, directly in the way of the bridge, the way out of Pittsburgh. Joel silently scanned the area and let out a small sigh.

“I’m gonna jump down there, and I’m gonna clear us a path,” he said.

Ellie turned her head with a look of surprise, “What about me?” she asked, uneasy with Joel’s plan.

“You stay here.”

“This is so stupid!” Ellie scream whispered at Joel with a scowl on her face. “We’d have more of a fucking chance if you’d let me help!”

“I am,” Joel said sternly. He slid his rifle from his back to his hands. “You seem to know your way around a gun,” he said. He held out the rifle towards her. “You reckon you can handle that?”

Ellie eyed the rifle with a feeling of uncertainty. “Well, uh, I sorta shot a rifle before,” she grabbed the rifle from his hands. “But it was at rats.”

“Rats?”

“With BB’s,” she replied.

Joel let out an incredulous sigh and looked at Ellie. “Well, it’s the same basic concept. Lift it up,” he ordered. Ellie raised the rifle and adjusted her shoulders, finding a comfortable position to hold the rifle. “Alright now,” he said, gently placing his hand on Ellie’s back. “You’re gonna wanna lean right into that stock.” He grabbed the barrel of the rifle and firmly pressed it into her right shoulder. “Because it is gonna kick a hell of a lot more than any BB rifle.”

“Okay,” Ellie obeyed, further adjusting the position of the stock in her shoulder as she looked down the rifle’s rear sight.

“Go ahead and pull the bolt back,” he instructed, pointing at it. “Grab it right there.” He motioned with his hand, demonstrating how to pull it back. “Just tug it.” Ellie grabbed the bolt and pulled it back, ejecting an empty casing out of the receiver, and sent the bolt back forward. “There you go. Now as soon as you fire you’re gonna want to get another round in there quick.” Ellie nodded her head, listening intently. “Listen to me,” he paused for a moment. “If I get into trouble down there you make every shot count, yeah?”

Ellie confidently nodded. “I got this.”

Joel rummaged through his back retrieving a fully loaded magazine. He grabbed the rifle from Ellie and loaded it for her and handed it back. He moved out of the sniper’s nest towards the fire escape. He turned back and poked his head back in. “And just so we’re clear about back there,” he began. “It was either him or me.” He moved toward the fire escape and began his descent.

“You’re welcome,” Ellie muttered under her breath, looking down the sights at the checkpoint.

Joel descended the fire escape and took cover behind an abandoned car on the outskirts of the checkpoint. He moved closer to the heart of the hunter’s territory, looking back to ensure Ellie was safe and in position. A conversation between a small pack of hunters could be heard as he scurried behind a large concrete barricade at the far end of the entry control point. They sounded panicked, referring to a tourist who had been killing their men and evading capture. Joel decided to take advantage of the small crowd of hunters, quietly dropping the backpack and retrieving one of Bill’s makeshift bombs. He lit the fuse and paused, waiting for the wick to burn down. He lobbed the bomb in a high arc, dropping next to the group of unaware hunters. The bomb detonated, sending a small shockwave through the area, as the smaller body parts flung through the air while the rest dropped lifelessly to the ground. Panicked shouts could be heard from the other hunters scattered throughout the checkpoint, and began blindly firing in the direction of the explosion. Joel used the chaos to move to a flanking position, firing shots at exposed hunters. One of the hunters retaliated by taking aim at Joel and firing a round from a pistol, missing wide. He yelled over the gunfire and chaos, pointing in Joel’s direction, when a rifle round screamed from the sky, dropping him to the pavement, clutching the fresh wound. Joel squeezed off another round, finishing him off. He continued to flank the remaining hunters while Ellie continued to shoot from above, hitting her targets. Even the shots she missed proved to be effective suppressing fire amongst the chaos. The remaining hunters fell quickly to the coordinated assault until Joel fell the final one with a shotgun shell to the back of the head.

Joel slumped over, catching his breath and wiping the sweat from his brow. He stood up straight and waved up at the sniper nest. “Alright, come down!” he called out.

Ellie relaxed her arms and let out a long sigh of relief. Her hands trembled from the rush of adrenaline, though not as severe as her first kill inside the hotel. She slung the rifle across her back and descended the fire escape to the ground below, where she caught up with Joel who was ransacking the bodies of dead hunters, stripping them of any useful ammo, even the occasional snack tucked into their vests. Ellie walked up and stood over him, the large rifle hanging clumsily from her small frame. “How did I do?” she asked.

Joel pried a pistol from the hands of a dead hunter. He took the rifle from Ellie’s hands and leaned it up against a nearby bench. He inspected the pistol, ejecting the magazine and pulling the slide back before reinserting the magazine and releasing the slide, chambering a 9mm round.

“How about something a little more your size?” He extended the pistol to her, grip first. Ellie hesitantly looked at Joel before slowly reaching for the pistol, which Joel subtly pulled back just out of her reach. “It’s for emergencies only,” he said in a serious tone. He nodded in approval and extended the weapon back into Ellie’s reach.

“Okay.” She nodded in agreement, slowly exchanging possession with Joel. She tilted the gun, inspecting it herself before she slid it into the waistline of her jeans. Joel tilted his head west towards the direction of the bridge, his body followed. Ellie gave a look of disgust at the dead hunter at her feet before sidestepping the still warm body, following Joel’s lead.

Joel slowed his stride as they made their way through the cleared checkpoint. While he was initially impressed with Ellie’s handling of firearms, he remained unconvinced she retained enough knowledge of them to not be a liability. He turned back to Ellie, wishing to speak further about the gift he had graced Ellie with.

“Now, the safety’s on. Do you know how to switch it off?”

“I do,” Ellie responded with sure confidence.

“Ok, you just... you gotta respect it. This is not-” he stumbled through his words.

“Joel. I’ll be careful.”

The assured tone of Ellie’s voice dispelled some, but not all of his doubts.

They continued further into the city as the sun began its slow plunge over the western skyline, bathing the city in a colorful tinge of soft light. The streets were unsafe, but quiet for the time being as they chased the setting sun towards the bridge out of the hell they found themselves in. They took shelter in an abandoned laundromat, drinking the last of their water and snacking on jerky, peanuts, dried fruit, and energy bars. Ellie’s eyelids felt heavy under the weight of the silence of the serene moment as she felt herself drifting away.

The silence was interrupted by the sound of incoming panic. Joel grabbed a started Ellie by the arm and pulled her downward, concealing themselves beneath the shattered windows. A man and a woman desperately fled down the street, screaming for help. A barrage of thunder followed the fleeing tourists, dropping them only a few meters from the laundromat’s front entrance.

Ellie almost stood up in a panic before Joel quickly pulled her back towards the floor. “What do we do?” she asked, panic in her eyes.

“Nothing, stay down!” Joel quietly ordered.

A heavily armored Humvee rolled to a stop next to the bodies. The vehicle had so much steel-armored plating welded to it that it resembled a small tank with razor wire wrapped around the front and rear bumpers. A pair of hunters piled out the back, armed with automatic weapons while another hunter manned the vehicle-mounted turret. One of the tourists rolled on the pavement, choking on her pleas for life before one of the hunters replied with an execution shot. Joel carefully peered outside while ensuring Ellie stayed on the floor.

One of the hunters knelt to the ground and searched the bodies. He cursed in frustration as he determined neither tourist had any food on them. And just like that they packed into the Humvee and continued down the street.

“Oh man,” Ellie sighed.

“There ain’t nothin’ we coulda done.” Joel ensured her.

Ellie had a solemn look on her face as she got to her feet. Joel placed his hand on her shoulder and slouched to her eye level.

“Let’s just get to that bridge.”

*

It was the perfect night for a full moon. The pale moonlight gave them the means to navigate through the city while the shrouding darkness gave them the means to evade the hunters. Foot patrols searched the streets and alleys, while the Humvee they had a close encounter with earlier made its presence known. A seeking spotlight beamed from the diesel growl of the armored menace. They pushed west for as far as they could, before fatigue and the unrelenting patrols forced them into a small apartment building several blocks from the bridge. Their bodies felt heavy and their minds were cloudy with exhaustion. They climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, elevated above the ground level patrols. Joel led Ellie past one locked door after another, until they spotted the soft moonlight peering through a door ajar halfway down the hall. Joel entered the room and was greeted by a fist catching him by the side of his head. He stumbled and felt a pair of arms wrap around his head and neck in a sleeper hold maneuver. A violent struggle ensued as Joel used his weight to slam the hunter against the wall, but the arms continued to constrict around his neck. Ellie pulled the knife from her pocket and charged into the room, but a boot caught her in the stomach, sending her sprawling back across the floor.

“What the fuck?”

Joel took advantage of the hesitation, flipping the hunter over his back, slamming him to the floor. He rained punches down on the attacker, who defended himself in desperation as Joel continued to land punches to his exposed ribs and midsection.

“Wait, wait, Joel stop!”

Ellie grabbed Joel by the shoulder and pulled him away with all the strength she could muster. His eyes rapidly darted between Ellie and his attacker, before his eyes followed the point of Ellie’s knife she pointed to the other side of the room.

“Look.”

A young boy stood shaking in the corner with a pistol pointed directly at Joel.

“Leave him alone!” The boy, no older than Ellie, nervously instructed as he transitioned his aim from Joel to Ellie.

Joel slowly stepped away from his downed attacker and slowly raised his arms into the air. Ellie did the same.

“Easy, son. Just take it easy.” Joel tried to comfort the boy with a soft tone.

“It’s alright,” the man on the floor instructed the boy. “They’re not the bad guys. Lower the gun.”

The boy hesitantly lowered the gun, keeping his eyes locked on Joel the entire time. The person who Joel mistakenly took for a hunter grunted as he struggled to a sitting position.

“Man, you hit hard,” he said clutching his ribs.

“Yeah, well, I was trying to kill you,” Joel replied.

The young African-American man in a beaten tank top covered in stains and sweat grimaced as he pulled himself up from the floor, walking over to the young boy. “Yeah, I thought you were one of them too,” he said looking at Joel. He pointed at Ellie. “Then I saw you. If you haven’t noticed,” he continued, “They don’t keep kids around. Survival of the fittest.”

“You’re bleeding.” The young African-American boy in a dirty cream colored zip-up hoodie stated, pointing to the young man’s arm.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” he replied. He gently took the pistol from the boy’s hand before slipping it into his belt. He turned the boy around and opened the hiking pack on his back. “I’m Henry,” he said as he continued searching through the bag. “This is Sam.” Henry pulled a roll of cloth bandages from Sam’s bag. “I think I caught your name was Joel?”

Joel silently nodded in agreement.

Ellie waved her hand in a greeting manner. “Ellie.”

“How many are with you?” Joel asked.

“They’re all dead.” Sam blurted without hesitation.

“Hey, we don’t know that!” Henry scolded as he wrapped the cloth bandage tightly around his right forearm. “There was a bunch of us,” he continued explaining, “Someone had the brilliant idea of entering the city and look for supplies.” He tied off the bandage and shook his arm around to ensure it was applied properly. “Those fuckers ambushed and scattered us. Now it’s all about getting out of this shithole.”

“We can help each other,” Ellie proposed.

Joel gave Ellie a disagreeable look.

“Safety in numbers and all that,” she continued.

“She’s right,” Henry added. “We could help each other. We got a hideout not far from here. Be safer if we chat there.”

Joel stood in silent thought for a moment, trying to determine the best course of action. “Alright, take us there.”

“Follow me.” Henry exited the door into the hallway. He led the way followed by Joel as Ellie and Sam walked side by side bringing up the rear.

“Sorry about the whole gun thing,” Sam meekly apologized to Ellie.

Ellie let out a playful laugh. “Don’t worry. I would’ve probably done the same thing. “Where you from?”

“All the way from Hartford,” Sam replied.

“Really? I heard some bad stuff was going on down there.”

Sam silently nodded but didn’t speak of it.

Henry led them around the hallway’s corner before he turned back to Joel. “We gotta be careful, we’re right next to one of their lookout areas. He led them down the rear stairwell that dumped them into an ally which they moved down to an entrance of an old toy store. They stayed low and behind cover as the Humvee rolled by, its spotlight pouring into the store accompanied by the smell of diesel fumes.

“It’s gone,” Henry declared. “That fucking truck, it’s been hounding us ever since we got in this damn... Sam, what’re you doing?”

Sam’s attention was intently fixed on a toy robot he grabbed off a shelf. “Nothing,” he replied as he tried to hide the toy from Henry’s gaze.

“Get rid of it,” Henry ordered.

“But my backpack is practically empty,” Sam pleaded.

Henry approached Sam, pointing his finger in a scolding manner. “What’s the rule about takin’ stuff?”

“It weights like nothing!”

“The rule, what is it?”

Sam dejectedly looked at the floor. “We only take what we have to,” he pouted.

“That’s right. Now come on, we’re close.”

Sam placed the colorful toy robot back on the shelf before falling in line behind Joel.

They exited out the rear and pushed through the dark alleys until Henry led them through a ground floor window of an office building. They made their way up through a stairwell to a conference room overlooking the Fort Pitt Bridge checkpoint. The room was dusty and dirty but lacked any overgrowth of fungus or vegetation. Joel and Henry stood by the intact windows and looked down upon the checkpoint. Hunters swarmed the checkpoint as wasps do their hive.

“You sure it’s safe being this close to them?” Joel asked.

Henry smiled, flashing his paper white teeth. “I’m the only one with the key.”

“And where’d you get that?”

“I killed one of ’em, he won’t miss it now.” Henry’s smile remained upon his face.

Ellie paced around, examining the room. A map of Pittsburgh was spread across the center conference table, and a pair of sleeping bags were tucked into the corner alongside the supplies of food and ammunition. She turned to Sam, who followed a few paces behind. “How long have you guys been holed up in here?”

“A few days,” Sam shrugged. “We found a bit of food though,” He led Ellie to the neatly piled supplies and picked up a small cotton pouch. “Blueberries, found a whole stash of them.” He took a seat on a black polyester couch, Ellie joined him.

“You want some?” Henry asked Joel.

Joel shook his head and made a gesture of decline with his hands, his eyes still fixed on the checkpoint less than a football field away.

“Hey man, relax. We’re safe.”

Joel backed away from the window. “So, why haven’t you left?”

“Been waiting for the right opportunity,” Henry paused. “Here, check this out.” He stepped up to the window and pointed down at the checkpoint. “Look at these sons of bitches. Every day, they congregate down there, guarding that damn bridge. Come midnight, it’s down to a skeleton crew. In a few hours, that’s our window. With most of them gone, we can sneak right past them.”

Joel crossed his arms and nodded in agreement. “That could work.”

“Oh, it’ll work,” Henry assured, nodding his head. “It’ll definitely work.”

The sound of childish laughter drew their attention to the couch. Sam and Ellie playfully tossed the blueberries into the air, catching them in their mouths. Sam laughed hysterically as a blueberry landed in one of Ellie’s nostrils, causing it to shoot across the room as she coughed.

Henry’s wide smile reappeared. “Wow... It’s been a while since that boy even cracked a smile.” He nodded toward Ellie. “She doesn’t seem bothered by all this.”

Joel closed his eyes and remained silent before pulling out a chair from the central conference table and taking a seat. “So, where are you heading?”

Henry pulled out a chair and sat across from Joel. “Heard the Fireflies are based out west somewhere. We’re gonna join up with them.”

“Yeah...” Joel muttered, drumming his fingers against the table, avoiding Henry’s eyes.

“Something funny?” Henry asked, leaning forward and resting his hands on the table.

Joel gave an apathetic shrug. “Just seems there’s a lot of people putting their stock in the Fireflies these days.”

“Yeah, maybe there’s a reason for that.” Henry folded his arms.

Joel squinted his eyes, giving Henry a look of suspicion. “So you don’t know where they are and you’re just gonna drag him across the country to find ’em?” He nodded his head towards Sam.

A vexed look appeared on Henry’s face as he rocked in his chair and leaned forward, meeting Joel’s eyes with an intense stare. “I tell you what, how about I worry about my brother and you worry about your girl?”

A silence fell between them as their eyes remained locked. “Easy,” Joel calmly tried to ease the tension. “We’re looking for the Fireflies too.”

Henry took a deep breath and relaxed a bit. He directed his attention to the map on the table. “This is us,” he pointed at a small dot just east of the Monongahela River. He dragged his finger to a large red circle to the west. “There’s an abandoned military radio station just outside the city. Any survivors from our group are supposed to meet us there tomorrow. If you and your girl want to join us, it goes down tonight.”

Joel’s eyes moved between Henry and the map before he let out a long sigh and leaned back in his chair. “I guess we best rest up then.”

Chapter 8

Summer 2033

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Joel's eyes slowly opened as he felt a small hand grip and shake his arm. He could make out Ellie's silhouette standing over him as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"He says it's time to go," she said.

Joel silently nodded as he sat up and got to his feet, slinging his backpack and weapons across his back. On the other end of the room, Henry placed his hands on Sam's shoulders and knelt down to eye level with him.

"We're gonna be moving fast, okay? So no matter what, you stick to me like glue."

"Like glue," Sam repeated with wide eyes.

Henry gently bumped his fist into Sam's chest as a gesture of strength before turning to Joel.

"Y'all ready?"

"Yeah," Joel nodded.

Henry led them out of the conference room into the hallway towards the stairwell. The beams of light from their flashlights bounced around the filthy steps as they descended until they finally reached the ground floor. They turned their flashlights off as they departed the building, allowing the darkness to obscure them as they moved towards the checkpoint. They stayed low and moved quickly, sticking together as they darted from cover to cover until they closed within striking distance. Joel scouted the checkpoint, confirming Henry's information of a skeleton crew standing watch. He counted a total of five men; three on the ground level, and two on a platform above the gate. Two of the three men on the ground level huddled around a fire in a barrel, while the third stood idly, with a rifle slung across his chest. The other two guards on the raised platform manned large spotlights which illuminated the checkpoint. Joel and Ellie slumped behind a concrete barricade while Henry and Sam huddled behind a van parked on the side of the road. The spotlight washed over the barricade as Joel readied his rifle. Ellie pulled her pistol from her waistline and nodded at Joel. He quickly took aim and fired a shot into the spotlight, causing the checkpoint to envelop into darkness. The hunters returned with blind gunfire that aimlessly sprayed through the streets. Sam beamed his flashlight on the checkpoint, highlighting and distracting the targets. Joel, Henry, and Ellie all took controlled, accurate shots

at their targets. One by one they fell, and it wasn't before long that the shooting ceased and silence loomed over the checkpoint.

Joel slung the rifle across his back and quickly moved to the closed steel gate. He gave the gate a strong tug and looked back at Henry over his shoulder. "Gimme a hand with this," he said gesturing toward the gate.

Henry nodded and grabbed a hold of the gate and pushed it in the same direction that Joel pulled. The door let out a creaking metallic moan as it slowly slid open. A blinding wave of light flooded the checkpoint, highlighting Joel and Henry as they frantically tried to get the door open. The blinding light was accompanied by the tormenting snarl of the Humvee that was accelerating in their direction. The gate cracked open enough to fit through, as Joel and Henry signaled Ellie and Sam through before following in behind them. They pushed the gate closed and locked it behind them, backing from the gate as quickly as possible. The path led through a narrow street, with the road obstructed by a pair of large shipping containers.

"We ain't out of this mess yet," Joel barked as he crouched down at the base of one of the shipping containers. He made a gesture with his head towards the interlocked fingers he held by his waist. Henry moved forward and placed his foot in Joel's hands, getting the boost he needed to climb to the top of the container.

"We're good!" Henry exclaimed from above. "Sam, your turn." Sam placed his foot in Joel's hands and was launched upward, catching Henry's hand and pulled to the top.irate voices could be heard from the other side of the gate as Ellie slipped her foot into Joel's hands. A thunderous crash was followed by slivers of light pouring through the checkpoint gate as the armored vehicle began to smash its way through. The Humvee backed up and rammed the gate again as Henry pulled Ellie up to the top of the container. Henry froze while his eyes remained locked on the gate.

"Ok, we gotta get him up!" Ellie exclaimed, breaking through Henry's daze. Henry looked down at Joel, then to Sam, then back to the faltering gate.

"I'm sorry..." Henry whispered under his breath, before repeating it to Ellie. "We're leaving."

Ellie glared at Henry with disbelief and fury. "What? What the hell?" Henry grabbed a trembling, silent Sam by the hand and leapt to the ground on the opposite side to the blockade.

"Hey! What the fuck, Henry!?" Joel called from the ground. Ellie stood alone on top of the container, desperately trying to figure out what to do. The Humvee rammed the gate once again, leaving it mostly destroyed. It would not hold for another strike. Ellie dropped back to the ground next to Joel, grabbing his arms to slow her fall. He pulled her back to her feet.

"We stick together," Ellie said, squeezing Joel's arm.

Joel's eyes broke away from Ellie's as he urgently searched for a way out. He spotted a steel garage door covered in blotches of rust and spray paint. He wasted no time bending down and pulling it up. The door cracked open a little less than a foot before locking firmly into place. Ellie hurriedly crawled through the opening and held up the door with all her strength. She groaned as Joel deftly removed his backpack and weapons and slid them under the door. He looked back to watch the checkpoint gate finally give way. Bright lights and black smoke poured through the gate as the monstrous vehicle forced its way through with a trigger happy gunner behind the mounted heavy machine gun. The familiar, menacing sound of gunfire filled their ears once again as Joel fell flat to the pavement and scurried through the narrow gap to a sanctuary of momentary safety. Ellie released the garage door as it fell to the ground with a metallic crash. Joel quickly slung the backpack and weapons around his shoulders and moved away from the garage door as quickly as possible. The steel door provided a means to separate themselves from hostiles but served little protection against .50 caliber gunfire. They moved into the main part of the building, a bar. Thick layers of dust coated the wood finishes of the floor and bar, while pool tables sat in the middle of the room with unfinished games. They could hear the steel door in the rear being forced open as they hurriedly moved towards the front door.

From there it was a dead sprint towards the bridge. Joel ran as fast as he could and Ellie was not far behind. The sound of clashing metal behind them emanated through the night as the Humvee smashed into the shipping containers over and over again, unwilling to forfeit the will to finish off the tourist prey. Sparks leaped from the pavement as the heavy shipping containers ground and scraped on the road, giving way to the will of the Humvee like a dam giving way to a mighty river. They made it to the lower deck of the bridge, creating distance from their pursuers when the containers finally gave way. They ran and ran, staying low as the Humvee's lights nipped at their heels and the shooting began once again. Bullets passed overhead and skipped off the ground as they weaved in between the abandoned vehicles along the bridge. They ran and ran until they could not advance further. They would be unable to cross the bridge as the bridge was destroyed less than halfway to the end. Joel and Ellie looked over the edge, down to the rushing waters of the Monongahela River.

"Oh fuck!" Ellie cried as she looked down into the dark waters while the intensity of the oncoming headlights grew stronger.

Joel slid the rifle from his back to his hands and turned around towards the pursuers. "How many bullets do you have left?" his voice was void of hope.

"They're gonna kill us!" Ellie shouted, in disbelief of Joel's decision.

"What other choice do we have?"

"We jump!"

"No! It's too high, and you can't swim!"

They took cover behind a jackknifed truck a few yards from the destroyed gap in the bridge. The Humvee barreled down the bridge, plowing through the cars like snow while the gunner remained heavy on the trigger. The lights grew brighter and brighter as certain death closed in.

Ellie's throat tightened with panic. She could see no other options. "You'll keep me afloat!"

The Humvee smashed into a car only a few yards away, sending it crashing into with the jackknifed truck which they had their backs against only moments. The track budged a few feet forward, edging closer to dropping into the river.

Maybe it was the adrenaline. Maybe the darkness gave her the ignorance she needed, unable to see the rushing water below her. Ellie was the first to jump. "No time to argue!" she sounded as she leaped over the edge.

"Ellie!" he cried extending his hand. The Humvee rammed the jackknifed truck once again as the bridge shook under his feet. "Dammit!" he cursed as he jumped after Ellie. He hit the water with a painful smack but was able to quickly recover and swim to the surface. He spotted Ellie a few yards away, flailing and struggling to tread the water but managing to keep her head above the surface. He managed to swim to her and grab hold of her, instructing her to not let go no matter what. He held her close as the river pushed them downstream. It wasn't until the last moment that Joel was able to spot the large rock peeking out from beneath the water's surface amongst the darkness. They braced for impact.

Chapter 9

Summer 2033

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Joel's head pounded and water stung his eyes. He let out a series of coughs, expunging the remaining water from his nose and lungs. It was when he felt his head gently sink down into the muddy sand is when he realized he was still alive. Two silhouettes stood over him, highlighted by the starry night sky. He slowly sat up and his head fell into his hands from the throbbing pain.

"Henry!" a young sounding voice emanated from one of the unfocused humanoid shapes. "He's awake!"

"Hey, you," he heard a familiar voice of a girl and felt a comforting hand placed on his shoulder. "We're alive."

He heard approaching footsteps as Ellie slowly helped him to his feet. "See, what did I tell you? He's good, everything's fine! Just so you know, Sam's the one that spotted you."

His face began to come into focus as he stepped closer and closer. The man's face began to come into focus. It was the face of the man that left him to die not so long ago. The anger that image incited gave his legs the strength to walk on their own albeit slightly wobbly.

"You guys had taken on a lot of water, when-" a shoulder caught Henry under his chin as he felt his pistol plucked from his waistline. He fell back into the sand and mud and looked up. A very angry man stood over him, aiming his own pistol at him. Water dripped from his hair and beard. It ran down his forehead into his crazed, unblinking, eyes. He continued to stand there, aiming down at him. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he snapped as he checked his jaw to see if it was still in its proper place.

Sam reached for the pistol but Joel quickly turned it towards the young boy and warned him to get back. When Sam stepped back with his arms raised in surrender, he turned his attention back to Henry. "Hey, hey, hey, easy, easy..." Henry tried to deescalate the situation from down on the ground. He spoke to Sam, but his eyes remained locked with Joel's. "He's pissed, but he's not gonna do anything."

Joel leaned in closer with the gun still raised. "You sure about that?"

"Stop, please!" Sam pleaded.

Joel felt Ellie's hand return to his shoulder with a comforting touch. His breathing slowed and his eyes began to soften. He cleared his throat and swallowed a few times. "He left us to die out there."

"No," Henry retorted with his arm raised in a manner as if he was reasoning with a hungry wolf. "You had a good chance of making it, and you did." His hand transitioned from a defensive position to a finger pointing directly at Sam. "But coming back for you meant putting him at risk." Sam took a step toward his brother to help him to his feet. Henry warned him to step back; he did not want Sam anywhere near him as long as that pistol was still raised. "If it was the other way," his words were drawn out, trying to get through to Joel. "Would you have come back for us?" He paused for a moment. "I saved you."

Joel remained still and rigid, angry, but unable to pull the trigger.

"He saved me too," Ellie chimed in. Joel finally turned his eyes away from Henry and looked at Ellie, her eyes were wide and sincere. "We would have drowned."

Joel slowly and let out a snort of disgust before tossing the pistol down at Henry's feet. Sam scurried over to his brother and helped him up. Henry could still see the anger in Joel's eyes, but he knew he was speaking with a reasonable man again. "For what it's worth, I'm really glad we spotted you," he said. The four of them looked at one another in silent agreement that it was time to move on from what had happened back. Both fighting for survival as well as the protection of a loved one can make a man make contentious decisions. Henry knew what he did may have been wrong in the eyes of some, but altruism becomes forfeit to survivalism in the presence of a dire threat. He pointed west. "Now, that radio tower is on the other side of this cliff. The place is gonna be full of supplies." His wide, contagious smile appeared back on his face. "You're gonna be really happy you didn't kill me."

They walked along the western bank for the most optimal route towards the radio tower. A small, beached fishing trawler came into view. Its painted blue hull was faded and covered with barnacles and its deck was littered with rope, netting, and traps. Rust ate away at the boat's exterior under a layer of chipped, flaky paint. They thoroughly searched the boat for any supplies but with no success. A trail of litter half buried in the mud led away from the boat, leaving evidence of a human presence at one point or another. The trail led them to a large sewer runoff capped with a circular grating protruding from the rocky cliff. Due to the size of the runoff's opening, there was a strong chance that it was connected to a major sewer network that ran under a town close by. With a little effort, Joel and Henry were able to lift the grating and leave enough room for Ellie and Sam to squeeze through before entering after them.

They trudged slowly and methodically against the flow of the ankle-deep water with their flashlights out and their eyes wide. To their surprise, the sewer did not smell as horrible as they anticipated. The lack of civilization resulted in a large decrease in waste, and now the sewer lines flowed the rainwater runoff from the world above. The sewer system bent and wove through the

underground and eventually led to a forked path. Joel and Ellie took the path to the right, while Henry and Sam took the path to the left. The sewers were dark, claustrophobic, and unnerving. The scratching and squeaking of rats bounced along the halls but was of little concern. They found relief in the lack of groans or clicking of the infected echoing through the sewers.

“You think they will join us all the way to Tommy’s?” Ellie asked as they continued to move up the sewer line.

Joel scratched at his beard and gave a shrug. “Well, I don’t know. We’re just gonna have to see how everything pans out.”

The separate tunnels converged, reuniting the two parties. They continued on for hours, deeper and deeper into the dark, damp sewers.

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“Uh, what is going on here?” Ellie’s flashlight illuminated the door in front of them.

“You think there are people in there?” Sam whispered to Ellie.

Joel and Henry looked at one another and then back at the door.

“Are we really going in there?” Sam asked aloud.

“No other choice,” Joel muttered.

A painting of a castle overlaid the doorway. The door itself was painted as the castle gate, while the outer frame was flanked by twin spires upon a sky blue backdrop. The castle was asymmetrical with colors bleeding outside the crooked lines, displaying the drawing skills of a child. Joel moved to the forefront and pressed his shoulder against the door. He slowly and carefully pushed, easing the door open inch by inch. He could not see or feel the fishing line tied on the other side until it snapped. Glass bottles fell from the ceiling, shattering everywhere. Joel quickly pulled his pistol, Ellie fumbled her flashlight, and Sam hid behind Henry. Silence filled the air after the bottles all fell. Joel kept his eyes fixed down the sights of his weapon, looking for any movement, listening for any sign of life.

“That was definitely a sound trap.” Henry murmured.

“A sound trap, huh? What exactly does it trap?” Ellie asked.

“It’s a sort of alarm,” Joel explained as he slid his pistol back into his waistline and carefully moved through the doorway, sidestepping the shards of broken glass that now littered the floor.

The beams from the flashlight pierced through the doorway into a large hall that was set up like a hideout; or even a home in some respects. Worn mattresses, sleeping bags, and cots

lined the walls covered with maps and children's artwork. Posters and dry erase boards that displayed the alphabet and basic arithmetic sat in front of some wooden stools. Shelves of food were neatly lined with cans of beans, peas, carrots, tuna, salmon, and even canned pasta. Salt, pepper, and other basic spices had an area for themselves, as did the dried meats. Toys were sparsely scattered throughout. Ellie came across a half-deflated soccer ball sitting next to a set of boards creating a makeshift goal. Fire extinguishers sat against a cabinet of medical supplies, ranging from tongue depressors to pain pills. A bookshelf was lined with assorted books, some looking they sustained heavy water damage. Clotheslines ran from wall to wall with socks and undergarments hanging from clothespins. Boxes of shotgun shells and 9mm ammo were tucked tightly into an opened locker, along with another cabinet of tools and packaged road flares. A side room contained a generator and a water filtration system. Despite the area appearing lived in, it also felt abandoned. Not a soul responded to the smashing of glass signaling the presence of an intruder.

They barred the door behind them and dropped their bags next to the sleeping areas they each claimed. Sam fell asleep within minutes while Henry searched through the medical cabinet. Joel thoroughly cleaned his weapons and sorted through the ammunition locker. Ellie toured the shelter while she snacked on some jerky, examining the drawings of crayon and colored pencil adorning the walls. The pictures were mostly of stick figure people playing in the world above; flying kites while their feet treaded the laurel green grass with the shining sun smiling down upon them. There were drawings of angels and animals and boats sailing the ocean. She was disappointed to find an absence of comics along the bookshelf, but a diary sitting on a desk caught her attention. She returned to her cot, laid her head back and began reading.

The diary went back many years and was penned by a man named Ish. He wrote of his time as a fisherman before the outbreak, how he spent months on the water once the outbreak hit, isolated from the fungal contagion and dystopic societies of the mainland. He spent that time on his fishing trawler sailing down the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico. His fishing skills kept him fed while out on the water. The isolation which started as a safe haven eventually began to chew away at his sanity. His longing for human contact had him sailing up the Ohio River and eventually landing outside Pittsburgh, before finally setting up a hideout in the sewers. He wrote of trading with a family in a town above ground before it was overrun with infected, then hunters, and how those hunters soon added to the number of infected. He wrote of how his loneliness drove him to the family to join him in the protection of his hideout. Susan and Kyle and their four children helped transform the hideout into a small community. Together they built shower stalls and rain catchers and set up a small learning space to give the children a basic education. The community soon grew with the recruitment of a man named Danny, a former soldier who stumbled across the hideout while fleeing to the sewers from the hellish surface. Danny provided security for the community and would lead Ish on excursions to the surface to procure weapons, ammo, and body armor from dead soldiers and police officers. While the majority of adults on the surface proved hostile, they occasionally came across parentless

children and lead them to the safety of the hideout. For a time, everything was well, even prosperous.

Ellie closed the diary with a queasy feeling in her stomach and her body shook with unease. She wondered why the entries of the diary that chronicled the rise of a community suddenly halted. The remaining pages were blank. The story was unfinished. There was no tangible indication of what happened to Ish and the rest of his community; a post-civilization Roanoke Colony. Deep down Ellie knew something very, very terrible must have happened.

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They rested, ate, changed their socks and underwear, and packed needed supplies into their backpacks; cans of food, bandages, disinfectant, and ammunition of all calibers. It felt as though it was the first time in forever that they were taking their time. Joel thoroughly cleaned everyone's guns and mounted a scope that he found in the armory onto his Winchester Model 70. Ellie and Sam used the free time to kick around the deflated soccer ball and play darts, feeling and acting like the kids they were. They didn't know how to keep score, as it was more of a competition of who could hit the bullseye, or at least come the closest to hitting it.

It was soon time to leave. They slung their bags and weapons and pushed farther into the sewers. They pushed through the sewer tunnels for hours, ensuring to keep heading west. The expedition promptly halted when the stirring sound of throaty clicks and deranged moans echoed from further down the tunnels. They knew that it was impossible for a group of four to move silently in ankle deep water. Moving forward was too risky, and it was time to surface. Ladder-like steps led up to a manhole cover that Henry removed. Sam and Ellie quickly followed while Joel brought up the rear. Joel paused near the top of the steps as a clicker came into view. He pointed his flashlight directly at the clicker. He tauntingly shook the light into its hideous, cauliflower-shaped face. He climbed out of the sewers with hate in his heart and Tess in his thoughts.

Chapter 10

Summer 2033

Bridgeville, Pennsylvania

It took a day in the sewers for them to appreciate the taste of the sweet summer air. Their eyes squinted while reacquainting with the glaring sun while the red seeds of dandelions danced upon the wind riding paper white parachutes. They surveyed their surroundings, finding themselves in the heart of the suburbs. The rows of houses were choked with vegetation and the windows were either smashed or boarded up. Henry pointed north to the radio tower on the hills, soaring over the rows of vacant homes.

“Would you look at that,” Henry laughed with joy, flashing his pearly white teeth. “See, what’d I tell you?”

They set on north through the streets abandoned cars and derelict homes. Old, faded spray-painted signs warned looters that their actions would lead to grave consequences. Soiled, tattered American flags fluttered in the breeze from flagpoles throughout the town.

“I was just five when the cordyceps hit,” Henry began as he peered down a side street. “My memory is pretty hazy, but I remember living in a neighborhood just like this.”

“What do you remember?” Ellie asked with curiosity in her eyes.

Henry looked up at the cloudless sky, the same sky that hung over him as a child. “Barbecues,” he licked his dry, chapped lips. “My parents would throw these crazy big barbecues and invite a ton of people. I remember the smell more than anything.”

“Weird,” Joel snorted.

A small pack of three dogs rounded a corner and stopped upon seeing the group of humans. They noisily barked and nipped at the air. Two of the dogs were medium-sized mutts of no specific breed, one black and one brown, and one small dog with a piercing bark from a muzzle covered in scars. The two regular dogs had shaggy, matted fur tangled in knots. The small dog had short white fur with black spots. The short fur made its ribs noticeable. There was hunger in their eyes.

“Doggies!” Ellie clapped her hands in joy, her feet lightly leaping in excitement.

Joel kept his rifle ready as they continued towards the dogs standing in their path. “You’re gonna want to stay away from those. It’s not like it is in the zone. These are wild.” He

made a feint towards the dogs and they took off running in the direction they came from. He let out a subtle sigh of relief, as he did not want to shoot any dogs in front of Ellie and Sam. Joel may be ruthless, even barbaric, but not without conscience.

They continued their trek through town until Ellie eyed a vehicular husk that stood out from the others. A white commercial vehicle with a large window built into the side and a speaker placed on the roof. The painted treats encompassing the large sliding windows were faded, but suggested it was once bright and eye-catching. “What’s that?” she asked.

Sam’s eyes followed Ellie’s. “It’s an ice cream truck,” he said.

“An ice cream truck?”

“Yeah. Henry told me about these. They’d sell ice cream out of the truck.”

“What? No way!” She looked back at Joel to either confirm or negate Sam’s claims.

“It’s true,” he let out a small chuckle and gave a rare smile. “This thing would drive around and play really loud, creepy music and kids would come running out to buy ice cream.”

Ellie’s eyes squinted in a dubious manner. “You’re totally fucking with me right now.”

“Nope,” Joel shook his head. “Serious.”

Ellie let out a nasal laugh. “Man, you lived in a strange time.” In many ways, Joel agreed with her statement.

“I heard some rumors about the Pittsburgh QZ,” Henry began as he eyed the Fireflies insignia plaster across the side of a house. “The Fireflies instigated an insurrection around five years ago, and for all intents and purposes, they were successful from what I understand. It lasted for over a year, really brutal stuff if you couldn’t tell by our time in there. FEDRA and the military straight up left when they started losing territory. They even left some of their own behind. Apparently, the civilian populace made up most of the fighting force and felt the city belonged to them once the military left, not the Fireflies. Drove them right out as well. If true, Hartford had a similar story. I should have joined up with the Fireflies then and there, but Sam was younger then and was my priority. I’m still trying to figure out a way to find them.”

“I know a guy,” Joel replied. “My brother was a Firefly actually. Last I heard he was in Wyoming. We get there, we find him, and we find the Fireflies. Whaddya say, you in?”

Henry smiled and threw an arm around Joel’s shoulders. “Sounds like a good plan, man.”

A glint of light in a third story window from a house seventy yards in front of them was all it took for Joel’s instincts to take over. “Get down!” he yelled as he grabbed Ellie and Sam by

their backpacks and threw them behind the nearest car. Henry followed Joel's lead without hesitation as a round ripped through the hood and into the engine block of the car.

"Fucking sniper," Henry hissed. "Did you see where it came from?"

"Down the street, third floor," Joel replied, the image of the glint of light that exposed the sniper still fresh in his mind. He kept his body pressed against the car and his head down as he weighed his options. "Ok... y'all stay here."

"No!" Ellie immediately protested, tired of seeing her protector throw himself headlong into danger.

"Before you start," Joel growled gnashing his teeth in irritation. "I need you guys to keep him busy. I'm gonna go around and see if I can get an angle on him."

Ellie's green eyes gaped at Joel, knowing she was powerless to change his mind. She had no autonomy or authority, powerless to make decisions or change his mind. "Ok, please, be careful." She huddled next to Henry and Sam, ensuring to hide behind the engine block rather than the less reliable protection of the car's body.

Joel snorted and took off, staying behind the car and swept behind the nearest house, staying clear of the fatal funnel that was their original route.

"That car's not gonna fucking save you!" a taunting voice carried from down the street before firing another round at the car.

It took all the discipline Joel could muster to keep his eyes forward rather than back. He knew the car wouldn't provide adequate cover for very long. The length of time before that car turned to Swiss cheese was entirely dependent on the caliber of the round being fired. Another round screamed through the air like a hawk riding a lightning bolt.

"I still fucking see you!" another round. This time the shooter let out a bellowing, maniacal laugh. "Show those cute faces again!"

Joel's heart beat through his chest as adrenaline flooded his veins. He heard no screams of pain, they must still be alright. He pushed farther up the parallel street of ambush alley. He heard shots coming from the way they came, Henry, and probably Ellie had started to return fire. The gunshots acted as an alarm as almost a dozen hunters poured from the front door of the house into the street. They moved directly towards the car in which the rest were pinned down behind. He knew he had to act quickly or it would be all over soon. He moved through a gaping hole in a picket fence cutting diagonally toward the shooter's house from the parallel street. He rushed in a dead sprint towards the front door, cutting behind the advancing hunters and under the field of view of the sniper whose magnified eye stayed fixed on his prey cowering behind an old, shitty car.

The main staircase welcomed Joel upon bursting through the front door. In a situation like this he would normally sneak up on his enemy, but time was not on his side in this instance. The rickety wood creaked and groaned under the heavy thud of his boots racing up the stairs. He rushed in blindly, hoping that neither the sniper nor the pack of hunters would accomplish their sadistic goal. He turned, pushing up the next set of stairs up to the third floor. He turned that corner with a ready rifle and little breath left in his lungs. He saw it, a sniper rifle set upon an adjustable rest unmanned in a half boarded up window. He cautiously entered the room, and as if on cue, to the point of predictability, the shooter sprang from the corner with a knife at the ready. Joel quickly released his hands from his rifle and went for the knife. The shooter was gaunt, skinny, and short. Joel outweighed him by at least thirty pounds and stood four inches over him. He grabbed the wrist of the knife-wielding hand and twisted counter-clockwise. He could feel the ligaments in his elbow tear and rent apart like breaking the seal of a water bottle. He snatched the knife from his hand as the malnourished predator screamed in agony, and plunged the knife into him. He pulled the knife out, quickly and repeatedly stabbing as if his body was the canvas of a stippling-style painting and the knife was a ballpoint pen. He dropped the knife next to the lifeless body and darted to the mounted rifle and firmly pressed the stock of the Orsis T-5000 into his shoulder and brought his eye to the scope and his finger to the trigger.

The hunters had moved dangerously close to the others. Henry and Ellie, maybe even Sam had been putting up enough of a fight to slow their advance. Joel fired at the first hunter he got in his sights, dropping him instantly. Pull the bolt back, eject the round, push the bolt forward, and repeat. The hunters were on the wrong side of cover and completely exposed. The remaining ones scrambled to better cover, some entering houses and some just picking a direction and running as far away as they could. Ellie, Henry, and Sam moved from behind the car and moved toward the house in which Joel was perched upon the top floor. Joel scanned the neighborhood through the scope for any threats. The group was halfway up the street when he felt his blood run cold. The sound of the gunshots drew reactionary hunters and instinctive infected into the little suburban neighborhood like a horn sounding for war. Violence begets violence as the warring biological factions converged on the neighborhood. The thirst for blood was rampant on both sides as the smell of exhaust from a heavily armored Humvee and the virulent spores joined together in the air along with the hissing, screeching, and cries of war.

The two sides rushed at each other like tsunamis on a collision course with Ellie, Henry, and Sam caught in the middle like the inverted parting of the Red Sea. Most of the hunters stopped advancing and took shots from a safe distance while the Humvee launched explosive rounds from its mounted Mk 19 grenade launcher. The 40mm rounds splashed onto the ground, sending limbs and fungal plates upward much like dropping a pebble in water. The infected which composed of both runners and clickers advanced from the west with no trace of cognitional fear.

Ellie led the way as Henry shielded Sam and kept him as low to the ground as possible, nearly crawling, but not quite. Bullet screamed overhead so close that they could feel the heat

and the symphony of gunfire almost drowned out the inhuman war cries of the infected. Joel deftly loaded another magazine into the sniper rifle, retrieving it from a neat stack next to the window. The barrel stayed pointed in the direction of the infected, desperately trying to slow the advance of the ravenous pack long enough for his companions to get to the house and barricade the door behind them. He fired round after round into the mob while Ellie, Henry, and Sam came closer with each step. While the wall of bullets kept the flood of infected at bay, sometimes even the greatest of dams can spring a leak. Two clickers fell upon them in an instant. One tackled Henry and pinned him to the ground, emitting a rabid snarl. Ellie managed to fire a hurried shot at the one trailing close behind, hitting it in the leg. It screeched and fell, but its outstretched arms wrapped around Sam's feet as it fell to the ground. He desperately kicked at the malformed head of the infected until Ellie fired another round, this time into its fungus infested skull. The infected went silent and limp.

Joel controlled his breathing the best as he could as the scope danced around the infected pinning Henry to the ground. Henry's arms were outstretched, keeping the clicker's teeth at bay, but would not last long. The flailing and thrashing of the clicker made it difficult to line up the shot properly. If the shot was off by mere inches, it would be the death of Henry, at Joel's hands rather than the infected. Hell, even if he hit his target at the wrong angle, the .338 Lapua Magnum round had enough penetrating power to kill Henry after ripping through the infected. Although the world was long forsaken, Joel said a silent prayer to any god that may be listening, to guide the round to its target properly. He slowly exhaled and squeezed the trigger, feeling the recoil push back into his shoulder as the round left the barrel.

Ellie wrapped her arms around Sam's chest and pulled him to his feet. Sam kicked his legs free in a frenzy of the limp, inhuman hands of the infected that loosely gripped his ankles. She turned her head and let out a yelp as a round cut through the infected that pinned Sam to the ground. The force of the round sent the infected tumbling down the road like a rag doll that was hit by a bus. Henry sprang to his feet and checked on Sam before checking himself. Sam was shaken but insisted he was fine. They continued their trek onwards in the midst of the warzone, now within thirty yards of their destination.

The waves of infected seemed to never end, gaining ground no matter how many rounds connected. Joel knew that in a few moments Ellie, Henry, and Sam would slip under his field of view from his elevated position. He abandoned the sniper rifle and rushed down the stairs, hoping that they would still be left alive to welcome into the house. He arrived at the door, still left open from not so long ago. He extended his arm through the doorway and caught Ellie's hand, pulling her in while Henry and Sam immediately followed. They slammed the door and barred it shut.

"Anybody hurt?" Joel breathlessly inquired, looking Ellie up and down for bite marks and bullet wounds.

“We’re good,” Sam could barely be heard over the chaos from the other side of the door.

Joel felt a wave of relief briefly wash over him but was quickly pulled back by the tides of reality. “I think it’s time we quit this place.” He led them out the back of the house into the back yard which was lined with a rotting wooden picket fence. While the war spilled over into the front yard, they quietly slipped out the back. The radio tower was close and stood tall, like a spire of deliverance. They left the battle behind them as they fled towards the relative safety of the tower. Let the animals and the creatures tear themselves to shreds.

*

“Shut the hell up,” Henry chuckled as he clutched his belly full of canned chili. Warm chili, the first hot meal he’s had since who knows when.

“Dead serious,” Joel replied as he gazed at the golden blue flame of the camp stove they sat around. The lid of the cooking pot gently rattled from the applied heat. He savored another spoonful of chili packed with meat and beans. “It was Tommy’s birthday, and all he wanted to do was just rent two Harley’s and drive cross country.”

Henry’s head fell backward as he let out an envious sigh. “Man, I could die happy if I could just ride one around the block,” He laughed to himself. “What was it like?”

Joel gave a subtle nod of the head as he reminisced of happier times. “It was good. It was real good.” He set the now empty cup of chili on the floor and let out a small burp.

“Good?” Henry asked in skepticism. He turned towards Ellie. “Can you believe this guy?” He directed his attention back to Joel. “C’mon, man, gimme the details! Describe it.”

Ellie grew bored with the adult conversations and pushed herself up from the floor. “You know what? You two deserve a little privacy.

Henry waved his finger at her. “No, no, Ellie, Ellie, this ain’t just any motorcycle, okay? You get on that bad boy, you feel the engine,” his contagious smile spread across his face. “Nothing like it.”

“Oh yeah?” Ellie’s eyebrows were raised in skepticism. “How would you know?”

“I’ve seen it in my dreams...” Henry’s eyes became distant for a moment, before suddenly and loudly mimicking the sound of an engine and placing his hands on the pretend handlebars. He burst out into laughter and Joel joined along, although less expressive than Henry.

“Okay,” Ellie shrugged. She walked out of the room, and with her departed the upbeat mood. They sat in silence for a long moment before Henry broke the silence.

“I don’t think anyone from our group is going to show up,” his eyes drifted down at the floor. Joel solemnly nodded his head in agreement before Henry continued on. “The worst part of all this is explaining it to Sam.”

*

Ellie opened the door into what used to be some sort of office in the building at the base of the radio tower. Sam sat at a desk and took inventory of the newly acquired cans of food and organized them by food groups; fruits, vegetables, and meats. She greeted him with a smile and joined him at the desk.

“Well, it’s safe to say that those two have officially bonded,” she pointed her thumb over her shoulder signaling to the neighboring room. “What’re you doing?”

Sam kept his eyes on the short stacks of cans. “Taking stock of all the food we found today.”

“I see,” Ellie said as she grabbed one of the cans from the table and took a peek at the label. “And how are we doing on canned peaches?”

Sam grabbed the can back from Ellie and placed it in its original position. “Did Henry send you?” his face seemed more serious than usual.

“No, why would Henry send me?”

“To make sure I’m not fucking up somehow.”

Ellie dismissed the statement as nonsense. “I’d say we all did pretty good back there, especially you.”

Sam pushed his chair back and moved over to the large windows overlooking the suburbs lost in the darkness. He pressed against the window and stood there in silence.

“Is everything alright?” Ellie inquired, her voice was full of concern.

Sam shrugged. “Everything’s fine.”

Ellie stood in silence, waiting for a follow up from Sam’s short, dismissive statement. She started to shuffle towards the door. “Well, I hope you have a good night.”

Sam turned as Ellie’s hand gripped the doorknob. “How is it that you’re never scared?” he asked.

“Who says that I’m not?” she replied.

“What are you scared of?”

Ellie released the doorknob and took slow steps toward where she stood just moments ago. She gazed around the room while she rubbed her hands together in a nervous fashion while she considered her answer. “Let’s see... scorpions are pretty creepy.” Sam rolled his eyes and turned his attention back out the window. “Being by myself,” she added. The answer was enough to turn Sam back around. “I’m scared of ending up alone. What about you?”

He turned back towards the window and pointed out into the darkness. “Those things out there. What if the people are still inside? What if they’re trapped in there, without any control of their body? I’m scared of that happening to me.”

Ellie felt her hair stand up on the back of her neck as she had never considered that a possibility. While there is a plethora of awful ways to die, that sounded to her as a prime example of the saying “a fate worse than death”. She managed to compose herself and attempt to persuade Sam from his sullen mood. “Okay, first of all, we’re a team now. We’re gonna help each other out. And second, they might look like people, but that person is not in there anymore.”

Sam’s shoulders slumped, still morose despite the encouraging words from Ellie. “Henry says that, “They moved on.” That they’re with their families in heaven.” He shook his head in doubt. “Do you think that’s true?”

Ellie’s mouth opened but the words didn’t come immediately. “I go back and forth,” she managed to say. “I mean, I’d like to believe it.”

“But you don’t.”

“I guess not.”

“Yeah... me neither.” Sam turned back to the window.

“Oh...” Ellie began as slid the backpack off her shoulders and on to the table amid the cans of food. “All this serious talk I almost forgot,” She pulled a toy robot out of her bag. The same toy robot that Sam wanted to take with him from the toy store in the city, but Henry would not allow. “There. If he doesn’t know about it, he can’t take it away.” Sam grabbed the toy from her hands and gave it a long look while Ellie slung her backpack on. “Alright, I’m pooped,” she said as she headed for the door. She looked back at Sam as she turned the doorknob. “I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

Sam studied the toy for a few moments before throwing it to the ground and returning to the metal folding chair behind the desk. He slid up his pant leg and scratched at the small bite mark on his ankle.

*

Ellie's nose acted as an alarm clock as she woke to the rich smell of a meaty stew being warmed on the camping stove that sat upon a pair of cinder blocks. She rubbed her eyes as she brushed off the wool blanket and sat up from her pillow. Henry's warm smile was present as ever on his face as he stirred the stew with a metal spatula. She took in the smell as she spread out her arms, stretching out the tension of a night's sleep on the hard floor.

"Damn," she began before interrupting her own words with a long, drawn-out yawn. "That smells good."

"Good morning," Joel greeted as he gazed out a window at the fresh sunrise.

"Where's Sam?" she asked as she sprung to her feet.

"I let him sleep in for once," Henry answered as he looked up from the pot of simmering stew. "If you want him to join us, you can go wake his ass up."

Ellie nodded her head in agreement as she sleepily rubbed her nose and turned towards the door that led to the room in which she spoke with Sam the previous night. She opened the door to see Sam facing out the same window that he did the night before. The sight of unusual body language and spastic twitching grabbed Ellie's guts and twisted them into knots.

"Sam?" she meekly called out to him.

He responded with an inaudible grunt as he turned towards the voice that called out to him. Saliva dripped freely from his mouth as his teeth clicked and gnashed against one another. Ellie's throat closed in terror as she looked into Sam's eyes; once vibrant and full of innocence, now bloodshot and glossy. She let out a horrified scream as he lunged at her without hesitation, busting through the door and spilling into the next room over. He pinned her to the floor with strength he had never exhibited before. He clawed at her face as he ferociously snarled and snapped at her. Ellie raised her arms in defense of the savage, relentless onslaught.

"What the hell?" Henry leaped to his feet, knocking over the pot of stew, sending it across the floor.

"Shit, he's turnin'!" Joel raced to his backpack and desperately searched for his pistol that he had stashed away the night before. He retrieved the gun and pointed it towards Sam, only to have a round fired at him first. He stumbled from the near miss and fell to the floor.

Henry's hands shook in panic as he kept the pistol pointed towards Joel. "That's my fucking brother!" he wailed.

Ellie's hands were desperately pushing against Sam's face as she screamed his name, begging him to stop. Sam only replied with grunts filled with rage and hunger.

Joel's eyes remained locked with Henry's. "Screw it," he said as his thoughts escaped his lips and scrambled back to the pistol lying by his backpack. Another shot rang out, but Joel did not feel this one race by him, nor did he feel the burning tear of the bullet ripping through his flesh.

Sam's dysrhythmia of breathing sputtered and his body went limp. Ellie quickly shoved him off and crawled across the floor as quickly as possible away from the body. She cursed to herself loudly as Sam's body convulsed on the floor, gurgling a mouthful of blood and saliva. Joel rushed to Ellie's aid and picked her up off the floor, checking her for wounds, ensuring she was unharmed. She nodded in confirmation, unable to take her eyes off Sam as he painfully squirmed on the floor.

"Sam..." a choked voice cut through the smoke pouring from the pistol's barrel. Joel and Ellie turned to see Henry, still as a tree yet shaking like he felt the chill of a thousand winters. "Sam..." he repeated, tears welling up in his eyes and spilling down his cheeks.

"Henry," Joel raised his hand in a calming gesture as he stepped in front of Ellie, shielding her. He carefully took a few steps closer as Ellie took a few steps back. "Henry," he softly repeated.

"Henry, what have you done?" he asked himself. His body language started to become erratic. His hands covered his face, one of them still firmly clutched to the grip of the pistol. The tears flowed like rivers down his face.

Ellie's legs gave out from under her as she felt her back press against the wall. She felt as tall as a blade of grass; helpless and unable to move, left to the mercy of which way the wind decided to blow.

Joel raised both hands in the air as if surrendering but slowly encroached on Henry, overcome with grief. "I'm gonna get that gun from you, okay?"

"Sam...Sam...Sam..." the only world Henry could say, as if repeating his name could bring him back to this world, by his side. He felt Joel creeping closer and closer and raised the pistol at him. The roles shifted, as he moved closer to Joel who now backed off with his hands still in the air. "It's your fault!" he cried. His free hand joined around the grip of the pistol.

"This is nobody's fault, Henry." He cowered as he felt the barrel pointing at him.

"It's all your fault!" he shrilly repeated as his voice trembled and cracked.

"Henry," Joel pleaded, unable to find the words that could reach Henry. None may have existed in that very moment. "Henry, no..."

Henry took a deep breath as his fingers grasped the pistol in a death grip. In a flash, the gun turned from Joel and was pressed against his temple.

“Oh my god...” Ellie whimpered, curled up on the floor.

There was no delay, no hesitation. Not a second thought or even a hint of doubt as Henry pulled the trigger, chasing his brother into oblivion.

Fall



Chapter 11

Fall 2033

Teton County, Wyoming

They awoke before sunrise, ate breakfast, and packed up their camping supplies in preparation for another long day of hiking. They filled their canteens where the waters of the Snake River and the Gros Ventre River met, and set off north along the Snake River. The soothing sound of the river rushed past them in a steady rhythm while the chirping of birds added layers to nature's song. The foliage remained as green as spring and summer and a cool mist hovered above the ground and waters. The sky was overcast, but the icy peaks of Teton Range knifed through the fog and made for a beautiful backdrop above the lush green of the pines, firs, and spruce densely spread along the base of the mountain. The air was crisp and fresh, with just enough of a cold bite to keep the sweat from forming on their foreheads. Ellie plucked a small stone from the river and enjoyed the feeling of the smooth surface of it against her hands. She playfully tossed it up and down as she trailed a few steps behind Joel.

"We passed by Jackson city yesterday, so... that means we're close to Jackson Lake, right?" she asked.

"Should only be a day's hike if we make good time," Joel replied, enjoying the quiet serenity of the forest. "We follow the river, it'll lead us straight to Tommy's."

She rubbed the stone between her hands, enamored by its shiny, polished surface. "You ready to see dear old brother?"

Joel unbuttoned the top button of his red flannel shirt to allow the refreshing air to flow down his body to cool him off. "I'm just ready to get there," he muttered.

A light sprinkle of rain gently fell from the sky, almost unnoticeable as the dense foliage above acted as a natural umbrella. "You nervous?" she asked.

"I don't know what I'm feeling," Joel admitted.

They continued for the next few miles in silence, focusing on setting a swift pace rather than conversation. They felt relaxed as they walked, they had not heard the menacing moans or clicking of infected in over a week. If anything, they were more concerned of a bear attack or a pack of hungry wolves roaming the wilderness. Wyoming was the least populous state in the country before the outbreak, especially in the northwestern region outside Yellowstone National

Park. The isolation meant protection from the infected, as well as the vicious hunters that infested the urban quarantine zones.

“What happened between you two?” Ellie couldn’t help but ask.

“What do you mean?” Joel asked looking back over his shoulder.

“You and Tommy, you’re not together, so clearly something went down.”

“We just had a bit of a disagreement, that’s all.”

“Oh, here we go,” Ellie chuckled, knowing that Joel tended to downplay the events of his past. “So what was it about?” she tossed the stone into the river and watched it sink under the white foam of the rushing waters.

“Tommy saw the world one way and I saw it another,” a hint of annoyance could be heard in his voice.

“And that’s why he joined the Fireflies?”

“Yeah,” Joel scoffed “Your friend Marlene promised him hope. That kept him busy for some time, but just like Tommy, he eventually quit that too.”

“How was it the last time you saw him?” she asked.

“I believe his last words to me were: *“I don’t ever want to see your god damned face again.”*

“Jeez,” she sighed. “But he’s gonna help us?”

“I suppose we’re going to find out.”

Ellie felt optimistic despite the despondency of Joel’s recollection of family memories. “Well, with or without his help, we’ll get there.”

Joel felt it was time to shut the conversation down. “Let’s just keep going.”

Joel referred to his map and decided to cut west, away from the Snake River towards Jackson Lake. The light mist soon turned into heavy rain, slowing their progress and forcing them to make camp for the rest of the afternoon. Ellie flipped through one of her comic books while Joel alternated between studying the fold-out map of Wyoming and trying to determine what exactly he was going to say to his brother. The soothing sound of the rain splashing outside the tent was enough to ease the anxiety while he plotted the course for the next morning. Tomorrow’s hike would be a short one, an hour west to reach the banks of Jackson Lake, then a few hours north to the Jackson Lake Dam. It would also be an uncomfortable hike, as they had run out of food. No dinner tonight, no breakfast in the morning.

*

“Whoa, what’s that?” Ellie asked pointing ahead.

“That right there is a hydroelectric power plant,” Joel explained.

The waters rushed from Jackson Lake through the dam, spilling into the commencement of the Snake River, which guided them most of the way there. While Ellie was impressed by the view, she failed to understand the purpose of the construct.

“A hydra what?” she asked in confusion.

“It uses the river’s movement and turns it into electricity.”

“How’s it do that?”

“Look,” Joel sighed. “I know what it is, I don’t know how it does it.”

They continued over the dam, acting as a bridge. Ellie poked her head over the side, watching the white foamy water below powerfully pushing from the lake into the river. She felt the tiny droplets of mist gently caress her face as she enjoyed the view. It would have been a perfect moment if it weren’t for the void inside of her. She groaned as she felt her stomach grumble. “Ugh, I am so hungry.”

“I know, I am too,” Joel grunted.

“Alright, the next squirrel I see, I’m totally shooting it.”

“Let’s just keep moving. I’m sure they will have some food to spare when we get there.”

“Well,” Ellie crossed her arms and turned up her nose. “If I starve, you’re responsible.”

They continued north until a large, walled-off compound came into view. It was tucked behind the power plant, invisible from the southern side of the river, residing in the power plant’s shadow. Tall, concrete walls lined with barbed wire sat below the manned watchtowers placed at all four corners. Backhoes, bulldozers, and other construction equipment sat outside the closed gate of the western wall. A grated steel bridge connected the small fortress to the power plant, extending from the southern wall which stood only meters away from the power plant itself. It was as if the power plant was part of the base itself.

“Should we try to head in?” Ellie timidly asked.

Joel silently nodded and continued forward. The fog still lingered from yesterday, shrouding their movement towards the compound. He wasn’t sure if this was a good or bad thing; suddenly appearing at the front gate through the fog like a specter or an apparition may give the guards the wrong impression, but the presence of a young girl may in itself be a symbol

of peace in a situation like this. He decided to grab Ellie by the arm and guide her towards the gate, following his lead. He could feel Ellie shaking under her sleeves. He knew not if it was the hunger, anxiety, or perhaps both.

They were greeted by the barrels of guns pointed downward along the concrete parapets, aimed by watchful eyes peering down iron sights and adjustable scopes. The sound of a weapon chambering a round startled Ellie. She quickly slipped her hand down to her waistline and gripped her pistol. Joel quickly reached over and pushed Ellie's arm down towards the ground.

"Don't even think about reaching for your weapons!" a shrill female voice called from above. "Tell the girl to drop it. Now!"

Joel gripped Ellie tightly by the wrists, but his eyes and demeanor seemed almost gentle. "Ellie, do as the lady says."

"Okay," Ellie complied. She lifted her empty left hand in the air in surrender while she slowly slid the pistol back into her waistline with her right.

"Please tell me you're lost," the same female voice said.

"They're alright," a voice called out, granting a brief moment of nostalgia inside Joel.

"Wait, you know these people?" the female voice asked, her eyes shifted from Joel and Ellie to the gate below.

The large, imposing steel doors of the front gate unlocked and creaked open. "I know him," the voice called out as Tommy appeared from behind the gate. "He's my goddamn brother."

"Tommy..." Joel stood in disbelief.

"Holy shit," Tommy exclaimed. He moved towards Joel, his hands released from the rifle slung across his chest and threw them around Joel in a brotherly embrace.

Joel threw his arms around Tommy and gently patted him on the back while his brother squeezed him tightly. A rare smile made an appearance on Joel's face. "How you doin' baby brother?"

Tommy returned the pats on the back before releasing, keeping one hand on his shoulder. "Let me look at you," he said, soaking in the sight of the brother he wondered if he would ever see again. He looked him up and down, looking for any changes in appearance. The newfound lines in Joel's face and streaks of grey in his hair and beard told only a fraction of the story of what he had been through since they last saw one another. "You got fucking old."

Joel chuckled and brushed Tommy's hand off his shoulder. Tommy looked mostly the same, maybe a few pounds lighter. His face was more grizzled than the last time he last saw him. He grew a beard, a bit shorter and less thick than Joel's, and his slicked-back hair fell halfway down his neck. A scar ran across his left eye, but not bad enough to make his face appear disfigured. He hated to admit it, but Tommy was definitely aging better than him, at least in the face, anyway. "Easy," he said. "It's gonna happen to you too."

A blonde woman in a black jacket appeared next to Tommy. Her hair was about the same length as Tommy's, her face hardened and serious. A face that painfully reminded Joel of Tess. Tommy placed a hand on her back in an introductory manner.

"This is Maria," he said. "Be nice to her, she sorta runs things around here."

"Ma'am," Joel nodded politely, his accent saturating the gesture with southern hospitality. "Thanks for not blowing my head off."

"It would have been embarrassing," she began. Joel recognized her voice as the one calling down from the ramparts only moments ago. Her eyes shifted over to Tommy, who looked deep into her eyes. "Considering you're my brother-in-law."

Joel's jaw lightly dropped, his eyes filled with surprise and intrigue.

"We all gotta get wrangled up at some point," Tommy said, shifting the rifle slung across his chest.

Maria's attention turned from the reunited brothers to the little girl that had followed Joel to the front gates of her compound. "Ellie, right?"

"Yeah," she nodded her head in confirmation.

"What brings you through here?"

"Uh... it's kind of a long story," Ellie replied, as the rain began to gently fall from the cloudy grey sky.

"Why don't we bring 'em inside?" Tommy suggested.

"Yeah," Maria agreed. She turned to the new arrivals. "You hungry?"

"Starving," Ellie replied.

Maria led Ellie and Joel through the front gate while Tommy followed them in, shutting the gate and locking it behind him.

“False alarm,” Maria called out to the watchful eyes all around the compound. “They’re friendlies.” She turned back to Joel and Ellie. “We’ve been dealt with raids in the past. Small pockets of bandits in the area.”

“It’s been quiet for some time though,” Tommy stated.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Joel said to Tommy. “I thought I’d find you in Jackson.”

“Been trying to bring the plant back to life,” Tommy explained.

“We had it working before,” Maria went into further detail. “But one of the turbines went south.”

Tommy placed his hand on his brother’s shoulder again. “We have electricity Joel,” he fumbled with his words. “Er... had. We’ll get this place running again.”

The inner compound was even larger than it appeared from the outside. It was composed of concrete walls lined with stairs and ramps leading up to the parapets at the top. Four watchtowers dotted the four corners of the walls that protected the inner compound, each containing a spotlight for the lookout on duty. Boxes of rations and crates of ammunition were stacked at the base of the ramps next to fire extinguishers and bells to ring in case of an alarm. Most of the inner space of the compound was lined with generators, waste bins, and construction supplies and equipment slightly sank into the muddy earth that squelched and splashed with each step. But it was the stables placed under the northwest watchtower that stole Ellie’s attention away from everything else.

“No way!” Ellie gasped in amazement. “You guys have horses?”

“We got a whole lot of ’em.” Tommy confirmed as Ellie’s walk turned into a jog toward the pinto stallion being groomed and brushed by a female hostler. Tommy turned his attention to assist the stable boy struggling to apply fresh horseshoes to an impatient mare who stomped her hooves in protest.

“Can I?” Ellie asked. When the hostler gave a nod of approval her hand reached up and gently stroked the nose of the horse. Its nostrils flared as it snorted with joy from the girl’s soft touch.

“He likes it when you pet his ears,” the hostler suggested to her. She watched as Ellie’s hands slid up the horse’s neck, standing on her tippy toes just barely reaching the base of his pointed ears. “You ever ride one?” she asked, watching Ellie and the horse forming a bond before her eyes.

“I have actually,” Ellie answered.

“When have you ridden a horse?” Joel interjected, his tone thick with doubt.

“Winston, this soldier back in the zone. He gave me lessons.”

Maria smiled. “You know, if you want, we can take him riding later.”

“That’d be awesome,” she returned Maria’s smile with one of her own.

The stable boy thanked Tommy as they completed the task. Joel took a moment to give the horse a gentle rub before falling in behind Tommy and Maria as they continued the tour. There were more people in the compound than Joel had initially anticipated. Lots of men and women busily worked, even the children were helping with manual labor suited for their size and strength. Maria took brief moments to check on the welfare of the people she passed, ensuring their needs were met; if they were getting enough food, water, and sleep. Tommy always stood close to his wife, playing the willing role of a loving sentinel. The role he would much rather play than the person everyone turned to and relied upon, a burden in which his wife carried with poise. The radio in Maria’s hand buzzed to life, calling her name.

“Go ahead,” she replied.

“We’re in the control room. Steve’s about to start it back up. Do you wanna come check it out?”

“I’d rather eat with Ellie,” she groaned, keeping her thumb off the push-to-talk button.

Tommy shrugged. “It’s my turn anyway. I’ll go.”

“I’ll come with you,” Joel insisted. “Go with Maria and put some food in you,” he instructed to Ellie, waving a finger towards Maria. He turned to follow Tommy who had already started towards the power plant.

“Joel?” Ellie felt a jolt of discomfort surge through her nerves. The separation anxiety struck her like the sudden bite of a coiled viper. She hadn’t strayed more than a few feet from Joel since leaving the QZ back in Boston.

“C’mon, Ellie,” Maria gently nudged her shoulder. “Let’s give the boys some space.” She pressed the push-to-talk button as the men departed. “I’m sending Tommy over. Stand by.” She led Ellie in the opposite direction, towards the mess tent outside the barracks.

*

“This’ll be the sixth time of them trying to get the turbines back on-line.” Tommy led Joel through a small brick building that accessed the elevated walkway that led to the power plant. “We’ve been here for just a week, but it feels like forever.” The main walkway ran along the southern wall, which branched into separate walkways that accessed the parapets along the

other walls. The walkway's scenic view of endless forest and mountains was a sight to behold, pure and beautiful. Untouched from the very beginning, there was nothing for nature to reclaim. The sound of flowing water from Jackson Lake through the dam reverberated in the air. When paired with the view of and perpetuating green and mountains, it felt like a pocket of heaven in a world closer to hell. "I don't know what you heard," Tommy began. "But you should see the town. We're over twenty families strong now. It was Maria and her father. They set up this place with the idea of being self-sustained. We got crops and livestock. Remember how we thought no one could live like this anymore? Well, we're doing it."

Engineers in bright yellow helmets entered and exited the power plant carrying supplies and equipment. Most of them acknowledged Tommy with a verbal greeting or a wave as they passed them on the walkway or on the ground below. It was the first time in a long time Joel had seen an organized group of specialists and professionals that hadn't been military, criminal, or murderous in nature.

"What do you do for protection?" Joel asked.

"The adults take turns guarding the perimeter. We even got an electric fence ready to go for when the plant's up and running."

"You still gotta deal with infected though, right?"

"Who doesn't? But it's the world we live in."

They came to the end of the walkway that led to the main control room where two engineers analyzed a set of blueprints of the power plant's generator.

"These two geniuses are gonna bring this plant back to life," Tommy explained, gesturing towards them.

"We think we got it this time," the middle-aged engineer in a khaki button-up and yellow helmet declared, tapping the blue print with his pointer finger.

Tommy's head fell back as he let out a laugh. It was not a laugh of mockery, but one of the "we'll see" type.

"You don't believe us?" the engineer frowned.

"I didn't say that," Tommy replied.

"I'll bet you a million bucks it works."

"Sure, make it two."

"We're almost ready," the other engineer in a blue button-up and yellow helmet spoke; "They just need to finish putting the shield back on."

“No rush,” Tommy nodded in affirmation.

Tommy led Joel out of the control room into the turbine hall of the plant. A somewhat tattered American flag hung proudly from the far wall, subtly flapping from the draft flowing through a set of broken windows. A team of engineers carefully lowered a large metal shield that fitted over the newly repaired turbine that would expectantly bring light and warmth to the small community. Tommy and Joel leaned on the railings, watching the engineers work their magic. The shield inched down slowly, lowered from an industrial strength chain hoist that was operated from the control room. The shield was properly aligned and fitted into place and was promptly followed by one of the engineers radioing the control room to fire it up. Moments later the turbines roared to life, and lights sputtered to life from above. The engineers on the floor danced, hugged, and shook hands. It was as if they were an ER surgical team bringing someone back from the brink of death.

“Way to go, boys, nice work!” Tommy called from the railing above.

Joel cracked a smile; he couldn’t help but be impressed by what he had just witnessed. “That’s pretty impressive.” He nudged Tommy with his elbow. “Looks like you’re out two million bucks.”

“Alright Joel,” Tommy laughed. “Let’s go talk.” He led Joel down a flight of stairs from the walkway above down to the floor of the turbine hall. Tommy opened a door to a small office room and sat in the chair behind the desk.

“That’s quite the crew you got there,” Joel said, closing the door behind him to muffle the sounds of the turbines.

“They’re good men,” Tommy nodded. “This place gives them a second chance. It gives us all a second chance. Oh, before I forget...” Tommy rummaged through the desk drawers. “I uh... got something for you. Last year I went back home to Texas. Most of our stuff was long gone. Here.” He pulled a photograph from the drawer and handed it to Joel as he sat across the desk on a rickety metal chair. “It’s a little faded but it still looks pretty good.”

Joel gazed at the photograph which was slightly faded and its borders worn. He looked at himself with his arm slung across Sarah’s shoulder. They both broadly smiled as she held a championship trophy in the air with one hand, and a single pointer finger in the air with the other. She wore her blue and white striped soccer jersey, with a bold, black number fourteen on the front. The green grass of a soccer field stretched to the tree line backdrop. His old wristwatch was strapped to his wrist, the watch she replaced with a new one the night everything went to shit. He closed his eyes, suppressing the tender memories with a blanket of cold callousness. “I’m good,” he said, handing the photograph back to Tommy.

“You sure?” Tommy’s eyebrow rose. “I mean...”

“I said I’m good,” Joel reassured with piercing hazel eyes. An uncomfortable silence lingered in the air.

“Okay,” Tommy solemnly nodded as he placed the picture back into the drawer and shut it. “So, why’d you leave Boston?” he steered the conversation in a different direction.

Joel took a deep breath and eased back in his seat, deliberating where to begin. “I’ve been on quite the adventure, little brother.”

Tommy nodded in understanding. “I reckon it’s got something to do with that girl.”

“Oh, it’s got everything to do with that little girl,” Joel confirmed.

“Well,” Tommy shrugged. “Go on then.”

“She’s immune,” Joel said with an expressionless face.

“Immune to what?” he thought for a second before shaking his head in disbelief. “Oh c’mon...”

“I know, I know...” Joel shook his head in disbelief along with his brother. “I’ve seen her breathe enough spores to take down a dozen men, and nothing.” His hands moved in a manner in which he was trying to get a point across. “I wouldn’t have believed it neither, but I can show you.”

Incredulity turned to fascination in Tommy’s eyes as he stood from the chair, now seating himself at the edge of the desk closest to Joel. “Alright, I’ll bite. Why bring her here?”

“I was supposed to deliver her to the Fireflies. The way I figure they’re your boys, so you finish the job, and you collect the whole damn payment.”

Tommy shook his head. “I haven’t seen a Firefly in years.”

“But you know where they are. Now I’m not asking for much, Tommy. I just want some simple gear, enough to set me on my way.”

Tommy’s face altered from curiosity to a disgusted scowl. “What makes you think I’d do this for you?”

“This isn’t for me, Tommy,” Joel slightly raised his voice. “This is your damn cause.”

“My cause is my family now. You ain’t talking about some walk in the park here.”

“Jesus boy,” Joel rose from his seat and began to pace around the room, his face not matching that of his brother. “Have Maria get some of your born again friends to do it.”

“They got families too,” Tommy held firm.

“Tommy, I need this,” Joel growled.

Tommy sat silent for a moment, his eyes still locked with Joel’s. “You want some gear, sure. But I ain’t taking that girl off your hands.” He had heard enough, getting up from his seat and made for the door.

“This is how you repay me, huh?”

Tommy froze at the door and turned back towards his exasperated brother. “Repay you?”

Joel advanced within inches of Tommy’s face, standing an inch taller than him. “For all those goddamn years I took care of us.”

“Took care?” Tommy replied with mockery. “That’s what you call it? I got nothing but nightmares from those years.”

Joel poked a finger into Tommy’s chest. “You survived because of me.”

“It wasn’t worth it,” Tommy held his ground, refusing to be intimidated.

Joel shoved Tommy against the wall, his face now red with anger and the veins in his face and neck were swollen and protuberant. “I bring you the cure for mankind and you wanna play the pissy little brother?”

Tommy kept his eyes locked with Joel’s. “We ain’t back in Boston. You lay your hands on me again it won’t end well for you.”

He could see that behind the curtain of anger was a heart full of distress, fatigue, and frustration. Joel’s stare softened and his grip loosened from Tommy’s shoulders. He could see Joel’s humanity deep down, suffocating under a blanket of savagery. Tommy remembered his brief career as a smuggler in Boston alongside his brother, and the extreme measures that Joel would take to ensure the survival of himself and those close to him. Their longevity was measured in the blood of others, some deserving, others not. Throughout all the violence, Joel’s motivations and actions were both benevolent and sadistic, leaving Tommy with a feeling of loving ambivalence towards his brother. Joel’s eyes drifted from Tommy’s as he softly patted him on the shoulder in apology. Tommy let out a long exhale as the tension faded and came to their senses.

“Let me sleep on it,” Tommy said as he bumped shoulders with Joel as he walked past him and out the door.

Chapter 12

Fall 2033

Teton County, Wyoming

“Absolutely not!” Maria’s harsh voice cut through the air, reaching Joel’s ears as he sat with Ellie behind crates of ammunition and rations, out of view of the arguing couple. He peaked around the corner to see Tommy’s head slouched down to the wrath of his wife. “You tell him to go find somebody else!”

Joel sighed as he pressed the back of his head against one of the crates. He knew his brother was not the best at winning arguments with others, let alone a wife with an iron will such as Maria. They were fully aware of his presence, but he felt remaining out of sight during the discussion would be in his best judgment.

“Maria, I can’t have this hanging over my head,” Tommy replied, doing his best to plead his (or Joel’s) case.

“What’s that all about?” Ellie asked as she peeked around the corner toward the arguing couple a few yards away. Joel silently shook his head, keeping his ears tuned in on Tommy and Maria. “Does that have anything to do with me?”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Joel grunted.

“Did he tell you where the lab is?” Ellie asked.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Joel irritably repeated.

“Later... right,” Ellie shook her head and stormed off, muttering obscenities under her breath.

Joel didn’t bother to chase her down. Instead, he remained seated and tuned into the conversation at hand.

“It takes one. One fuck up, one fuck up and then I turn into one of those widows!” The intensity in Maria’s voice had yet to falter.

“I have to do this,” Tommy replied. His tone was firm despite his biddable body language. “I don’t know what else to say.”

Maria shook her head as she struggled to find her words. “Fine,” she broke off the conversation and started in Joel’s direction. Tommy followed closely behind his wife, calling her name and asking her to wait.

“Here we go,” Joel grumbled as he saw Maria quickly approaching.

“You,” Maria jabbed a finger into Joel’s chest, her eyes filled with azure fire. “If anything, and I mean anything at all happens to him, it’s on you!” She stormed off in the same direction Ellie had only moments ago.

The brothers stood silent and despondent, despite convincing Maria it was the right thing to do.

Tommy cleared his throat and broke the silence. “I’ll take that girl of yours to the Fireflies. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“It’s best this way,” Joel solemnly nodded.

“Maybe some real good will come out of this,” Tommy agreed.

Joel paced around for a moment. “I need to talk to Ellie.”

Tommy walked off in pursuit of Maria while Joel ran a hand through his beard and hair, unsure of how he felt. Tommy knows exactly where to bring Ellie and who exactly to bring her to. He had gotten her this far and he had kept her alive and fed. He had done his job and done it well. But he struggled with the cognitive dissonance of his mind telling him he had done his duty and his gut telling him he was dumping his responsibility onto someone else. He sat down on an ammo crate as the onerous weight spread from his mind to the rest of his body.

“Joel!” he heard his brother’s voice call out. He stood up to see Tommy running back in his direction, waving his handheld radio over his head.

“What is it?”

“That girl of yours, she took one of our horses and rode off.”

“Damn it,” Joel snorted. He could feel his teeth grinding and his fingers flexing.

Tommy radioed the stable hand to saddle up two horses as they made their way to the stables at the outer perimeter of the compound. They quickly arrived and vaulted up onto the saddles and placed their feet in the stirrups. The horses lightly trotted outside the walls, mud splashing around their hooves. Tommy pointed at the fresh tracks in the mud left by Ellie’s horse and burst into a gallop in pursuit, with Joel’s horse shortly behind. The tracks turned north into a thin forest of sparse trees.

“She couldn’t have gotten far!” Tommy called out to Joel as his brother’s horses pace even with his own. “We’ll find her, don’t worry!”

Joel felt his stomach turn as his fingers tightened around the reins. By taking his eyes off Ellie for only a moment, the potential cure for the infection that plagued mankind had slipped through his fingers. *Stubborn kid.*

“She usually pull these stunts?” Tommy asked, keeping his eyes forward on the tracks leading their way.

“Nothing like this. I don’t know what’s going on,” he lied. *Ellie, what are you fucking thinking?*

The tracks cut east into a narrow ravine, forcing Tommy and Joel to pass through single-file on their horses. Joel’s chestnut mare needed a kick of encouragement to brave the rocky corridors, snorting and resisting along the way; but passing through nonetheless. The tracks led for another half-mile through a tumultuous trail through the forest. They slowed their horses to a trot, carefully vaulting and circumventing the many fallen trees in their way. Joel fumed at the fact that Ellie had recklessly stolen a horse and rode through such difficult terrain. One misstep could lead to injury, or worse. It certainly wasn’t her experienced horseback riding skills that had taken her this far, and luck is known to be finite. Their eyes were greeted by the sunlight that had broken through the clouds as the dense canopy of treetops gave way to an open pasture nestled in a valley. A ranch sat at the far end of the pasture, nestled under a slow turning windmill and gated by a humble wooden picket fence. A barn sat behind the house, its chipping red paint giving birth to specs of the white paint underneath.

Tommy pointed to the horse that was hitched to a post by the front porch of the ranch. “That’s our horse! She’s gotta be there!” Tommy forced his heels into the horse’s side, speeding up through the overgrown pasture.

Joel followed suit, his heart racing as fast as the hooves that carried him. They reached the outer perimeter of the picket fence, greeted by a wooden sign reading *Hidden Pines Corral* that hung from an archway that acted as an entryway. They reached the front of the ranch, where Joel quickly tied his horse to the hitching post and entered the unlocked front door while Tommy stayed outside to watch over the three horses. “I’ll keep an eye out,” he said. “Reckon you guys need to have a chat.”

Joel was shocked by the state of the interior of the ranch. Aside from a thick sheet of dust that covered the wooden furniture and flooring, the ranch felt untouched and unblemished, as the secluded nature of the corral prevented the profanation by the hands of vandals and looters; preserving the relic that once symbolized the growth and flourishing of life.

“Ellie!” he called out as he slowly walked through the spacey interior of the home, listening for her voice or footsteps. “Ellie!” he called again.

“I’m up here,” her muffled voice could be heard upstairs.

“Jesus Christ,” Joel muttered, relaxing his shoulders. His heavy booted footsteps echoed through the house with heavy thuds as trudged up the stairs. Once upstairs he passed through a wide hallway lined with rooms of varied furniture caked in dust and cobwebs until coming to a room with a slightly opened door at the end of the hall. He opened the door into the remnants of a little girl’s room. While much was gone, dusty stuffed animals lay propped up upon low-lying bookshelves next to a bare mattress resting on a box spring. The pink walls were dull and faded, cracks spreading through the molding like veins. Ellie sat curled in the window, gazing outside past the rays of light that spilled into the room.

“Is this really what they had to worry about?” she inquired, holding up the diary in her hand, the diary left behind by the last girl that inhabited the room before the outbreak. “Boys? Movies? Deciding which shirt goes with which skirt? It’s bizarre.”

Joel stood above her with hands on his hips. “Get up, we’re leaving, c’mon.”

“And if I say no?” Ellie’s words caught Joel off guard as he began to turn towards the door. She closed the worn diary and swung her feet down from the window-sill to the ground.

Joel felt his blood boil but practiced enough restraint to keep his tone civil and his volume moderate. “Do you even realize what your life means? Huh? Running off like that, putting yourself at risk, it’s pretty goddamn stupid, Ellie.

Ellie shrugged her shoulders in a mocking manner. “Well, I guess we’re both disappointed with each other then.”

“What do you want from me?” Joel shook his head, approaching Ellie with quick footsteps.

“Admit that you wanted to get rid of me the whole time.”

Joel paused and raised his hand in the air, offering an explanation. “Tommy knows this area better than-”

“Oh, fuck that,” Ellie sprang to her feet.

“Well, I’m sorry,” Joel’s voice grew louder in frustration. “I trust him better than I trust myself.”

Ellie pressed her hands into her face in irritation. “Stop with the bullshit!” she cried. “What are you so afraid of? That I’m gonna end up like Sam? I can’t get infected! I can take care of myself.”

“How many close calls have we had?” Joel interjected.

“Well, we seem to be doing alright so far!” Ellie fired back.

“And now you’ll be doing even better with Tommy!”

The room fell silent as they coldly stared at each other. Joel snorted and turned for the door.

“I’m not her, you know,” Ellie broke the silence, reeling Joel back into the room as if the words acted as a fishing line.

“What?”

“Maria told me about Sarah. I-”

“Ellie!” Joel stormed up to Ellie and pointed a threatening finger uncomfortably close to her face. His face reddened and his eyes flared with a burning intensity. “You are treading on some mighty thin ice here.” His breathing grew heavier and faster.

Ellie remained calm and composed in the presence of Joel’s fury. Her voice remained calm and sincere. “I’m sorry about your daughter, Joel. But I have lost people too.”

“You have no idea what loss is!” Joel’s mouth was nearly frothing in rage.

“Everyone I have cared for has either died or left me,” her voice of calm reason ceased as she violently shoved Joel in the chest. “Everyone, fucking except for you!” The shove might as well been a sucker punch to the gut, leaving Joel short on breath and short on words. “So don’t tell me that I would be safer with someone else,” she shouted, taking command of the argument. “Because the truth is I would just be more scared without you.”

Joel’s breathing slowed by his eyes remained intense and focused. “You’re right...” he murmured. “You’re not my daughter, and I sure as hell ain’t your dad. And we are going our separate ways.” He turned and walked out the door without looking back. Ellie stood there with a shocked look on her face and a sullen feeling in her heart. Her head hung as she shuffled her feet out the room and down the stairs and through the front door as she wordlessly placed her foot in the stirrup and vaulted onto the horse. Tommy silently looked on while Joel kept his eyes forward towards the forest and the sun that began its submerging decent into the treetops. They rode off in single file and in silence, with Tommy taking point and Joel bringing up the rear. The sounds of hooves in soil and stone filled the air in place of conversation, while the sounds and

songs of wildlife hummed in the background while fireflies glowed in their flying nocturnal dance.

Ellie's body felt heavy with feelings of disappointment and abandonment. Joel's words had smothered her spirit, making it difficult to breathe in the life around her. The fire in her eyes and heart were aflame upon entering the ranch but was now cloudy in the smoke and ash as reality had followed her through the woods. She refused to show tears but wrestled with inner-conflict finding her place and meaning in the world. She had grown up in a quarantine zone, where people come and go in and out of life day to day. She understood that she had to make choices and take action at a young age. The endgame of dependency left you heartbroken with the loss of a loved one, weak in the eyes of peers, or manipulated by those with malevolence. While dependency was frowned upon in an existence dedicated to survival, it was no secret that the feeling on wanting to depend on someone, and equally feel that person depend on you, laid inert inside the human heart. She felt she could depend on Joel for the seven hundred miles they had traveled. Keeping her safe, keeping her fed, honing her survival skills. The hands that protected and guided her from Boston to Wyoming now washed them of her and left her in the uncertain hands of another. The more she thought of every element of the situation, the more her sadness and disappointment exacerbated. What she felt inside synchronized with the path of the sun, now ending its time of light and warmth with dark and cold. Hoping to feel the radiant warmth of rapport again, but nothing and tomorrow are never guaranteed; as she had witnessed and experienced coming of age.

Joel could not escape the sight of Ellie as he rode behind her. He guarded himself against feelings of sympathy, but empathy found a way through the armor. He couldn't deny the feelings they shared about the situation they had found themselves in and how they felt about the people around them. The indescribable feeling of being asked to deliver the potential cure or vaccine for the infection, in an attempt to save the very same people that tried to kill him every damn day, every step of the way. Why should he push on any longer? Those guns the Fireflies held back in Boston meant nothing to him now. Hell, if he even decided to return to Boston, his life there meant nothing without Tess. He realized that he didn't want to discard Ellie because he didn't give a damn about her, he just wanted out of the fucked up situation altogether. He knew the importance of the girl from day one, and no matter how he felt towards the rest of humanity, this was bigger than him. But still, fuck 'em, he didn't owe them a thing. It became clear he wasn't doing it for the guns he wanted or paying back some debt he owed. At a certain point, he could not specify during the journey, the risks they took and the danger they faced were not in the name of virtue or duty, but for the person who stood shoulder to shoulder with you when entering into the jaws of peril. He meant every word he said to Ellie back in the ranch; Ellie was not Sarah and never would be. But just because Ellie wasn't his daughter didn't mean that there was no place for her in his life. Dependable, strong, and reliable, and had the ability to keep her wits about her in times when most would panic. Not a daughter, but a protégé. She was young and keen, looked up to him as a father figure. Could he really just walk away?

The evening sky faded from a blend of purple and gold twilight to black as they passed through the woods, coming to a ledge that overlooked the settlement built around the power plant. They stood in silence looking down upon the lights that were tightly clustered in a surrounding sea of darkness that stretched into the infinite.

“There she is,” Tommy spoke softly looking down at what he once thought impossible now a reality. “Kids will be watching movies tonight,” he said with a smile.

“Where is this lab of theirs?” Joel asked.

“It’s all the way out at the University of Eastern Colorado.”

“Go Big Horns,” Joel chuckled. “Ellie, get off your horse, give it back to Tommy.” A look of confusion and joy fused across Ellie’s face. Joel softly patted the neck of the horse he sat upon. “I’m gonna hang on to this fella, if that’s alright with you.” He turned back to Ellie who still sat upon her steed. “Go on. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“What are you doing?” Tommy asked, seemingly as confused as Ellie.

“Your wife kinda scares me, and I don’t want her coming after me,” Joel said.

Ellie stepped down from her horse and handed the reins to Tommy. “Sorry for stealing your horse.”

Tommy grabbed the reins and looked back to Joel. “Look, let’s discuss this at least.”

A rare smile crept across Joel’s face. “You know me, my mind is all made up.” He grabbed Ellie by the arm and pulled her up onto his horse. “University of Eastern Colorado,” he muttered. “How do I find this lab?”

“It’s the science building, it looks like a giant mirror. You can’t miss it.” Tommy paused for a moment. “There’s a place for you here, you know.”

“Take care of that wife of yours,” Joel winked as he looked back at Ellie with the smile that remained on his face. She didn’t have to say a thing; the joy glimmered in her eyes above a smile that mirrored Joel’s. Ellie could have ridden her own horse but chose to ride on the back of Joel’s back to town. They slept soundly that night after enjoying the working lights and hot showers of civilization while they packed their food, ammunition, and medical supplies. Tommy and Maria bid them farewell the next morning outside the front gate of the compound as Joel and Ellie rode east, into the sun ascending over the forested horizon behind a mantle of morning mist.

Chapter 13

Fall 2033

Collinsville, Colorado

University of Eastern Colorado Campus

The banner that read *GO BIG HORNS!* was the first thing to grab Ellie's attention when their horses stood on a hill overlooking the campus. The derelict display hung and fluttered in the light breeze like a faded bronze and forest green war banner on their team's stronghold. The long dead stadium lights rested on top of the stadium, peering down on the hundred yards of late autumn frost clinging to the weeds and overgrown grass. Joel reminisced of the riveting college football seasons of years past as he explained the basic rules of the game to Ellie as they rode down the hill into the heart of the main campus. He spoke of how twenty-two men fought from sideline to sideline and whistle to whistle for sixty minutes in a game played as war is fought; a combination of sheer force and deception. Football was a way of life in Texas, whether you played or supported your team.

"Ok, let me get this straight," Ellie began as their horse passed under a tree of loose hanging leaves glowing with the color of fire. "If you mess up on fourth down, then you give the ball to the other team?"

"Right, it's called a turnover." Joel nodded in confirmation. A squirrel stood on its hind legs, watching the rare sight of two humans riding a large steed. The foreign sight startled the small rodent and retreated to the branches of the tree of fire they passed under.

"And if you clear the ten yards then you're back at first down?"

"First down, that's right."

"Man, that's confusing," she sighed.

"You just gotta play it a couple of times. It'll all make sense." Joel pitied the fact that Ellie had never had an opportunity to experience the atmosphere of a football game, and never even seen a single game played.

Ellie felt she needed to silence the call of nature. "Callus, halt," she ordered and stepped down from the saddle of the slowing stallion. She ducked behind a nearby bush while Joel remained seated in the saddle, keeping an eye out for any threats.

“What kind of name is Callus, anyway?” Joel asked, running his hand through his scraggly beard. He adjusted himself in the saddle as his posterior had become sore after spending the last two weeks alternating between riding in a saddle and sleeping on the cold hard ground in the wilderness.

“Not my fault that you forgot to ask Tommy his name!” she called from behind the bush.

“Callus, I hate that name,” Joel muttered. *I wanted to name him Scotch.*

Ellie emerged from behind the bush and climbed back atop the horse. They continued eastward through the campus, towards the science building. Tommy’s description of the building was slightly off but accurate enough to identify it. The structure was encased in massive glass tiles, but the elements wore the glass from a shiny mirror to that of sooty, unreflective slates.

Ellie looked around at the dormitories and academic buildings that surrounded her. She had attended the FEDRA Youth Academy for a short time in the Boston QZ, but had trouble imagining an education at an institute such as this. The FEDRA Youth was a pipeline of strict military bearing and government indoctrination, and as Joel had explained, colleges allowed the freedom of choice of the type of education one desired. “So these places... people would live here and just study? Even though they were all grown up?”

“Yep. Study, party, find themselves and figure out what they wanted to do with their lives.”

“I would’ve wanted to be an astronaut,” Ellie proclaimed with a smile.

“That a fact?” Joel humored her.

“Yeah,” she turned her eyes up to the cloudless blue sky. “Can you imagine being up there all by yourself? It would have been cool, just saying. What about you? What’d you want to be?”

“Well, when I was a kid I used to want to be a singer.” The feeling of pity returned. At least he had the chance to pursue his dreams. He never made it as a singer, but rather took up a job in construction in order to feed and clothe his daughter. With freedom came choice, and with choice came consequence. Ellie was not born in a time in which she could actively pursue a career as an astronaut, or any of the other prestigious careers that became extinct in post-outbreak society.

Ellie let out a laugh. “Shut up,” she had a hard time imagining Joel with a microphone in hand instead of a gun.

“I’m serious,” Joel replied, half-heartedly laughing along with Ellie.

“Sing something,” she requested.

“Ah, no.” Joel politely declined.

“Come on, I won’t laugh!” Ellie said as she slammed her palms on her thighs in frustration like a child who was refused dessert.

“I don’t think so.”

“Joel, please?” she drew out the word “please” to the length of saying it five times.

He kept his eyes forward, responding to the child-like begging with silence.

Ellie gave up on her request and went back to examining the buildings scattered across the campus. She imagined the branching paths of the infinite as she pondered where her life would have led her if granted the option of attending college determining what she wanted to do with her life. She gazed over Joel’s shoulder at the science building sitting on the campus’ eastern horizon as brittle leaves danced through the air in their submission to gravity. Her mind shifted to the immediate reality from the interminable possibilities of a hypothetical life of free will.

“How many people do you think there are? Fireflies, I mean.” Ellie asked.

Joel raised his eyes toward the science building that grew in size with each encroaching step. “Reckon it takes quite a crew to run that operation.”

“You think there will be other people my age?”

“I’m not sure,” Joel admitted.

They emerged into the quad at the open, scenic heart of the university. A cracked and worn statue sat in the middle of the landscape, immediately surrounded by park benches. Crisscrossed sidewalks of brick interlocked at the base of the statue, lining the overgrown fields of green and dried leaves encased by university buildings on all four sides with three abandoned supply vehicles sat deserted of human life but occupied with another. Both of their jaws dropped upon the sights of dozens of macaques occupying the space of the quad and hanging from the trucks. Their watchful, intelligent stares followed them as they continued their path toward them. Within moments a howl pierced through the air, and the macaques scrambled to create distance from the intruders. Ellie took in the sight of the watching primates, fascinated by their appearance and behavior. The chorus of howling and wailing increased as more macaques joined in the chorus sang for the unwelcome visitors. The cries remained warnings as they passed through the quad, welcomed by Firefly graffiti sprayed across the building on the east side of the quad.

“That’s a good sign,” Ellie murmured.

Joel hummed an acknowledgment but something in his gut knew that something was off. The Fireflies graffiti certainly confirmed their presence, but they had yet to see a single one. If this lab of theirs was so important, the lack of security and surveillance of the area was worrying. Those monkeys had to have escaped the lab. A college campus in Colorado wasn't exactly their natural habitat. Joel's worry was only further enforced as they pushed eastward, encroaching closer and closer to the lab. His feeling was contagious, as it soon spread to Ellie as she noticed that graffiti was the only thing present about the Fireflies.

"No guards. No nothing..." Ellie murmured.

"Yeah..." Joel spoke slowly, scanning the building rooftops for sniper nests, noticing the absence of glinting light. "I'd expect to see someone by now. Let's just get to that lab."

But as they pushed closer to the lab, the trail of bodies and brass began to act like a trail of crumbs to their destination. The bodies were difficult to identify between Firefly, early stage infected, and civilian. Bodies were shot, stabbed, bitten, and beaten. The Fireflies were here, but things have clearly gone horribly wrong. The birds sang and the crickets chirped a macabre requiem over the fields and walkways of rotting dead.

They arrived at the front entrance of the lab building where Joel hitched Callus to a nearby bike rack. Another small pack of macaques huddled at the base of the front of the building; watching, howling, and bearing their teeth. Joel carefully opened the door into the front lobby, and the echo of the creaking door let Joel know it was empty before his eyes could properly adjust to the dark interior.

"Hello?" Ellie called out. The only response was her voice bouncing back at her. She turned to Joel. "Where are they?"

The lobby was a mess of debris that had fallen from the roofs, surrounded by lights wired to a small generator. They cautiously stepped further into the lobby and headed to the staircase at the back of the room.

"Yoo-hoo, Fireflies," Ellie wanted to shout at the top of her lungs but escaped her lips in a soft voice. "Cure for mankind over here... anyone? Please?"

Joel's face remained stern as they ascended the stairs to the second floor into a hallway that led them to the floor's offices and labs. The building was constructed in an arboreal fashion; as the floors were one hollowed transparent glass rectangular floor built atop of one another with a tree growing up through the hollowed space. It may have once been a gorgeous sight, but the tree stood leafless and lifeless, as the dirty windows of the walls became impermeable to sunlight at some point in time. They moved office-to-office, shuffling through stacks of paper; hoping to find any sort of clue as to the whereabouts of the Firefly researchers. All of the paperwork only contained research notes, spreadsheets of data, and onerously large scientific words derived from

Latin that Joel couldn't even begin to make sense of. Ellie felt the same as Joel, she knew all this information was critically important to some but useless to them. They backtracked to the main stairwell and headed up to the third floor. A barricade sat before them. Desks, chairs, and other office furniture were haphazardly stacked upon one another, keeping whatever was on the other side of the metal double doors contained. Joel looked the barricade up and down, questioning whether the answer they sought lay behind the barricade that contained and quarantined a biological threat.

Joel and Ellie looked at each other in the eye and nodded in agreement, each with a look of determination upon their faces as they began dismantling the barricade piece by piece. Chairs were stacked neatly upon one another, and desks were pushed to the sides of the hallway. Joel quickly backed away from the door after pulling away the final piece of the blockade. A thin, dried crust of spores was recognizable among the hue of dust and cobwebs that nested at the base of the door. He set his backpack down, keeping his eyes on the door while he retrieved his gas mask from his pack. He readied his rifle as he slid the backpack back on while Ellie swiftly and smoothly pulled her pistol from her waistline. Joel carefully opened the door and peered through into a dark hallway. He flipped on the flashlight fastened to one of his backpack straps, his eyes following the beam of light down the hall. Light bounced and reflected along the spores that danced and fluttered in the air from the first draft of air in a long time; months? Years?

They funneled into the dark hallway with light footsteps and guns at the ready. This area of the science building had more labs and offices. The hallway was littered with bodies of infected and Fireflies alike. Fungal colonies clung to the base of the walls on each side of the hall, spilling thin clouds of spores into the air. The fungal colonies subtly expanded and contracted as if they were breathing in air and exhaling spores. Joel had an ominous feeling as if they were aware of their presence, an eyeless stare burning through them. The dancing and cascading spores within the silent hallway resembled a night of nuclear winter, with spores signaling humanity's death knell instead of radioactive snow and ash.

The tension slowly began to slip away in the absence of moaning and clicking. The infected were never ones to hide, stay silent, or plan any sort of ambush. Ellie coughed and choked, wafting the spores from her face.

"As long as we find out where they went," Joel's grunt was muffled by his gas mask.

Joel opened the first door to his left and peered in. The walls were lined by rows of cages, some with doors hanging open, others still locked up tight. The locked cages housed the corpses of withered and emaciated macaques. In what remained of Ellie's childhood innocence, she felt a small sense in relief that not all of the monkeys met the same fate, as many escaped their cages and made a home of the sprawling college campus; breathing in the mountain air instead of clouds of spores. Joel's flashlight scanned past the rows of cages along the wall to the far corner

of the room. They both recoiled the terror as the beam of light illuminated the first human corpse they had spotted in the building.

The body that slumped upright in the corner appeared to be female, by the small, slender build and long chestnut brown hair that tumbled down the side of a face of decaying flesh. Her mouth was agape; the final expression her face ever made was one of horror. Fungal growth protruded through a small, circular hole in the center of her head, most likely from a bullet. Her white lab coat was stained with blood and had a Firefly insignia embroidered on her breast pocket, still filled with a handful of pens. Ellie picked up the metallic clipboard that laid on the ground near her body and began to flip through the papers as Joel gave her the light she needed to read.

The handwriting was sloppy but legible. She read the notes aloud to Joel. How the monkeys were not affected by the cordyceps, but could still carry and spread the infection. Joel shined his light towards the dead macaques in their cages. None showed any signs of infection. Their physiology was normal, with no fungal growth blooming from their heads. He shined the light back at the dead scientist. The bullet wound made sense, as she must have been infected from a bite from one of the macaques. The other Fireflies must have put her down quick before she could turn and spread the infection further. Joel felt his blood run cold. If those monkeys they passed earlier had been aggressive, it would have been the end. If bitten by a clicker, the infection would be clear and self-evident. He could turn the gun on himself before the infection took hold of his mind and body. But a bite from a monkey could have been inconspicuous, the infection slowly sneaking up on him.

"I'm glad we didn't mess with them monkeys," Joel murmured as he shook the morbid thought and led Ellie back into the hallway.

"Yeah," she quipped at the obvious statement.

A sudden crash rang from behind the double doors at the end of the hallway. It was a hollow, metallic sound; like a bedpan falling from a shelf. Joel's gas mask expanded and contracted quickly from the hastened breathing as he readied his shotgun to his shoulder. Ellie silently fell in line behind Joel with her pistol at the ready. He burst through the door and scanned the room before his flashlight bathed a lone macaque on a nearby tabletop. The monkey cried out and bared its teeth, feeling threatened by the blinding light. It leaped from the table and dashed to a nearby open window where it climbed out into the dwindling daylight under the shroud of encroaching grey clouds. Joel exhaled and relaxed for a moment, now able to get his bearings of the room they had found themselves in. The room was a laboratory that had looked like the remnants of an evacuated command center. A Fireflies banner remained hung on the far wall above a pair of portable generators that were still wired to a table of computers that sat dusty and abandoned. Maps of the campus and surrounding terrain remained pinned to the walls, and a few microscopes and basic laboratory measuring equipment remained behind. The room

smelled of death despite the cool breeze drifting through the open window. Ellie pointed to a body slouched over the desk under the window. Joel approached the body to inspect it while Ellie observed from a few steps behind him.

Dried blood splatter covered the table in addition to a pool of dried blood that was amassed at the base of the chair. A pistol sat at the edges of the dried pool of blood. The body was attired in a green military dress uniform, but instead of US Army rank and insignia, Firefly insignia was sewn to the sleeves and collar, and Firefly pendant hung from his neck instead of a set of dog tags. His right arm hung loosely while his left hand remained upon the desk, with a voice recorder still clutched in his hand. Joel pried the voice recorder from his rigged fingers and hit the rewind button before hitting play. A dejected voice sounded through the tiny speakers of the recorder.

If you're looking for the Fireflies, they've all left. I'm dead...

"Yeah, no shit," Ellie spoke over the recording.

...or I will be soon. Got time to reflect.... I dedicated my life to this cause and now I won't get to see whether we make it or not. I joined the Fireflies shortly after the outbreak. Here was a group willing to do whatever it takes to save us from the plague when the government was willing to retreat to the ghettos.

I couldn't just give up on our country and give up on humanity. God... that sounds so... trite. Anyway... There have been years that felt like we were on to something... like we might eradicate this thing. Those were usually followed by years of utter despair. Like this entire fucking thing was a goddamn waste of time. It feels like the past few years were more of the latter. We haven't had a breakthrough since the passive vaccine test we ran, what.... Five years ago?

"C'mon, give us something..." Joel groaned

Now this entire lab has been compromised and the higher-ups have decided to abandon the university. I'm just so fucking tire... I can't do this anymore. I'm not gonna do this anymore. If you made it here looking for the others, they've all returned to Saint Mary's Hospital in Salt Lake City.

Ellie and Joel exchanged an intense stare, knowing they got what they came for.

You'll find them there. Still trying to save the world. Good luck with that...

There were a few seconds of silence before the tape cut out. Joel placed the recorder back on the table as light fluffy snowflakes drifted through the window.

"Do you know where that is?" Ellie asked.

“I know the city,” Joel nodded.

“Is it far?”

“It ain’t close, I mean on horseback...”

The red dot a laser cut through the light trickle of snow into the room, brushing over Ellie’s forehead and onto Joel’s midsection.

“Shit, get down!” Joel dove for the floor, pulling Ellie down with them. A bullet screamed through the open window, drilling a hole in the wall behind them.

Ellie shuffled her feet and pressed her back against the table. “Who the fuck are these guys?” she spat.

“It don’t matter,” Joel slung his shotgun in his hands. “We know where to go. Let’s get the hell outta here.”

Outside the window on the ground below, a voice could be heard shouting orders. Joel grit his teeth, realizing they had been followed this whole time, and they were undoubtedly heading for the science building. Joel led Ellie out of the command center and back into the third-floor hallway. They descended the stairs to the second floor, welcomed by ivory white snow and blood orange leaves gently falling through the porous rooftop. Joel kept his shotgun firmly in his shoulder in anticipation for an attack, Ellie right behind him with her pistol at the ready. They pivoted around a corner towards a set of double doors leading to a stairway to the ground floor. Their fingers crept towards the triggers as voices and footsteps could be heard approaching the set of doors from the other side. The door burst open to the sight of two men in raggedy and stained jeans and winter coats. One wore a ski mask, while the other had a holey blue scarf wrapped around the bottom half of his face, and they were both armed with knives. Joel and Ellie simultaneously pulled their triggers, their shots hitting the same target; the man on the left in the ski mask. The body was flung back by the force of the combined blasts but gave the other attacker a window to lunge towards Joel. He was forced to drop the shotgun and put his hands up in defense before he could chamber another shell from the ammo tube. He caught the attacker by the wrist, redirecting the knife that was aimed for his throat. The force of the attack slammed them against the feeble railing of the walkway, causing it to partially give way. Ellie frantically aimed her pistol, but she could not get a clear shot at her target during the struggle, as their bodies pushed and shifted positions. The scarfed man with ratty, matted hair delivered a vicious head-butt, putting Joel in a concussed haze, giving the attacker a window to free his knife hand and go for the killing strike. Joel willed himself through the daze and lurched forward, attempting to thwart the attack. He dodged the overhead slice, but the attacker’s momentum sent them back against the railing. This time it gave way, sending them both over the edge. They fell, still locked in combat as gravity guided them towards the pile of debris below. The attacker

landed headfirst into the detritus with his body folding over him, his neck bending like a question mark before snapping like a pencil.

Joel fell straight on his back, sending a sharp, intense pain through his body. The pain engulfed his entire body, but within a blink of an eye, he could feel the epicenter of the anguish. A wedge of rebar protruded from the bed of plaster and concrete, penetrating Joel's midsection slightly off-center, close to his right kidney. He glanced at the penetrating steel in paralyzing shock, before a tidal wave of pain surged through him causing him to utter a blood-curdling cry. Ellie looked down from above in a panic, before promptly turning around and racing down the stairs to help her guardian.

"What do you want me to do?" she cried, kneeling over him. The panic prevented her from deciding her actions.

"Move," Joel groaned.

"What?"

Two men burst through the door behind them, both armed with baseball bats. Joel shoved Ellie aside with what strength he could muster and slid his pistol from his waistband. A surge of pain shot through his body, causing the pistol to rattle in his hand before it slipped from his fingertips to the ground. Ellie spun and fired at the two attackers without hesitation, dropping them both with shots to the chest. Blood pooled around fire-colored leaves as they squirmed on the ground, fighting for their next breath. She turned her attention back to Joel who struggled like a live insect pinned in a display case.

"What do I do? What do I do? Oh man, Oh God,"

Joel's breathing was short and intense. "I'm gonna need you to pull," he groaned.

"Okay," Ellie nodded. "Alright, are you ready?" She grasped Joel's hand in her own and placed her other hand behind Joel's shoulder. "One, two,"

Joel's breathing became rapid, anticipating another rush of agony.

"Three!" She pulled with all her strength. Joel dug his heels into the ground to push with what little strength and leverage he had. He felt the rebar slide through his body, grinding against the bottom of his ribs on the way out. Ellie pulled him to his feet as he cried out, but he immediately dropped to his knees, watching blood flow from the now open wound. He placed his hands over the wound immediately, applying as much pressure he could. Ellie could hear voices coming from outside the door again. Her eyes repeatedly darted back and forth between Joel and the incoming threat in front of her.

"Just get to the damned horse," Joel growled, blood filling his mouth and dripping from the side of his lips, filling up his gas mask. He pulled himself up on his own strength.

It was a straight shot down a long hallway to the front entrance back to Callus. Ellie took point with all her attention focused on the front sight of her pistol. Joel limped behind her, clutching the wound near his right kidney. He felt lightheaded and his vision was blurred from tears and pain.

“Joel, how we doing?” Ellie called back.

“Fine.... Fine...” his already weakened voice nearly muted by the gas mask. He collapsed to the ground.

Ellie rushed back to him and helped him to his feet. “C’mom, c’mom, we gotta move!”

He struggled back to his feet with Ellie’s assistance. “I’m okay,” he quietly spoke.

“You’re not okay, now come on!” she took point again, her hoodie further sullied by Joel’s blood.

He leaned against the wall as support as he trudged forward, feeling his strength being sapped with each step. His vision became darker and blurrier. He collapsed to the ground, struggling up to one knee. Ellie doubled back again, sliding under Joel’s arm, helping him back to his feet.

“Lean on me, I’ll help you!” she instructed.

“No, take point.”

“Can you walk?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah,”

“Then fucking walk!” she commanded with fire in her eyes and voice. “There’s the exit,” she pointed straight down the hall. “Just a little bit more, come on!”

Three men charged through the front door directly at them. Joel slid down the wall back to the floor, his vision growing ever darker. All he could make out was the sound of gunshots and screams ricocheting through the hall. The shots were rapid and frantic, leaving his ears ringing. Only next could he feel Ellie’s familiar grip peeling him once more from an expanding pool of his own blood. He braced himself against the wall, leaving a smeared, streaking handprint. Ellie once again slipped under Joel’s shoulder.

“I swear,” she huffed, struggling under Joel’s weight. “If we get out of this, you’re so singing for me.”

“You wish,” Joel croaked with a mouthful of blood and saliva.

They struggled through the lobby to the front door. She managed to push open the doors onto the front steps. A man with scraggly hair pulled at the reins of a hysterical Callus, who kicked and pulled and swung his head in defiance. Joel slipped from Ellie's support and tumbled down the short flight of stairs. The would-be horse thief turned to see a young girl raise a pistol in his direction. A muzzle flash caught his eye and a series of bullets splashed into his flesh. Callus' reins slipped free from the dying man's grips. His hooves slammed against the ground, spooked from the chaos that surrounded him. Joel managed to struggle to his feet while Ellie grabbed the loose reins. She pleaded with Callus with soothing commands and stroked his neck until he calmed down. Joel grunted and moaned in pain as he struggled to mount the horse. Ellie pushed him up into the saddle with all the strength she could muster, and leap onto the rear of the horse. She gave Callus a kick of encouragement and they began their race away from the science building, back towards the way they came from. It was when they reached the outskirts of the campus Joel fell from the horse. His skin was cold and pale and his breathing was weak and shallow. Tears began to well up in the corners of Ellie's eyes as she struggled to peel Joel from the dirt. She felt the nauseating pull of panic and fear. Snow fell gently from the grey sky.

"Joel!" She cried out. "Get up! Get up! You gotta tell me what to do! Come on! Joel!"

Chapter 14

Fall 2033

Collinsville, Colorado

Ellie's fingertips stung from the cold as she frantically searched for anything that could prove useful. The limited amount of bandage wraps and gauze in her backpack was not proving sufficient enough to stop the bleeding. Joel was unresponsive, his shallow, steaming breath and occasional grunts of pain were the only indications that his heart was still beating. She found a roll of duct tape in a drawer and felt a spark of hope in her core. She knelt beside Joel and pulled up his coat, flannel button up, and undershirt up past his gaping wound and shifted him to his side as he groaned in agony. Blood continued to trickle from the punctured flesh. She draped a t-shirt over the wound acting as a bandage; the same shirt she wore the day that she had left the quarantine zone. She forcefully wrapped the duct tape tightly around his abdomen, applying pressure to stop, or at least slow the bleeding. She gently laid Joel back down onto his bed of flattened cardboard with a backpack for a pillow.

She slid over to the wall and let out a long sigh. *That should buy us some time at least.* She looked around the room, at the scattered tables and chairs covered in dust, at Callus silently standing in the corner. The former frozen yogurt shop on the first floor near the entrance of the mall proved adequate shelter for the time being. The steel shutter door protected them from the icy winds that blew through the vacant mall. Her body and eyelids felt heavy like anchors; exhausted both physically and emotionally. The adrenaline had worn off. Scattered thoughts swam through the turbulent current of her mind. As she felt her consciousness slip away, she felt the primitive feeling of the fear of loss. The fear was fueled by the haunting familiarity of the setting she found herself in. Her mind's eye stared deep into the mirrored image of a different time in a different place, her dreams delivering her back to the moment when everything changed.

*

The hallway lights crept through the cracked door as the rain gently pattered on the window of Ellie's room of the FEDRA Youth barracks. She remained sound asleep as a shadow crept through the doorway, stalking its way towards her bed. It inched closer and closer until it lunged for her neck, letting out a sinister hissing sound as it lunged for its prey. Ellie woke in an instant, violently thrashing the attacker off of her and sent it sprawling on the floor. She reached

under her pillow for her knife. She slid off her bed and held the knife in a combative posture at the attacker struggling to pull itself off the floor. The hissing slowly turned into a playful giggle, a human finger pointing at Ellie's knife.

"Riley?" Ellie's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of her friend on the floor rather than an infected.

"That hurt," Riley slowly rose from the linoleum floor. "I landed on my hip."

"The hell!" Ellie rasped raising a hand to her neck. "I thought I was bitten."

"I know," Riley smiled as she adjusted her blue blouse. "It was kinda awesome." Ellie's eyes burned with rage as they locked with hers. "You're not gonna kill me are you?"

Ellie folded her knife and slipped it back under her pillow. "I haven't seen you in I don't even know how long..."

"45 days," Riley confirmed, the moonlight poured through the window, shining on her charcoal skin. "Well, 46 technically. Wanna know what I've been up to?"

Ellie shook her head in shock and disgust. "All this time I thought you were dead."

Ellie's words cut into Riley's heart as she took a deep breath and nodded. "Here," she said as she fumbled with the clasp seated on the back of her neck. She removed the pendant from her neck that was engraved with the symbol of the Fireflies and placed it in Ellie's hand.

Ellie looked at the pendant and back up to Riley. "No way."

Riley gazed around the room while Ellie's eyes were drawn back to the metal pendant in her hand. "Still no roommate?" Riley asked. "I had to sleep under Liz for three years and you know how bad that girl smelled."

Ellie flipped over the tag in her hand. It read *Abel, Riley 000129*. "You're a Firefly," Ellie quietly said.

Riley quietly nodded in confirmation as she wandered over to Ellie's desk, plucking a Polaroid picture from the wall, a photo of them together from some time ago. "You still have it up," Riley smiled.

Ellie quickly moved to her door and looked both ways down the hallway for anyone that could be listening.

"What are you doing?" Riley asked.

"I'm making sure I don't get caught with a Firefly in my room," she said.

“Relax,” Riley reassured her. “There are no soldiers on the entire floor.”

“Here, congrats,” Ellie handed the Firefly pendant back to Riley with a handshake.

“Hey,” Riley tightened her grip on Ellie’s hand, keeping her from pulling away. “Are we cool?”

Ellie forcefully pulled her hand back. “Are we cool?” she asked in a mocking tone.

“I disappeared and you’re mad,” Riley sighed. “And I owe you an explanation. Let’s get outta here and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“It’s almost morning and I have military drills,” Ellie protested. “You know, where we learn how to kill Fireflies.”

Riley grabbed a pair of jeans draped over a chair and tossed them at Ellie. “Put some pants on and let’s go. C’mon, when have we ever gotten into trouble?” A mischievous grin crept across Riley’s face.

Ellie got dressed and followed Riley’s lead as they carefully exited the barracks and onto the streets of the quarantine zone. Their quick footsteps splashed in the shallow puddles of the drizzling rain under the cover of night as they made their way for a floor level window of the vacant shopping wall just inside the quarantine zone wall. They tightly slid through the window into a dusty, dirty storage room. They exited the room into the vast openness of the mall. Their flashlights guided them through the darkness to the motionless escalators that led them to the second-floor balcony.

“So, how did you find them?” Ellie asked.

“The Fireflies?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember that Firefly you bit and stole his gun?” Riley chuckled.

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I remember him.”

“That’s Trevor. I saw him walking down the street so I tailed his ass. I follow him into this alley and all these Fireflies ambush me. They took me right to their hideout. To Marlene.”

“Were you scared?”

“Terrified,” Riley admitted. “I thought this time she would actually shoot me. But instead, she just says, “*What took you so long?*” She was expecting me.”

“And she just made you a Firefly?”

“Something like that. That whole almost killing me thing was a test. She wanted to know I was committed.” Riley decided to change the topic of conversation. “So, who do you hang out with these days?”

Ellie shrugged. “I don’t know. No one really.”

They reached the top of the escalator to the second-floor balcony of the mall. They leaned against the railing, their flashlights breaking apart the darkness below them.

“What about Tino and the rest of the guys?” Riley asked. “How are they doing?”

“Riley, those are your friends.”

“But you talk to them.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Ellie softly spoke.

Anti-FEDRA graffiti covered the walls and empty display windows that remained intact. As if signaled by the graffiti itself, the citywide PA system sounding off with a familiar female voice. Her tone was always so upbeat and cheery, as if the post-societal world around them was just an illusion and everything was completely under control under the government’s watch.

ATTENTION! WE ARE PLEASED TO REPORT THE ZONE HAS BEEN FREE OF CORDYCEPS INFECTION FOR THIRTY DAYS. YOUR COOPERATION AND DUTIFUL ATTENTION TO SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY...

“Thirty days my ass,” Riley snorted, making a sour face as she interrupted the announcement, saving Ellie’s ears from the carefully crafted propaganda. “People are getting infected all the time, they just do a good job of hiding it.” She spat over the railing in disgust.

“You’ve run into more infected?” Ellie asked.

“As part of my initiation, they actually made me kill this...” Riley’s thoughts and words seemed to steal her away from the moment and into another one of her recent past. “You know, let’s talk about something else.”

“Alright,” Ellie solemnly nodded and agreed.

They moved from their position walking aimlessly through the upper floor of the mall, their flashlights guiding them through the darkness. Their steps reverberated through the halls of the husk of consumerism’s past.

“Hey, so, maybe I should join the Fireflies,” Ellie suggested.

Riley shook her head in disappointment. “Ellie, that was the first thing I asked Marlene. She wants you safe at that stupid school. I’m not even supposed to come see you.”

“Why does she care?”

“She’s worried I’ll get you into trouble.”

“Whatever,” Ellie muttered with a shrug. “I can get into trouble just fine on my own.”

“Oh, I know.” Riley smiled.

“So what are we doing here, Riley?”

“Remember the first time I took you here?” Riley’s smile grew wider. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Is it a dinosaur? I’ll be your friend again if it’s a dinosaur.”

Riley’s smile opened into a laugh. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Their flashlights illuminated a life-sized sculpture of a horse erected in the center of a crosswalk that connected the two sides of the floor. The sculpture of the horse appeared wild and strong. It stood on its hind legs, with its front legs striking the air to its front. The suffocating darkness around the proud beast filled Riley and Ellie with sadness, as the horse was forever parted from its band, as humanity had been reduced to a pathetic schism of warring factions divided from its once collective society.

Riley sighed. “I can’t believe Winston’s gone.”

“You heard?” Ellie sounded surprised.

“Yeah, do you know how it happened?”

“They said he just fell off his horse,” Ellie replied. “Heart attack or something.”

Winston had been one of the most kind-hearted FEDRA troopers in the quarantine zone. Most army soldiers weren’t mean-hearted or hateful per say, but very authoritative and jaded. Sergeant Winston Asher conducted business with Riley and Ellie, as they were far less conspicuous to conduct business with than the known smugglers and thieves within the QZ. They got to ride his loyal steed, Princess, in exchange for a regular supply of whiskey. It was well known around the QZ that Winston was constantly in hot water with his superiors by showing up to duty drunk on a regular basis. His face was often beet red as he rode around on his horse and his words tended to slur. His face was often covered in stubble and his uniform was constantly wrinkled; an antithesis to the conformity of the military’s grooming standards. The only reason he was never relieved of duty was due to the fact the military needed every able body possible to maintain order in the powder keg that was the Boston QZ.

Riley shrugged and shook her head. “Well, how many people get to die of natural causes in this world?”

Ellie sighed. “None that I know of.”

“Exactly,” Riley nodded. “So let’s see what he left us.”

Ellie smiled and followed Riley’s lead down a flight of stairs back to the ground floor. They came to a small tent that had been set up in the middle of the floor where Winston and other soldiers would often gather to drink, away from the watchful eyes of authority. The tent walls were covered with photographs of the soldier’s friends and family, and the occasional topless pin-up girl. Winston’s uniforms still hung from hangers and empty whiskey bottles laid scattered next to his sleeping bag. Riley dug through a chest while Ellie’s eyes scanned the tent for more windows into the life of Winston. The sound of empty bottles clanged around until Riley excitedly discovered a near-full bottle of whiskey from the chest.

“Bingo!” Riley held the bottle triumphantly over her head. She extended the bottle toward Ellie. “Want some?”

“Sure,” Ellie accepted the offering. She unscrewed the cap and brought the bottle up to her lips.

“Watch out, that’s not beer,” Riley warned.

The booze went from Ellie’s lips to the floor in a spraying mist immediately. She fumes made her eyes water and her lungs erupt in a fit of coughing and hacking. She wiped the flavored solvent from her lips. “Oh my god, that’s disgusting,” she handed the bottle back to Riley.

Riley raised the bottle in a toast. “Cheers, Winston.” She took a swig of the bottle. Her face twisted and contorted in discomfort, but managed to force the booze down. Her lips puckered as she set the bottle down. “Wow, that’s strong.” She opened the flap of the tent and exited out to the bleak darkness of the mall.

They wandered aimlessly through the mall, peering into the shops that had been picked clean. Pharmacies, clothing stores, jewelry stores; carrion picked clean by scavenging looters since the outbreak. A Halloween themed store named Spooky Town remained stocked and relatively untouched, as its merchandise seemed meaningless to the means of survival. They entered the store to the sight of plastic jack-o-lanterns, witch hats, cloth, and paper ghosts and plastic skeletons dangling from the ceiling, mannequins adorned in vampire attire, and a seven-foot-tall display of Frankenstein’s green-skinned monster. Ellie wandered further into the store, glancing at the shelves for anything of interest. She turned around to the horrifying sight of a figure in a demonic clown mask lunge towards her, letting out a sharp growl as it grabbed her by the shoulders. Ellie lunged back in fear as the growl morphed into childish laughter.

Ellie forcefully shoved the demonic clown in Riley’s clothing away. “You dick! That’s two times today!”

Riley's laughter continued as she glanced around the store. "How the hell did we never find this place? C'mon, I've got the perfect mask for you." She guided Ellie towards a wall lined with latex Halloween masks and grabbed a mask of a werewolf, covered in coal black fur and a gaping mouth bearing long, jagged canines. Its eyes were a sickly yellow color with pupils the size of pinheads. She handed the mask to Ellie.

"What is this, like a wolf-man or something?" Ellie asked, inspecting the mask in her hands before placing it over her head.

"Yeah, that's badass," the demonic clown nodded in approval to the wolf-girl. "Now roar!"

Ellie felt ridiculous. She merely said: "Roar," instead of letting out an actual roar.

The demonic clown with bulging yellow eyes, jagged yellow teeth, and a balding head of red hair shook its head in disapproval. "Ellie. Really? Fucking roar."

The she-wolf knew that the clown would not stop until she let out an actual roar. She summoned the inner-beast from deep within her core, letting out a fierce roar as she raised her arms above her head, like channeling the energy around her into the cry of the beast.

The demonic clown in Riley's clothing slapped her thigh and clapped for a moment, laughing all the while. "There she is!" she cried. "Now let's see what else this place has."

They meandered through the aisles of the store together until Ellie spotted a human-shaped skull sitting on a plush velvet pillow. The cardboard display above it had an illustration of a skeleton draped in purple robes, adorned in a wizard's hat and a purple robe, holding a sparkling crystal ball in its boney fingers. The bold text wrote: "ASK SKELESEER A QUESTION... SHAKE FOR YOUR FORTUNE!" Ellie picked the skull up from the pillow and inspected it. It was a simple magic 8-ball in the casing of a skull. Regardless, she began shaking the skull as she pondered a question in which she wanted answers. "Are we gonna die today?" She flipped the skull over to its bottom side. It read: *Seems dreadfully unlikely*. "Whew, what a relief," Ellie spoke as she set the skull back down upon its pillow. They grew bored of the Halloween store and exited, dropping their grotesque masks on the floor on the way out.

"Question time," Ellie said. "What does Marlene say about my mom?"

"Not much," Riley began as she dug further into her memory. "I gather that they were friends even before the outbreak. Oh, and she said your mom was a nurse. Apparently, they argued and fought a lot, but they were close." Riley winked at Ellie. "Sound familiar?"

Ellie nodded with a weak smile.

"C'mon," Riley placed a hand on Ellie's shoulder. "Let me show you that thing we talked about, we're almost there." She led a short walk to a set of swinging doors that led to a pitch-

black hallway that smelled of dust and stale air. The hall led to a set of stairs that descended into the basement of the mall.

“What are we doing here?” Ellie asked as she trailed behind. “This place is creeping me out.”

“So,” Riley began as they made it to the bottom of the staircase. “You know how we thought they only powered certain areas of the city?”

“Yeah?”

“Follow me, then.”

Riley led her to a room in which circuit panels and wires covered the wall. She flipped open the large circuit panel on the far wall of the room. “So, it turns out the whole city has power. They just flip the fucking circuit breakers. All you gotta do is flip it back.” Riley gestured towards the large red switch in an inviting gesture.

Ellie approached and grabbed the lever switch in her hand. “There’s no way this is gonna work.” She flipped the switch anyway. The lights above them flickered and sputtered before finally coming to life. The soft hum of the bulbs glow gently banished the darkness in rays of unfurling light. She smiled as she looked up and around with a smile as more and more lights and machines sprung to life.

“What did I tell ya?” Riley said with a smirk.

“Wait, so the whole mall is lit up now?”

“Let’s go find out,” Riley exited the room and headed back towards the stairs. They made their way up the stairs to the swinging doors that led back to the mall.

“Wait,” Ellie instructed Riley just before they burst through the swinging doors back into the main area of the mall. “I know what you’re trying to do, and, well, I’m really glad that you’re not dead. I mean, I’m glad that we’re back together, and...”

“I didn’t mean it,” Riley interrupted with a solemn look. “All that stuff I said before I left. I didn’t mean any of it.”

“Riley...” Ellie found herself short on words and redirecting her eyes from Riley’s to the floor. “You’re such a sap.” Those words brought a smile back to Ellie’s face and contagiously spread to Riley’s.

“Bitch, you started it,” she giggled and Ellie joined in. They collected themselves as Riley began to press her body against the swinging doors. “Are you ready?”

“Totally,” Ellie joined her weight with Riley’s and pushed the door open. “Are you kidding me?” she thought aloud as a wonderful spectrum of colors poured into her contracting pupils.

*

Her eyes crept open like rusty hinges as the warm evening in her dreams turned to a frigid chill. Callus snorted in the corner and pulled on his reins that were tied to the counter, bothered by the tight confines of the frozen yogurt shop. Joel’s chest slowly rose and fell as Ellie crawled over to check on him. The bleeding had been contained but the tight constriction of the duct tape made breathing more difficult than normal. The duct tape and t-shirt patch job were not enough. She had to find particular medical equipment. Bandages and disinfectant remained in her bag, but she desperately needed sutures and a needle if she was to save Joel’s life. She grabbed the padlock and key left on one of the dining tables. “Watch over him, Callus,” she ordered the horse as she closed the sliding metal gate behind her. She slipped the padlock on and locked-in the vulnerable Joel and Callus. She turned to the open halls of the mall, in bewilderment of where to begin her search. A pharmacy was as good of a place to start her search she deduced.

The mall was as surreal of a sight as she had seen in her journey since leaving the quarantine zone. Snow gently fell through the shattered skylights, irradiated by the morning sun in a twinkling glint. The main hall of the mall was a farrago of cellular phone kiosks and a military staging ground, all of which looked abandoned long ago. She walked through the silent halls of the mall, her eyes sweeping in all directions. She soon came across a promising prospect of a store, Weston’s Pharmacy. The doors and windows were smashed open, leaving a doormat of shattered glass welcoming Ellie as she stepped through the door. The store appeared to be looted and picked clean. Its shelves were nearly bare and the cash register was nowhere to be found at all. She quickly browsed the shelves and inspected whatever pill bottles remained. She shook one of the bottles and found it was empty, causing her to throw the bottle to the ground in frustration. That bottle proved to be one of many others that sat in empty nugatory. “What the hell?” she wanted to scream but ended up a whisper to herself. “Did people just swallow the pills and leave the bottle? God dammit, everything’s been picked clean.” She checked behind the cashier’s counter and felt her heart skip a beat. A colony of red and brown fungus sprouted from a desiccated human host, spores falling from the body like flakes of dandruff. The fungus spread across the floor and inside the counter in close proximity to the body like metastasizing cancer. The only evidence that the host was human was the lower half, the dress pants and shoes. A hybridized feeling of horror and hope gripped her when she spotted a medical kit gripped in the scaly hand of the fungal-human abomination. It didn’t have the same physical appearance as a runner, stalker, clicker, or a bloater. She froze in thought, wondering if there was any chance that it was alive. Either way, she needed what was in that supply kit. She pulled the pistol from her belt and held it in her right hand as she reached towards the kit with the other. She gripped the first aid kit and began to pry it from the dry, flaky, lifeless hand. The rigid plates of fungus

crumbled like coffee cake as she managed to pry the kit completely free, and to her relief, the body remained cold and void of life. She opened it to find it much like the pill bottles on the shelf, empty. “No...” she whispered to herself as anxiety and doubt began to suffocate the small spark of hope left in her heart. She kicked the first aid kit in frustration at the body of fungus and exited the pharmacy back into the main hall.

The mall was much larger than it appeared from outside. From the approach, it looked moderately tall and wide but was unable to perceive the depth of it. She ventured further into the heart of the mall, passing countless hobby shops and clothing stores. The mall began to look like a vacant crypt of consumer culture until the next bit of hope appeared. Never had such a dismal scene ever bestowed hope upon a young girl such as this. A handful of dead soldiers and infected were littered across the ground upon a bed of spent brass, but above them sat a helicopter that had crashed through the ceiling. A red cross upon a white background was emblazoned upon the olive green paint. Its nose protruded from the upper floor balcony and its tail remained lodged in the ceiling. The helicopter looked as if it was a fallen angel with clipped wings, weeping over the horrors it had witnessed from above before crashing down into the chthonic horrors below. The scene of dead soldiers and infected being picked at by squawking crows felt all too recurrent to Ellie, the cross upon the helicopter’s husk was all that mattered to her. She backtracked to the nearest escalator and climbed the motionless steps to the second floor and then over to the crashed helicopter. The helicopter shifted and moved as she climbed onto its tail. She could feel that the helicopter’s balance was not steady, and there was a good chance it could tumble down to the ground floor. The tail rotor felt as if it would lift if much more weight shifted to the front of the helicopter. She held her breath and slowly crawled up the chopper’s tail until she lay flat under the mangled rotor blade. By this point, her body was well past the safety net of the second floor. She held her breath and whispered a small prayer as she carefully slid down towards the landing skids. Her toes made contact and she lowered the rest of her weight down as slowly and evenly as possible. The helicopter creaked and moaned and shifted around under her feet but remained stable for the moment. The moment she passed through the open side door of the helicopter was when she felt the helicopter slide from under her as the nose dipped further down towards the ground floor. She stumbled and slammed into the back of the pilot’s seat as the chopper slid forward. The dead pilot’s head dangled like an apple on a tree, being pulled down by the hungry tendrils of gravity. Bits of shattered glass chimed as they shifted and spilled around the cockpit, while the glass embedded in the pilot’s helmet from the impact of the crash remained firmly in place. Just as Ellie felt helpless and accepted whatever fate awaited her on the ground below, the helicopter’s fall came to an abrupt halt. She sat quiet and motionless and waited for the chopper to continue its fall, but it remained in place. She dared not stick her head out the door to investigate what prevented the helicopter from falling.

A first aid kit was within arm’s reach, snuggled in some mesh netting in the helicopter’s interior. She carefully pulled it out, mindful of how she shifted her body around. Tears of joy and relief formed in the corners of her eyes as she opened the first aid kit. She gasped in relief when

she saw it was fully stocked and the supplies inside were still in their sealed packaging; bandages, gauze, a tourniquet, adhesive tape, surgical gloves, iodine solution, antibiotic ointment, and most importantly, sutures. She latched the box shut and held it close to her body, hugging it as if a child would hold a puppy. “I’m never letting you go,” she repeated, pulling the kit closer and tighter to her body. “I’m never letting you go.”

*

Ellie was hugging Riley so tightly that she could feel her shoulders compressing against her ribcage. She squirmed away from the suffocating hug while Ellie gazed around at the twinkling lights of the mall.

“Are you kidding me?” Ellie said with her jaw agape in amazement.

“Told ya,” Riley said alongside her.

They walked together toward the center of the hall towards a carousel that was lit up like a Christmas tree.

Ellie hesitated her approach. “Wait, won’t the soldiers spot the mall being all lit up?”

“Nah, the exterior lights don’t work,” Riley assured without a hint of doubt in her voice.

“How do you know?”

“Melanie, this Firefly told me about it.”

Ellie shrugged off any worry and mounted one of the horses on the carousel while Riley manned the control panel.

“You ready for this?” Riley asked.

Ellie nodded in confirmation and Riley started the ride. Ellie cheered in joy as she held on to the golden ribbed pole as the horse gently bobbed up and down. The carousel made a few passes before she beckoned for Riley to join alongside her. She hopped up onto the carousel and mounted the inner horse next to Ellie. Together they groaned and sulked as the carousel began to malfunction and power down a few seconds later.

“No, I just got on. Live!” Riley shouted as she spurred the wooden horse with her heels.

“Well, I had fun at least,” Ellie said still sitting upon her horse.

“I got something that should make up for it,” Riley said as she pulled a small booklet from her backpack and cleared her throat. “What did the triangle say to the circle?”

Ellie excitedly inhaled. “What is that?”

“You’re so pointless.”

“Fuck you, you found another pun book?” Ellie’s eyes were wide with joy.

“What did the cannibal get when he showed up to the party late?” Ellie thought aloud for a moment but answered with a shrug. “A cold shoulder!” They laughed together at the stupid, silly pun. “Here, it’s for you,” Riley handed the book to Ellie.

“You know, you might be my favorite person again, just saying,” Ellie said as she thumbed through the book.

Riley dismounted her horse. “I know my girl, just saying.”

Ellie followed suit but kept the booklet open in her hand. “I heard two peanuts walked into a park,” she read as she followed alongside Riley. “One was as-salted.” She read one pun after another as they took their time strolling through the mall, laughing and giggling along the way, feeling like their age for the first time in a long time.

“A boiled egg in the morning is hard to beat.”

“I’m reading a book on anti-gravity and it’s impossible to put down.”

“It’s not that the guy didn’t know how to juggle... he just didn’t have the balls to do it.”

She put the book away when they saw a photo booth next to nestled between a car display and a pretzel cart. The sign was a flashing neon pink and read “Snapshare,” with a white star in the hollow of each “a”. A white bunny stood three-feet tall next to the sign with its paw-arms crossed across its chest and big black sunglasses over its eyes. “How does this work?” Ellie asked as she pushed aside the cloth curtain and stepped into the booth. The walls of the booth were a bright powder blue with a dark pink stripe running across the walls directly above a dark purple stripe. The television glowed blue with the word “START” in white across the screen with a large arrow pointing down at a large pink button directly under the screen.

“Just follow the instructions, I think...” Riley said as she followed her into the booth and closed the curtain behind them. “Should I do it? No. You know what? You do it.” She took a seat next to Ellie on the bench.

“And off we go,” Ellie said as she pushed the large pink button. An option of themes popped up across the screen. “Cool” contained a picture of the same bunny in sunglasses displayed on the top of the booth, “Friends” had a bunny high-fiving a frog, and “Love,” had a bunny holding out a flower to another bunny. Ellie selected the “Cool” option. They posed for the series of pictures with a variety of different faces; smiling, scary, goofy, and for one picture Riley slipped her fingers behind Ellie’s head to give her bunny ears. The digital copies of the pictures displayed on the screen and asked if she would like to share the photos on Facebook.

“What’s a Facebook?” Ellie asked.

“Maybe it prints our faces in a book?” Riley shrugged.

Ellie selected the “no” option followed by the “print” option. The screen responded with “printer out of order”.

“Oh, come on, fuck you,” Ellie said as repeatedly mashed the print button again and again. When that failed she slammed on the screen with her fist, and Riley mimicked her actions. They gave up and lamented when the print screen changed into a blue screen of death. Together they slumped back against the bench.

“I think we broke it,” Riley sighed.

“I think we did, too,” Ellie agreed.

Silence lingered in the booth while they fished inside the rivers of their mind for the next words to speak or the next idea to propose.

“Want to keep exploring?” Riley asked.

“Hell yeah,” Ellie agreed with a smile.

They left the booth and continued their march through the mall. They had completely lost track of time until the omnipresent voice of authority came across the PA system once again

ATTENTION. THE 6 AM SHIFT STARTS IN TEN MINUTES. ALL DRAFTED CITIZENS MUST REPORT FOR DUTY. ANYONE ABSENT AT ROLL CALL IS IN VIOLATION OF THE LAW.

“I hate that lady,” Ellie confessed the obvious to Riley. “Why does she have to sound like such a dick?”

“I know, right? Here’s how I’d do it...” Riley cleared her voice and altered her voice as if she was Little Red Riding Hood, reminding the wolf how big its teeth were. “Attention. The 6 AM shift starts in ten minutes...”

Ellie laughed and snorted, causing her to laugh even more. “Okay, let me try, let me try,” she said. She mocked the authority with the same tone of voice that Riley used. “All citizens are required to carry their ID card at all times...”

“Report all signs of infection to your nearest area administrator,” Riley chimed in. “Remember...”

“Inaction costs lives!” their voices joined in unison. They laughed together and agreed they would make for a better voice for the city. They took a working escalator back up to the

second floor, thrilled to experience the feeling of a technological relic helping them ascend to a higher level.

The next stop of their tour of the mall led them to Raja's Arcade, it's bright, flashing neon pink sign radiating nostalgia of the archaic arcades of the 1980s and 90s that Ellie and Riley had only heard through the fond memories of other residents in the quarantine zone.

"No fucking way," Ellie said as she entered under the bright pink sign. Just when she thought that the night might have peaked, there was always another apex around the corner, waiting under a bright glow of fluorescent light. But to their disappointment, none of the arcade games worked. All of their screens were blank and without power, many of them cracked and destroyed. One game cabinet named "The Turning" was powered up, but the screen was a blank slate of blue. Her face turned sour. "I was really hoping I was going to get to play something."

"You still can," Riley replied.

Ellie looked perplexed. "How?"

"Come here," Riley said as she threw her arm around Ellie and guided her to the joystick and buttons bathed in the blue light from the deadpan screen. "Close your eyes," she instructed.

Ellie looked at her out of the corner of her eye in a mix of confusion and suspicion but relented nonetheless.

Riley moved Ellie's hands for her around the controls. She slipped her left palm over the joystick. "You use this to move," and she spread Ellie's pointer, middle, and ring fingers across three buttons with her right hand. "This is punch, kick, and you block with this one."

Ellie could feel some of the bright blue light directly in front of her uncomfortably piercing through her eyelids, but she nodded in agreement to Riley's instructions. "Okay," she said.

"First," Riley stepped back a few feet from the arcade machine. "You have to choose your character. "You're playing as the unstoppable, claw-wielding, yet, drop dead gorgeous, Angel Knives."

Ellie's eyes crept open. "Am I supposed to picture all this?"

"Eyes!" Riley scolded.

"Okay, sorry," Ellie apologized and sealed her eyes shut again.

Riley continued the narration. "She stands on the edge of the Shadow Temple, an ancient mystical building where they hold the tournament of the immortals. Your opponent, Blackfang, steps out of the temple. He's a super ripped white dude with three arms. He's out for your blood."

Drums of war beat in Ellie's head as she imagined Angel Knives and Blackfang getting into their fighting stances.

"Ready?" Riley asked.

"Bring it," Ellie nodded.

"Round one starts," Riley said. "Blackfang rushes towards you. He throws a double punch in your direction. Jump up!"

Ellie's middle finger slammed down on the jump button.

"There," Riley noticed Ellie's correct response. "He overshot you. You land behind him. Quickly, punch him in the back!"

Ellie slapped the button multiple times with her pointer finger.

"You nailed him with a wicked elbow, taking off like 15% of his health. He spins around and comes back with a shadow claw attack. Hold back and block to counter!" She watched Ellie input the right command. "You throw up your elbows just as he executes his combo. You skid backward but take no damage. The final block knocks him off his balance. He could recover any second, quickly counter with a heavenly lift!"

The intense fight continued in Ellie's imagination as Riley continuously narrated the battle and issued input commands. Ellie correctly executed all of the commands Riley ordered until Blackfang was put down and needed to be finished. She mashed the buttons seemingly at random in order to issue the finishing strike.

"The screen turns dark," Riley narrated in a voice that inspired anticipation. "Angel Knives' blades begin to glow. She pierces his torso again and again until his heart flies right out of his chest. She winds back her leg and roundhouses his head clean off. A geyser of blood covers the entire playing field. That is an Ultra Kill. Angel Knives throws her fists in the air. You win."

"Nice, I win, fuck yeah," Ellie said as her eyes crept back open and she stepped back from the controls.

"Not bad for your first time," Riley complimented. "So, what did you think?"

"It was alright," Ellie replied gazing back into the glowing blue screen.

"You loved it," Riley laughed as she playfully punched Ellie in the arm.

"Yeah, I kinda did," she giggled. "You know what, we should head back though. I need to get back to the barracks."

“You got plenty of time,” Riley insisted as they headed to the arcade’s entrance together.

Ellie shook her head. “Riley, I don’t have any more strikes left at this place. Let’s just pick up where we left off tomorrow.”

Silence lingered in the air and Riley’s gaze drifted towards her feet. “I can’t.”

“Well, we’ll just do it another day then?”

Riley’s fingers nervously wrung her hands together and remained silent.

“Okay Firefly-girl, when?”

“They asked me to leave,” Riley croaked.

“Leave what?” Ellie asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Boston. I’m supposed to join a group in another city” She looked up to see Ellie’s eyes widen in shock. “I argued with them to stay here, but you know how Marlene is. Nothing is easy with her. Everything’s a test,” she groaned. “They’re picking me up tomorrow.”

Riley’s words acted as a siphon, draining out any joy and enthusiasm Ellie had inside of her. She realized that tonight was not a rekindling of a friendship, but rather a farewell. She searched inside her heart and mind, seeking the right words. But she could only find one. “Okay.”

Riley’s brow furrowed in vexation and her eyes beamed into Ellie’s. “That’s it?”

“Well, what do you want me to say?” Ellie threw up her arms in frustration.

“I don’t know,” Riley shrugged. “How about some friendly advice? I’m being serious.”

“Why did you bring me here?” Ellie asked.

“I wanted to see you,” Riley struggled to say.

“No,” Ellie stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “Why did you bring me here?” she repeated.

Riley’s eyes avoided Ellie’s like Medusa’s stare as she fumbled her words. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know...” Ellie mirrored her words with a disgusted scoff. “You want my advice? Go.” She stared down Riley who continued to stand there in silence. “C’mon, let’s just say our good-byes.”

Riley guided Ellie's attention to the faint sound of music lingering in the air, emitting from deeper inside the mall. "I'm going to go check out that music," Riley said as she brushed past Ellie.

"Riley," Ellie shook her head as she watched her friend walking away, for perhaps the final time. "Riley!" she called hoping for her to turn back, but she only moved further away as her steps quickened and turned a corner out of Ellie's field of view. "Goddammit," she growled to herself as she felt a dense, dark pit forming in her stomach. "Where the hell is she off to?" Ellie followed in Riley's steps, listening carefully to the music in hopes of finding the source of the faint melody. "Riley!" she called out. "Riley!" She followed the trail of musical notes to an electronics store where Riley leaned against a smashed, emptied display case. The faint music that echoed through the store was bubbly and relaxing.

"Are we just done talking?" Ellie called out as she approached Riley.

Riley's body remained of stone, but her head turned towards the sound of Ellie's voice. "I don't know, are we?"

"You don't get to be pissed off at me," Ellie said. "I'm pissed off at you!"

Riley climbed to her feet and faced the encroaching Ellie. "For what? Asking you what you think?"

Ellie looked incredulous. "When have you ever cared about what I think? We were good. We were better than good, and then you told me to fuck off, and then you just up and vanished! This whole day... did you feel guilty? You want an out? I'm giving it to you."

The words weighed heavy on Riley. Their eyes remained locked together amidst the silence while Riley tried to translate the maelstrom of dissonant feelings into a comprehensive string of words. "I'm supposed to be holed up on the other side of town," she said. "I get caught as a Firefly, I'm dead. Guilt didn't make me cross a city full of soldiers, Ellie. And yeah, I did some shit I don't know how to take back, but I'm trying." She watched Ellie's stare and expression soften with her statement. "Speaking of," Riley continued as she unzipped her backpack and tossed it to Ellie's feet. Two water guns tumbled out of the back. They were not in the original packaging, but still in pristine condition. Water sloshed around the bright orange liter reservoirs, contrasting neatly with the fluorescent green plastic body. "Those water guns you've been dreaming of... I nearly got shot for these. Surprise," she shrugged.

Ellie's face was painted in guilt as she stood there in silence. She shuffled over to the backpack and grabbed both water guns, holding one in each hand by the pump. "Okay," she sighed. "First, I'm gonna destroy you," she extended one of the water guns to Riley. She accepted the offering with a look of suspicion on her face. "And then we'll talk."

“You’re about to get drenched,” Riley said as she began pumping the gun, building up pressure.

“Let’s see what you got Firefly-girl,” Ellie taunted as she mirrored Riley’s pumping.

They took cover in close proximity to each other and exchanged fire. Jets of water exchanged through the air in a duet of childish laughter. As the water tanks ran lower they both came out into the open and exchanged blasts, letting each other be soaked. The match was dead even until Riley ducked under a blasting stream and caught Ellie dead to rights. A long, pressurized torrent caught her in the face until she had to release her hand from the pump to protect her eyes. Riley laughed as Ellie waved her arm in submission and coughed up tiny sloughs of water, pooling together with the water dripping from her clothes and hair at her feet.

“I just fucked you up,” Riley taunted, arrogantly running a hand through her wet hair.

“You barely even hit me,” Ellie boldly denied, wringing water from her tank top. She quickly turned the muzzle of the gun towards Riley and let out one last pressurized blast, soaking Riley with the remaining water left in her gun. “See what I did?” Ellie returned Riley’s taunting gesture with one of her own. “Never let your guard down, didn’t the Fireflies teach you that? Someone should revoke that dog tag!”

“Oh, now you’re just being sneaky and mean,” Riley said, wiping the water from her eyes and face. “Okay then, let’s refill these things and go again, rematch!”

As much as Ellie enjoyed the thought of another water gun fight, she knew time was running short. “Riley, I would love to do this all day, but...”

Riley nodded in understanding with a feeble smile on her face. “But you gotta go back,” she finished Ellie’s sentence for her.

“I gotta go back.”

“Okay, fine,” She placed her free hand on Ellie’s shoulder. “Can I at least walk you home?”

“I guess,” Ellie smiled.

“Come one, let me get my backpack.”

Ellie followed Riley to her backpack. She picked it up from the floor and placed her water gun back into it. “Hey, so...” Ellie began as she handed the water gun to Riley. “I said it like an asshole, but I totally meant it. You should go. This is something you’ve wanted for, you know, forever. So who am I to stop you?”

The words tasted bittersweet to Riley. “The one person that can.”

“No, please, don’t go. I’ll be so miserable without you,” Ellie’s plea carried a sarcastic tone but there was unadulterated truth in her words. She closed her eyes and shook her head, realizing this was no longer the time for mockery. “I’ll be fine and you’ll be fine. We’ll see each other again.

Riley smiled and fetched one of the water guns from her backpack and handed it back to Ellie. “We should keep these. Not gonna do me any good.” She handed the second water gun to her. “You still lug that Walkman around?” she asked.

“Always,” Ellie said as she shuffled the items in her bag around to make room for the water guns.

“Let me see it.”

“Here,” Ellie opened the compartment she kept the Walkman in and handed it to Riley.

“What’s in it?” Riley asked as she examined the dated technology.

“That tape you gave me.”

Riley laughed and placed a friendly hand on Ellie’s shoulder as she zipped up her backpack with the barrels of the water guns protruding through the zipper. “You really will be miserable without me.”

“Shut up,” Ellie sarcastically snorted.

“Leave that, follow me.”

“What are we doing?” Ellie asked as she got up and followed Riley.

Riley walked over to a functioning stereo and connected its auxiliary cord into the headphone port of the Walkman. “I Got You Babe” by Etta James blared over the store’s sound system. She began dancing around until the dancing brought her to the top of a glass display case. Her feet smoothly glided across the glass while her arms moved and waved in perfect rhythm.

“Really?” Ellie asked.

Riley’s hands began to clap to the beat as her shoulders and head swayed from side to side. “C’mon, get your ass up here.”

“So stupid...” Ellie muttered but climbed atop the display case next to Riley nonetheless. She bobbed her head and stiffly bent her knees in a lame attempt of dancing.

Riley grabbed her hands and swayed them to the rhythm for her until she broke through the awkward discomfort. Soon her arms began to move freely on her own and her feet felt lighter

and more dexterous. Soon the two were freely dancing together atop the display case, showered in the dance floor lighting of the blue glow of blank television screens mounted on the walls above them. Before long Ellie's smile began to feed and her feet began to slow while the music continued to play. Riley's concern caused her to halt her dance and grab Ellie's hands.

"Hey, are you alright? What's wrong?" she asked.

Ellie looked deep into Riley's eyes, unblinking. "Don't go," she whispered, barely audible amidst the music.

The quietly spoken two words felt like a lead blanket over Riley's shoulders and concrete shoes around her feet. Everything felt heavy; her body, her mind, her heart. She found her hand reach up to her own neck and pulled off her disc-shaped Firefly dog tag and dropped it to the floor below.

Ellie could find no words in response to her gesture. Her gratitude was returned with a passionate kiss to Riley's lips. She could feel the electricity resonating with the vibrations flowing through the air. Her mind felt cloudy and hazy as their lips parted. Her eyes could barely focus on Riley's face while the rush of oxytocin left her in a daze. "Sorry..." she whispered.

Riley showed noticeable joy on her face as her breathing sped up. She felt as if Ellie could see her own heart beating out of her chest as if reaching out to her. "For what?"

Ellie shook her head around as if to shake loose the cobwebs of overstimulation, trying to shift gears from pathos to logos. The moment felt so right, but she knew there was an intrusive horizon in their future. "What do we do now?"

Riley shrugged her shoulders, her mind unable to leave the bubble of the moment. "We'll figure it out," she claimed. "But I don't think Marlene's gonna go for it."

"Wait..." Ellie froze, grabbing Riley by the arm.

Shadows moved and shifted outside the store while growls and snarls filled the air, inharmonious and discordant with the music. Riley slid her pistol from her waistband and held it at the ready.

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Ellie's eyes shook back to life, unknowing if the past few hours of her life had been a dream or a hallucination or something intermediate. Her hands ached and were coated and caked in blood. When her eyes adjusted further she saw Joel lying on the floor, fading in and out of consciousness as his chest slowly but steadily rise and compress. She saw sitting next to her an open medical kit, containing a bloody needle and a thread that tailed into a splitting end where it had been clipped for the larger spool. She tried to remember as she buried her face into her knees, squeezing herself for warmth. It was as if Riley had guided her to the medical kit in the

crashed Army helicopter and back to Joel and Callus. It was as if Riley was the one who guided her into the back corner of a sporting goods store in the corner of the mall, where she found a hunting bow and a quiver of arrows that sat further behind the bloodied medical kit. Like Riley somehow guided her to her success and survival.

No matter how fast they ran, no matter how many doors they tried to barricade behind them, the infected kept finding a way to always be nipping at their heels. If the door leading to the mall's roof wasn't locked up tight, they may have had an option of escape, but instead, it ended in a final stand of sorts. Riley stood in front of her and fired round after round, dropping infected as they advanced. When the thin front wall of infected had absorbed enough bullets for the second echelon, Ellie stabbed and thrust furiously with her knife. They fought the infected with everything they had; bullets, knives, love for the one fighting next to you. The growls and snarls were eventually phased out from the throbbing ringing of their ears after the continuous sonic booms of their last line of defense. Their lungs still drew breath as their hearts beat in frenzied unison. They had survived the attack, but there was no peace amongst the silence. Blood dripped from Ellie's right forearm while Riley's left hand flexed and convulsed and writhed from a painful bite. Ellie was the first and only one to cry at that moment. She will never forget the words Riley said next that turned her watery eyes from tears of pain and sadness to tears of hope. When she dropped the pistol at both their feet as they sat against the walls looking into each other's eyes.

"The way I see it, we got two options. Option one: We take the easy way out. It's quick and painless. But, I am not a fan of option one. Option two: We fight."

"Fight for what? We're gonna turn into one of those things."

"There are a million ways we should've died before today. And a million ways we can die before tomorrow. But we fight, fight for every second we get to spend with each other. Whether it's two minutes or two days, we don't give that up. I don't want to give that up. My vote: let's just wait it out. You know that we can be poetic and just lose our minds together."

"What's option three?"

"Sorry."

It was option two that guided them down their separate paths before the government and the Fireflies ever could. One of the bites led to mental degradation, an unquenchable rage that threatened others, and a hunger that would not be satiated; a bite that managed to kill her before she could even turn into one of those things. The other bite gave hope to those around her, a bite that sent her across the country whether she willed it or not. It was a bite that inspired hope for the remnants of the human race. Her heart and mind overflowed with the memories and lessons learned from Riley. The sight of Joel made her vow that she would never let another one so close to her go. Not to the infected, not to anyone. A lesson she pulled from the treacherous abyss of her memories, memories of a time gone and forever left behind.

Winter



Chapter 15

Winter 2033

Nederland, Colorado

The road to Salt Lake City was proving to be a snowy slog amidst the mountains of Colorado. The freezing, perilous weather assaulted them from all sides, while the cold went from nipping during the day to a vicious mauling at night. Joel showed signs of recovery, but somewhere along the journey, his wound began to show signs of infection. He could not keep food down and had trouble even standing. Ellie had Joel strapped to a sled that she fastened to Callus' saddle that dragged behind him. She bundled him up to stay warm and kept a slow pace to make the ride as bearable and safe as possible. The constant stops to check on him slowed them as well, and with the food supplies nearly depleted, Ellie had to start hunting. Her skills with a bow and arrow were improving by the day and rabbits had been plentiful in their burrows amongst the shallow dunes of snow. The meat that fragrantly cooked over a campfire sated their hunger for a time, but it returned, often. Callus' figure withered with the departure of twenty or so pounds, but he remained strong and determined, developing a taste for roasted rabbit.

They took refuge in the garage of a large, empty house they had found in a small neighborhood along the main road. Ellie examined the taut string on her bow and ran her finger across the arrow's pointed tips. She examined the room and she slipped a pair of gloves over her hands in preparation for another hunt before the sun went down. Joel lay bundled up in coats and blankets on the floor. His face winced in pain as the cold gripped his body, adding to the ache of the tender, infected wound. She washed and attended to the wound on a daily basis, but unsuccessfully prevented the infection due to the conditions of life on the road. The stitches held nicely but were sewn into discolored and foul-smelling flesh. He was able to talk and hold a conversation, but only for minutes at a time. Joel's mind was often barraged by the pain or murky from an opiate-induced haze.

The bow was in good shape and all the arrows were sharpened and accounted for. She bent down to feel Joel's head to check his temperature. He was running hot, and his skin was a ghostly blue, filling Ellie with a sense of dread every time she laid eyes on him. His survival was kept at the forefront of her thoughts at all times.

"Be safe out there," Joel croaked in a raspy voice; his eyes remained closed. Ellie assured him not to worry. She always made sure to slip a pistol under the coverings of blankets and tarps in case Joel had to defend himself in her absence.

Callus stood docile, hitched to a post outside the house. His tail carelessly swished back and forth, brushing against his freshly grown winter coat. Ellie stroked Callus on the nose and unhitched him from the post before climbing aboard the worn leather saddle. It was cold but bearable and the sky was an unblemished blue. The snow was light and powdery and sank up past her calves. Her green army jacket on top of her burgundy hoodie was enough to keep her warm, at least during the daytime. She rode Callus away from the cabin and carefully into the forest. Loose rocks and hidden ruts were amongst the many types of hazardous terrain lurking under the fluffy ivory surface. She found a clearing that she liked and tied Callus' reins to a tree before she settled behind a boulder and scanned the area for any movement. The rabbits in the region had coats as white as the snow they hid, so movement was the only thing that would give away their position. Before long, a rabbit emerged from a burrow about fifty feet away. Its long ears stood up and its nose twitched as it stood on its hind legs, scouting for threats. Ellie slowly and smoothly pulled back on the bowstring until it was taut, and let loose an arrow. It cut through the air and impaled the rabbit through its body before it could react, killing it instantly. She wiped a thick film of sweat from her forehead and trudged through the snow over to her fresh kill. She picked up the rabbit's body from the pool of red snow that formed under it and pulled the arrow from it.

"This won't last very long," she sighed to herself as she examined the animal's size. It was small and lean, only a minuscule amount of meat. She wiped the blood from the arrow and slipped it into the quiver hanging from her back and took her disappointing kill over to Callus where she tied a strip of leather around its neck and let it lifelessly hang from the saddle. A hoarse snorting sound directed her attention to the tree line. A large buck with majestic antlers wandered amongst the trees in search for food, steam billowing from its nostrils. It did not remain stationary for long and moved farther into the trees, breaking Ellie's line of sight. Her hunger hijacked her mind, painting images of succulent tasting venison roasting over tonight's fire; meat that would stick to her ribs and leave her feeling full for the first time in what seemed like forever. She found herself racing toward the trees in pursuit of the buck. Her mouth watered like a voracious wolf as she chased after her prey. She followed the trail of tracks through the snow. The snapping of a low hanging branch provided an audio cue that directed her attention to the buck sprinting through the trees and leaping over small boulders, kicking up snow along the way. The hunt led her deeper into the forest where she spotted the deer again, gnawing on the bark of a tree. She carefully prowled closer to her prey, moving from tree to tree for concealment. She found a clear line of sight atop of a large boulder where she carefully notched an arrow and pulled the bowstring as far back as it would go. She took a deep breath and loosed the arrow as she exhaled. The arrow soared through the air and landed between two of the deer's ribs. He let out a cry of pain and bolted off further into the woods, leaving droplets of blood to highlight the trail of prints in his wake. She wasted no time and continued the chase, catching up to the buck much quicker than she had anticipated. The buck's head flailed in pain from the arrow lodged into its body while Ellie prepared her next arrow. It flew as true and straight as the previous arrow and landed in the buck's right hind leg. It let out another painful cry and awkwardly bolted off further into the woods, favoring its wounded leg.

How are you still alive? She followed the droplets of blood, as they eventually became small pools of snow soaked in red. The blood loss seemed more severe with each set of prints

that the deer wouldn't last much longer; she just had to keep stay on its trail until it eventually collapses and dies. The bloody prints eventually led to a clearing that overlooked a valley. A series of dilapidated buildings built from wood were scattered throughout. Some were the size of cabins or barns, others much larger. *What is this place*, she thought to herself as she followed the prints down the snowy slope into the valley. As she descended into the valley her heart began to race and hair on the back of her neck stood on end. A feeling of paranoia and dysphoria spread within her, a feeling of unease permeating from her bones. The trail of blood led to the deer's body lying in the snow near the front of one of the many wooden cabins erected in the valley. She hovered over the deer and inspected it. It was still as ice and drew no breath. The faint sound of a snapping twig from behind her caused her to notch an arrow and pull all the slack from the string, turning towards the direction of the sound.

"Who's there? Come out!" she called out, hiding the uneasiness from her voice.

"Hello," A man stepped out from behind a tree that stood next to one of the cabins. He held a hand in the air as he signaled that he meant no harm. He had a head of black hair along with a black mustache and thin black beard. He wore blue jeans and a blue winter coat. A hunting rifle was slung over his right shoulder. She wagered her was a decade older than Joel. "We just want to talk," he said in a calm, non-threatening tone. Another man stepped out from behind the cabin close to the tree. He wore a black beanie cap and a black coat and black ski pants. He did not appear armed.

Ellie moved her arrow from one target to the other as she scanned the two men and sized them up. "Any sudden moves and I put one right between your eyes!" she threatened. She aimed the arrow at the man in the black beanie. "Ditto for buddy-boy over there." She switched her aim again to the man with the rifle. Her arrow declared who the questions were directed at. "What do you want?"

"The name's David," the man with the rifle gestured to himself. "This here is my friend James. We're from a larger group. Women, children; we're all very, very hungry.

"So am I," Ellie responded, watching the two men like a hawk. "Women and children, all very hungry too."

David and James exchanged a glance. "Well," David began. "Maybe we can trade you for some of that meat there. What do you need? Weapons, ammo, clothes?"

"Medicine," she snapped. "Do you have any antibiotics?"

"We do, back at the camp," David insisted. "You're welcome to follow us-

"I'm not following you anywhere," Ellie snarled as she gripped the bow tightly. "Buddy-boy can go and get it. If he comes back with what I need, the deer is all yours. Anyone else shows up-

"You put one right between my eyes," David finished her sentence, raising his finger to the light bridge of hair that connected his eyebrows. A smile appeared on his face, the type of smile that shape-shifts between mockery and sincerity.

"That's right," Ellie said with confidence.

David's eyes switched between Ellie's cold stare and the cold metal tip of the arrow pointed at him. He softened his stance and turned to James. "Two bottles of penicillin and a syringe," he said. "Make it fast." He watched James' mouth fall agape and his shoulders shrugged in protest. "Go on," David insisted, unconcerned with James' silent but obvious opinion on the matter.

James gave Ellie a long stare before disappearing behind one of the many empty cabins in the area. Ellie's aim followed him the entire way.

"I'll take that rifle," Ellie said as her aim swung back to David.

"Of course," he complied, sliding the weapon off of his shoulder and tossing it at the base of Ellie's feet.

She ordered him to back up before slinging her bow over her shoulder and placed the arrow back in its quiver before bending down to pick up the rifle. She pulled back the bolt on the hunting rifle to check for a chambered round. She sent the bolt forward and her eyes ran down the runway of the sights towards David's chest.

The wintery wind filled the void of silence as she kept her aim intensely fixed on David. His body language remained calm and relaxed despite being on the potential receiving end of his own rifle.

"He's probably going to be a while," David said. He gestured to one of the nearby empty structures. "You mind if we take some shelter from the cold?"

Ellie considered his proposition. "Take him with us," she waved the barrel of the gun at the dead deer.

David dragged the deer by the antlers, leaving a bloody trail to the doorway of the decrepit house. With Ellie's approval, he built a small fire from the splinters of the home that were sprawled across its frozen dirt floor. He grabbed larger kindling from the nearby trees to add to the flame. "You know, you really shouldn't be out here all on your own," he said, warming his hands by the fire.

"I don't like company," Ellie replied from the other side of the fire.

"I see," David nodded respectfully. "What's your name?"

"Why?"

"Look. I understand it's not easy to trust a couple of strangers. Whoever's hurt, you clearly care about them. I'm sure it's gonna be just fine."

"We'll see." The one-sided conversation was interrupted by the dreaded familiarity of the inhuman rhythm of clicking and abhorrent breathing. They shot to their feet and scrambled to different windows in search of the threat. A small pack shuffled through the snow, heading directly for their cabin. David pulled a pistol from his waistline and fired upon the group of infected. Ellie's eyes widened at the sight that managed to pull her attention from the small group of infected. "You had another gun?" she shouted before taking a shot of her own.

"Sorry," David shrugged as the last of the small pack collapsed in the snow. The hail of gunfire drew attention from more infected that emerged from the nearby tree line. The small

pack that wandered into the camp was only a small slice of a much larger herd. He checked the magazine in his pistol. "Okay," his voice shook from both the fear and the cold. "I'd really like my rifle back now."

"No," Ellie shouted. "You have your pistol."

"I hope you know how to use that thing. Make every shot count," he said as he dragged the deer's carcass into the house and bolted the door shut behind him. Ellie stuck the rifle's barrel through the window between two of the boards that were nailed to the window. She pulled the trigger and sent the fungal hive of an infected head and sent it sprinkling like bloody confetti across virgin vanilla snow.

"I've had some practice," she said as she bolted another round into the chamber. "I've done this before." Another round rendered another infected body still among the snow. She landed one round after another on target, dropping infected like it was a morning routine. The bodies of the infected fell as quickly as the brass from each round dropped to the icy dirt floor.

David watched Ellie fire as he reloaded his pistol. The girl's form was impressive. Her shot was as clean as any seasoned survivor he had worked with. He pulled one of the loaded rifled magazines he had stored under his coat and tossed it to Ellie as the magazine ran dry. "You weren't kidding. You're a better shot with that thing than I am." He continued firing rounds from his pistol, assisting Ellie in thinning the pack of infected. Ammunition was running low, but the last of the infected were still in the blood and fungus covered snow. Their ears were pummeled with the ringing from the gunshots. David took a look out of each window in search of any more infected. "I don't hear anything," he said. "I think we did it kid," He looked at the brass strewn across the dirt floor. "You handled yourself pretty good back there. I'd say we make a pretty good team.

"More like lucky," Ellie replied.

"No, no, no," David waved his finger as he began to poke at the fire. "No such thing as luck. No, you see I believe that everything happens for a reason."

"Sure," she muttered as she rubbed her hands together for warmth.

"I do," he smiled. "And I can prove it to you. Now, this winter has been especially cruel. A few weeks back I sent a group of men out to a nearby college town to look for food. Only a few came back. They said that the others had been slaughtered; on some college campus by a crazed man. And get this; the crazy man is traveling with a little girl.

Ellie felt her blood run cold as she could see the meaning that swam in his eyes.

"You see? Everything happens for a reason."

Ellie grabbed the rifle and pointed it at David, still sitting next to the fire. "Don't move!"

"Now, now, don't get upset," he said, waving his finger. "It's not your fault. You're just a kid. James, lower the gun."

James aimed the barrel of his pistol pointed towards the back of Ellie's head. She never heard him creep up to the window at her back. "No way David, I'm not gonna let her go."

“Lower the gun,” David repeated as he unbolted the door, allowing James in. “Now give her the medicine.”

James entrance through the door captured the aim of Ellie’s rifle. He tossed a small plastic bag with the medicine at her feet. “The others won’t be happy about this,” he sourly said to David.

“Yeah, well, that’s not your concern.”

Ellie picked up the medicine at her feet and made her way for the door, not letting her guard down even for a second.

“You won’t survive long out there,” David said, staring into the embers of the dying fire. “I can protect you.”

“No thanks,” Ellie said as she slipped out the door, making her way to the hill that would take her out of the valley back to where Joel was resting. She climbed the hill and ran through the forest, looking back over her shoulder every few steps. She didn’t see any pursuers among the trees as she struggled through the snow, but it somehow felt their breath was on the back of her neck. She made it back to Callus and removed his reins from the branch she had left him tied to and climbed aboard the saddle. She pushed Callus to a full gallop through the snow under a canvas of snowy pines, her racing heart matching the frantic pace of the horses’ hooves as they kicked up snow around them.

They reached the house as the sun began to disappear behind the mountains. She brought Callus into the garage with her; if the men in the valley were to see him outside the house, they knew the horses’ owner was close by. She leaned against the wall as she felt her head spinning and her stomach turning. The anxiety left her breathless. She had dealt with all sorts of people in her young life, but something about David filled her with dread. He seemed kind, even generous, but it felt as if the friendly face was only a veil. She vowed to stay clear of that valley and prayed she would never cross paths with him or James again. She snapped herself out of the unpleasant thoughts and turned her attention to Joel, still bundled up on the floor in the corner. His breaths were shallow bits of steam.

“I only managed to get a little bit of food,” Ellie frowned as she sifted through her backpack. “But I did get this,” she said as she pulled the penicillin and syringe from the sealed plastic bag. Joel was near comatose and didn’t respond, not even a groan. She pulled back the covers and pulled up his shirt. She soaked a rag in alcohol to clean the stitched-up wound before forcing the syringe into the bottle. She pulled back on the plunger and watched the barrel of the syringe filled with the medicine before tapping it to ensure there would be no air trapped in the needle. “Here we go,” she whispered to herself before sticking the needle into Joel. He let out a small grunt of pain and his face winced. Normally she hated to see him in any pain, but the fact that he even responded to the pain gave her a sense of hope and relief. “Sorry,” she whispered as she wiped the small trickle of blood that spilled out with the tip of the needle. “All done, that’s it,” she said as she pulled his shirt back down and threw the blanket back over him. He violently shivered and his teeth were clattering. She laid down next to him, using her backpack as a pillow. “You’re going to make it,” she whispered to him.

Chapter 16

Winter 2033

Nederland, Colorado

The voices were muffled by the garage door but were loud enough to pull Ellie from her dream-filled slumber. She pulled herself up from the ice-cold concrete slab of a floor and looked out the garage door windows that she covered up with cloth scrap curtains. A small pack of armed men methodically moved from house to house, searching for something; or someone. Ellie's blood ran as cold as the floor she slept on and she could feel her heart in her throat. *Oh, fuck. They tracked me.* Deep down, she knew it was inevitable. There was no way for her to cover her tracks, at least this quickly. She scrambled back to her backpack and threw it over her shoulders.

"I'm gonna draw them away from here," she said, unable to determine if Joel was conscious enough to understand her or not. "I'll come back for you." She went back to the window and watched and waited for the right moment. The small band of men split up to search the different nearby houses, and that's when Ellie decided to make her move. She opened the garage door as quietly as she could, guided Callus out of there, and shut the garage behind her before leaping up into the saddle. She quietly clicked her tongue and bumped her heels into her mount's sides. She felt exposed as she rode down the street as quietly as possible, hoping that she could make it to the forest of shadowy pines. To her left, the front door of one of the houses swung open. A man emerged, wearing a puffy winter jacket, winter gloves, jeans, and boots. His face was concealed behind a black wool scarf that was wrapped around his face.

"There she is!" the man yelled and made a sprint for the horse.

Ellie went for her pistol and took aim. Callus reared onto his hind legs in fear of the man now rapidly approaching them. The sudden jolt from the horse caught Ellie by surprise, causing the pistol to slip from her cold and clumsy fingers. She helplessly watched the pistol fall to the ground next to Callus' back hooves. The man closed the distance quickly and had Ellie by the arm in a matter of seconds. His strong grip dug into her while he kept Callus stationery by grabbing onto his reins. Ellie grunted and growled as she thrashed and struggled to free herself from the grip of the menacing man.

"Hey! I got her!" the man yelled, alerting his nearby companions who were searching the other houses. "Get your ass over-

Ellie's knife was out of her pocket and into the man's throat before he could finish his cry for backup. Blood flooded his airways and dripped from the scarf while he made grotesque garbling noises as he fell to the snowy ground. His call for help was cut short, but successful nonetheless. More men in filthy winter clothing and their identities hidden behind scarves and hoods emerged from houses throughout the neighborhood.

"What are you waiting for? Shoot her!" one of the men called out, raising his pistol towards Ellie from across the street.

To her surprise, another man that emerged from the same house slapped at the pistol, disrupting his aim. “But David said-

“Fuck David! Shoot her now!”

Ellie flicked the reins and slammed her heels into Callus, who took off as if awaiting the command. He made a dash for the forest, valiantly galloping at full speed through a storm of gunfire like a World War I warhorse.

“Go! Go!” Ellie roared, pushing Callus to his limits as the bullets began to scream past them. The rounds passed by them one after another, narrowly missing their targets. The frequency of the shooting increased, as more men emerged from houses and began taking aim at their targets. Ellie’s dread swelled as she realized the group was much larger than she surveyed from within the garage. She had known danger and turmoil for her entire life, but this was the first time she felt deliberately hunted like wild game. She could hear the shouts behind her in between the supersonic snaps of speeding bullets. They sounded like a pack of hounds that had found the scent they were searching for; bullets nipped at their heels rather than the razor-sharp canines from their frothing maws. The dead rabbit from yesterday’s hunt dangled from the saddle as Callus continued to rush forward. The tree line of the forest grew closer and closer with Callus’ thunderous steps, but a muzzle flash from a nearby window caught him in the neck. He collapsed at full speed and slid across the icy street without a single cry of agony. Ellie’s body slammed painfully to the ground. The impact left her feeling as if her body was depleted of all oxygen with a single blow and left her head spinning. The blurring in her eyes began to subside, and the lifeless vessel of Callus came into focus. His passing at any other point in time would have brought tears to her eyes, but the sadistic pursuit she faced forced her to postpone the mourning of her loyal warhorse. She crawled across the street, dragging her aching body towards the horse’s body. The stock of her rifle stuck out from under the body, still lodged in its scabbard on the saddle. She pulled with all of her strength, but the rifle refused to budge, still secure in the scabbard and trapped under the weight of Callus’ deadweight. Her futile efforts forced her to leave the rifle and hurry into the forest, in an attempt to lose the pack of hunters at her heels. The snow was deeper this morning, as a fresh layer of powder fell from the sky as she slept through the night. She trudged through the now knee-deep snow further and further into the forest. Looking north sent chills down her spine, as it led to the valley in which she ran into David and set this whole manhunt into motion. She continued west, tripping and slipping on the rocky ground that was slick with a thick sheet of snow. Her heart beat faster than her feet could move, bogged down by the elements. The angry, sinister voices could be heard from behind her, gaining ground by the minute. She relentlessly pushed west; cold, hungry, and only armed with a small knife. Through the corridors of tall pines, a large frozen lake came into view. The morning sun brilliantly glistened on its icy surface. She ran until she reached the shores of the lake, looking around for any means of throwing the hunters off her trail. She spotted a large lakeside resort along the southern shore of the lake. It has the look of a massive cabin, built from wood with massive windows on the second and third floors overlooking the lake. The roof was thick with snow and ice but appeared relatively untouched overall.

Ellie looked at the massive resort and decided that it would be a better place to hide than out in the open on the lakeshore. She quickly moved south until she arrived at the front door. She gave it a tug, but it was locked up tight. She searched the perimeter of the house until the sight of fluttering curtains directed her attention to an open window. She climbed through the window

into the resort. The inside was frigid and cold as the outside, but the walls protected her from the howling winds. She emerged into a sprawling foyer with high a ceiling. The skylights were covered in thick sheets of snow, which blocked out the sunlight, giving the resort a gloomy feel. Suitcases were lined and stacked on luggage carts of nameless people whose vacations were forever cut short with the collapse of civilization. She peered out a nearby window, scanning the lake. The hunters emerged from the forest and had arrived at the shore, following Ellie's footprints like a trail of breadcrumbs. She crouched under the window, feeling helpless; there was no escape. She decided her best chance of survival was to hide and wait it out. She found a janitorial closet and hid. Weaponless and without a guardian she was helpless, hugging her knees in the corner of a cold dark room, praying to evade the hunt. Soon she heard the footsteps creaking on the wooden floor, closer and closer to where she hid. She gripped her knife tightly, the last and only line of defense left. The doorknob jiggled but refused to budge. She readied her knife, pointing its razor-sharp tip towards the door. The door burst open from a swift kick and Ellie sprang from the closet like a jack-in-the-box, prepared for her final stand. The knife sliced through the air, but a hand wrapped around her wrist and pushed her to the floor. An arm slung around her neck and began to squeeze. She thrashed with all her strength but was completely overpowered. Her head felt light and her vision blurred as she struggled for air. She felt her eyes rolling back as the grip continued to tighten.

"Relax," a hauntingly familiar voice whispered into her ear. "I'm keeping you alive." David felt Ellie's body weaken as the thrashing lessened and the flow of the blood to the brain was cut. "There you go."

Ellie could see the trail of small, wet footprints overlapped by larger boot prints leading straight to the closet before her vision went dark. Her grip on her blade weakened until it slipped from her fingers like a leaf of a tree embraced in winter's grasp.

*

Ellie awakened to her body shivering on a cold cement floor. Her head was pounding and her body still ached from falling from a horse. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and found herself behind a barred door along a wall of chain link fence in a small rectangular area. The look and feel of it resembled an ordinary kennel. A rhythmic thudding lured her to the cell door as her eyes began to refocus. A man in a black beanie and black coat continuously slammed a cleaver down on a chopping block like a butcher at work. She expected to see the deer she had hunted yesterday. But she felt her stomach turn as a human hand was pushed from the table to a pile of flesh on the floor. She pushed herself from the cell door and pushed her back against the back wall, feeling the fog and grogginess replaced by fear and absolute disgust. She could feel the bile rising in her stomach and her gag reflex activating. Before she knew it her legs gave out and she slumped back to the floor.

Ellie's noises distracted the butcher, who turned with his clear held high above his head. James gave her a silent stare of loathing that pierced through Ellie before dropping the cleaver on the chopping block and exited through the door. Without James' body blocking the chopping block's view, Ellie could now see a pair of human torsos placed there like slabs of meat. Their arms, legs, and heads were severed and sitting in a pile on the gelid cement floor. She found the strength to spring to her feet and shake the cell door with whatever strength she could muster. A set of padlocked chains secured the door, making all of Ellie's efforts futile and worthless. She walked along the chain link fence, looking for any possible means of escape, but there was none.

David entered the room with James tailing right behind him. “How are you feeling?” he asked with a subtle grin on his face. He was carrying a tray of food and a bottle of water with him.

“Super,” Ellie said with a look of disdain.

David smiled and slid the tray under the cell door. “Here, you should eat.” The plate on the tray contained hunks of meat mixed in with a bed of rice. “I know you’re hungry, you’ve been out for quite some time.”

Ellie looked at the place and then at the torsos on the chopping block. “What is it?”

“It’s deer,” David said, his face showing no signs of deceit.

“With some human helping on the side?”

“No, no, I promise,” he said with a friendly smile. “It’s just deer meat.”

“You’re a fucking animal,” Ellie said as she slumped to the floor and began devouring the food. The meat tasted delicious, but she had to take David’s word for it. She had never tasted deer in her life, nor human flesh for that matter.

David crouched on the other side of the cell door to get on the same level as his prisoner. “That’s awfully quick to judge,” he said. “Considering you and your friend killed how many men?”

Ellie swallowed and looked up from her food. “They didn’t give us a choice.”

“And you think we have a choice?” David rebuked. “Is that it? You kill to survive, and so do we. We have to take care of our own by any means necessary.”

Ellie gave David an intense look. She felt hatred and disgust for him, but could not deny the sincerity in his eyes. “So now what?” she asked. “You gonna chop me up into tiny pieces?”

“I’d rather not,” David said, shaking his head with a smile. “Please tell me your name.”

Ellie kicked the tray back under the door as she finished eating. “You’re so full of shit!” she screamed as she climbed to her feet and tugged on the cell door again.

“On the contrary,” David said as he rose to his feet. “I’ve been quite honest with you, now I think it’s your turn. It’s the only way I’m gonna be able to convince the others.”

“Convince them of what?” she asked with suspicion.

“That you can come around.” He wrapped his hands around Ellie’s on the bars of the cell door. “You have heart. You’re loyal. You’re special.”

Ellie placed one of her hands on David’s embracing his touch while she looked deeply into his eyes, only shifting her eyes to his waist for a split second, where a set of keys hung from his belt. She brushed her palm against his fingers in a sign of affection and understanding. She took advantage of David’s docility, and wrapped her hand around one of his fingers. He cried out in pain as she twisted and bent his finger until she felt a wet pop and pulled his hand further into her side of the barred door. She swiped at the keys on his hip, her fingertips brushing against the saw-toothed sides of the keys, but unable to grasp them. David pulled back, slamming Ellie’s

face into the barred door. Her face and shoulder met cold iron over and over, but her many fingers remained wrapped around David's one, twisting and pulling at the tendons and joints and reaching for the keys.

A strong pull by David resulted in Ellie's face slamming especially hard into the bars, allowing him to pull his hand from the squeeze of the vicious little she-viper. He shrieked in pain as he looked at his finger; distorted and grotesque. "You stupid little girl!" he shouted at the girl holding her bloodied face on the kennel floor. "You are making it very difficult to keep you alive! What am I supposed to tell the others now?"

"Ellie," she said as blood flowed from her cracked lip.

"What?"

She shot a mucousy blood clot from her nose onto the floor. "Tell them that Ellie is the little girl that broke your fucking finger.

David looked at his hand and back at Ellie, her eyes cold and focused like the serpent she was. "How did you put it? Hmm? Tiny pieces?" He walked to the door. "See you in the morning, Ellie."

*

Joel's eyes crept open to the sight of unfamiliar surroundings. His body still badly ached, but his fever had resided. He pulled himself out from under the blankets and crawled to his knees, moving slowly in anticipation for a jolt of sudden pain. "Ellie?" he coughed and waited for a response. "Ellie!" the silence of the house was the reply he received. He struggled to his feet. *Where is that girl?* He bent down and grabbed his backpack on the ground next to him and slung it over his shoulders as his teeth ground against one other in discomfort. He struggled up the basement stairs into the kitchen where she was nowhere to be found. "Ellie!" he called again, clutching his side. His search led him out the front door, and still no trace of Ellie, or Callus for that matter. "Ellie!" he cried into the howling wind. He spotted prints in the snow that resembled the hooves of a horse, and his intuition guided him along the trail. *Where the hell are you?* "Ellie!"

Before he could call out again a pair of attackers descended upon him from between a pair of houses along the road. A forearm wrapped around his neck to restrain him. "I got you asshole," he grunted as he tightened his hold around Joel. "Finish him off!" he shouted to his partner who drew a hunting knife from his coat. "Now hold still!"

Joel delivered a swift kick to the crotch of the knife-wielding man, who dropped his knife and grabbed his parts as he collapsed to the ground in a loud moan of pain. As soon as his kicking foot was firmly beneath his he swung his head back, catching the man who held him square in the nose. He could feel the cartilage of the nose crushed by the force of the strike and could feel the attacker's warm blood spill into his hair. The pain that had dogged him faded with the rush of adrenaline. He turned around and grabbed the attacker's head and forcefully slammed it into the icy street with a loud smack. "Son of a bitch," Joel growled as he spit on the unconscious body. He walked over to the man he kicked in the groin, who now crawled on the ground to retake the knife that fell from his hand. He sent his boot across his face with all the strength he could muster and watched the man fall in a motionless heap. "You're coming with me," he said as he picked the body from the ground and dragged him into a nearby house. He

zip-tied the attacker's hands and legs to a chair before returning outside to attend to the other attacker. He dragged him back to the same room and zip-tied his hands to a wall heater in the corner of the living room. He moved the unconscious man in the chair close to the man tied to the heater and waited. He dug through his back and found a bottle of painkillers. He decided to take one as he felt the adrenaline begin to subside and the pain reintroduce itself. The two men eventually gained consciousness and Joel went to work. He sent one right hand after another across the face of the man tied to the wall heater until blood poured freely down his face and one of his eyes was swollen completely shut. His knuckles felt raw and bloodied but still, the blows continued.

"What do you want?" the man in the chair screamed as he watched the brutal pummeling of his friend. "What the fuck!" the fear trembled in his voice.

Steam billowed from Joel's nostrils like an enraged bull. "You wait here," he ordered the beaten man tied to the wall heater. He shuffled to a nearby table and picked up the knife that was intended for his guts only moments ago. He walked over to the man in the chair with heavy steps and bent down to look him directly in the eye. "Now," he growled, his fingers restlessly gripping the handle of the blade. "The girl, is she alive?"

"What girl? I don't know no girl," he said.

Joel, short on patience drove the pointed tip of the knife deeply into the man's left knee. The blade sunk nearly to the hilted grip, tearing through flesh, bone, and sinew.

"Fuck!" the man cried in pain, breathing heavily. His eyes rolled back into his head from the pain, and rocked in his seat, unable to squirm and flail due to the restraints. His head fell forward, fading in and out of consciousness from the overwhelming pain.

"Focus right here," Joel snarled, slapping his face to keep him conscious. "Right here," he said pointing to his eyes. "Or else, I'll pop your goddamn knee off." He clasped his hand around the knife's grip again. "The girl," he repeated.

"She's alive," the man managed between gasps. "She's David's newest pet."

"Where?"

The man hesitated to respond. Joel remained short on patience and twisted the knife with animalistic fervor. His face remained cold and blank, watching the man tremble in pain like a dragonfly whose wings were being torn away by a sadistic child.

"The lake!" he screamed. "The lake!"

He pulled the knife from the man's knee and shoved the grip into his trembling mouth. The man's blood dripped from the tip of the blade down to his jeans. Joel pulled a map from his pocket and held it eye level. "Now you're gonna mark it on the map," he ordered, pushing the map closer to his face. "And it better be the same exact spot your buddy points too," he said, poking him in the chest. "Mark it!"

The man guided the blade with his mouth and marked his own blood along the southern shore of Silver Lake, west of town. "Right there, the resort on the lake," he said after spitting the blade from his mouth. "You can verify it, go ask him, go on. He'll tell ya, I ain't lying!"

Joel folded the map and slipped it back into his back pocket and picked the bloody knife from the floor. He circled around the restrained man in the chair and dragged the blade from one side of his throat to the other. He turned his attention to the man tied to the wall heater while the man in the chair gurgled and choked for a final breath. Joel's eyes burned with frenzy and rage as he watched the man desperately trying to free himself from the heater.

"Fuck you man!" he cried, blood and saliva spraying from his mouth. "He told you what you wanted! I ain't telling you shit!"

Joel flicked off the blood that dripped from the blade. "That's alright. I believe him." He drove the blade deep into the man's neck.

*

"Wake-y, Wake-y!" James hissed as he pulled Ellie up from the kennel floor. "Come on!"

"Let me go!" Ellie shouted, woken by the sudden pulling of her hair.

He pulled her out of the kennel and tossed her to David, who violently cupped her face in his hand. He wanted to see the fear in the she-viper's eyes, but only caught her fangs. She bit quickly and ferociously, taking a bloody chunk from David's only good hand. He slammed a knee into her stomach, causing her to spit out his flesh as she fell to her knees. He shrieked in pain and ordered James to throw her on the chopping block. James delivered another blow to Ellie's sternum and pinned her to the chopping block as David grabbed the cleaver from the wall.

"I warned you," David spat as he raised the cleaver over his head.

"I'm infected! I'm infected!" Ellie screamed as soon as she caught her breathe from the consecutive blows.

Sweat beaded on David's forehead and the cleaver rattled in his hand as blood dripped from the other. His eyes burned with hate and his skin flushed red. "Really?"

"And so are you," Ellie licked David's blood around her lips.

David lowered his cleaver and looked towards James, who glared back at him with wide, alert eyes.

"Right there," Ellie looked directly to her right forearm. "Roll up my sleeve, look at it!" she cried.

"I'll play along," David said, slamming the cleaver into the chopping block inches from Ellie's right ear. He pulled back Ellie's jacket and undersleeve, revealing a toothy scar. His blood ran cold as his eyes remained locked on the bite mark.

"What did you say?" Ellie recalled with a mocking grin. "Everything happens for a reason, right?"

"What the hell is that!?" James shouted, pointing at the scar that had sent David into silence.

David shook his head and looked back to James. "She would have turned by now, it can't be real!"

“It looks pretty fucking real to me!” James shouted.

Ellie acted the moment they became vulnerable, turning against one another. With her left hand, she reached across her body and wrapped her hand around the cleaver’s handle and set it across her body, straight into James’ collarbone. He let out a cry as blade splintered bone into fragments with a crunch and sunk deeply into his soft tissue. David pulled a gun from his coat, but Ellie rolled off the table in an instant, causing David to fire wildly and miss. She rolled and fell onto the floor, next to James who squirmed on the ground, moaning and bleeding. He could not handle the gun efficiently with one hand supporting a disfigured finger and the other bleeding down the pistol’s grip. He could not get a clean shot at the she-viper as she slithered out of the room with haste, each bullet missing wide of its mark. She found her way out of the room and sprinted down the long basement hall. David’s screams of anger bounced along the walls and followed her down the hallway. She passed by a smashed window, where the icy wind rushed in and cut at her skin like tiny knives. A massive blizzard had rolled in as sheets of white fell from skies of pale grey. She considered crawling through the window and run for her life, but she knew it was not an option. There was no chance she could make it through the woods and back to town, back to Joel. The storm was blinding and navigation would be impossible; even if she could find a straight path back to town, the cold would devour her faster than the mouths of hungry cannibals. *What the fuck is wrong with these people?* Her mind raced along with her feet with the thoughts of monsters made flesh.

David moved like a mongoose, in pursuit of a bothersome snake. With every turn of a corner, the tail of her jacket fluttered past the far corner down the hall. His shots were hurried and ill-placed; the small and swift target remained one step ahead of proper sight alignment. One hand ached of a mutilated finger and the other stung from a bite of venomous tenacity. He barked down the twisting hallways after her, calling for her life. His shoulder brushed against the corner as he rounded and fired another shot. *Shame*, he thought he looked at his pistol with the slide locked to the rear. *The sheep and cattle among men were made for the meals*. He dropped the pistol to the floor, the metallic clang rang down the halls. *Such talent, such potential. Predators belong in a pack*. He unzipped his coat and grabbed a 14-inch blade in his hand. A drop of blood flowed down the black rubber grip and ran down the keen edge of the gleaming steel blade. “Where ya going Ellie? There’s nowhere to go!”

I need a weapon, Ellie thought as she bolted through the dark, mazelike hall. When she woke up in the kennel, all her weapons stripped from her. She felt naked and vulnerable with empty pockets and without a rifle within arm’s reach. A set of double doors appeared before her and she burst through, leading her out into a dining hall. Long wooden tables were lined with long wooden benches and wooden chairs that rested alongside the smaller rectangular tables. The dining hall had a hunting lodge theme, with the mounted heads of wild game and wooden wagon wheels decorating the walls. A cobweb infested chandelier hung from the ceiling’s center. A dark, dusty crown of bone antlers that birthed no light. Large wax candles were lit on iron sconces and lined themselves along the side walls. Light poured in through the window of the door at the other end of the hall. She opened it to the sight of impenetrable sheets of white fall from the sky and closed it behind her. Her eyes landed on a table set for a meal. A plate, a glass, a coffee cup set atop a thin saucer, a spoon, a fork, a knife for butter, and a knife for-

David’s silhouette appeared in the doorway like a shadowy specter. The flickering candlelight caught the long blade in his hand, flashing across the room into her eyes. Ellie’s hand

slid to the knife on the dining room table. It didn't have the same feel as the knife she had for years, but it had a sharp edge and a jagged tip. Perfect. Her nostrils flared and the blades' handle rubbed against her sweaty palm. This would be the place where she would make a stand.

*

The howling winds and sheets of snow enveloped Joel like a wintry leviathan. The wind whipped at his coat and snow collected in his beard and hair. His body still ached something awful, and the cold was only exasperating the problem. His head still pounded, but the fever had resided. He felt as if he had the flu, but after you had turned the corner on the way to recovery. Every step proved more difficult than the last as the snow grew deeper and deeper. He thought nothing of the two men he left bleeding out back in that house, only of Ellie. He hated himself for leaving her so vulnerable and embarrassed from switching roles from guardian to dependent. The winds screamed at him to give up and turn back, but his instincts refused to listen. His fingers and toes had gone numb and the icy grip began to spread to the rest of his hands and feet. He exhaustedly cleared the wintry forest into a clearing. He pulled the map from his coat and looked it over. If there was supposed to be a lake before him, the storm made it impossible to identify whether the snow stacked on top of grass, rock, or ice. A large structure could be made through the blinding snow in the distance. The intricate slants and angles of the lake resort that could be seen from there on a clear day were reduced to an out-of-focus dark spec among a moving curtain of white. The wind was now at his back, pushing him towards her.

*

David's slash went high and the blade slammed into one of the metal sconces. Sparks flew from the strike and sent the candle sailing into a nearby table. The flame fed from the tablecloth and slowly consumed it as the fire spread across the table. Ellie used her small stature and quickness to dodge the slashing and stabbing but was unable to effectively strike. The length of David's blade made getting inside of his defenses excruciatingly difficult. She knocked chairs into his path and slid under tables to the other side, making herself a hard target as David continued his relentless assault and the flames began to spread farther and farther.

David grabbed a candle from one of the sconces and set it to a nearby table cloth, willingly spreading the fire. "There's no way out of this one, Ellie!" he taunted, setting another tablecloth aflame. "So what's it gonna be?" Ellie flung one of the coffee cups from a table straight for David's face but he dodged it effortlessly. "I gotta admit," he began as the flames cast David's face in a sinister shroud of dancing shadows. "You had me back there! For a second, you shook my faith. But only for a second." The flames began to feed on the wooden furniture as the tablecloths were completely consumed.

Smoke slowly began to fill the room as the flames devoured its surroundings like a swarm of locusts. It gave Ellie an idea. She could not go toe-to-toe with him, but the dancing flames and thickening screen of smoke could give her an advantage; the element of surprise. She dropped to her hands and knees, crawling from under one table to another. The shadows moved in chaos as the flames danced around them. Before long her shadow and movement were lost among the entropy. She slithered from under one table to another, submerged under smoke and shadow with her knife at the ready, waiting for the perfect moment.

"I'm truly sorry about your horse," David taunted. "I truly am. I hope you take comfort in knowing that we won't waste any part of him." He scanned the room, hoping to lure Ellie out,

baiting her emotions. It worked, but not in the way he would have liked. Ellie sprang from the table behind him. She latched onto his back and drove the knife into his flesh repeatedly, but failing to hit any vital organs. She screamed in fury, sending the blade into any available part of his body. He recovered, grabbing Ellie with his free hand and tossing her to the floor. “Nice move, Ellie,” he said with a crazed look in his eyes. He raised the machete over his head and brought it down with an overhead slash. She rolled to her side under the safety of a table as his swing became increasingly cumbersome with each wound Ellie was able to inflict. “You know, you keep surprising me,” he said as he examined his most recent wounds. His body slumped in pain, but he was far from defeated.

Ellie kept moving, just as Joel had taught her. A moving target is a hard target. She grabbed another coffee cup in that had fallen from one of the tables. She threw it at the base of the eastern wall, causing a crash that grabbed David’s attention. He moved towards the sound as his body slumped in pain and coughed violently as smoke swirled around him. The distraction gave her the opportunity to circle around him again for a vantage point. She struck like a death adder, driving the pointed tip of the blade into his lower back. She pulled the blade out as quickly as it went in and lunged backward as David spun with a wild retaliatory slash. The tip of the blade caught Ellie’s cheek and sent a sharp pain across her face. She leaped at David again and drove the blade into his thigh. David yelped in pain and the blade slipped from his hand that was slick with blood. He grabbed Ellie by the hair and tossed her backward, causing the back of her head to slam against the wall. She rolled on the floor, disoriented from the force of the concussive blow. David bent down and retrieved his blade. He rose to his feet to deliver the killing blow, savoring the moment of imminent victory. His leg trembled as blood poured from the gash as he fell back to one knee. Pain coursed through his body like venom. Smoke stung at his eyes, throat, and lungs. The blade scraped across the wooden floor. *No*, he thought. *I want her to see it coming.*

*

Joel burst through the first door he could find. He was so cold that every muscle and bone in his body ached and his hands were locked in place like rigor mortis. The room was not heated, but the walls sheltered him from the wind and snow. Tiny icicles fell from his beard as his teeth chattered and his body violently shook. He looked around to room to the sight of shelves and hangers of winter clothing, neatly stocked and organized. Shelves of folded scarves and ski pants and fully stocked coat racks occupied the room’s four walls. The sight of a backpack sitting on the second shelf of the western wall drained the cold from his body as a fire ignited inside him. It was Ellie’s backpack, no doubt about it, down to the very pins that decorated the surface. She had to be close, the only question was if she would still be alive by the time he got to her. He looped his stiff fingers through one of the straps and slung it across his shoulder before passing through the door farther into the building. The next room was a meat locker. While a typical butcher’s shop or restaurant would have massive slabs of beef or pork dangling from its hooks, these hooks held the remains of humans. The sight of the hanging bodies flashed images of Pittsburgh in his mind. How the hunted dangled from their necks while these poor souls dangled by their feet like livestock. Each naked body, both man and woman, had large cavities in their chest and abdomen where their organs had been removed. *Oh, Christ I gotta find her fast..* Their faces were covered by cloth sacks, shrouding the faces of mouths agape and open eyes that stared into the infinite nothingness of oblivion. The bodies swayed like wind-chimes as he

pushed past them to the other side of the room. He opened the door to billows of smoke creeping down the hallway towards him.

*

Ellie regained consciousness via a swift kick to her ribs. She grabbed her sternum as she groaned, searching for her breath.

"I knew you had heart," David hissed above her, smoke swirling around him like a demon. He readied his machete in his hand as he applied pressure to his wounds with his other hand. "It's okay to give up," he said. He watched Ellie search for the kitchen knife on the floor, and pathetically crawl towards it once it was spotted. "I guess not," he sighed, shaking his head. "It's just not your style, is it?" He kicked her once again when she was close to reclaiming the knife. He slipped his machete back into his coat, straddled Ellie, and grabbed a handful of her auburn colored hair. "You can try beggin'," he hissed at her.

"Fuck you," Ellie spit into his eye.

His hands slipped from her hair to her small, delicate neck. "You think you know me?" he asked as he tightened his grip and watched her cheeks grow from pale white to a deeper shade of red. "Well, let me tell you something." Ellie's eyes began to roll into the back of her head and her arms flailed wildly. She tried to pry his hands away from her throat but to no avail. "You have no idea what I'm capable of!" his spittle splashed onto Ellie's face. He repeatedly slammed the back of her head to the floor. Her arms continued to flail as the red of her face began to turn a purple-blue. Her left hand went from flailing to a swing, and David felt a poke in the side of his neck. The knife slipped away from Ellie's fingertips as David's hands released from her neck. They went to his neck instead, and felt warm streams of red flowing into his hand.

She pushed him off of her as she violently coughed, trying to catch her breath as the smoke overtook the breathable air. She straddled David's squirming body as he coughed and sputtered on his back, and reached inside his jacket for the long-bladed knife. She raised it above her head and let the scream of a wrathful banshee, and brought the blade down into the center of David's face. She pulled the blade from cartilage and bone, and brought the blade down again, and again, and again. Blood, smoke, and fire filled the room in which man once feasted upon man. Ellie continuously slashed at his face, until there was no longer a David, only bloody ribbons of flesh sprinkled with fragments of bone. Her screaming turned to crying and her tears washed away her attacker's blood that sprayed back into her face. The sound of blade on flesh and bone was accompanied by a sonata of hysterical crying as streams and blots of blood covered the walls and floor.

"Ellie! Ellie!"

She felt a pair of strong hands pull her off of David. The voice told her to stop, but she struggled in the man's grip, resisting with every ounce of strength left in her weakened, exhausted body. "No! No! Don't fucking touch me!" she screamed. The hands went from her waist and slid past her neck, up to her cheeks that were smeared with blood and tears. The hands guided her eyes to his.

"It's okay, it's me, it's me!" Joel's eyes locked with hers. Ellie still struggled in his arms, disoriented by the trauma she had suffered. "Look! Look! It's me!" he pleaded with her, guiding her eyes back to his. He could see her eyes coming back into focus.

She buried her head in his shoulder, trembling like a frightened animal. “He tried to-”, she choked back tears as she tried to make sense of everything that had just happened.

Joel threw his arms around her and held her close. The guilt had returned, he had allowed this to happen. He had not been there to protect her, and this was the result. He vowed at that very moment that he would never allow her to experience something as horrible as this ever again as he slid one of her hands to the back of her head and stroked her hair. “Oh, baby girl,” he whispered, holding her tightly in the security of his arms. “It’s okay, it’s okay now.”

“Joel,” she sobbed hysterically. She felt drops of tears soak into her hair as he whispered something into her ear. He pulled her up from the floor and guided her to the door into the freezing, but fresh, breathable air as David’s body was left to burn with the remains of his fortress of ash.

Spring



Chapter 17

Spring, 2034

Salt Lake City, Utah

The warm breeze blew into their faces as they marched north along Interstate 15. It was a pleasant day; the sky was clear, the sun was warm, and they had not encountered any hostiles in weeks, neither infected nor human. A beautiful view of the Wasatch Range painted a rocky backdrop contrasting with the sky blue palate of the east and the north. Light, fluffy clouds formed angelic halos around the mountain's awe-inspiring peaks. Birds and insects sang their songs of celebration of the fair, comfortable climate. Ellie looked up at Joel, examining him. It was as if the stresses of the journey prevented the snows of a Colorado winter to melt in his hair. Streaks of grey had spread throughout, and his beard was no exception. At the current rate, the salt and pepper color of his hair would be a full slate-grey in no time. But a smile still remained fixed on his face and his wound was almost fully healed. He took a deep breathe, tasting the sweet spring air fill his body.

"You feel that breeze? I tell you, on a day like this, I'd just sit on my porch and pick away at my six-string. Yeah, once we're done with this whole thing, I'm gonna teach you how to play guitar. I'd reckon you'd really like that, huh? I'll teach ya how to swim as well, whaddya say, kiddo?" Ellie silently marched next to him, her eyes fixed on the northern horizon. She was unresponsive to his offer. "Ellie, I'm talkin' to you."

"Huh? Oh yeah, sure, that sounds great," Her smile was forced and her mind was occupied with other thoughts. The interstate was sprinkled with abandoned cars, buses, and RVs. Police cars, taxis, and ambulances were turned to rust and choked with plant life that sprouted from the pavement soil. The image of an airplane was plastered on the side of one of the derelict buses, an ad for Air West, an airline that once flew everyday people to all corners of the earth before the outbreak. "I dreamt about flying the other night," Ellie said, stopping her march to examine the jet on the side of the bus. It looked exactly like the one from her dream.

"Oh yeah?" Joel asked, stopping beside her.

"Yeah."

"Go on, tell me about it."

"So, I'm on this big plane full of people," she brushed away strands of hair that the pleasant wind blew into her face. "And everyone is screaming and yelling because the plane's going down. So I walk to the cockpit, open the door, but there's no pilot. I try to use the controls

but... I obviously have no clue how to fly a plane. And right before the crash, I wake up. I've never been on a plane. Isn't that weird?"

Joel shrugged. "Well, you know, dreams are weird." They walked for a while longer in silence. He pointed at a blue sign that read: SAINT MARK'S HOSPITAL NEXT EXIT. "Look. St. Mark's Hospital. This is where we get off." They walked down the exit ramp to the main road, forever congested with the ghosts of traffic's past. The cars ran in and out of the gates of an empty quarantine zone. Plastic bags clung to the concertina wire that looped along the top of imposing walls of concrete. "Look at that," Joel said with his hands on his hips. "Another city, another abandoned quarantine zone." Throughout their travels, they both learned that Boston may have been one of the last quarantine zones still standing. Order was rare in the post-apocalypse, and quarantine zones demanded the highest of order. Empty stomachs while extinction scratched and clawed at your gates drove the masses to inevitably panic, and the disintegration of order shortly followed.

They had walked for miles that day and decided to take a break. They found an empty three-storied building of a local community college and took a seat on the air conditioning unit on the roof. The building was covered in plants that grew up along the walls and crawled into the insides of broken windows. The building gave a satisfactory, but not spectacular view of the city. Joel pointed at the hospital to the northeast. A pair of massive Firefly banners were draped from the roof and tumbled down the walls, flanking a large cross on both sides. Bold black Firefly emblems were emblazoned on backgrounds of soft yellow. Ellie seemed uninterested by the sight of the hospital and was more interested at staring down at her feet while she cracked her knuckles nervously.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You just kind of seem extra quiet today."

"Oh, sorry."

"No, it's not... It's fine." Ellie looked up when an alien sound found her ears. "Oh my god," she gasped as a creature she had never seen before strolled up to the eastern wall. It was freakishly tall and was covered with brown spots on golden-white fur from head to toe. A mane of mohawk fur ran down the back of its neck that nearly stretched to the building's roof. It had a pair of knobs on the top of its head that looked like horns that were dwarfed in their infancy. A soulful brown eye on the side of its head watched Ellie while its black tongue whipped at the leaves of the plants that grew along the exterior of the building. The creature seemed unafraid as she approached, with her hand raised in a peaceful gesture. "Are you kidding me?" she whispered to herself.

Joel stood in shock by the sight of a giraffe casually grazing for food. It may have well had been a dinosaur, as he had never seen a real version of either in his life. He followed Ellie to the edge of the roof, where the giraffe came to eye level when it wasn't bending its neck downwards at the plants. The giraffe moved closer, examining the pair of curious creatures. Joel extended his hand and rubbed its long neck while Ellie froze in awe in being in such close proximity to a giant. He invited her to join him in petting the magnificent animal's neck.

"Hey there," Ellie patted the giraffe's neck with her sweaty palm while its ears twitched in different directions. And just like that, the giraffe gently pulled away from her hands and casually strolled away. She was sad to see the beautiful creature walk away but a smile remained on her face. "So fucking cool," she whispered to Joel as the spring breeze tossed her hair around. "Wow, look at those things," she pointed as they watched the giraffe rejoin its tower in the outfield of a nearby baseball field. They soon carelessly drifted into the heart of the city's quarantine zone and out of sight behind distant buildings. They sat in silence, still processing the rare sight of beauty in a grim reality. But actuality slowly crept back in, as the hospital drew their gaze once again.

"We don't have to do this," Joel finally broke the silence and turned to face Ellie. "You know that, right?"

Ellie shook her head in suspicion. "What's the other option?"

"We go back to Tommy's. We can just... be done with this whole damn thing."

"After all we've been through and everything that I've done," she sighed. "It can't be for nothing." She got to her feet and headed for the door to the stairs that descended back to the ground floor, and Joel followed. Their conversation continued as they began northeast towards the hospital. "Look, I know you mean well, but there's no half-way with this. Once we're done, we'll go wherever you want, okay?"

Joel managed a smile. "Well, I ain't leavin' without ya, so let's go wrap this up." Their route led them through a city of tents and medical trailers within the quarantine zone, nearly all of them branded with the initials of different government agencies, including FEDRA. "Well, this place takes me back," he said.

"How so?"

"It was right after everything went down," he recalled running a hand through his greying, scraggly beard. "I ended up in a triage just like this. Everywhere you looked you just saw families that had been torn apart from one another. The whole damn world seemed to have turned upside down in a blink"

"Is that after you lost Sarah?"

“Yes, it was,” he painfully confirmed.

“I can’t imagine losing someone you love like that,” her voice was filled with remorse. “Losing everything that you know. I’m sorry, Joel.”

He threw an arm around her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “That’s okay, Ellie.”

She suddenly dropped her backpack to the ground and opened one of its smaller compartments. “Joel, I got something for you,” she said, pulling something out of the pouch. “Maria showed this to me and I kind of stole it. I hope you don’t mind. Here.” She handed it to him.

In Joel’s hand was the exact photograph that his brother had handed to him back in Wyoming. A younger version of himself, with coal black hair and a neatly trimmed beard with his arm around his daughter Sarah. They shared the same wide eyes and joyous smiles while Sarah held her 1st-place youth soccer trophy triumphantly in the air. The blue and white stripes on her jersey were covered in grass stains and her face and hair was covered with dirt and sweat. She wore the number fourteen. Her other hand flashed a “peace” sign at the camera, as he remembered how much peace his daughter had brought him. The bottom right corner of the photo had been torn off, but all that was missing was the green grass of the soccer field.

Something felt different when gazing upon the photograph this time around. The feelings of pain, anxiety, and anger were no longer there. He was no longer transported back to the nightmarish moment when a soldier had opened fire upon them, stealing her away from him. His jaw didn’t clench and his fingers didn’t tighten; but rather, a sense of closure and acceptance filled his heart. Ellie was not his blood daughter, but she gave him purpose. No longer was it survival for the sake of survival, but a sense of duty and direction. The photograph now gave him peace, a reminder that Sarah’s demise was not the end of everything. Wounds heal but scars remain, each one a memory, a lesson; a story of its own. “Well, no matter how hard you try, I guess you can’t escape your past. Thank you, Ellie.” He slid the photograph into his pocket.

They continued northeast through the quarantine zone towards St. Mark’s Hospital. The QZ was thick with abandoned fuel trucks and military vehicles, including a few tanks. Rust ate away at the sea of scrap metal while grass and weeds sprung from the asphalt, reaching toward the sun. The quickest route to the hospital led them through a tunnel that was two lanes wide on both sides of the road. It was dark and damp, but patches of sun poked through the holes of the destroyed roads above. The sound of dripping water echoed through the tunnel as moss clung to the concrete and brick. Flowers bloomed in the patches of sunlight like a singer in the spotlight. As they moved further into a tunnel, a silent story unfolded before their eyes. Sudden congestion of military vehicles, many with visible damage, while some were completely immolated. Brass shell casings littered the ground like sand on a beach, and the bodies began to appear. The tunnel began to smell like a sewer as the body count grew higher and higher the further they ventured into the tunnel. Decomposing corpses adorned in both military and Firefly uniforms were

scattered in the open and behind the cover of cars. The ceiling of the tunnel was lined with black soot and the pavement was stained with blotches of red. They carefully tiptoed around the destruction and continued north. They wondered if any Fireflies remained alive inside the hospital, or the last of them laid dead at their feet. The further they walked, the more apparent the intensity of the battle. The body count grew from dozens to hundreds, leaving neither side the numbers to collect their dead and give them a proper burial. The northern end of the tunnel was a complete disaster. Water reached over their toes and climbed to Joel's knees and Ellie's thighs and inched up towards her waist. A barricade of cars and debris sat at the end of the tunnel, sitting in a deep pool of dirty water. The walls of the tunnels were nearly destroyed, by what appeared to be the site of a massive explosion. Sunlight poured through the windows of cars and over the side of the overturned bus that was used as a barricade. Four lanes of traffic completely blocked with concrete barricades, overturned vehicles, and stacks of tires. The damage to the tunnel walls caused water to continuously pour in from the damaged pipes inside the walls, now exposed and destroyed.

Joel groaned and rubbed the thick hair of his beard. "Should we turn back?"

Ellie looked over her shoulder and looked back at the long, dark tunnel and then forward toward the sunlight cracking through the porous barricade. Light shimmered across the surface of the water that grew higher with each step. "We can get past it."

They waded further into the flooded tunnel and began to climb the barricade. They climbed to the top of a bus, using its broken windows for footing. Their soaked jeans made their legs feel heavy as they climbed and felt the water run down their legs into their socks and shoes. They gazed over the barricade to the tunnel's exit. They began the short climb down the other side when Ellie's foot slipped and her body fell backward. The back of her head caught the bumper of a car, and her motionless body fell into the water with a loud splash that echoed across the tunnel walls. Joel gasped as he looked down into the rippling water and leapt down after her. Ellie's densely packed backpack dragged her under the surface of the water.. The shallow pool of water was enough to submerge her, a thin layer of water standing between her lips and precious oxygen. Joel landed in the water with a splash and rushed to her body and pulled her up to the surface. He dragged her a further ten yards through the water to a dry spot at the base of the upward ramp of the tunnel's exit. Her eyes were closed, and when he put his ear to her mouth, he could not hear a breath being drawn. He lightly slapped her face and commanded her to wake up, but she remained unresponsive.

"C'mon!" he yelled as he violently tried to shake her back to life. "Wake up!" He started to perform CPR, compressing her chest and breathing into her mouth as he pinched her nose shut. He felt himself panic as round after rounds of chest compressions and rescue breathing were not bringing her back. Water dripped from her hair and lips as her mouth hung open.

A pair of shadows crept along the walls behind Joel, partially blocking the light that poured in from the tunnel's end. "Hands in the air!" a voice called out.

Joel looked over his shoulder to see a pair of men in coyote tan tactical gear and olive green tactical vests. Black armbands that wrapped around their left arms displayed a white Firefly logo. They pointed their assault weapons directly at him, but he did not cease with the chest compressions. "She's not breathing!"

"Hands in the fucking air!" the one in the black beanie commanded, carefully advancing towards Joel.

"Come on! Ellie!" Joel refused to cease until he felt the stock of a rifle smash against the side of his head.

Chapter 18

Spring, 2034

Salt Lake City, Utah

Joel's head throbbed in pain as he slowly regained consciousness on the hospital bed. He rapidly blinked to regain focus in his eyes and shook his head to stop the ringing in his ears. His clothes were still wet and uncomfortable and he felt a chill run through his body. He turned his head and blinked some more, wondering if the sight of Marlene was real, or if it was all a dream; or maybe he was dead.

"Welcome to the Fireflies," she greeted. She sat in a visitor's chair, relieved by the sight of Joel regaining consciousness. "Sorry about the-" she made a gesture towards the side of her head where Joel had been slammed not too long ago. "They didn't know who you were." She gestured to the armed Firefly in the other corner of the room with a face of stone. It was the same soldier that had clocked him in the head not long ago.

Joel shot up to a seated position. "And Ellie?"

"She's alright," Marlene gave a nod of confirmation. "They brought her back."

He felt his heartrate slow with the reassuring news and he slowly lowered himself back to the laying position. He looked at Marlene, who appeared exhausted. Heavy bags sat under her tired eyes and her body looked starved and worn. Her mocha colored skin appeared pale and pallid. Her eyes seemed unfocused, like she hadn't slept in weeks.

"You came all this way," she shook her head in disbelief. "How'd you do it?"

"It was her," he replied with shut eyes, dealing with the dull pain inside his skull. "She fought like hell to get here. Maybe it was meant to be." He struggled back up to the seated position, grunting in discomfort.

Marlene stood up from her seat and gave a look to the soldier in the opposite corner of the room before directing her attention back to Joel. "I lost most of my crew crossing the country," she explained, pacing around the patient room. "I pretty much lost everything. And then you show up and somehow we find you just in time to save her. Maybe it was meant to be." She rubbed her eyes looked down at the floor as it was a silver screen that played back the memories of the trek across the country. How the sizeable group of Fireflies that left Boston arrived in Salt Lake City as a small pack of survivors. When infected and government troops weren't making life miserable enough, illness and hunger joined intensified the misery. For some

time, Marlene beat herself up about handing Ellie off to a pair of smugglers. Ana would never have approved handing off her daughter to a pair of criminals. But there is no way of knowing if Ellie would have survived the journey with the Fireflies. Men and women who were both stronger and seasoned did not survive the journey, so how would have a young girl such as Ellie defied the odds? Marlene felt guilt ravage her insides as she lost one Firefly after another, but some smuggler managed to keep her safe this entire time.

Joel grimaced as he swung his legs from the bed to the floor. He wobbled and braced himself on the bed as he struggled to his feet. "Take me to her."

"You don't have to worry about her anymore," Marlene said. "We'll take care of--"

"I worry," Joel interrupted. "Just let me see her, please." His voice had the tone of a concerned father.

Marlene crossed her arms and her eyes ventured back towards the soldier who stood silently in the corner before locking eyes with Joel again. "You can't. She's being prepped for surgery."

Joel pushed himself from the bed, standing firmly on his own two feet. "The hell you mean, surgery?"

Marlene placed a hand on Joel's shoulder to halt his advance. "The doctors tell me that the cordyceps, the growth inside her, has somehow mutated. It's why she's immune. Once they remove it, they'll be able to reverse engineer a vaccine." A tired smile crept across her face and wells of water formed in her eyes. "A vaccine," she repeated.

Joel gave Marlene an incredulous look. "But it grows all over the brain."

The water welling in Marlene's eyes rushed down her gaunt cheeks as her jaw trembled, trying to find the right words. "It does," she nodded. "You deserve a thorough explanation," she said, pulling a radio from her pocket. She called for a Dr. Carey over the radio, and he arrived a few minutes later. He was a tall man dressed in green hospital scrubs and a surgical mask hung from one ear. His hair was covered by a scrub cap and a pair of thick lensed glasses covered his eyes. He looked to be in his late forties or early fifties. He introduced himself and began explaining the situation to Joel.

"The girl's infection is unlike anything I've ever seen," he began. "As we've seen in past cases, the antigenic titers of the patient's cordyceps remain high in the serum and the cerebrospinal fluid. Blood cultures taken from her rapidly grow cordyceps in fungal-media in the lab. But her white blood cell lines, including percentages and absolute-counts are completely normal. There is no elevation of pro-inflammatory cytokines, and an MRI of her brain shows no evidence of fungal-growth in the limbic regions, which would normally accompany the prodrome of aggression in other infected patients. We are trying to replicate this state under

laboratory conditions. We're about to hit a milestone in human history equal to the discovery of penicillin. After years of wandering in circles, we're about to come home, make a difference, and bring the human race back into control of its own destiny. All of our sacrifices, your sacrifices, and Ellie's sacrifice, will not be in vain." He smiled at Joel who starred back at him, and nodded to Marlene, who nodded back in dismissal. He left the room and closed the door behind him before Joel could formulate a single question from his explanation that was saturated with medical jargon that he did not comprehend.

Joel felt the final pieces of the puzzle click together inside his head. He understood Marlene's tears were not that of joy for finding a vaccine, but that of sorrow for what she was willing to sacrifice. He took another step forward, his fists and jaws clenching. "Find someone else," he growled.

Marlene kept a stern face behind the light stream of tears. "There is no one else."

Joel shoved his pointer finger angrily into Marlene's shoulder. "Listen, you are gonna show me where-"

The soldier in the corner quickly moved from his spot and drove a knee into Joel's back. He let out a cry of pain as he collapsed at Marlene's feet. The soldier pointed the barrel of his rifle downward at Joel.

"Stop," Marlene ordered him, moving to his side. She looked back down at Joel. "I get it," she said. "But whatever it is you think you're going through right now is nothing to what I have been through. I knew her since she was born. I promised her mother I would look after her."

"Then why are you letting this happen?" Joel snarled.

"Because this isn't about me!" Marlene shouted. "Or even her. There is no other choice here!"

Joel shook his head, trying to make sense of it all. An intense scowl remained on his face as he dragged himself off the linoleum floor. The pain was too intense, and he sat against the closest wall, unable to pull himself up under his own weight. "Yeah," he spat. "You keep telling yourself that bullshit."

Marlene stared at him silently. She turned her head to the soldier next to her. "Ethan, march him outta here. He tries anything, shoot him." The soldier nodded and kept his eyes trained on Joel, still seated with his back against the wall. "Don't waste this gift, Joel," Marlene said before heading out the door, leaving it open behind her.

"Get up," the soldier ordered. Joel remained seated, silently staring at the ground. "I said get up," the soldier repeated, now pointing his weapon at Joel again. Joel slowly peeled himself

up from the ground, giving the soldier a look of vicious intent. “Go on, move,” the soldier gestured to the door with the barrel of his rifle. Joel shuffled towards the door, the heavy thoughts in his mind weighing like anchors in his waterlogged boots. The soldier grew impatient and shoved him out the door. “I said move!” the soldier’s agitation was becoming apparent. Joel turned, his upper lip twitching like an angry pit bull. The soldier was unexpressive and made sure Joel was looking down the barrel of his rifle. “Give me an excuse,” he taunted.

Joel let out a deep breath and shook his head. “Which way?” he asked.

The soldier tilted his head to the left. Joel walked down the hallway with the soldier only a few steps behind him, his weapon trained on the center of Joel’s spine. The hallway of patient rooms on both sides led to a waiting room with a receptionist desk and rows of empty chairs. The lights were dim and flickering and a layer of dust rested on all surfaces. Out of the corner of his eye, Joel saw Ellie’s backpack sitting atop the receptionist desk, still soaked from the incident in the tunnel. It caused Joel to stop in place. He remembered the last time he saw Ellie’s backpack without Ellie. How he failed to protect her in Colorado, and the trauma she faced because of it. She was only a little girl, but the supposed savior of the human race. The girl’s life was to become forfeit for a vaccine; the sacrificial martyr to restore the world to its former state. Joel felt his mind bend and twist, and damn near snap cleanly in two. To drag this girl clear across the country, only to sacrifice her to save a species that tried to kill, rape, and even eat her every step of the way. Was the life of a young girl worth the price of saving a species that committed acts far more sinister than the infected ever could? Did humanity even deserve a vaccine at this point? Why were the lives of these people more important than Ellie’s? Joel’s feet stopped moving and he stood there, trembling.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the soldier asked. “Keep movin’.” He pushed the barrel into Joel’s back. “I said keep movin’.”

Joel spun around in a flash, catching the barrel of the rifle with his elbow. The gun fired wildly into the ceiling and a struggle ensued. Joel’s rage coursed through his body, overpowering the soldier and pulling the rifle from his hands as he repeatedly drove a knee into his stomach. He then delivered blow after blow to the soldier’s face with the rifle, returning the favor of what happened in the tunnel. Joel wrapped his left hand around the soldier’s throat, feeling his warm, sticky blood run from his busted nose and lips down his hand. With his other hand he drove the barrel of the weapon firmly into the soldier’s genitals. “Where is the operating room?” Joel asked with a rabid intensity.

The soldier met his eyes with matching intensity, but there was no denying the presence of fear. He who holds the weapon is in control of a situation, and now the shoe was on the other foot. His breathes become more frantic as he could damn near see the foam forming in Joel’s mouth, spilling into his beard. His eyes darted back and forth and his nostrils flared, but no words escaped his mouth.

“I ain’t got time for this,” Joel muttered, firing a round into his parts. The soldier’s eyes grew wide with pain and shock and his mouth flung open with a scream of agony. He moaned in torment, but Joel was bankrupt of empathy. He slammed the soldier’s head against the wall and pushed the barrel further into the bloody pit of annihilated flesh between his legs. “Where?” he screamed, before firing another round. Vomit poured from the soldier’s mouth and down his vest as his eyes stayed wide with horror and suffering. “Where?”

“Top floor. The far end,” the soldier coughed through the trickle of vomit on his lips, now mixing with the blood that poured from his face. Joel nodded and released the grip around the soldier’s throat. He granted him with five-point-five-six millimeters of mercy into his skull in return for the information he gave him.

Joel slung the M-4 Carbine across his chest and pulled the fully loaded magazines from the dead soldier’s tactical vest. He shoved the magazines in his pockets as the dead soldier’s radio went into a frenzy. *Ethan, come in, do you copy? We heard shots fired, your floor. Ethan, do you copy? Ethan! Report! Stand by, we are on the way!* The elevator was located close to the receptionist desk. Joel took cover behind a nearby corner as he watched the numbers on the top of the elevator decrease one-by-one. His thumb slipped off the safety switch of the rifle to fully automatic and pointed the barrel towards the elevator doors. The elevator let out a ding and the doors split open. Before the group of four Firefly soldiers could file out of the elevator door, Joel squeezed the trigger. The bodies fell as quickly as the brass casings, as bullets filled the fatal funnel of the elevator. Not one Firefly managed to fire a single round as the elevator was awash with blood. Only when the slide locked back to the rear when the magazine emptied did Joel release his finger from the trigger. The elevator doors repeatedly tried to close, tapping the body of a dead Firefly soldier only to open back up. Joel released the empty magazine and inserted a full one and set the slide forward, chambering a round. He dragged the body from the doorway, leaving a trail of blood from the elevator to the receptionist desk. He entered the elevator and hit the button to the top floor. The doors closed and he felt the elevator lurch upward. Blood pooled around his boots and the vacant eyes of dead Firefly soldiers stared up at him as the elevator lights rapidly blinked on and off. Their bodies were contorted in uncomfortable looking positions, nearly stacked atop one another. The elevator let out a familiar “ding” sound, welcoming Joel to top floor. He filed out with the rifle held tightly to his shoulder, leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind him with each step. He followed the signs to the operating room’s doors and burst through without hesitation.

Every wall and surface of the room was pristine and sterile, and the room was so bright that Joel’s eyes had to adjust from the transition from the dark hallway. *Sweet Jesus*, Joel thought as his eyes adjust to the scene before him. Ellie was still upon the operating table, adorned in a white hospital gown. Her mouth was covered with a mask that was hooked up to an anesthesia machine. Intravenous needles were inserted into her inner-elbow, feeding her an elixir of fluids from IV bags hanging from an IV pole. Surgical lights beamed down onto her, illuminating her unconscious, still body. Monitors and machines hummed and beeped. The all-female team of

three surgical technicians in identical green scrubs, hair nets, and surgical masks looked at each other in confusion as Dr. Carey rushed to the foot of the operating table, standing between Ellie and Joel.

“What are you doing in here?” The surgeon demanded to know.

Joel took a long look at Ellie on the table and took a menacing step forward. The intensity in his eyes was as sharp as razors.

“Doctor?” One of the surgical techs asked as she nervously backed away from the operating table towards the wall. The rest of the surgical techs gasped and moved away as the head surgeon scrambled to the instrument table and took the scalpel in his hand, waving it towards the encroaching man whose boots tracked in blood from the hallway outside.

“I won’t let you take her,” the surgeon stammered as the scalpel nervously shook in his hand. “This is our future! Think of all the lives we’ll save! Don’t come any closer, I mean it!”

Joel ripped the scalpel from the surgeon’s hands and drove it into his neck, overpowering him with ease. The surgeon choked and gurgled, his surgical mask turning from a pure white to a deep, dark red. The body fell against the instrument table, sending a neatly placed row of surgical instruments strewn across the floor.

“No! You fucking animal!” one of the surgical techs screamed as they all huddled in a corner, shaking like frightened dogs. The other two were screaming and crying in a panicked frenzy, unable to process the nightmarish scene before them. They reached out to the surgeon’s body, letting out blood-curdling screams like widows weeping over the loss of a loved one. They watched in horror as this crazed man in soiled rags of clothing ripped the anesthesia mask off the girl and pulled the needles from her arm. Their dreams of finding a vaccine flatlined with the machines as the sensors were stripped from her. They watched the bearded man with large shoulders and large forearms lift the girl from the operating table and carry her out of the room, paying no mind to the hysterical surgical technicians in the corner.

“Come on, baby girl. I gotcha, I gotcha,” Joel whispered as he carried her back towards the elevator. By the time they arrived at the elevator, alarms sounded through the entire hospital. Joel stepped over one of the Firefly soldiers lifeless bodies and hit the button that sent them to the underground parking garage below the hospital. “I’m gonna get you out of here,” he whispered to Ellie as if she could hear him. The elevator arrived at the second level of the parking garage and the doors opened. He rapidly tapped the red emergency stop button on the elevator before leaving, preventing any soldiers above from pursuing him.

“You can’t save her,” a tired, familiar voice called out from the darkness. Marlene emerged from the shadows, aiming a pistol at Joel’s head. Her tired eyes locked with Joel’s fiery stare. “Even if you get her out of here, then what?” She carefully moved towards them, keeping

her focus on the front sight of her pistol. “How long before she’s torn apart by a pack of clickers? That is, unless she’s raped and murdered first.”

Joel pulled Ellie close. “That ain’t for you to decide,” he growled.

“It’s what she’d want!” Marlene hissed. She watched Joel’s shoulders sag and his demeanor soften as the thought weighed heavy upon him. She knew that he understood the situation, and what was at stake. Cognitively dissonant ideas struck at each other like entangled serpents in his mind. “And you know it,” she said. “Look,” she turned the pistol from Joel and held it out to her side and pleaded. “You can still do the right there here.” She felt sadness well in her heart, she just wanted to put an end to this entire cluster fuck. “She won’t feel anything.”

Joel’s grip loosened from Ellie’s body.

*

The sun peeked over the tips of the mountains to the east of Interstate-80. Joel felt tired and nauseous in the driver’s seat. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and adjusted the sun visor to keep the magnificent morning rays out of his eyes. His eyelids felt heavy as stone. He heard a groan from the backseat and looked up at the rearview mirror. Ellie’s eyes crept open and as she mumbled nonsensical words. She looked at the hospital gown she was dressed in?

“What am I wearing?” she groaned.

“Just take it easy,” Joel said in a soothing voice. “The drugs are still wearing off.”

She rubbed her eyes as they struggled to focus. Her head ached and her stomach felt like it had just gotten off a rollercoaster. She blinked over and over until the fog in her eyes started to fade. “What happened?”

Joel paused as he organized his thoughts. “We found the Fireflies,” he began.

*

Marlene’s eyes were wide and her heart was racing. She kept her pistol pointed away from Joel. She hoped that the gesture would signal a lack of hostile intent. She was tired of the senseless violence, tired of the death, tired of the suffering she witnessed everywhere she went. Pointing the pistol towards him wouldn’t have proved useful anyway. She was so exhausted that she was seeing double; if she pulled the trigger, there was a high chance she would hit Ellie instead. She saw him slowly kneel down and lay Ellie gently on the ground. What she didn’t see was the assault rifle hidden behind the hanging white curtains of Ellie’s hospital gown while Joel cradled her in his arms. The barrel came up in flash and she felt something cut through her before she could hear the deafening blast of the rifle. She felt herself fall backwards while the pistol slipped from her fingers and slide across the ground. She watched Joel walk towards her and tower over her. “Wait!” she pleaded. “Let me go! Please!” she gasped between breaths.

“You’d just come after her,” he grunted as he pointed the rifle between her eyes and pulled the trigger.

*

“Turns out, there’s a whole lot more like you, Ellie. People that are immune. Dozens, actually. Ain’t done a damn bit of good neither. They’ve actually stopped... they’ve stopped looking for a cure. I’m taking us home. I’m sorry.”

Epilogue

Spring 2034

Teton County, Wyoming

It was a gorgeous day in the wilderness of the Teton Mountain Range. Pines, spruces, and firs towered above them, casting lean, overlapping shadows across the forest's floor. The aromatic scent of flowers and berries filled the fresh, delectable air. They sat upon a fallen pine on the side of the trail. Ellie traced the scars of the bite mark on her forearm with her pointer and middle finger as if tracing it, learning it to its every last detail.

"Really pretty ain't it?" Joel gestured to the forest around them. Ellie shrugged and kept her attention focused on her arm. He stood up from the fallen tree and groaned, placing a hand on his lower back. "Oh... feeling my age now," he chuckled. He extended a hand and pulled Ellie up from the tree and they continued their walk through the forest. "Don't think I ever told you, but Sarah and I used to take hikes like this. I think the two of you would've been good friends. I think you really woulda liked her. I know she woulda liked you."

"Yeah," Ellie gave a weak smile with her hands shoved in her pockets.

The trail brought them to a clearing that gave a magnificent view of Jackson Lake and the surrounding forests and mountain ranges. They could see the dam and the township nestled in the surrounding wilderness. From up here, it was as if they could see halfway around the world.

Joel noticed Ellie nervously wringing her hands. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Ellie was silent for a moment as she gazed at the infinite horizon. "Back in Boston, back when I was bitten, I wasn't alone. My best friend was there, and she got bit too. We didn't know what to do. So, she says, 'Let's just wait it out. Y'know, we can be all poetic and just lose our minds together'. I'm still waiting for my turn."

"Ellie-"

"Her name was Riley and she was the first to die. And then it was Tess. And then Sam."

"None of that is on you."

"No, you don't understand," she said, shaking her head.

“I struggled for a long time with survivin’,” Joel crossed his arms. “And you... listen, no matter what, you keep finding something worth fighting for. Now, I know that’s not what you want to hear right now, but it’s-”

Ellie sighed. “Swear to me,” she said. “Swear to me that everything that you said about the Fireflies is true.”

Joel flinched in surprise but kept his eyes locked with hers. “I swear,” he said.

Ellie stared him deeply in his eyes, searching his soul for the truth in the case his tongue was casting deceit. She scanned every inch of his face and studied his body language. She gave a subtle nod of her head. “Okay,” she said.

A Message from the Author

The Last of Us was a groundbreaking video game released in 2013 by Naughty Dog, LLC based in Santa Monica, California. The game was released to critical acclaim and is regarded as one of the best video games ever released for the Playstation 3 system.

This book was written for two reasons. First, to tell The Last of Us' incredible story to those who do not play video games. The video game industry has recently emerged as a new storytelling platform that employs some of the best writers in the industry, and the results show. If video games are not your thing, please enjoy the story of The Last of Us in novel form.

Second, to have the fans of The Last of Us video game relive the experience in a different fashion. This is not fanfiction, but a retelling of its original story. Minor details have been changed and certain sections were omitted to make the story feel more like a novel rather than a literary playthrough.

This is hopefully the first of many video game stories in novel format. All requests, compliments, constructive criticism, hate mail, and death threats can be sent to games2literature@gmail.com

About the Author

Neil Druckmann (born December 5, 1978) is an Israeli-American writer, creative director, and programmer, and Vice President of Naughty Dog, known for his work in the video games *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. He was born and raised until the age of 10 in Israel, where his experiences with entertainment would later influence his storytelling techniques. He studied computer science at Carnegie Mellon University, before searching for work in the video game industry.

Brett Hansen (born October 27, 1986), the dude who wrote this book, is some guy who lives in South Dennis, Massachusetts. He started writing this book while procrastinating during his final exams at Clemson University, where he received a BS in Chemistry. He is happily married with two dogs. He grew up in Coventry, Connecticut but left, because that place doesn't have much to offer. He has played video games his entire life, much to the disappointment of his father and wife. He served in the US Navy, where he served as a Master-at-Arms 3rd class with deployments to Spain, Iraq, and Haiti. He also loves beer (Sierra Nevada and Sapporo) and Japanese whiskey. He aspires to be a professional writer, but currently works as a tutor and substitute math teacher.

END



