

A World Forsaken

by Brian Kittrell

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Chapter 1

The sun peaked to the east and shone on the westerly canyon walls beneath the El Tovar. Andy found himself looking out across the Colorado river below. Having reached the Grand Canyon a few days prior, he had spoken little to the others about the dreams and the visions. Justin simply urged them to wait. *She is coming*. It echoed in Andy's mind constantly.

He wondered who this girl was and what she was supposed to be bringing with her. *The key*, he thought, *but what, exactly, was that? A cure for the virus? The answers to their endless questions?*

Alyssa turned on her side. "Is everything okay?"

Turning his head, he looked at her. "I'm fine. I'm just wondering what all of this means."

"Justin said that we have to wait here for the girl."

"I know. I just wish he would tell me more about what's supposed to happen now. We're here, and we've been waiting for days now."

"Maybe he doesn't really know himself. He's probably just as impatient as we are, if not more."

"I don't really buy that."

She shook her head. "Oh, Andy. Why would he lie to us? He's just a sweet old man."

While he stretched his back, he clasped his hands behind his head. "Maybe you're right. He's been good to us so far. He didn't have to take us in like that."

"Stop worrying. Come here and lay down with me."

He walked to the bed and sat on the edge with his back to her. "I wish we didn't have to wait so long. It's the waiting that's killing me."

As she rubbed his shoulders, he responded by lowering his head in submission. "Just relax. Use this time to get some rest and clear your head. You were so stressed out at North Star that I didn't think you were going to survive it."

"I've been wondering if we made the right choice."

"To be together?"

"No, I don't regret that."

"What do you mean, then?"

"I wonder if leaving the military was the right choice. I feel like I've thrown everything away, everything I've worked for all my life."

"We didn't have much choice. If we didn't have a plan, we would've died in there, too."

"Maybe you're right." He folded his arms.

"There were times that I had my doubts about you, captain." She smiled.

"Really now?" He displayed a grin, and she leaned forward to kiss him.

He raised an eyebrow. "How about we continue this conversation in the jacuzzi?"

"That sounds like a great idea to me, Mr. McKenzie."

Once they were dressed for the day, they joined the others in the dining room downstairs. It had become a ritual since they arrived at the hotel, and the quality of Justin's meals couldn't be denied. As always, breakfast was laid out in the serving station, and he somehow seemed to know how much food to prepare to keep any from going to waste.

Robert sat at the table reading the newspaper. "Morning, you two."

Andy noticed he was looking through the same edition of *USA Today* he'd already browsed at least three times. "You're reading that paper again? Didn't you get enough of those the same stories for the last couple of days?"

Joining the others at the table, Stephanie, with her breakfast plate, didn't say a word. The look of severe depression had sat on her face for several days. She made it clear that she needed time to sort through her emotions, and she wasn't talkative; she had barely said a word since the day they arrived at the El Tovar.

"It makes me feel normal. I always read the paper in the morning. We don't have access to much other reading material, you know?"

"You could be reading some of those survival books we have."

Robert rustled the newspaper. "I planned on it later today."

Andy struggled to maintain his calm demeanor, but the anger itched at him. *Every time I ask, it's 'later today',* he thought to himself, but he let it roll off his back. *I'm not the leader here anymore. That's Justin's job.*

Justin arrived at the dining table, and he was still wearing his stained apron. He wiped his hands on the loose ends of it. "I have to eat fast today. I have a good feeling that today is the day."

Robert folded his paper and looked past it to Justin. "She's coming today?"

"I think so. I think this is the day. She won't come here, though. Oh, no. She won't come here."

Andy became confused. "I thought we were waiting here for her."

"Near here, son. She'll be close, but not up here."

"What do we do, then?"

"We have to get ready to meet her. It'll be somewhere by the river."

Andy licked his lips. "I think I know where. She found me near the adobe tower."

Justin grabbed Andy by the shoulders in jubilation. "The Desert View, yes! Of course!"

“When do you want to go?”

“When we're done eating, we'll get dressed for the hike. The weather can change fast in the canyon, so bring different clothes. If you don't have nothin', get some out of the gift shop out front.”

Justin ate his breakfast and choked and coughed several times, and he seemed to be excited about the girl arriving and could hardly wait to get out on the trail to find her. The others tried to keep pace with him. When they were finished, they returned upstairs and went to the gift shop to pack a few things for the hike.

By the time everyone met downstairs, they saw Justin walking outside towards a path. He had already donned a backpack and carried a walking stick in his hand, and with each step, the stick struck the ground before rising again.

Andy ran out the front door, followed by the others. “Hey, wait up!”

“No time to wait, no time.” Justin kept his pace and continued along the trail. With Justin being an older gentleman not accustomed to hiking, they were able to catch up in short order.

Andy walked just in front of him to see his face. “Where are we going?”

“Down the canyon. We just have to find her down here. She's so close now, I can just feel it.”

Robert pulled his backpack higher on his shoulders. “I hope it's not too far. I haven't been hiking in years.”

“We have to keep going until we find her. Simple as that. She's close. Just be glad we have a path to walk. The canyon's hard to hike without a trail.”

The pathway snaked along the canyon walls. By the time they reached the bottom about five hours later, Andy was weary, sweaty, and fatigued. Even Justin showed signs of extreme exhaustion despite his determination to reach *her*.

Andy leaned on his knees, trying to catch his breath. “Why don't we stop and rest for a while, Justin? Aren't you tired yet?”

“Maybe you're right. I could use a rest about now.” He wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

They gathered in a circle near the cabins at the bottom of the canyon. After taking a swig, Andy passed a water bottle to Alyssa. “What's this place?”

Stretching, Justin removed his backpack. “This is the Phantom Ranch. People used to pay a pretty penny to stay down here. Not anymore, though – and most likely never again.”

Alyssa put the bottle on the ground next to her. “I can see why; it's a beautiful spot. It takes a while to hike down here, though.”

Andy nodded. “You end up pretty tired, too. I can't see people hiking down here and getting much fun out of it.”

“There was mule rides down here. They'd bring you all the way down the canyon on a mule if you signed up for it. They took those old mules with them when they left,

though. It would've been nice to have them here, but we'll just have to manage without them."

"Sounds nice."

"It was. I took the ride a couple of times since I've worked here at the park. It was better on a mule."

Andy pointed to the cabins. "How about we rest in there for a while?"

Standing, Justin acted like he'd been reinvigorated by some unknown source. "Oh, no, young sir! We're only taking a short break. We have to get moving again!"

He led the way towards the river. "It's not far now. Once we get to the river, we can just follow along the banks. It's nice, flat ground down there!"

They reached a small hill and a boulder which overlooked the nearby river, and they squinted their eyes. With the clouds drifting overhead to dim the sunlight, they could make out silhouettes on the bank.

The outlines came into focus—other people. With a quick glance to the others, Andy raised his weapon, pointing it towards these unknown subjects. The others raised their weapons in kind.

Chapter 2

Stephanie walked to the front of the group to see what was happening, and she put her hand on the boulder and peered down the hill at them. She focused on the back of one of the males. Having his shirt off, the man seemed to be washing himself in the cool water, and he had numerous bullet scars on his back.

Her eyes lit up hopefully, and she clenched her fists and yelled across the canyon. "John!"

The male stood and turned around immediately. "Stephanie?"

Andy tried to stop her, but she escaped his grasp. She ran to the man. When she reached him, he swept her up in his arms and turned in circles with her. "I can't believe I found you! I've missed you so much, John!"

He looked into her eyes. "I shouldn't have stayed out. I should have just left to come and get you. I wanted to come after you, but there were so many of them."

"You wouldn't have been able to get into the hospital anyway. Those creatures were all over town not long after you went to work. The sick people kept coming in from the east coast."

John glanced at the others. "I...left. I left because I was scared. When I saw the first one at the gas station, I was too damned scared to come back. I should have come for you and the folks."

"It's okay, John. We're together now. Just calm down and relax."

"Did you see the folks at all before you left?"

“There was no way. We barricaded ourselves in the hospital. If it weren't for him, we would still be there.” She pointed at Andy.

Approaching, Robert's eyes lit up when he seemed to recognize a girl behind the others. “Nadene? Nadene Schafer?”

Robert smiled brightly, took her by the shoulders, and knelt in front of her. “Have you seen Haley? Sally? My boys?”

Nadene didn't speak.

“Nadene, where are the boys? Sally? Have you seen Haley?”

She paused for a few moments before looking into his wishful eyes. “They didn't make it, Mr. Nelson. The virus got them.”

He let go of her, his whole body apparently weak. “What happened?”

She remembered the events in St. Louis to herself. The vivid images she tried to repress came flashing back as if she were standing there once again, trying to escape with her life.

* * *

Nadene glanced over her shoulder one last time to see William drive the truck away. “Alright, we have to go. Let's get out of town. I found a road that should take us safely out of the city.”

She led them along the boulevard to the south and to the southerly wall. The military had erected great concrete barriers throughout the fortress cities. She glimpsed the walls, imagining how difficult it might be for the undead to climb the high, flush stone.

“How are we going to get through that?” Haley eyed the wall.

Nadene turned to her. “We're not. The creatures are on the other side of it, so we have to find a way around it safely.”

She glided her fingertips across the wall while she walked. Haley and Sally jogged ahead.

“We have to hurry! Like Naddy said, there's no time!” Haley grabbed Sally's hand and gained speed.

John pointed at them. “We don't need to get separated! We'll get there, stay close!”

Haley and Sally ignored him. It was as if they could see the end of the journey—an escape—just beyond that barrier.

They had gotten about thirty feet ahead of the others when John yelled again. “Slow down you two!”

When Sally passed it, the wall exploded right next to her. A blast of concrete chunks and dust enveloped them, and Nadene fell to the ground, the ringing in her ears clouding the disoriented screams of the others.

She lifted scrambled to her knees and caught her breath. “Sally! Haley!”

Standing, Susan ran to where Sally had vanished in the explosion. "Oh, my God!"

When Haley became conscious, her scream echoed off the walls of the nearby buildings. She clambered over the debris to find her daughter. "Sally! No!"

Screaming, she repeated the same words, then gathered the killed child in her arms. Sally's eyes were fixed on the sky, her body bloody and broken. "Sally!"

Susan knelt next to her. "Haley! Haley, are you okay?"

"Sally!" she screamed, a mother who had lost her only remaining child. The sound was enough to pierce Nadene's heart and break her spirit.

"We have to get out of here, Haley. She's gone." Though Susan pried at her hands, Haley wouldn't release Sally's body.

Susan looked to the left where a new hole had been created in the wall. Hundreds of hungry dead were climbing through the opening, and a series of explosions along the wall ahead made Nadene uneasy. The feeling reminded her of the fire at her school, the first time these strange visions had started.

"We have to go now," Susan yelled, trying to pull Haley, but she didn't respond. She sat there holding the body of her dead daughter, then the dead overtook her.

As the zombies tore Haley's body apart, Susan ran to the others. Once there, they ran towards the river to the east, but Nadene could see more creatures emerging from the holes along the wall.

John led the way. "We have to get to the river!"

The space between the building to the left and the horde of undead on the right narrowed like a tunnel closing at the end. John was first to the river's edge, followed by Nadene, and then Wayne. A group of creatures grabbed Susan and tripped her to the ground.

"Oh, God!" she screamed, the monster's teeth tearing through her shirt and then her skin.

Turning, Nadene's eyes widened. "Susan! No!"

"We have to jump. We've got to jump now!" John shouted, looking at the drop below.

"You're first, Nadene." John spun her around. She breathed heavily and whimpered at the sight of Susan being devoured. "You have to go now, girl!"

Shaking his head, John picked her up, spun his body, and cast her off the edge. Falling to the water, she screamed, finally splashing into the Mississippi.

"Go, Wayne. You're next!"

Nadene saw Wayne jump off the edge, followed shortly thereafter by John. Once he hit the water and resurfaced, Wayne turned about until he found Nadene. She was having great difficulty trying to swim, but she did better with his assistance.

"John?" Wayne looked across the river. "John!" The creatures were falling off the rise above in an attempt to chase them.

"We've got to swim, Naddy." Wayne splashed his arms in the water. "I don't know how good those damned things can swim, but I don't want to find out!"

* * *

She stared at Robert, her mind drifting back to the present. She knew exactly what had happened, but she couldn't find the right words to make any of it any easier. "They caught the virus and died. There was nothing we could do... There was nothing anybody could do. It was hell on earth."

Robert took her hand in his and continued weeping, and she pet his hair while he cried. "They spent the money from the bank account. I thought they were alive somewhere still!"

"The money helped us get as far as we did. It helped pay for things while we were in St. Louis. I'm sorry, Mr. Nelson."

Standing alongside the river and holding him, she felt an empty feeling inside, for she had mourned her missing or lost loved ones for so long that she felt insensitive to the pain. When she saw the hurt in Robert, though, she was reminded of the anguish she felt for her mother. She was happy for John and Stephanie who had been reunited, but it couldn't keep the feelings of loss at bay. On the contrary, the feeling of loss seemed to strengthen at seeing how happy they were.

Justin glanced at each of them and approached, then his eyes fixed on Nadene. "You brought the girl. Thank the lord above that you made it here safe, missy. You and your friends are welcome here! I'm Justin."

Nadene eyed him with suspicion. "You've been waiting for me?"

"Yes, of course! You're the key to all this, you see?"

"I'm the key to this? Are you kidding?"

"I'm as serious as a heart attack, young miss. I don't know how or why, but that's what I know. Come on, all of you. We'll go back to the cabins over here for now. It will take too long to get back to the top today."

Andy checked the time on his watch. "It's only about noon now. We could make it back up there by sunset if we leave now."

"No, good son," Justin said. "It could take double the time to get back. Last thing you want is to be wandering around out here after dark. People can get lost or hurt. We need to stay at the cabins here at the bottom."

Andy nodded to Justin before turning to the others. "My name's Andy. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Wayne." He extended his hand and shook Andy's.

"A pleasure to meet you all."

Justin led the way to the Phantom Ranch cabins and walked next to Nadene. "I'm just glad you're here, young miss. We've waited for so long for you to get here."

"I still don't see why you were waiting for me. I have no idea what to do from here. I'm just like the others."

"No, you're special. Special like me. Special like Andy back there. We all have the gift, you see?"

She glanced back over her shoulder at Andy. "Him, too?"

"Yeah, we all have it, one way or another. It's like a voice inside that tells us things. I don't know why it does, but it does."

"What does your voice tell you about me?"

"It told me to wait for you to get here. It told me that you're the key."

"It didn't tell you why? Did it tell you what I was supposed to do once I got here?"

"No, but you're the key. I just know it."

Nadene raised her eyebrows. "I guess we just have to wait and see, then."

Justin nodded. They reached the cabins a few minutes later and spread out, selecting sleeping quarters.

Justin stopped Andy from entering the cabin with Alyssa. "I would like you and the girl to come in the cabin with me to discuss things."

"Can't we wait until the morning to talk?"

"It needs to be tonight, good son."

Alyssa nodded. "It's okay, go ahead with him."

Andy followed him and Nadene to the other cabin. "So, what did you want to talk about, Justin?"

Standing at the door to the cabin, he didn't speak for a few moments and maintained a confused look on his face.

"Justin, are you alright?"

"I'm sorry." He snapped out of it. "It felt like I forgot someone for a second there."

"Forgot someone?"

"Yeah, like I was supposed to wait for someone else to come in this room first."

Nadene took a few steps towards him. "Do you know who it was supposed to be?"

"I can't tell. It's not clear to me right now. It just seems like someone else was supposed to be here." He wiped his face and cleared his throat.

"What did you want to tell us, Justin?" she asked.

"This plague is spreading, and it won't be stopped soon. We can't stay here forever. It will keep coming."

Andy looked at him with his eyes wide. "Who will find us out here? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"That doesn't matter, good son. It don't matter one bit. The plague will find its way here. It won't be safe forever. It will spread across the whole world if we don't stop it."

"If we don't stop it?" Nadene asked. "How are we supposed to stop it?"

"There's no cure." Andy shook his head. "It can't be stopped."

"There has to be a way. We have to find it. We have to do it fast, too, before every last living thing gets taken by it."

"You don't understand, Justin. This isn't some new thing that just came up out of nowhere. The virus has been around for a long time, and no one has been able to find a cure for it."

Nadene turned to Andy. "How do you know this?"

"Before we came out to the canyon, I was assigned to a research facility in Texas. We tried to find a cure for it, but we failed. There was a man named Blake there that told me about the virus. It's called Revelation, and there's no cure."

Justin looked across the room away from them and stared at the wall. "I saw a new day in my dreams. The monsters died out, and people could walk around outside again."

"That still might happen, but not anytime soon. Who's to say how long the creatures can survive? Once they've eaten everything they can find, how long do they last? A day? Week? Years?"

Justin closed his eyes and turned his head towards the ground. "What about those cities you told me about?"

Andy folded his arms. "What about them?"

"You said they had cities where they were keeping everybody who survived."

"Yeah. When we left North Star, the big cities along the river were walled up by the military. They put everyone they found still alive in there like prisoners."

Justin scratched his chin. "Maybe that's where we need to go. One of those cities. We could get with the other people and see if we can find a way out of this."

"We can't go to St. Louis. It is full of the creatures now. We got out just in time ourselves," Nadene said.

Andy shrugged and threw his hands up. "The cities are a death trap. I'd feel safer out here in the desert on our own. At least we're free out here, and we can't rely on the military to keep us safe. They couldn't even keep my post supplied and operating. That's part of the reason we left."

"We won't find a cure out here in the canyon. We have to do something about it," Justin said.

Andy tensed up and his voice was firm. "What part of *there's no cure* don't you understand?"

Nadene placed her hand on Andy's arm. "Don't be angry with him. He's right."

"He's right about what?"

"We have to do something about this."

"And what did you have in mind exactly?"

"We need a way to talk to the cities. We don't have to go there, but we should at least talk to them to see what they know."

"There's some radio equipment back at the village that we could use. The phones haven't worked in weeks," Justin said.

Andy nodded slowly. "Alright. When we get back, we'll talk to them, but that's it. We won't tell them where we are, either. Is there anything else for tonight?"

"I have a question," Nadene said.

Justin turned to her, and she eyed them both. "What do you know about the visions?"

"What about them?"

"When there's danger, I feel pains in my stomach. I have these dreams that I can't explain. It's like seeing the future."

Justin sighed. "I don't know exactly why it happens, but it does. My grandmother told me she had the same thing and that it goes down through the family. When something bad is about to happen, certain people get a piece of all that energy, and they start seeing and hearing things. I never had a vision, but I hear voices."

Under any other circumstances, what Justin had said would make her think he was crazy.

"What do your voices tell you?" she asked.

"They don't tell me anything specific. They told me that you'd come and that you were the key to solving all this," he said.

"I don't see how, but I don't know everything." She folded her arms. "We'll have to wait and see how this all plays out."

Justin nodded. "Let's go back to the others. Get some rest."

Andy returned to the cabin with Alyssa, and Nadene went to stay with Wayne. Justin remained by himself for the rest of the night.

"What did you all decide?" Wayne asked when Nadene entered the cabin.

"We're going to use the radio to call the cities tomorrow. Justin seems to think there is a way to solve this problem."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know. That other guy—Andy, the army guy—doesn't seem to think so. He keeps saying there's no cure."

"Maybe there doesn't have to be a cure. There might be a way we can just avoid the creatures."

Nadene relaxed on an empty bunk. "Either way, we're going to see what the cities have to say tomorrow. They talked about a village near here, so I assume that's where we're going."

"How do you feel, Naddy?"

"A lot better now. At least now I know I'm not the only one seeing all these crazy things. It makes it a little easier, you know?"

"No one thought you were crazy. You were hard to deal with on the trip here, though."

"It's not easy having all these images in your head all the time. If you heard voices all the time, you'd go out of your mind, too. I'm glad that I'm not alone."

"You never were alone. You always had us."

"It's different. It's like when you have a secret that no one else knows, and you can't tell anybody else. You feel trust for the other people who know because that's how you're bound together. Like it or not, you're with them."

"I'm just glad to be back with you," Wayne said.

"We're glad you're here, too. Just don't try anything like what you did at the river again. You might not be so lucky next time."

"I didn't mind. It wasn't until the last second that I thought I could jump. I really thought it was over back there."

"You were really going to sacrifice yourself for us?"

"Of course, why not? You and your mom, you're like family to me. It was the closest thing I've had to a family in a long time."

She had always thought that Wayne had planned to jump out at the last moment the whole time. "You're a good man, Wayne Scarborough. One of the best I've ever met."

"I don't feel that way. I was just trying to make right the many wrongs in my life. I thought that maybe if y'all carried on, it wouldn't be such a waste of this old bag of bones."

"No one is worth more than anyone else. We're all the same, especially now—just trying to claw out an existence. You aren't a 'throw away' person, Wayne."

"I feel like I don't deserve to be here."

"Why would you say a thing like that?"

"John has Stephanie. You're important because you have your dreams, and you see the things that you see. Same with that other guy."

"And?"

"Your friend Robert lost his whole family. Haley, Sally, and the boys he talked about. They're all gone."

"We couldn't save them... you can't save everybody, but I'll always miss them." Her eyes watered up and her voice became a little scratchy. "I miss them both right now, but we couldn't do anything."

"Well, I just wonder why I've been spared. I should have been the one to go ahead."

"So you could get blown up? That's no way to think."

"I'm just a used-up old man, Nadene. I lived for years where I'd be ready to rob people to get enough money to buy some liquor. I'm a bad person. I don't deserve to survive all this."

"Wayne, you saved us back there. You're just as good as anybody else."

"Am I? I don't feel that way."

“You are. Do you think my mom would have brought you along if she didn't see something behind your eyes? She was an excellent judge of character.”

“I appreciate her bringing me along. You're the one that's saved me, Nadene, not the other way around.”

“Then, we're even. Try to get some sleep. We have some long days ahead.”

Chapter 3

The cool air wisped through the canyon and between the cabins while they slept. It was a pleasant, quiet night—cold, but pleasant nonetheless. It was the first night in a long time that didn't see Nadene sitting awake for hours with her terrible thoughts.

The morning light crowned the canyon and shone into the cabin windows. Waking, Nadene met Justin and the others outside in a circle of benches, and he distributed snacks.

Susan stretched her back and looked out across the horizon. “We could stay down here forever, and no one would ever know we existed.”

“The dead will come here eventually.” Justin looked at her. “A plague won't stop until it takes everything.”

Andy hoisted his pack and put it on his shoulders. “Let's get ready to go. We'll be doing good to get back before this afternoon.” He helped Alyssa gather her things.

Forming a single-file line, they proceeded along the trail leading out of the canyon bottom. The trail was treacherous and long, and the fact that Nadene was still tired and sore from the hike the day before didn't help matters. It was a slow ascension to the south rim that went on for eight grueling hours.

At the first sight of the Grand Canyon village, Nadene celebrated with the others, sharing their relief.

“Everyone is welcome here!” Justin yelled to the others. He had hardly lost his ecstatic demeanor during the climb, despite the fact that he was probably older than all the others. “Some of the rooms are spoken for, but there are plenty to go around. Take you a hot shower, and we'll meet up in the dining room in a few hours.”

Though tired and aching, Nadene's feet carried her rhythmically to the waiting hotel. To take a hot bath after all this time running from St. Louis was a welcome proposition to her. Noticing the wrinkles on her fingers, she dressed and met the others downstairs.

Justin was wearing his finest clothes, most likely a hotel-issued tuxedo for special occasions. “I know you appreciated the hot shower, but now I have something special in store.”

He wheeled a cart in front of him and opened the top, the aroma of a beef stew filling the room. For Nadene, the mere smell gave her pause and induced a deep aching in her belly.

She turned in her chair and looked for Robert. "What about Mr. Nelson? Shouldn't we wait for him?"

"No, young miss. I talked to him before he went upstairs, and he wants some time alone."

"I'm sure he's hungry. I can bring him something."

Justin shook his head, but maintained a generous and pleasant demeanor. "I already made arrangements with the doctor, and I'll take him a tray after dinner. We have to give him time. He's lost everything."

John and Stephanie eyed each other quietly for the duration of dinner, hardly speaking a word to anyone else. Wayne was too busy eating to be bothered with conversation, and Justin served the many courses of the supper. After the soup came a creamy cheese soufflé with a grilled chicken breast, and a mint ice cream afterward.

"Justin, this is absolutely divine. What's the special occasion?" asked Andy.

Justin took a seat, then started on his soup. "The girl is here. She's the key."

"I wanted to ask you more about that," Nadene said. "I don't understand what you mean."

"You're the key to the cure," he said plainly.

"How do you know that?"

"My voices, you know? The girl comes to the west and gives us the cure. I don't know how, but that's what's supposed to happen."

"I didn't bring a cure with me, I'm afraid."

Justin smiled. "We'll see about that. Maybe you did."

Finishing his soup, he folded his hands and looked at the others in turn. "We have to call the cities. We need to know what's going on in the rest of the world."

Andy rested his elbows on the table, then leaned his chin against his clasped hands. "I can tell you what's going on in the rest of the world. It's not pretty. I'd be surprised if there's anybody left."

"There's got to be people left out there somewhere," Justin turned to Nadene. "Can you tell us anything that might help?"

She sat upright in her chair. "They had a news station that they kept going. They talked about a few other cities that hadn't been infected yet."

"Which cities?"

She closed her eyes and strained to remember. "There were several in California. Denver, Colorado, was another. I remember them talking about Seattle being safe on another broadcast. Oh, and Las Vegas. They said Las Vegas was still there."

"The closest one would be Las Vegas. It's about a hundred miles away from here," Justin said.

"Let's give 'em a call, then," Andy said.

Wayne leaned forward. "Not so fast. If we contact them, they'll know where we are. They've been herding people into the cities, so who's to say they won't try to do the same thing to us?"

"We have to find out what's going on in the outside world," Andy said. "I don't know how long you've been out in the wilderness, but we've been here for quite some time. The only thing you could tell me was that it's spread as far as St. Louis."

"The cities are a death trap," Wayne said. "I don't want to die in one of 'em. If I'm going to die, I'd rather do it free."

"We don't have much choice." Justin sighed. "What if they're surrounding us right now? We'd never know about it 'till it was too late."

Wayne looked confused. "Who, the military?"

Justin shook his head. "No, the undead. I think we'd have an easier time dealing with the military than the dead. At least you can talk to the military."

"For now," Andy said in a cynical tone of voice. "I agree with Justin, though. I think it'd be better if we talk to them and find out what our situation is."

"Should we take a vote?" Wayne asked.

Justin shrugged. "If you want to, we can. It's everybody's neck on the line, so everybody should have a say in what we do next."

Andy tore a napkin into strips. "Secret ballot?"

"That's fine with me," Wayne said.

"Alright. 'Yes' means you do want to contact the military, and 'No' means you don't want to contact them." Andy passed the slivers of paper out to the others while he gave the instructions. Each wrote their choice on their napkin and passed it to Justin, and he read the votes aloud when he had received them all.

"Three said 'Yes' and three said 'No'. It's a tie."

Andy put his hand on Justin's shoulder. "There's one vote left."

"Everybody voted, though. Who's left?"

"You, Justin. You didn't vote."

He stood and walked to the window nearby which overlooked the canyon's spectacular beauty. "I vote that we contact them. Yes."

Andy nodded. "Good. Where is the radio?"

Justin led the way out of the El Tovar. "All of that stuff should be in the ranger's office, right across the railroad tracks a bit."

Once inside the ranger station, Andy sat at the desk and turned on the radio. "It could take a few minutes to find a channel that they're actually monitoring. Have a seat and relax for a while."

Andy fidgeted with the radio equipment and talked into the microphone for about an hour, trying different frequencies. Nadene hoped he could find someone out there amidst all that static.

Finally, a voice answered him. "We read you. Identify yourself."

He looked at the others with surprise. "This is North Star."

"North Star?" the voice asked, stammering.

"Yes, this is Captain McKenzie of North Star. Who am I speaking to?"

"Um, this is Las Vegas Command. We didn't think anyone made it out of North Star alive."

"I almost didn't. Dr. Kemper started making zombies in the basement and didn't let us know about it."

"Are you requesting pickup, sir?"

Andy narrowed his eyes. "Stand by."

Switching the radio off, he crossed his arms. "Are we requesting pickup?"

"What choice do we have?" John said. "We can't sit here not knowing what's going on."

"Any objections?" asked Andy.

The others shook their heads, but Wayne stood. "I don't like it, but I'm not staying out here by myself."

Andy reached for the radio, but he turned towards the nearby window. Nadene peered through the glass when she heard a vehicle driving by outside. It was a beat up military truck with metal grating welded to the windows and frame.

"Raiders?" Robert asked, peeking past her shoulder.

Andy walked to the window. "Not sure. Get the guns and come on."

They readied their weapons, and Andy led the way out and across the street. He stayed low to the ground, the others matching his movements.

The doors of the truck opened outside the El Tovar near the moving trucks packed with their supplies. Two men and a young female stepped out and looked around the area like they were lost.

Nadene squinted and put her hand on Andy's shoulder. "I know one of them. I don't know the other two."

"Which one do you know?"

"The younger guy is William. We met him in St. Louis. The other guy must be the one he went back to find when he left us. I have no idea who that girl is."

"Is he a threat?"

"No, not at all. He's probably here trying to find us."

"How did he know where to look?" asked Alyssa, pointing her pistol in the direction of the El Tovar.

"He hears and sees things, kinda like I do."

"Hey!" Andy shouted towards them. They stopped and turned to look in his direction. "Come over here!"

William approached, but stopped abruptly. "Don't shoot! We're looking for a young girl that might have come this way."

Nadene stepped out beside Andy. "I'm here. These are my friend."

The two groups converged in the street, and William spoke. "This is Edgar Moore, the one I went looking for. We found Jessica here when we were left the research facility."

A series of handshakes preceded an exchange of introductions for the ones who hadn't met before. When they were finished, Andy said, "You're just in time. We're in the process of trying to call the military to get us out of here."

William nodded. "It's a good thing, too. There are undead everywhere."

"Everywhere?" Wayne asked.

"Yeah, they've spread up to the Rockies now from what we heard on the way here. We've seen them all over Arizona, too. Better make it quick."

"Did you break the gate to get in?" Andy asked.

"No, just the chain. We closed it back, but it won't hold forever," Edgar said.

Andy led them back to the radio, turned it on, and picked up the receiver. "North Star to Las Vegas Command."

The voice replied, "Go ahead, North Star."

"We're ready for extraction. I am sending you the coordinates through teletype now."

He typed on the keyboard and sent the message. "Have you received it?"

"Yes, sir. We're receiving it now. We're showing those coordinates to be... in the Grand Canyon?"

"That's right. We have a bunch of supplies here that we need transported, too."

"Personnel?"

"Eleven."

"Copy. The earliest we can extract is tomorrow morning. Are you secure?"

"We are. We'll see you then. North Star out." He switched off the radio.

"That's it, then?" John asked.

Andy nodded. "That's it. We'll be in Las Vegas this time tomorrow. Let's get back to the hotel."

Chapter 4

Returning to the hotel, Andy stared at the beauty of the evening sky waning to a starry night.

"We need to sleep in shifts tonight." Andy looked at Justin when he returned. "If the undead are close by, we can't afford anything to go wrong before morning."

"Should we go to a more secure building?" John took bites off a granola bar between his words. "This place has lots of windows."

Justin nodded. "The best place to go is probably going to be the Hopi House. It's more like a museum, but it's got the smallest windows."

"A museum? How are we supposed to sleep in a museum?" asked Stephanie.

"Don't worry. There are places to sleep in there. It was built so artists could live there and make crafts like they did in the Old West. Kind of like a living museum, you see? We'll be just fine staying there tonight," Justin said.

Andy nodded. "Alright, let's get everything we need and get going. There's no telling when we might see zombies crawling all over the place. Get the vehicles."

They loaded up in the vehicles and drove across the village to the Hopi House, parked the vehicles near the small front door, and entered the building.

Andy walked to the stairs. "I'm going to take a look at the second floor." Upon his return a few moments later, he said, "There are three rooms upstairs. Each one has two beds."

Wayne folded his arms. "I'll be the first to volunteer to take the floor, then. It's a step up from sleeping under a bridge anyway."

Andy nodded. "Alright. What about the rest of you? Each bed might be able to fit two people if you lay close."

"Me and Stephanie can sleep down here. We'd like a little privacy," John said.

"Alright. We can figure out the rest when we get ready for bed. Can we have something to eat? I don't know about you, but I could use a little extra after the trip we had." William asked.

Justin walked over. "I can whip something up—"

"—you've waited on us hand and foot since we got here. I'll get it for them," Andy said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'll build a fire outside and use some of that stuff we've got in the moving trucks. I doubt the helicopters will be able to get all of us and all of that stuff."

He walked outside, followed by Alyssa. "Want to help?"

She nodded. "Sure."

"Grab some cans from the truck." He gathered some straw and wood from the flower bed. When she returned with the food, he was already coaxing the fire and feeding it with straw.

"Do you think we'll make it?" she asked.

"Sure, why not? The Army will be here tomorrow." He took the cans and set them to the side.

"That's not what I mean."

"Well, what do you mean, then?"

"Do you think *humans* will make it through this?"

Shrugging, he shook his head. "So many have been lost already, I don't know if we can survive in the long run. It depends on how many others made it out from the east."

"I always thought we'd get killed off in a hundred years by pollution or the comets they talk about. It was funny how the comets were twenty years away every time they predicted them."

He let out a hearty laugh. "Yeah, the meteor striking the earth thing. I think they said all that just to get funding for the space program."

"Probably so."

"We won't have a problem with pollution if we do survive. There won't be any factories operating for a long time. I always laughed about the Mayan calendar thing, but it looks like they were only off by a little less than a year."

"Do you miss things about the way it used to be?" she asked.

"Sometimes. I thought life was complicated before the undead with the schedules, the work that was never done, and all that. Now, it seems silly to have worried about any of it."

"I know what you mean. Before I went to North Star, I was assigned to a security detail for a congressman. He'd been getting threats in the mail, so they assigned me to him."

He nodded, stirring the cans in the fire. "Did you like working security for him?"

"No, and that's one thing I found I don't miss: self-entitled politicians."

He laughed. "I heard that!"

She smiled. "Sounds like you have experience in that area yourself."

"Of course. I was in the military. When you sign up, everything's great. You have that patriotic feeling like you're really doing something important, and then, you go through boot camp and the good feelings fade a little."

"You don't feel good about what you've accomplished?"

"It's not that. When you've been in for a while, there are times that you feel like you've been tricked into it. Sometimes you wonder if the ones making all the decisions are really looking out for your best interests."

He poked the fire and added some more straw. "There are times that I sat up at night in Iraq and wondered if I did the right thing by joining. It felt like the people who sent me there didn't really care if I lived or died."

She shrugged. "I think everybody feels like a number sometimes. Some of them care, some of them don't. It's just like anything else."

"They played with people's lives, though." His anger blazed through his words. "There were times that I felt like I was there just to push someone's political agenda. When I think some of my friends died in the sandbox because they wanted lower gas prices, it pisses me off."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "It's alright, Andy. They lied to everyone. That doesn't make it okay, but you're not alone."

Knocking the cans out of the fire pit, he nodded. "They're done."

"How do you know?"

"The label's burned off, and the can's black. All you have to do is reheat this stuff."

They gathered the cans and walked inside, and the others were scattered about the room, relaxing on improvised furniture. Andy opened each can in turn and poured the contents into serving bowls.

Over the next hour, they ate and gossiped over their assortment of canned vegetables and meats. It was nothing compared to what Justin served, but it was edible.

John stood and took Stephanie by the hand after a whispered conversation. "We're going to take a little walk."

Andy looked at him and shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea. We need to stay together until we're out of here."

"Well, I need to talk to her about something, if you know what I mean. We won't be gone long."

"I still don't think it's a good idea."

Alyssa grasped his hand tightly. "It's alright, Andy. He looks like he can take care of himself."

"Okay, okay."

"We'll be back in half an hour." John led Stephanie out the front door and closed it behind them.

Andy still had a concerned look on his face. "It's reckless for them to go off by themselves right now. We have no way of knowing where the zombies are right now."

"They're young, Andy. They haven't seen each other for weeks now," Alyssa said. "Let them have some fun."

"They could've waited until the rescue."

Wayne laughed. "I think you're wrong about that, Captain. I think if John had to wait any longer, he'd have exploded."

"Alright." He held Alyssa close. "Maybe you're right."

"They're adults, Captain. They'll make their own choices."

Andy nodded, and they chatted over the next hour. For every story Andy had about the war in Iraq, Wayne had an even bigger one about the war in Vietnam. Robert interjected a story from the emergency room when the conversation went silent, inspiring tales of all the celebrities Justin had met at the hotels over the years. William chimed in from time to time about the crazy people he'd given therapy, and Edgar offered anecdotes from his own life experiences. Moreover, they each told of people they'd loved and lost along the way.

Jessica sat by herself on the far side of the room, offering little to the conversation. Nadene, who was a bit out of her league with all the chatter, joined her. "Your name's Jessica, right?"

"Yeah," she wiped her nose with a tissue.

"I'm Nadene. Are you sick?"

"Yeah, I've had it for a few days now."

Nadene nodded. "Where are you from?"

"Virginia. You?"

"Alabama. Close to Mobile. How'd you get out here?"

"I was traveling with my mom and brother. They got killed before I met those two guys," she said. Nadene couldn't tell if she was wiping tears or mucus from her face.

"I lost my mom, too." She paused for a moment and choked back her tears. "She was killed in Alabama by *them*."

"Did she turn into one?"

"No. She begged Wayne to put her out of her misery. It was better that way."

"My mom and brother are out there somewhere. They turned and came after me, just like all the others that attacked us. I was lucky to get away."

"I don't know what's worse—knowing your loved ones are dead or knowing they've turned into *that*."

Jessica looked her in the eyes. "It's worse knowing they're out there wandering around without a soul. I can guarantee you that."

Nadene nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"I know I am."

Nadene rubbed her stomach, a sharp pain coursing through her body.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Jessica, shaking Nadene with her hand.

"I don't know. Maybe those beans didn't agree with me."

The door creaked open, and everyone glanced to see John and Stephanie walk through. Andy let out a sigh of relief. "It's about time you two got back. It's dangerous for us to separate."

"You're such a worrier, Andy." Alyssa took him by the hand. "I told you they'd be fine."

Andy didn't reply, and John and Stephanie crossed the room to join them. He jumped to his feet and pulled the shotgun up, cocking it.

"What the hell are you doing!" Wayne yelled as Andy pointed the weapon at them.

Once he was close enough, John grabbed Alyssa by the arm and bit it. She let out an agonized scream, then pulled away. Andy took the opportunity to fire, hitting John in the forehead. His limp body fell to the floor and rolled over, revealing numerous bites on the backs of his legs.

Stephanie took hold of Justin's neck, and he grabbed hers, fighting to keep distance from her chattering teeth. Through a brief struggle, Justin was able to throw her to the ground, but not before she tore a piece of flesh from his hand.

"Get upstairs now!" Andy shouted to Nadene and Jessica, turning the shotgun toward the door as more zombies entered. They ran to the stairs and disappeared from sight.

Wayne threw a pistol to William and took a rifle for himself while Justin crawled to the weapons, his hand squirting blood all over the floor. Alyssa writhed in pain, putting

pressure on her injury. Edgar retrieved a revolver and took aim, and Robert took the bag of the remaining weapons and slung it across his back.

They fired into the encroaching crowd of monsters, hitting them at random. The room quickly filled with the haze of smoke and the smell of black powder, along with the moaning of the hungry dead.

“Come on!” Andy yelled, moving toward the staircase and firing. “There's too many!”

William took hold of Edgar's shirt, forcing him to the stairs while he continued firing. “Come on, man!” he shouted, turning to Wayne.

“Alyssa, come...” Andy's jaw dropped as he looked to her. She was busy eating from Justin's neck and shoulders. His new love—his reason for living since he left the military—was chewing on the sinews of their host with howls of pleasure.

Drawing the pistol from his pocket, he held it to the back of her head, hesitating to end the life of the woman he loved.

“Come on, Andy! We've gotta go now!” William shouted, stopping on the stairs to look at him.

“I loved you,” he whispered, pulling the trigger. Her face disappeared in a pink mist, her body falling lifelessly to the floor. He fired a shot into Justin's forehead before running, not wanting to face him when he turned. Racing upstairs, Andy saw the creatures piling through the door and giving chase.

“Naddy!” Wayne shouted when he topped the staircase.

When Andy reached the second floor, she appeared at the end of the hall through a doorway, waving her hand to them. They ran to the room and closed the door.

“Help me block it!” Andy pulled a chest of drawers on one side.

“Put that board across it, too.” Robert grabbed a two-by-four lying next to the door. William slid the board through a pair of rails to secure it while Wayne helped move the chest into position.

Edgar raised his hands. “What do we do now!”

“We keep our voices down for starters.” Andy narrowed his eyes. “There's no need to panic.”

“No need to panic? There's zombies flooding the downstairs. How are we going to get out of here?”

“I know they're down there, okay? Just calm down. The military will be here tomorrow morning.” The sight of Alyssa chewing on Justin's flesh scarred his memory.

William folded his arms. “Who's to say they don't just leave when they get here? What if they assume we've been killed?”

“We have to come up with a plan.” Andy turned to listen to the door. “They're coming.”

A few moments later, they heard a hand slapping the wood on the other side. Not long after that, several sets of hands were scratching and beating on the door. The scrapes of fingernails clawing into the wood was unnerving to him, and it grew louder.

"We're done for." Edgar slouched along the far wall to the floor and covered his head in his hands.

"Don't give up yet, old man. We haven't come all this way to give up now." William crouched next to him.

"Just let me think for a minute, alright?" Andy closed his eyes and leaned against the dresser.

"What's wrong with her?" Jessica turned to Nadene with a concerned look on her face. "She's had this pain since we were downstairs."

Wayne looked at the girls. "She feels pain when the creatures are close. It's unbearable for her."

William sat on the bed next to Nadene. "Have you always had pains like this?"

Nadene grunted through the pain. "Not until the school caught fire. Then, the monsters came. I get this feeling when they're close by or when something bad's about to happen."

"I hear things sometimes. When we were in Pittsburgh, I heard them coming from down the block. There's no way I could, but I did."

"It's the gift, if you want to call them that," Andy said. "That's what Justin called them."

"I'd hardly call this a gift." William watched Nadene writhe. "In my case, maybe."

Andy nodded. "He said certain people had the gifts, and they were different for everyone. I dream things. You hear things. She gets the pains."

The banging grew louder on the door while they talked, and every once in a while, the pounding was hard enough to shake the chest of drawers. Each time it shook, fear washed over Andy, and he could see fright in the faces of his companions.

William pointed to the door. "You think they can get in?"

"Maybe. It won't be easy for them, though. The hallway's narrow on this end, and they can't cluster up," Andy said.

The wooden door creaked and moaned, the creatures pushing and pounding against it like starving men prying hopelessly on a can of beans. The unnerving moans of the undead were dispiriting and grating to Andy. Each of them offered prayers and wishes for the morning light and the promise of a military rescue.

The wood of the door cracked, and Wayne shot up. "They're getting in!"

Andy sneered at the shouting. "Calm down. They can't get in—"

The board broke and the monstrous hand of a zombie reached inside. The hand felt around the door and wall as if seeking the source of the noise. Another hand reached in and pulled the board loose, leaving an opening where more hands and arms reached through.

Wayne shook his head, then grabbed a rifle. "Can't?"

William climbed onto the dresser, a pistol in his hand. He took aim and fired through the waving arms. Another board was torn away, and another set of arms reached through and touched the barrel of William's pistol.

Andy fired from behind the chest of drawers, the opening large enough for him to see the creatures in the darkness beyond. William continued firing as the girls screamed.

"Start reloading!" William tossed an empty clip to Wayne, and he put a fresh one in the pistol and kept shooting.

The confined space of the room made each gunshot deafening until the only thing Andy could hear was a dull boom each time another round was spent. The door buckled under the pressure of the zombies trying to break through, yet the morning light was still hours away.

Chapter 5

Cresting the canyon walls, several helicopters widened their formation. They hovered slowly above the hotel and the ranger station before following the rail tracks to the east.

"Down there, that adobe house," said a soldier from the open door on the side. "Take it down."

When the helicopters hovered close enough to the ground, the soldiers emerged and established a perimeter, scanning the area for threats. A few zombies shambled out the door, undoubtedly disturbed by the noise. Under a hail of gunfire, the creatures collapsed to the ground.

"Do we go in or what, sarge?" asked one of the men.

He nodded. "Clear the first floor."

With an exchange of hand signals, they ran to either side of the door, then proceeded through the door and opened fire once inside. The sergeant walked in after them, the soldiers still shooting at the large number of zombies staggering down the stairs.

"It's a waste of time, sarge. Ain't nobody alive in here."

"We still check. The last time we didn't, ten people starved to death." The sergeant looked over the bodies.

"Stairs in the back," said another soldier, moving to the side of the staircase.

The sergeant gave the nod, then the troops ascended to the second level, a hail of gunfire erupting from their weapons when they reached the landing. After several minutes of moving and firing, the soldiers took aim down a narrow hallway, each shouting "Clear!".

Drawing his pistol, the sergeant crept down the hallway, arriving at a door with several bullet holes pierced through the wooden frame. The wall opposite the door was shredded.

"Don't shoot." The sergeant waved his hand in front of one of the openings. Having not been shot, he peeked through the hole, a flashlight in hand. Just beyond the door and a broken dresser sat several people huddled in the corner holding each other.

Their faces were covered in a thin mixture of dust and gunpowder residue, and it was difficult for the sergeant to tell if they were even alive before they twitched at the flashlight hitting them in the eyes.

"It's alright, folks. You're safe now." The sergeant pried the door loose and moved the chest.

Wayne, William, Andy, and Robert stood, their joints creaking and cracking until free movement returned to them. Behind them sat the two girls and Edgar like a prize or treasure to be protected. Without a word, they followed the soldiers to the waiting helicopters, and when everyone was on board, they lifted off the ground and turned to the west.

"Thank you for saving us." Andy extended his hand to the sergeant.

He took it firmly. "You were all at North Star?"

"No. These other people are just trying to survive. I'm the only one left from North Star."

"I heard it was hell back there. At least Dr. Kemper's research made it out."

Andy nodded. "Dr. Nelson here made it out, too. It's a good thing they didn't get along."

"Didn't get along?" the sergeant asked.

"Dr. Kemper didn't like the doctor being down there with him. Probably because he had other plans."

"What happened exactly? We didn't recover any personnel from the facility."

Andy looked to the horizon and tried to remember things he wanted to suppress. "Dr. Kemper kidnapped some of the staff and turned them into walkers with samples of the virus he'd gotten from Dr. Nelson. Before we knew what was happening, they came up in the elevator and attacked."

The sergeant shook his head. "He killed our own people?"

"Crazy times."

William sighed. "Yeah, crazy times. Some of your men chased me and Edgar across the country. They thought he had some kind of cure in his blood."

"Why's that?"

William averted his eyes. "Don't overreact. He was bitten by someone else who didn't make it, but he's immune to it."

"Immune?"

"He has to be. It's been several days now, and he hasn't turned into one yet."

"Well, he'd be one by now. No one lasts more than a few hours after being infected."

"Exactly," William said. "We had to run all the way from Ohio to get away from Major Edwards, the officer who was trying to take Edgar. We barely made it out here with him."

"I doubt they'll care now," the sergeant said. "Curing the virus is no longer a part of the plan."

Andy raised an eyebrow. "What's the plan now?"

"Relocating, I guess you could say."

"Relocating?"

"We'll talk more when we get to Las Vegas. I can tell by your faces that you haven't had any sleep, so get some rest."

"I'll just wait 'till we land," Wayne said. "It's only about an hour's trip to Vegas from here."

"Nah, go ahead and sleep. We have to take a different route back. We've heard the dead are moving west, too."

"Wait... what?" Andy asked.

"We're not sure exactly why, but there are theories. A large number of dead have been walking west. No sleep, no rest. They just keep walking day and night away from the cities."

"They're coming for us," Nadene whispered. "They won't stop until they get us all."

Jessica put her arm around Nadene.

"What are the theories?" Andy asked.

"The higher-ups think they've been attracted by the living people going west—all the planes, cars, and vehicles. Go where the food is, that kind of thing. When we come back to Vegas, we have to take a—"

"Thinkers," Nadene said. "We saw one in Alabama."

"Those creatures out there can't think, girl," the sergeant said.

Wayne leaned forward. "No, it's true. I saw it."

"What happened?"

"It was a small boy, just a kid. We were staying at these cabins, and when we started loading up to leave, he was standing there. He was trying to bait us, but we saw the others in the trees."

The sergeant shook his head. "Probably just a coincidence."

"No, they were waiting," Wayne said. "They didn't attack until that kid let out this awful scream. It wasn't a good trap, but it was set up as one. *They can think.*"

"We haven't seen any evidence of that," the sergeant said. "The walkers attack in waves with total disregard of what they're doing."

"Good. I'm glad you haven't had to deal with that yet."

The sergeant scratched his chin. "How many of those 'thinkers' have you seen?"

"Just the one," Wayne said.

"We saw one, too." William tilted his head. "Back in St. Louis, one of them kept watching us like he was trying to figure us out."

"So, two of them? Out of how many?"

"Thousands or more. We kind of lost count during the run," William said. Wayne laughed at his comment and nodded in agreement.

The sergeant shrugged. "We'll have to keep a tighter watch, then. Get some rest, folks. We'll be in Vegas in a couple of hours."

* * *

The helicopters landed on an improvised tarmac, the sudden touchdown stirring woke Andy from his sleep with a fear of a zombie horde breaking through the barriers, but he sighed when he realized that was a distant memory.

"It's alright. We're safe now," Wayne said.

The soldiers helped them out of the crew compartment, and they looked out across the abandoned landscape of Las Vegas.

"Not much like I remember it," Andy said.

The sergeant turned towards the city. "Desert's almost reclaimed it. With nobody here to keep the sand back, it'll eventually get swallowed up completely."

When everyone had exited the helicopter, the soldiers escorted them to a temporary housing unit. It was a single, long hall with beds arranged along the walls. Andy immediately recognized it as a barracks.

"What were you talking about earlier? Relocating?" Andy asked, taking a seat on a bed.

"Pick yourself out a place." The sergeant turned from others and looked at Andy.

"Yes, the government has been in preparation almost since this started. They're preparing to relocate the remaining populace."

"Where?"

"Remote places. Hawaii, Alaska, the Aleutians. They've even been talking to countries in South America about building a refugee area there, but the consensus is they want to keep Americans in American territory."

"That's probably best."

"It doesn't come without its problems. We've been building tunnels in Alaska and trying to up the food production, but it's not easy. At least they have oil and natural gas."

Andy nodded. "Thank you, sergeant."

"You're welcome... what was your rank?"

"Captain. I'm Captain McKenzie."

"Sir!" The sergeant raised a salute. "We didn't think you made it out. I wanted to thank you for warning us, sir."

Andy shook his hand. "It was the right thing to do."

"Yes, sir. Let us know if you need anything." The sergeant exited the dormitory.

"Well, sir, what do we do now?" Wayne asked with a smug grin.

William joined them. "I think we need to let Dr. Nelson work on a cure."

"What if Dr. Nelson has no interest in finding one? What if he feels it's hopeless?" Robert asked.

Andy looked at Robert with disappointment. "You have to try, doc. You're the only one with experience."

Robert sat on the bed and leaned on his knees. "Maybe so, but why bother? They're relocating everybody, and the walkers will die off eventually. Even Dr. Kemper believed that."

"If we can find a cure, we can fight them," Andy said.

Robert nodded. "And if the process can't be reversed?"

"It's a start," Andy said. "If we can cure ourselves, we can at least stop the spread of the virus. We can stop anyone else from becoming one."

"I'll need a lab and equipment. It could take time."

"We've got time," William said. "We've got Edgar, too."

Edgar walked to the foot of Robert's bed. "Wait just a minute there. I thought we weren't going to be killing the old guy."

"We're not." William looked at Robert again. "I think he'll do you right."

"He will," Nadene said. "He's a good man."

Before leaving the hall, Andy nodded to them. "I'll see what I can do."

Chapter 6

Andy returned to the room after about an hour. "No deal. They don't have any medical facilities or labs left in Las Vegas, and clearing one out from under the desert isn't possible."

"Is Las Vegas the last place left?" Robert asked.

Andy nodded. "I already asked. Most of the big western cities fell apart, but they were able to hold it together in Eureka, so you're going there. That's the only one in California left, and the posts in Oregon and Washington state are madhouses."

Robert raised an eyebrow. "You're not coming with us?"

Andy paused before shaking his head. "No, I'm staying here."

"But why?" Robert asked.

"I've lost everything. My family, my command... Alyssa. I have to go back. It's all I have."

"You left, though," Robert said. "You left all that behind when you escaped with us."

"The only people who know that are in this room, doc. I can go back now, no questions asked, and that's what I intend to do."

"We've all lost everything, but you're going to leave us now?"

"I have to. The Army's the only thing that seems normal to me now. I just want to go back."

"It's okay, doc," Wayne said. "It's his choice, leave him to it."

With a downward glance, Andy left the hall, and not long afterward, through the door walked the sergeant who had rescued them. "We'll leave tonight. Captain McKenzie told me you want to go to Eureka. Is that right?"

"I guess," Robert said. "As long as it has a suitable hospital, I can continue my work on the cure."

"You can do it, Mr. Nelson," Nadene said.

He nodded and turned to the sergeant. "Where is Eureka?"

"California. We've been using it to manufacture and load supplies from the mainland, bound for Alaska. They have the biggest hospital in the area, and it's still operational."

"Good," Robert said. "We should be protected there, then."

"Protected? Yes, most definitely," the sergeant said.

"Alright. When do we leave?"

"Tonight, about six hours from now. Get some sleep."

The sergeant left, then they each lay in a bed. Nadene faced Jessica, and they chatted under their breath while the others fell asleep.

* * *

The sun waned in the west until the sergeant returned for them. "Alright, folks. Time to get up. The helicopter's prepping on the flight line."

Gathering their meager possessions, they followed him to the flight line, boarded the helicopter, and were soon in the air headed northwest.

"The further west we go, the better I feel," Wayne said. "It's at least a thousand miles to the nearest zombie."

"You never know where they might show up," Nadene said.

"I can't believe we lost so many at the canyon. Especially not John." Wayne shook his head.

Robert nodded. "Andy told them not to go off by themselves. They made a mistake, and the rest of us had to pay for it."

"Just drop it." William saw the anger behind Wayne's aged eyes. "We've been through a lot. Everybody's made mistakes, and we've paid dearly for the ground we've covered. Let's leave it alone and move on."

"I just can't believe it." Robert ran his fingers through his hair. "The number of people dead over this, it's staggering. Unfathomable."

"It was over a billion in the first week worldwide. Since then, we haven't been able to get good reports from other places," the sergeant said. "North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia are all crawling with walkers."

William leaned forward. "You said South America was safe. What about Africa and Australia? Japan?"

"We heard from Yokota in Japan. The Japanese couldn't hold off the Chinese refugees from entering the country, so we retreated from there when it fell into total chaos. Australia is holding out, and we don't know much about Africa at this point."

"So, Japan is infected, too? So much for the safety of being on an island," William said.

The sergeant shook his head. "No, not infected. At least not when we left."

Edgar scratched his chin. "What happened, then?"

"The same thing that happened everywhere else: the total breakdown of society. Los Angeles wasn't destroyed by the plague, it was destroyed by rioters. By the gangs trying to carve up territory and claim it for their own. When the people saw our government was paralyzed, they started getting hungry for resources. Without electricity, most of the western cities can't sustain themselves."

Robert nodded. "Just about every city in the southwest has these huge air cooling devices, moisturizers, and other things like that. When those things fail, the air gets hotter and drier. It's hard to live."

The sergeant continued. "With the fires, the smog, and nothing to cool the city, the Los Angeles metro area saw temperatures well over a hundred degrees every day. We had to pull out; the people didn't want us there, and we didn't have the resources to keep control."

"What about Eureka?" Edgar asked. "Did they burn it down, too?"

"No, it's basically the same. Smaller populations are more willing to work with each other during disasters. For instance, when we contacted people in Montana, they told us they didn't want any help. They said they were staying right there."

"They had a choice?" Nadene asked. "They forced us to go to St. Louis. They didn't ask what we wanted."

The sergeant nodded. "The goal then was to focus the population in specific places. It's easier to defend people when you circle the wagons in one spot, so to speak."

"It probably would have worked, too, if it hadn't been for Major Edwards," William said.

"Who?" the sergeant asked.

"The madman who chased us all the way from Ohio," Edgar said. "He set charges on the walls and let the damned things into St. Louis."

Nadene's mind flashed back to the scene in St. Louis where Haley was holding Sally's limp body and screaming for her to come back. *The exploding walls*, she thought. She covered her mouth and turned away from Robert to conceal the truth of what happened.

The sergeant's head dropped in disappointment. "I've seen a lot of crazy things since this started, but that's the most insane thing I've ever heard of."

"Tell me about it," Edgar said, leaning back in his seat. "He killed an untold number of people to hide a kidnapping."

"What happened to him?" the sergeant asked.

William glanced to the floor. "We killed him. We wanted to take him with us, but he tried to shoot me. Edgar took him out."

"Serves him right," the sergeant said. "If he did that in St. Louis, he didn't deserve to live."

William nodded. "It's over now. I think we can all agree we're just glad to be alive."

They nodded in agreement. After a few hours, Nadene could see the coastline in the distance. Below her, she observed fresh, thorough cuts through the surrounding forests.

"What happened to all the trees?" Edgar asked, peering through the window.

"Building materials," the sergeant said. "Until we've evacuated, we're getting what materials we can. There's similar operations for strip mining, fuel harvesting, food gathering, and the like."

"The rape of the land," Edgar whispered.

As the helicopter touched down, soldiers on the ground approached to help them. Nadene and her companions were escorted to a convoy of vehicles waiting on the nearby roadway.

"I'm Colonel Ericson, commander of operations here in Eureka. Which one of you is Dr. Nelson," an officer said when they arrived.

"I'm Robert Nelson." He extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Nelson. The entire hospital will be at your disposal. Anything you need, you let us know." The colonel took his hand. Getting into the vehicle, Colonel Ericson patted the driver's seat. "Let's roll."

"Just like that? You're going to give me a whole hospital?" Robert asked.

The colonel eyed him for a moment. "Of course. Captain McKenzie spoke highly of you, and he told us about your plans. Besides, we don't have enough people in Eureka to need a hospital, so maybe somebody can put the equipment to use."

"Does your hospital have all the available information on the virus? The materials from North Star?" Robert asked.

"And then some. We've been accumulating information on the walkers and the virus since this thing began. Well, not just in Eureka, but all around the country."

Robert looked uneasy. "I'll do my best."

"What's wrong, doc?" Wayne asked.

"Pressure. Stress. Imagining how I come up with a cure for something like this. The greatest minds in the world—well, the ones that survived—have surely tried and failed."

"You're right, doc." William took Robert by the shoulder. "All the great minds have tried, except one."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence, but it's not easy. Even if it can be cured, it'll take months."

Edgar's eyes met Robert's. "You know how I dealt with cancer? One day at a time, just like everything else. We'll give it our best shot, but we can at least say we tried."

The convoy turned onto James Street, and the colonel turned to Robert. "There it is, St. Joseph's. Emergency room or main entrance?"

"The emergency room. It should have most of the things I need in a small space. Better than running all over the hospital for everything."

"You got it." The colonel leaned forward and instructed the driver. Getting out in front of the building, the colonel led them inside, and a staff of doctors and nurses greeted them.

"Dr. Prewett, this is Dr. Robert Nelson. He'll be here performing research at your facility," Colonel Ericson said.

Dr. Prewett shook Robert's hand when it was offered. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Nelson. Would you care to tour the facility for a moment while your friends wait?"

"Sure," he replied, following the doctor down the hall.

Jessica sneezed loudly, her nose pouring with mucus. One of the nurses approached and looked her over. "Are you alright, hon? We can get you some medicine."

"I'm alright, thanks," she replied, taking a few steps back.

"Nonsense." The nurse took her by the hand. "Let's go in here and check you out."

"I'm fine!" Jessica snatched her hand away. "Don't touch me!"

Shocked by the sudden outburst, the nurse froze in her tracks. Everyone stared at Jessica for a few moments before Nadene spoke. "Don't blame her. She lost her mom and brother just a couple of days ago."

"I'm sorry." The nurse backed away. "Let us know if you change your mind."

Wayne followed the girls to a waiting room. "They're just trying to help."

Jessica nodded, pulling some tissues from a box. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be like that."

"It's alright," Nadene said. "We're safe now."

"It stays with you," Jessica said.

Nadene raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"When I said we left because they didn't want kids, that was a lie. We left because the men tried to turn us into... sex slaves," Jessica said. "They did it to me... over and over again. My mother had to hear that happening to me."

"People do sick things when there's nothing to stop them," Wayne said. "We won't let that happen to you. Not ever again."

"You're lucky, you know?" Jessica turned to Nadene. "You have your dad—or is it your grandpa?"

Wayne shook his head, but Nadene spoke before he could say anything. "Uncle. Uncle Wayne." She took his hand in hers and smiled, and she could feel his heart melting.

"I wish we'd found you before we ran into those other people," Jessica said.

Robert leaned into the doorway of the waiting room. "Ready to go?"

Jessica nodded, and they followed Robert into the entry hall. "Alright, we'll be staying here at the hospital. I'm going to take Edgar to do some tests and see if we can get started on this cure. I'll need Will's help since he had the most contact with Ed. The staff will show you around."

Without another word the men disappeared behind a door at the end of the hall. Wayne, Nadene, and Jessica followed the nurses for a tour of the residential section of the hospital—the tall office tower rising above the facility's center.

* * *

"Don't be poking and prodding me too much, doc. I'm an old man." Edgar lay on the MRI machine. He was dressed in a hospital gown and looked down the tunnel with a troubled frown on his face.

Robert nodded and smiled. "It's alright, Ed. I just want to take a look inside. We haven't even gotten to the blood work yet." When Edgar stopped inside the passage, Robert operated the controls and snapped pictures. Following the MRI readings, Edgar complained further as Robert took blood samples.

The day proceeded forward, and Edgar became exhausted from the tests. William entered the lab as Edgar shuffled past him too tired to talk.

"Find out anything?" William asked.

Robert sorted through the images, pulling one in particular from the pile. "He's got cancer."

He rolled his eyes. "We already knew that. Anything else?"

"I can't find a trace of the virus in his blood work," Robert said. "You said he was infected?"

"We're not sure how, but we know he was bitten at least once while we were with him. It could have been before then, though."

Robert looked through the microscope, changing slides quickly. "What do you mean?"

"A note that we found at his house. It was written by his wife before she killed herself—she seemed to think he was infected a few days before we found her."

"Did you figure out why?"

"The window in his room was open, and we found a creature outside the house. She must have assumed he was infected by the virus."

"Maybe. All I know is there's no virus in his blood now. Not a trace."

"We saw him get bitten."

Robert shrugged. "Well, maybe it didn't transfer to him."

William sighed and sat on the desk nearby. "Have you ever heard of anyone *not* catching it from a bite?"

"I can just tell you the facts we have at hand and what I can derive from those facts. There's no evidence he ever had the virus, even though you think he may have been exposed twice."

"What about the cancer?"

"It's growing fast. He's about stage two or three, judging by its current size and progression."

"He was stage four when we found him. He should have been dead according to the reports, and he's what, four or five weeks past when they said he would be dead?"

Robert scratched his chin and brushed the hair from his forehead. "This doesn't make any sense. He's supposed to be infected, but he's not. He's supposed to be cured of cancer, but he's not—it's actually spreading fast. I'd give him another month or two at best."

The information ran through William's mind, and he tried to pair that with his limited medical knowledge. He had studied medicine—it was part of his required course study in college—but he was drawing a blank.

"I need to start at the beginning," Robert said.

With his train of thought broken, William turned to him. "What do you mean, doc?"

"I have to consider the information we have, determine what we'll say is true and what we'll say is false. Care to help?"

"Sure," William said. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just be my sounding board for this," Robert replied, grabbing a notepad and a pen. "You say that Edgar was on his deathbed when you found him. He had stage four cancer, and he had been exposed to the virus. We'll mark those as true."

William watched him write it out. "Okay."

"On the other side, 'Edgar is infected', and we'll put false next to it. Then, we'll put 'Edgar has cancer', and that's true," Robert said. "Anything else?"

"That's it as far as I can tell."

Robert studied his simple notes for a few minutes. His eyes traced the notes, and William could tell the gears were churning in Robert's head.

"My God," Robert said finally.

William's eyes widened. "What?"

"It's all right here. Edgar has cancer, thus he is not infected."

"What, you think the cancer kept the virus from affecting him?"

"I don't know. I need a sample of the virus to see what happens."

"I think we're fresh out of zombies, doc," William said. "Where are we going to find a sample?"

"The medical staff. We need to see if they've got any. Can you find out for me?"

"Sure, no problem." William exited the room, and after scouring the halls, he found a nurse near the emergency room entrance.

"Ah, Mr. Murray, your friends are upstairs if you're looking for them," the nurse said.

William nodded and clasped his hands. "Ah, good. Actually, I was wondering if you could help me with something."

"Yes?"

"We were wanting to see if you have samples of the virus at this hospital. Dr. Nelson needs them."

"We do, but they're kept in the isolated labs. We can't remove them."

William smiled. "We'll just have to take the doctor to them, then. Can you tell me where we need to go?"

The nurse gave him directions, then William returned to Robert. "They have samples upstairs. You ready?"

Without speaking, Robert followed him to the other laboratory.

"This gives me the creeps." Robert donned a biohazard suit.

William laughed. "You've got the creeps? You're the doctor."

"You don't understand," Robert said. "The last time I put on one of these, I was with the man who later killed several of the staff at North Star. I could have been one of them."

"Who's that?"

"A crazy man named Alfred Kemper."

Robert's mention of Dr. Kemper had piqued William's curiosity. "What happened down there?"

"Kemper started taking soldiers to his lab—he was obsessed with the virus. He turned them into zombies for his research." Robert shook his head with disdain. "We had to leave when his creations emerged from the lab. Well, more like run for our damned lives."

"Why would he do something like that? A man with all that intelligence?"

"He wanted to be the first to find the cure, and he was willing to do anything and everything necessary—ethical or not—to achieve his goals. Luckily for those of us who made it out, he didn't have a chance to abduct us all."

"I'm glad you made it out, doc." William stopped him. "If you hadn't we might never have gotten a cure."

"You'd have to thank Andy McKenzie for that one, and let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're nowhere close to a cure yet."

Once inside the lab, Robert was quick to pull the samples and mix them with some of Edgar's blood. "Just as I expected." He squinted, peering through the microscope.

"Are they dying?"

"No, they're taking over the blood cells. He's not immune to the virus, so that leaves only one possibility remaining."

"Which is?"

"The cancer. It's eliminating the virus—destroying it."

"But how?"

"I'll have to see what happens with some cancer cells from Edgar to know that. It looks like we have some work to do."

William followed Robert out of the lab, and they took off the suits and proceeded to the elevator. Arriving at the lobby level, the others were standing there waiting.

Chapter 7

William exited the elevator, and he could see the curiosity written on each of their faces, but he didn't notice his friend amongst them.

"Where's Edgar?" William asked.

"Worn out," Wayne replied. "He seems to be more exhausted every day that goes by."

"The cancer's spreading quickly." Robert lowered his head. "It won't be long before he'll be confined to a bed."

Nadene walked beside Robert. "Did you find out anything, Mr. Nelson?"

"I have to run some more tests, and I need another sample from Edgar. Beyond that, I think the cancer stopped the virus from taking hold."

"How long does he have left?"

"Maybe a month. Two at most."

"Should we tell him?"

Robert nodded. "Yes, we can't keep it a secret. He deserves to know what he faces."

"He's faced it once," William said. "At least he's gotten more time than he expected."

Robert stopped dead in his tracks.

"Doc, you okay?" Wayne asked.

"Just thinking. If the cancer did stop the virus, it wasn't without making Edgar feel differently," Robert said. "What if this virus cured his cancer, if only for a while?"

Wayne shook his head. "I don't like where this is going, doc. We can't inject him with that stuff."

"And I don't mean to," Robert said. "Not until I've studied it. Not until I can prove it."

"Get to work, doc. You have, you said a month? Not a moment to waste," Wayne said.

* * *

Like they often did in the Pacific Northwest, the rains came with great frequency as December marched forward. William, Robert, and Edgar spent most of their time in the labs and searched tirelessly for a cure—both for the virus and Edgar's cancer. Wayne watched over the girls while they tried to entertain themselves, and Jessica consumed cold medicine by the bottle; her cold was unpredictable at best, and some days were better than others. Some days were better than others for Edgar, also; the cancer was returning with a vengeance hellbent on finishing the job it had started.

"I've established that cancer cells and the virus don't play well together." Robert stared into the microscope. "Revelation has a hard time invading the cells and taking on their characteristics. At least we've found out it can't survive in the open air."

"I don't understand the part about it taking over cells," Edgar said. "Dumb it down for me."

"The Revelation virus operates by taking over a cell and duplicating its functions. It can take over any host cell, but it's not very efficient; however, when it comes into contact with the cancer cells, it doesn't know what to do," Robert said.

"Why not? I was always taught cancer is just like any other cell, it just reproduces uncontrollably."

"The 'reproducing uncontrollably' part seems not to mesh well with the virus. Yes, they're your body's own cells, but they're still very different."

Edgar collapsed into a chair, and William and Robert rushed to either side of him.

"Ed!" William grabbed his arm. "You alright?"

"Yeah, just getting weak, you know?" Edgar tried to right himself.

Robert's eyes met William's. "Maybe we should ask him now."

"Ask him what?" Edgar asked.

William shook his head. "I don't think that's the best choice."

"Best choice?" Edgar asked.

"You know it is," Robert said.

"Dammit, I'm right here! What are you two talking about?" Edgar asked, thrusting himself between them.

William turned away and walked past Edgar a few steps. "He wants to inject you with the virus."

"You're crazy, doc!"

"Am I?" Robert turned to Edgar. "Am I now? And what if it works?"

"What if it works all too well? What if I turn into a walker?"

"Did you turn into one the last two times you've been exposed?" Robert asked.
"What do you have to lose, anyway?"

Edgar glanced between the doctor and the floor. "You're a pretty smart fellow, doc."

William turned around to look at them. "You're gonna do it, Ed?"

"He's right, isn't he? It's either die now taking a chance to live or die later, right?"

"There's no guarantee it will work," William said. "Did you tell him that, doc?"

"That's true, Ed. It's true there's no guarantee it's going to work. If it doesn't work, we'll have to put you down."

"Hell, it's better than just wasting away," Edgar said. "Go ahead, doc. Shoot me up."

Robert took a syringe and filled it with fluid from the sample. Watching it approach Edgar's arm, William grabbed Robert's wrist. "Just a minute, doc. Don't you think that's a lot to put in him at one time?"

"If the cancer stops it, it won't matter how much," Robert said.

"Yeah, but you can't wouldn't get nearly that much if they bite you. What if more than a tiny amount kills him anyway?"

"You're probably right." Robert lowered the syringe. "I'll give it to him in small doses. We can always add more later if we need to."

William nodded. "I'd feel a lot better about it. Thanks."

"I'll start with a needlepoint just under the skin, and we'll go from there."

Robert monitored Edgar's status over the next several days, watching for any major changes or inconsistencies. He increased the dose until the cancer reduced in size and rate of growth. After a week of observation, Robert stopped adding more doses, and Edgar progressed from feeling terrible to only slight exhaustion.

Robert watched Edgar leave the lab after finishing his checkup. "We're still not any closer to a cure."

William folded his arms. "I wouldn't say that. The things you've learned from Edgar's body have taken us farther than anything else."

"True, but it's still a matter of managing two things at once. The cancer resists the virus, and the virus reduces the cancer. If the virus dies out first, the cancer will start growing again," Robert said.

"And if the cancer dies out completely?"

Robert shrugged his shoulders. "Ed would probably turn into a zombie."

"We'll have to watch him closely, then."

"Indeed. I wish we could do something else, but it'll have to work for now."

"You know what you just did, doc?" William asked, displaying a grin.

Robert shook his head. "What?"

"You've found the cure for cancer. Congratulations."

"It's hardly a cure, Will. I'm just managing its effects, reducing its size."

"You don't give yourself enough credit," William said. "Yeah, you're managing it like chemotherapy, but it's a much better method. Looks like it has a much higher success rate, too."

"Maybe, but that's not important. I'd trade a thousand cures for cancer for just one cure for Revelation," Robert said. "It's a much bigger problem."

"Small steps, doc. It's all we can do."

Robert nodded while organizing the paperwork on his desk. "I wish I could bring them back, Will."

William looked at Robert, then he noticed a photograph had been pulled out. Upon closer examination, William could see an adult woman, a young girl, and a boy on a beach in the picture. "Who are they?"

"My wife and my two oldest. We had another boy, but this picture was before he was born." Robert's eyes watered. "God, it's hard for me to remember his face."

"You'll see them again," William said. "One day."

Robert's stared hopefully at William. "You really believe that?"

"Fortunately for you, yes. Unfortunately for me, though."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"I've done a lot of bad things in my life, doc. Things that I shouldn't have, things no one should ever do." He folded his arms and paced to the other side of the room.

"You'll have to forgive yourself before you'll get any peace."

"I've killed people." He lowered his head. "My wife, her lover. At least one soldier who was chasing us. They're all dead because of me."

Robert watched him for a moment. "I don't presume to know what happened, and I don't want to. I'm not your judge, Will. We have to move forward and get past the things we can't change."

Finishing, Robert folded the photograph and put it in his pocket. "We have to be better men than we were. It's all we can do, Will."

William nodded. "It's not easy. It's hard to accept when so many have died over so little. Not just in my situation, but the whole thing. The virus, the missiles, everything."

"Justin always said we have to live for today, to keep going. We have to find a cure." Robert paused, and he looked at the desk. "The gift."

"The gift?"

"Yeah, the gift he always talked about. He kept saying 'the girl is the key'. Nadene."

"What's she got to do with this? She's never been bitten or infected."

"Still, everything else Justin said came to be true. He knew where to find the others, by the river in the canyon. Maybe he was right. Maybe she is the key to this whole thing."

"I'll get her." William left the lab.

* * *

Entering the room, she remembered Robert as if it were weeks before, as if he was sneaking into the house after a long shift, secreting pork chops from the refrigerator and trying not to wake anyone. He looked worn down, though; the stress and worry had carved fine lines into his face, the same kind she saw on her mother after the divorce.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Nelson?" she asked.

Robert nodded. "Yes, Naddy. Do you remember Justin talking about how you were the key?"

"Yes, but I don't know what he was talking about. I don't understand why he believed that."

"Well, I wanted to see if you wouldn't mind me doing some tests to see if we can figure it out," Robert said.

"If you think it will help, I'll do it, Mr. Nelson."

Robert nodded, then turned to William. "Will you help?"

"Sure, doc."

Having drawn her blood, Robert helped Nadene in and out of the MRI machine, then examined the scans for a moment. "It looks like you're a completely healthy fourteen year old, Naddy. Nothing on the MRI."

She smiled, then he put slides of her blood under the microscope. "Nothing in the blood, either. Looks one-hundred-percent normal."

"What about an EEG?" William asked.

"You'll have to refresh my memory on that, Will," Robert said.

"EEG is a electroencephalography."

Robert nodded. "Ah, yes. Scanning the brain waves?"

"It couldn't hurt."

"I don't know what it would accomplish, though. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with finding a cure."

"I'd like to know," William said. "I'd like to see what my results are, too."

"Alright, we've got time. We'll do yours first."

Robert retrieved the recording net and the recorder, then he placed it on William's head and asked test questions while monitoring the machine.

"According to the charts and the results, you have abnormal brain activity. There are plenty of deviations, and they're beyond established limits," Robert said.

"What do you think it means?"

"I've seen this kind of thing before in medical journals. The theory is that human beings don't normally utilize their full brain capacity. This seems to indicate that you are using more than most people."

"Do you think that has something to do with the voices?"

"It could. We truly don't know what would happen if a human could use the sum of their brain's resources in their entirety for a prolonged period of time. Some think it would give you superhuman abilities."

"What do you think, doc?"

"Who's to say for sure? If you hear things at great distance sometimes, it may be an involuntary reaction."

"Oh, it's involuntary, that's for sure," Nadene said. "I've never been able to control what I see."

"Well, let's find out what your readings can show us." Robert patted the examination table.

Nadene nodded and sat, then Robert affixed the recording net to her head. Robert raised an eyebrow when the test was finished and examined the results. "Interesting."

"What?" William asked.

"The Theta, Beta, and Gamma waves are elevated, well outside the norms. Like yours, but these are much higher."

William looked at the chart on the screen. "Have you ever been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, Nadene?"

"No. I've never had a problem concentrating."

"It's very strange," Robert said. "An increase in theta waves usually represents repression or inhibition. Did you lie to any of the questions, Naddy?"

"I didn't lie about any of it."

"Something's being repressed, though. It's clear," Robert said.

William nodded and turned to Nadene. "It wouldn't be normal if she wasn't. We've all seen some terrible things, but these readings aren't just repressed memories. It's too strong."

"John said it was ESP. Maybe he was right."

Robert shrugged. "I've never seen any evidence of it before, but it could be true. Your visions came true?"

"Every one of them. All except one so far."

William stepped closer. "Which one hasn't?"

"I'm standing alone by the sea, and it's cold outside. I'm looking across the ocean, and then it ends."

"That's it?" Robert asked.

"Yeah. It's like deja vu when a vision becomes reality. Everything falls into place, and you're powerless to stop it from happening. It's like you watch the events unfold just as you remembered, and you're too caught up in it to do anything."

"So you can't change what happens, you can only see it before it happens?" William asked.

"Right. I couldn't stop mom from getting killed. I saw the zombie in the darkness, and I couldn't do anything." She fought back the tears and the guilt. "And when I told the others about my visions before they came to pass, I don't know if that made them happen or not."

"What do you mean, Naddy?" William asked.

"It's just something I wonder sometimes. If I hadn't told them about a vision, would it still have happened? Did their knowing what I saw in my dreams change the decisions they made?" She rubbed her forehead. "It's hard to think about."

"A paradox," Robert said. "A question leading into an endless circle of more questions."

William smiled. "Either way, I hope your last vision comes true. Even if it is cold outside, at least there aren't any walkers where you were."

She grinned and nodded. "At least now I know I'm not crazy."

"We never said you were." Robert turned the corner, and his arm hit a glass beaker, its contents spilling all over the floor. "Damn!"

The liquid crawled along towards Nadene, and her eyes widened. Her muscles tensed, and her gaze was focused on the slow-moving fluid. The recorder, still connected to the net atop her head, whirred with activity.

Robert glanced at the machine when it emitted a chaotic tone of beeps and blips. "My God..."

"What's going on?" William shouted.

"I spilled the virus." Robert grabbed a container of bleach and poured it on the floor near Nadene, covering the fluid. "Her readings are off the charts!"

The smell of chlorine permeated the air, and Nadene relaxed after a few minutes. Robert and William each took deep breaths and stared at her.

"Can I go now?" she asked. Robert nodded, and she left.

Wiping the sweat away from his upper lip, William looked at Robert. "Have you ever seen anything like that before?"

Robert shook his head. "I've never even heard of anything like that. It certainly puts a new perspective on extra-sensory perception."

They cleaned up the bleach and fluid from the floor and gathered the streams of printer paper. "I think we've done enough for today," Robert said, removing his gloves and dropping them in the biohazard receptacle before opening the door.

Chapter 8

The evening went on with little conversation about what had happened in the lab, and Nadene was content to eat her meal and retire early. Robert explained there was no cure to be had yet, and he left it at that.

Early the next morning, Colonel Erlicson woke her and asked her to gather with the others in the common room. "We've been advised that the walkers have come as far as Los Angeles in the south and Denver to the east. At this point in time, we've been given just under two weeks to wrap it up here and evacuate."

Robert stared at the Colonel. "Two weeks? There's no way I can finish my research in that amount of time."

"You'll have to, doctor," the colonel said. "We can't stand and fight here with the limited personnel we have. It was never the intention; we're here to collect resources and survivors and evacuate when our mission is threatened."

"It'll take the walkers longer than two weeks to walk here from LA," Robert said. "We can't get an extension?"

"We'll be doing an ordered evacuation, not a hurried retreat as they chase us into the boats, doctor. We've tried the hasty escape before, and it hasn't worked well for anybody yet."

Robert threw up his hands and walked away. "Fine, then I have some work to do. If you'll excuse me."

William followed him to the elevator, and Colonel Erlicson spoke again. "If any of you want to leave early, there's a ship coming in tonight. We can get you on it."

"No," Wayne said. "We're family now, and you don't leave family behind. We're staying with the doc."

"Suit yourselves, but you'll all be leaving within two weeks. Make sure you're ready to go. That goes for the doctor, too." Erlicson walked towards the elevator.

* * *

Robert slammed the door once William had walked through. "How the hell do they expect me to finish up in two weeks? Two months, maybe. Two years, sure. Two weeks!"

"Calm down, doc. They have their rules," William said. "We've come this far, so let's focus and try to find a cure for this bug."

"What's the point? It's over, Will. I've used up all my good ideas, and that got us less than half way to the goal."

"You're the only one who can do it, doc. I can help, but I'm no doctor. Just keep trying. One step at a time."

"Alright. Fine. It won't be the first time I've stood in the face of futility."

"What happened the last time?"

"They brought in a pregnant girl, maybe eighteen. Hit by a drunk driver. We lost both of them."

"I'm sorry."

"That one's always stuck with me. The staff thought I was crazy when I jumped up on the table trying to save her. They knew it was no use, but I was stubborn."

"You don't have quit in you, doc. We'll find a way through this. We have to, like Justin said. If we stop now, the plague will take the rest of us."

"I just don't see how Nadene's gift plays into this," Robert said. "If she's the key, I can't see why."

"Well, we have the proof," William said. "He proved it when he led you to the others in the canyon. There's no other way he could have known they were coming."

Robert sighed. "It just doesn't make any sense. Let me look over my notes for a while and see what I can come up with."

"Call me if you need me, doc."

* * *

The days counted up, and Robert toiled with his notes, the virus samples, and any ideas for a potential cure. He stayed in the lab for six days straight, taking his meals there and only leaving briefly to use the restroom. He even slept there amongst his piles of notes and test results. Every once in a while, he caught a glimpse of the military and hospital staff dismantling equipment and packing it. Each day, Robert noticed fewer and fewer people in the hospital, a sign that he and his friends would soon be forced out of town in the evacuation.

William came to the lab late on the seventh day, and when he saw William, Robert felt agitated. "I told you I wanted some privacy down here."

"Have you been drinking?" William asked, closing the door behind him.

"So what if I have? Who are you to say what I can and can't do?"

William glanced around the room. "Looks like you've been busy here, doc." Robert had done little to hide the mess of crumpled papers, liquor bottles, and microwave dinner trays.

He laughed, the odor of alcohol drifting from his lips. "Busy? Yeah, I've been busy. Busy looking through the same papers for days now!"

"Have you found anything?" William asked.

"Found anything? Found anything! Yeah, I found something. I found there's no damned cure, that's what I found!" Robert scattered a pile of papers through the air with the back of his hand.

"Calm down, doc."

"You want me to calm down. Fine. I give up," Robert said. "There is no cure. It's over!"

"There's something we're overlooking," William said. "We're too close to it to give up now. Let's go over it again."

"What's the point? I've gone over everything for days now. I haven't slept for a week looking at this stuff."

"Humor me," William said. "Let's look at it again. Tell me what you're stuck on. Maybe I can help."

Robert sighed, then picked up his papers from the floor, and William helped him.

"I'm sorry for that," Robert said. "I'm so damn frustrated right now, I can't see straight."

"It's alright, doc. I shouldn't have left you down here by yourself," William said.

"There's nothing you could have done. I just needed some time to go over things, and it's useless."

They sat on either side of the desk, and Robert read his findings. "Revelation is an autoimmune virus which is capable of invading a cell and duplicating its functions. As such, the virus is able to keep a body working well after it should have died. The newly-invaded cells are less efficient than before the virus took over, but they can continue running on much less energy."

Robert looked up, pausing.

"Keep going, it's fine," William said.

"It is estimated that the walkers can last years without a food supply by entering a sort of hibernation. The only known method of destruction is by destroying the brain or severing the head to eliminate the nerve connection.

"Now, on to what we know as of this point. The virus doesn't react well with cancer cells; it can eventually invade and defeat the cells, but the virus often dies in the process."

"And the cancer doesn't yield any useful information for a cure, right?" William asked.

"I've designed a plan based around it, but it's unfeasible."

William raised an eyebrow. "What's the plan?"

"It's silly. There's no point in even bringing it up. We just don't have the resources to implement it."

"I'd like to hear it."

Robert sighed. "Alright, I'll entertain you. The plan calls for duplicating cancer cells and injecting them into healthy people. Once the cancer has reached stage two, it should be developed enough to ward off Revelation."

"What are the problems with the plan, beside the fact most people don't want to be given cancer?"

"First, you have to wait for the cancer to develop. That can take some time depending on the individual," Robert said. "Second, you have to create cancerous cells for each individual. You can't use one person's cells on someone else because the immune system would quickly identify them as foreign bodies and eliminate them."

"I see," William said. "How long would it take for the whole process?"

"At least a month or more on average, probably. And that's if the cancer cells would develop. There's no guarantee."

"What about Nadene? Have you found a place where she fits into all this?" William asked.

"No, I've tried," Robert said, then the door opened.

Colonel Ericson entered the room, glancing at the mess. "What's happened in here?"

"Dr. Nelson's been hard at work. What can we do for you, colonel?"

"I wanted to check on your progress," the colonel said.

William nodded. "Nothing yet, sir, but we're close to having something, I think."

"Well, I wanted to tell you two the same thing I told your other friends. Command has spotted movement coming from the south at a rapid pace."

"The walkers are running now?" Robert asked.

"Oh, some can run. I've seen it before," William said.

"No, they're moving in vehicles. Command thinks it's a group of survivors escaping the undead," the colonel said.

Robert folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Makes sense. Escape while you have time."

"Command's given us the option on whether to evacuate now or make contact with these survivors," Ericson said. "Well, doctor? What do you think I should do?"

"We need more time here," Robert said. "We haven't exhausted every possibility yet."

"Alright, then. We'll evacuate the majority of the troops and equipment. When these survivors get here, we'll have to move out, though."

Robert nodded. "Yes, sir. Thanks."

Colonel Ericson shook his head. "I really hope you figure something out, Dr. Nelson."

"Me, too, colonel."

"How long do we have?" William asked.

"A day and a half, maybe less. Depends on how much trouble they have getting up here."

When the colonel left, William turned to face Robert. "You don't feel bad for lying to him?"

"It'll be alright," Robert said. "It won't hurt to put some more time into this and see if we can come up with anything we haven't thought about yet."

"Alright, doc. Let's continue, then," William said. "Justin said that she's the key, but how?"

"I don't know," Robert said. "The virus invades her blood cells just like everyone else I've seen."

"So, it's another dead end."

"I wish there was some way of knowing. Some kind of hint. It's like Justin was telling us to inject her with the virus."

"I don't think that's what he meant. I think that would be a mistake."

"You're probably right. Sorry, I don't know what I was thinking. I'm so tired."

William nodded. "Let's get some sleep, then. This can wait until tomorrow."

"There's still time. It's only nine o'clock."

"You'll probably sleep for twelve hours, doc. We'll get started after breakfast in the morning. We both should sleep on it."

* * *

Early the next morning, Robert and William ate breakfast and met at the lab again to pour over the information. Nadene returned from her morning shower and noticed Jessica still hadn't emerged from her room. She knocked on the door, but she received no answer.

"Everything okay?" Wayne asked, passing through the hallway.

"Have you seen Jessica? I haven't seen her come out yet," Nadene said.

Shaking his head, Wayne knocked on the door, then turned the knob and opened it. "Jessica?"

Nadene stepped inside to the sound of coughing. "Jessica, are you okay?"

She lay in the bed covered with blankets, and the only thing she could see was her hair. Wayne held his hand up, gesturing for Nadene to remain at the door, and he walked through the threshold. She could see his hand quivering, and he reached to the blankets and pulled them back, revealing Jessica's pale face. Disregarding Wayne's apparent instructions, Nadene quietly entered the room and approached the bed.

Her eyes opened and looked to Wayne, and his breathing hastened. "What are you doing?" she asked, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"Sorry, I thought you might have turned into one."

"No, I'm just sick. Please, leave me alone." She pulled the blankets around her neck.

Nadene felt Jessica's forehead, jerking her hand away at the touch. "She's burning up!"

"We've got to take you to see the doc." Wayne pulled the covers off her. "Come on."

"I said leave me!"

Shaking his head, Wayne tucked his arms under her back and legs, lifting her from the bed and carrying her from the room. Jessica kicked and screamed the entire way, shouting obscenities at him.

"Could you hit the button, Naddy?"

"Let me go!"

When the elevator opened in the lobby, Wayne struggled to keep control of her. Continuing to the emergency room doors, Jessica went limp in his arms. She breathed out a long, raspy breath, and Wayne picked up speed.

"Quick, Naddy, get the doc in here!" he shouted, kicking the door open which led into an exam room. Nadene ran farther down the hall. Moments later, she returned with Robert and William.

"She's not breathing, doc!" Wayne said.

Robert donned his stethoscope and put it to her chest before shouting, "Get a defibrillator and some adrenaline!"

Robert ripped open her shirt and performed compressions on her chest, and Wayne held the bag. Her shirt hung in ribbons around her. Each time Robert shouted 'Breathe', Wayne squeezed the respirator and her chest rose. Nadene jumped out of the way of William when he burst through the door, then he handed the defibrillator and a needle to the doctor.

Taking the top of the syringe off with his teeth, Robert plunged the needle into her chest and injected it. When it was empty, he tossed it aside and continued compressing her chest. "Get that thing ready!"

William uncoiled the leads on the defibrillator, fighting with each tangle and bind until he had them loose. Robert snatched them when they were offered and quickly attached them to her lifeless body. The defibrillator said, "Testing... please stand by."

"Don't touch her." Robert took his hands off her chest. "It can pick you up if you're touching her."

Having repeated the phrase several times in a robotic voice, it finally said, "Stand by for shock. Stand clear of patient. Shocking in 3... 2... 1..." With a discharge of electricity, every muscle in her body tensed.

"Continue CPR," the machine said, and Robert did until it blurted, "Testing... please stand by," once again. The process repeated until she had been shocked three times with no positive results.

"She's gone." William patted him on the shoulder.

The doctor lowered his head and stretched his arms wide along the examination table. Shaking his head, he stood upright. "Autopsy."

William nodded. "I'll give you a hand."

Chapter 9

Robert slipped the mask over his face, completing his preparation. William did the same. Under the stringent, fluorescent lights of the morgue, the doctor examined the implements before selecting a scalpel.

"I'll need you to handle the samples after I take them." He looked at William. Receiving an nod, the doctor proceeded, cutting the familiar "Y" shape into her chest.

Folding back the flaps of skin, he exchanged the scalpel for a bone saw, engaged it a few times, then lowered it to her ribs.

Tearing through her bones, the saw emitted a high-pitched noise mixed with a sort of grinding sound. Robert handed the sternum to William when he had finished, and he discarded it in the nearby basin. With the scalpel, the doctor took pieces from the heart, lungs, and esophagus.

Through the passing minutes, Robert collected more samples from the liver, kidneys, stomach, and digestive tract while he worked his way down. Each piece of her innards sat in an ordered line of labeled jars until each contained a bit of flesh.

"All done." Robert affixed a lid on the last jar. "I'll sew her up if you'll take them to the lab. Just put them in the fridge."

Pushing the cart through the swinging doors, William stopped near the cold storage. He carefully placed each jar on the racks within before returning to the morgue. Once he reached the autopsy table, he saw Robert was halfway finished.

"Done many of these, doc?"

"Yeah, if the examiner was on vacation. She usually handled it herself, but I helped sometimes—couldn't rely on the deputy coroners back in Grand Bay since they weren't medically-trained."

"Really? I'd think they'd need to be for that kind of work."

"All they had to do was load the bodies and bring them in. Nothing special about that."

"I see your point." He leaned against the table while Robert sewed the last stitch.

"All done." Robert lifted her body, and with William's assistance, he moved her to a drawer on the wall. "I better get started on those samples."

"It's late, doc. Wouldn't you rather wait?"

"Can't. Those survivors from the south will be here tomorrow night or the next morning, and I need to know if she had something we should be concerned about."

"Okay." William stretched his back. "Let's get to work, then."

"You want to help?"

"Of course. Can't let you go it alone all the time."

"I would've thought you'd want to get some sleep. You look tired."

"You're one to talk, doc." William rubbed his eyes. "Let's get to it. I'll get us some coffee."

* * *

When William entered the lab, Robert was already busy studying the samples and scrawling notes on a pad of legal paper. He set the coffee on the table and sat across from the doctor.

"This esophageal sample is interesting. Damage to the tissue on the microscopic level," Robert said.

"Any findings as yet?"

"No, not yet. I've made notes, but it's just the first sample."

Finishing, Robert set the slide on the table. William, seeing an opportunity to help, took it and placed it under a microscope.

"Don't contaminate it," Robert said. "We won't get a sample as fresh as these, so we can't waste them."

With a nod, William peered through the lens. "How do you know if they're damaged?"

"Grab one of those." He pointed to a shelf. "That book has pictures for comparison and evidence for common diseases."

They studied each slide. Robert got them first, then William checked them to see if anything had been missed. Finally, the doctor said, "That's it!"

"What?"

"Take a look at this." Robert passed the slide to him.

"Those don't look like normal cells."

"They're not. Its Orthomyxoviridae."

"Ortho... what?"

Robert's lips curled into a grin. "Influenza. Specifically, influenza A, and further—H1N1."

"Swine flu?" William asked, his forehead wrinkled.

"Yeah, also known as Spanish flu. The 1918 pandemic which killed millions of people—you're looking at it. It doesn't make much sense, but that's what it is."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Well, you found her somewhere around Kansas City, right? You said she was sick then?"

"Yeah."

"Flu can be slow, but you'd see more than just a runny nose and light coughing after this long, and the lethal varieties don't crop up in a day's time and kill you. That's why, with treatments, fewer and fewer people die from it these days. Well, before the attacks anyway."

"Then what are we missing? There must be something else."

"We have a few more samples to go," Robert said. "Best keep looking."

When he reached the liver sample, Robert said, "My God," and scribbled notations furiously.

"What is it?"

"Massive infection in the liver, and it's not the flu."

"Can you tell what it is?" William asked, walking around the table to his side.

Twisting the knobs on the side of the microscope, Robert squinted. "Yeah."

"Well?"

"Revelation."

Robert slid to the side, and William peered through the lens. "I'll be damned."

"Looks like we need to start cultivating some flu virus."

"You think it will work?"

Robert shrugged. "She didn't turn into a zombie, and we know how it reacts with cancer cells. If I'm right, influenza is an antibody to Revelation."

William turned his head toward the morgue. "Then *she* was the key Justin talked about. Not Nadene... this other girl held the secret to the cure."

"I wish we'd known soon. I could have saved her, Will."

"You can't blame yourself, doc. She refused to be examined—it's not your fault."

"I know, I know." He folded his arms. "I just wish she would've let us help her before it was too late. That's all."

"We don't know what might have happened if you'd cured her before all of the Revelation virus was dead, though," William said. "She could have turned, and we might have gotten infected, too."

"Maybe, Will. Let's get some rest. We'll meet with the colonel tomorrow and tell him the good news."

"You don't seem very happy about finding the cure tonight, doc."

"At what cost, Will? At what cost... so many dead, so few left alive."

* * *

The morning light crept into the room, and Nadene rolled onto her side. The night before had been surreal for her, and she struggled to sort reality from the fantastical. The more days that went along, the more trouble she had separating the two and making sense of anything.

Her morning routine consisted of a bath in the community shower followed by breakfast with the others. Walking the corridor past Jessica's room, she eyed the door with mixed feelings. They had not known each other long enough for her to mourn her passing as she might a close friend or relative, but she felt great sympathy for her. Jessica had been a victim in more ways than any teenager should have, regardless of the times or situation.

Following the shower, Nadene met the other survivors in the kitchenette. They had assembled long tables and chairs to give a sense of community during each meal—a vain attempt at normalcy in a world crawling with the undead. Much to her relief, Nadene entered the moment Robert announced the cure had been found.

She tended to sit beside Wayne during breakfast since he was the only one left from their original group. So long ago were the days she enjoyed Grand Bay with her mother, with her friends. Gone were the careless evenings spent watching scary movies, eating

popcorn, and drinking all the soda she could take in Sally's living room. Gone, too, were Sally and Haley—the closest people she'd had to a sister and an aunt. Wayne was now the best friend she had; he'd been with her the longest, and she knew she could trust him.

"The eggs are good today," Wayne said when she sat beside him. "Will didn't burn 'em up today."

"Hey, now, if you don't like my cooking, you don't have to eat it."

He waved his hands in the air. "No, don't get me wrong, these are good. It's just that I like them to be white and yellow, not black like yesterday's."

Keeping things playful and light had a way of easing her tension, and she assumed the others felt the same way. It was as if the flavoring and consistency of eggs could somehow wipe the world clear of billions of hungry cannibals if only for a passing moment.

William joined them at the table when he finished cooking. "Anyone heard when are we leaving for Alaska?"

"When those other survivors get here, I'd say." Wayne clasped his hands and leaned forward.

"Have you heard any more about that?"

"No, just tonight sometime. But we need some supplies. I'll check with the colonel when I go down."

"I'll go." Nadene put her hand on Wayne's arm.

"No, I'll do it. That's a lot of stuff for a young lady to carry."

"Why not let her? She may never get to drive a car again after this." Edgar tapped his finger on the table. "Won't be any cars where we're going—not any we'll be allowed to drive anyway. Besides, what do we need? One more meal's worth of food?"

"Alright, then." Wayne handed the keys to her. "We'll be watching for you to get back. Ask the colonel if he's heard anything else, alright?"

With a broad smile and a nod, Nadene gave Wayne a hug and was soon on the first floor. Making her way to the covered parking area, she chirped the horn with the remote. Although she hadn't driven much in Alabama, she found ways to occupy her time in Eureka, and Nadene's favorite pastime was driving.

She put the SUV in drive and crept onto the side street, then around the corner, and after a short trip, she arrived at the seaside landing. The dock usually would have been filled with supply crates, but there weren't nearly as many that day—it was the last day they expected to spend in Eureka, and the military's plan was to evacuate by nightfall.

Exiting the vehicle, Nadene saw the colonel approach. "Ah, Miss Schafer. Coming to get something?"

"Yes, sir. Just some food for this afternoon."

“Go ahead and take whatever you like. We overestimated what we needed before sending out the last shipment, so there's plenty to go around.” Colonel Erlicson opened his hand to the crates.

“Heard anything else about those survivors from the south, sir?” Though she wasn't accustomed to using courteous titles, everyone else she'd seen had called him 'sir'.

“They should be here very soon. According to what I'm being told, they've picked up speed and...” The colonel was interrupted by another soldier who came from a nearby tent.

“Sir, they're approaching the town now. They should reach us in about five minutes.”

“Thank you, sergeant.” He folded his arms. “Well, there's your answer, young lady. Has the doctor come up with anything?”

“He has a cure.”

The colonel's eyes widened. “He actually did it?”

“Sort of. He found out the flu can be used to fight it.” She stared at her shoes. “Jessica died, and he found it in her system.”

“The other girl?”

She nodded. “It was sad how much she's been through only to die like this—to die when we're so close to being free.”

“We've all been through unspeakable things. So much has been lost that I don't think much of the future. Sure, we have Alaska, but how long will that last?”

She shrugged. “I don't know, sir. All I know is we have to do what we can.”

“Get your supplies.” He gestured at the supplies. “We'll be leaving by dark, so let the others know. I hope we have enough room for these other survivors when the ship gets here.”

While packing the back of the SUV with canned goods and boxes, she heard the rumble of engines in the distance echoing through the air. She closed the door and approached the driver's side, and she could see vehicles coming over the hill—all different kinds of trucks, cars, and even some military transports.

There must be hundreds of them! she thought to herself. She opened the door and climbed into the SUV, and she could see the colonel walking out to where the vehicles had stopped some fifty yards or so away.

A man sat atop one of the military trucks which had been at the lead of their convoy. His hair was black with streaks of gray, and he had a beard to match. One of his arms helped support him on the roof while the other held an assault rifle. He and the colonel exchanged words, but it was too far for Nadene to hear.

Placing the key into the ignition, she heard a shot ring out and quickly turned her head to see Colonel Erlicson collapsing to the ground. Her breathing became panicked

as she turned the key and threw it into drive. Stomping the gas, the tires spun in the loose gravel before contacting the street.

More gunfire erupted from behind, and she could see soldiers being slaughtered in the rear view mirror. The back glass of her own vehicle suddenly shattered. *They're shooting at me!* Ducking her head, she could just barely see over the dashboard to the street beyond.

The hospital came into view, and she saw trucks giving chase from behind. *Do I skip the hospital and make a run for it?* she asked herself out of desperation. With her turn approaching, she had to make a decision fast. Her pulse raced and fear flooded her reasoning. She could only think of Jessica and how she'd been made to do terrible things by her captors, things she couldn't speak of to others.

At the last moment, she slammed the brakes and turned the wheel, almost crashing the SUV into the hospital. She threw open the door and sprinted to the door, hoping and praying Wayne had been watching like he promised. The automatic doors opened, and she heard the squealing of tires behind her—the other survivors were hot on her heels.

The door had closed halfway before it opened again, her pursuers reaching out to her. Grabbing the back of her sweater, the man dragged her to the floor.

"What have we got here?" The man flipped her around and looked into her eyes, taking her arms in his hands. "Ah, look at this pretty thing!"

"Get off me! Help!" She clawed and bit at anything she could while screaming, but the man was considerably stronger than she. "Let go of me!"

"No need to fight. Everything will be just fine in a second, I promise it." The man leaned down to kiss her on the forehead, the other man laughing. "We have to be quick before Ole Barnes finds us, so just relax!"

Grunting and moaning, she fought until she was pinned beneath him. She turned her head and saw Wayne coming around the corner. Though he was some distance away, she could feel the raw anger and hate behind his eyes like that of a wild animal blinded by rage.

He opened fire as he ran, and William entered the hallway behind him. She felt the weight of the man lift off her body when he rose to his knees, and he pulled a pistol from inside his coat. She scooted a few inches away before drawing back her leg and kicking the man in the groin with a vicious scream. He grabbed his crotch and fell backwards, and the other man was struck in the chest by the gunfire and crumpled to the floor.

Wayne knelt next to Nadene, then he dropped his weapon and took her in his arms, lifting her completely off the ground in a tight embrace. William looked at the man writhing on the floor. "What the hell do you think you're doing, buddy?"

"Just a sweet little thing, that's all. I didn't know she was already spoken for." The man rolled to his side, and William could see his face. His voice, choice of words, and his creepy glare gave Nadene a sick feeling inside.

"They killed the colonel and the others!" Nadene clung to Wayne's jacket with tears in her eyes. "They tried to kill me!"

"I didn't want to kill you. I wanted us to share something special." A sinister smile curled the man's lips.

"Sick bastard." William put his gun to the man's temple, then Robert and Edgar joined them. "What are you laughing about?"

"What do I care if you shoot me?" The man pushed his head against the barrel in contempt.

William shook his head. "Why'd you kill them? The soldiers, the colonel?"

"Ain't no more government, man! It's us against the world now! The world's the devil's playground—who cares if I live or die?"

Blood sprayed across the floor, and the weapon recoiled in William's hand. "Not me."

Nadene stared at Wayne before looking at William, his eyes cold and bearing little emotion. Nadene watched his clenched lips quickly relax to match the rest of his features.

"We'd better get out of here." William looked at the others. "Get what you need and let's go."

Wayne nodded and he ran to the elevators, still carrying Nadene in his arms like a baby. William followed close behind after grabbing the weapons from her attackers' bodies, and Robert took off down a side the hallway.

Edgar yelled at Robert. "Where are you going?"

"I have to get the samples and my papers. Get everything else and meet me in the underground garage!"

Following a brief plunder of their former quarters, they were on the elevator again. William pushed the button marked 'Sub Level B', and the doors closed. "The survivors killed them all?"

Nadene nodded. "They shot the colonel and the others."

"We can't wait on the rescue, then. Anyone got any bright ideas?"

"We can't drive the whole way, that's for sure." Edgar rubbed his hands together.

William turned to him. "Why not?"

"The soldiers I talked to said the creatures are reaching the west coast in more places than LA. They can't watch the whole country from their satellite pictures."

"What, then?"

"A plane? A boat, maybe?" Edgar offered.

Nadene looked at Wayne, but he shook his head. "Oh, no. There's no way."

"You flew us out of Alabama." She maintained her stare.

"I can't. Besides, Alaska's a million miles from here. We'd never make it."

"More like a couple of thousand." Edgar tilted his head. "We can make it that far."

"What about gas, and where are we going to find a plane big enough to take us all that I can fly? And who's to say there's even a place to land once we get out there?" Wayne waved his hands. "A helicopter's one thing. I vote for a boat!"

Edgar pulled a map out and opened it. "There's several marinas on the southwest side of the city."

"Where do you get all these maps?" William shook his head.

"What? I like maps—it's never bothered you before..."

"I was just kidding, Ed. Find us a path there that doesn't lead us near the army post."

The elevator dinged and the door opened, the musty, still air of the garage permeating her nostrils. Walking behind them, she detected the mixing of old rubber and burnt oil in the scent.

"Over here." Robert waved to them, catching his papers before they fell.

"Are the keys in it?" William peered through the driver's window. "Is it open?"

"Yeah." He opened the back door and slid his papers under the seat. "Let's get a move on."

Nadene and Robert joined him in the back seat while Edgar got in the front. When William opened his door, he turned his head.

Robert leaned between the seats. "What is it?"

The glints of daylight from the exit did little to illuminate the darkness deep within the garage. William squinted at the opening, and Nadene noticed a silhouette. It was the outline of a man, and he was just standing there.

William raised his pistol to the figure before Edgar whispered, "Wait, Will... just leave him."

"He'll tell the others if we don't. Just calm down." He steadied his aim and closed one of his eyes. With a thunderous roar, the gun expelled a bullet, and it struck his target.

The silhouette lurched and stumbled with little more than a grunt. Then, the head turned in the direction of the vehicle, and the unknown man approached.

William's face contorted when the man walked beneath an overhead light.

"Walkers!" He slammed the door once he was in and turned the key.

"What, here? How!" Edgar looked across the steering wheel into the darkness.

"They said it would be weeks!"

"Well, they either didn't know or they lied." William threw the vehicle in reverse and punched the gas. "I think they lied."

"Why would they?" Robert asked.

“Seems kind of funny the army was sure we were leaving today, doesn't it?” William shifted into drive. “Looks like the damned zombies followed those crazy people all the way here.”

Edgar shook his head. “I didn't get that impression of Erlicson. Seemed like a good man to me.”

William turned the wheel and drove towards the exit, and the headlights shone upon the creature. Most of the flesh of its face was rotted away, and only one eye remained in its skull. What little remained of its torn and shredded clothes was covered with dirt, grime, and dried blood. Under the bright lights of the SUV, the pale, white parts of his skin glowed, but the black, decrepit pieces hanging from his body glistened as if coated by a greasy substance.

William gritted his teeth and accelerated, sending the zombie under the tires as he ran it down. “Hold on!”

Turning at the end of the row, Nadene saw from the back seat more outlines crowding the exit. The vehicle plowed through the two in the center of the opening, a black substance spraying all over the windows. William engaged the wipers without slowing up, and the SUV landed on the pavement outside—the incline of the exit serving as a sort of ramp, and Edgar gave him instructions to the road they needed to follow.

“There's not many of them out here.” Edgar looked out the windows and through the mirrors. “We better hurry before more come.”

“How far is it?” William glanced over Edgar's map.

“A couple of miles if you keep on this road. It will take us there.”

Nadene pulled herself forward between the seats. “Get off this road.”

“Why? It's the quickest way.” Edgar closely examined the map. “It'll take just a few minutes.”

“Those insane people came from this way. There could be more of them.” She shook her head. “We have to be careful.”

Wayne turned to her. “Are you having a feeling about this, Nadene?”

Everyone else in the car became quiet, and she could feel their eyes trying to find meaning or answers. “No. Not *that* kind of feeling, but I think it's the right thing to do.”

William watched her through the rear view mirror before sighing, then he turned into a neighborhood, parked near the curb, and turned off the engine.

“What are you doing?” Edgar asked. “We could be out of here in no time. Stay on the main road!”

“Look, if we're taking a boat, we need supplies.” William turned in his seat and jerked against the seat belt. “If they evacuated these houses in a hurry, we could find something useful.”

“He's right, Ed.” Wayne nodded to William. “We can't go two thousand miles by boat without something to eat, without water.”

“And we'll need to do something else, too.” Robert unzipped a small nylon bag.

"What is it?" William asked.

"Influenza." Robert produced a syringe. "From Jessica."

"What do you plan on doing with that?" Wayne waved his hands.

William nodded. "He plans to inject us with it, that's what."

"Won't be pumping me full of the flu, that's for damned sure. I've got enough problems," Edgar said.

Robert shook his head. "I don't have to. The cancer will take care of you if you get bitten. The rest of us—we need something for protection."

"Oh, yeah? What if you shoot everybody up with that stuff, and they don't bite us?" Edgar rolled his eyes. "You'll have a bunch of people who can't go on because they're sick."

"As soon as the symptoms start, I'll treat it." Robert pointed behind his seat to a large box. "I brought a bunch of medicine from the hospital—more than we could ever need."

William stared at him. "How confident are you about this?"

"Very. Jessica proved it works. It's just a matter of containing it once all remnants of Revelation are gone."

"Alright." William slid his coat off and presented his arm. "Do it."

With William's wrist in one hand and the syringe in the other, Robert plunged the needle beneath his skin and injected the fluid. When he finished, the area beneath the puncture was flushed, and William itched it. "That stuff burns, doc."

"It won't for long. Who's next?"

Wayne shook his head. "You're going to use the same needle? How do I know where the rest of you've been?"

"Right." Robert exchanged the syringe for another. "I've got plenty of them."

With a reluctance on his face, Wayne offered his arm. Nadene was next after him, and Robert finally injected himself before placing the needles back in the bag and zipping it closed.

Nadene rubbed the spot where she had been injected. "What now?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry." William shifted in his seat and eyed a nearby house. "How about we start with this one and work our way up the street?"

"We should just go!" Edgar crossed his arms and his face flushed red. "We need to quit wasting time and get out of here."

"Suppose for a moment, Ed. Suppose we do find a boat able to carry us all the way to Alaska." William looked him in the eye. "We need food, water, and clothes to make it that far. And that's if the boat holds out and takes us the whole way. What if we get stuck and have to walk?"

"It's better than being stuck here waiting for some monster to pop in. I'd rather starve than be eaten alive by one of those damned things."

“And I agree with you there, but we don't need to make mistakes. We can't afford it. We may make it a few hundred miles, but what then? See if we can find a town on the coast to get supplies?”

Edgar nodded. “I'd prefer that to what you're suggesting now. The walkers haven't moved north.”

“Says who? Colonel Ericson? He told us they'd take weeks to get here, but they're here now.” William shook his head. “We've been through a lot together already, Ed. We'll make it out of here if we keep our heads and work together.”

Edgar threw his hands in the air. “What do you want from me, Will?”

“A day or two, tops. We'll keep our heads down, search these houses, and then find a boat. Can I count on you, old man?”

“Don't 'old man' me.” Edgar turned away and looked out the window before glancing back. “Okay, Will. Fine. Have it your way.”

“Thanks, Ed. Now, let's get going. This one here looks like a good place to start.” William pointed to a single-story house across the street from them. Nadene could see the windows were boarded up with plywood, and the front door was closed.

William looked to the back seat. “When we get out, don't slam the doors, close 'em easy. We don't want anyone—anything—to hear us.” He walked towards the door and scanned the area while he moved. Reaching the porch, William tried the door while the others kept watch. It opened with a slow turn of the knob, and they followed him inside.

Chapter 10

Flicking the switch on the wall, William sighed. “No power.”

“The hospital had generators.” Robert blinked and rubbed his eyes. “Guess we'd better get used to it.”

Wayne locked the door once everyone was inside. “Looks like they left in a hurry.”

“They probably didn't have time to pack.” William walked farther into the room and peeked through the kitchen door. “Took most of the food with them.”

With the click of a button, Nadene turned on a flashlight, and it shined a narrow beam about the walls. “They didn't take everything.”

“Alright, split up and search the house.” William put his hands on his hips. “Keep your eyes on each other—don't go off by yourself.”

She went with Wayne to one of the back bedrooms, and they sorted through the things scattered on the floor. He produced a jacket from a pile. “This will probably fit you, Naddy.”

“Thanks.” She caught the coat when Wayne tossed it to her. “Nice and thick. That'll be good for Alaska.”

"Ever been?" Wayne asked.

"Where? Alaska?"

He nodded.

"No, never. My dad told me stories about it when he worked there."

"What did he do?" Wayne pulled out a button-up shirt.

"He was an oil company executive. He chose to work in Alabama." She paused, remembering his face. "It doesn't matter."

"You don't miss him?"

"He left us—me and mom. Got a new girlfriend, a new life. He didn't care about us." She sighed.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"What about you? What were your parents like?"

He raised his eyebrows, and his eyes widened. "I haven't seen them in twenty years or more. Hadn't even thought about them."

"Were they still alive... when..."

"No, no. They passed a long time ago." Wayne cracked his knuckles. "My old man didn't agree with me going to Vietnam, and he didn't like the woman I chose to be my wife. We didn't talk much after that."

"What was her name?"

"Virginia," he said slowly. "Her name was Virginia."

"What happened to her?" Nadene shook her head. "You don't have to tell me that. I'm sorry for asking."

"No, it's okay." Wayne took a deep breath, then sat on the bed. "It was a long time ago."

Standing at the foot of the bed, she waited for him to speak.

"She was so happy. We'd been trying for a baby that whole summer, and the doctor told us the good news that September." He sighed. "You should've seen the look in her eyes—she was a new woman. Confident, happy, just glowing all the time."

"How did you feel about it, Wayne?"

"I had my reservations about it at first. Just the usual 'new dad' kind of feeling. You feel like time's going by so fast, and you think there's a million things needing to be done all of a sudden." His lips tightened into a grin. "I was happy, though."

She wondered if her father had ever felt that way about her while Wayne talked. If he had, she never got that impression—the most vivid memories she'd had of him were the constant fights and arguments. She couldn't remember the last time he asked her if she had a good day at school, and she had trouble recalling the last time he even smiled her way.

"The day came, and we were off to the hospital. We had complications..." He looked at the floor, and his breathing slowed. "I lost them both, right then and there."

She walked over and gave him a hug. "It's okay."

"The only thing I found that could take my mind off things was the bourbon. I drank until I couldn't remember anymore. I drank until I couldn't even tell if they were real, but they were—every time I was sober, it all came back."

"There's no need to be sad." She wiped the tear from his cheek. "I live for my mom, and you live for your family. To be loved in the hearts of those we leave behind is not to die."

"Thank you, Naddy." He nodded, looking up to her. "When we found each other, I felt like I had a family again. Someone to look out for, people to watch over."

"And it's a good thing, too." She smiled. "We would've been in some real trouble if you hadn't come along."

"I'm just glad your mom let me." Wayne stared at his shoes. "I had to take a chance, though. She was a real special lady to take some washed-up old bum with her."

"She saw something in your eyes, just as I do now. There's love, compassion, and a lifetime of suffering in your face, and I think she saw herself in you."

"Maybe so."

"Let's get the rest of this stuff packed up. Some of these clothes will fit the others." She loaded various garments into the boxes and suitcases which had been left behind. "I could use a change, too. I wonder if the water works."

"It did at the hospital. It should here, too."

"Find anything?" William pushed the door open and poked his head through.

She nodded. "Lots of clothes here."

"It's the same in the rest of the rooms. We found a little ammo, but I think we were lucky to find that."

"Find a shower?" She took a set of clothes in her arms.

He pointed behind himself with his thumb. "Across the hall."

Once in the bathroom, she turned the spigot, and the cold water rushed over her body while she scrubbed as quickly as she could. Despite the fact she shivered after stepping out, she was thankful to be clean. Showers—whether hot or cold—were a rare luxury to be had.

She exited, and a line had formed in the hall. Each of the others held a towel and a change of clothes in their hands. She dried her hair with the towel, then made her way through the hall and into the living room.

The photographs on the wall caught her attention first. Looking them over, she saw one particular picture which filled her mind with a feeling of what once was. A man in his mid-thirties posed in it with his hands on his hips, and he had a bright smile on his face. The next was a family portrait with the same man and a beautiful woman who was holding a child in her lap.

Her mind drifted to her own life back in Grand Bay before the divorce, before the war, and before the undead infestation. She imagined the days long before her mother suspected her father of infidelity, the days when they gathered together in the living

room for popcorn and a movie. She remembered how she loved her father so long ago, before he broke their hearts with the other woman. The memories came flooding back, and a tear ran down her cheek. She turned her head away from the photographs.

"Something bothering you, Naddy?" Wayne stood at the other end of the living room drying his face.

She shook her head. "Old memories, that's all. Just thinking about mom."

"Do you want to talk about it?" He folded the towel and plopped down on the sofa.

She sat across from him in a plush armchair. "The more I go along, the more I wonder about what could have happened. If they hadn't gotten a divorce, where would we be now?"

"No way of telling."

"I know, but it still makes me wonder. Would I have met you? If I had, would we have taken you with us? Knowing my father, we wouldn't have."

"And I wouldn't have blamed him for that, either. Just like I didn't expect your mom to take me with you." He folded his hands and sighed. "We go along making choices, and we can't change the past."

"I just wonder what happened to him, you know?"

"Who, your dad?"

"Yeah. I wonder if he died in Grand Bay."

"Either way, I doubt we'll ever see him again. If he made it out, people are scattered to the winds now."

She nodded. "I'm glad you're here. At least I know I can count on you."

"Of course you can, Naddy. Anything you need."

With a smile, she stood and walked towards the window. "You think any—" She stopped speaking, and her jaw dropped.

"Naddy?"

"There's a zombie out there," she whispered.

Wayne checked the door, then joined her. "Door's locked."

The creature shambled aimlessly on the porch of a house across the street and pounded its hands against a door. Nadene watched another walk from behind the house and join the first. Wayne ran through the kitchen and secured the back door, then went to each window and drew the blinds. "More on this side."

"What are you on about, old man?" William entered behind them.

"Shh!" Wayne put his finger to his lips. "Undead everywhere."

"Well, we all knew this would happen." William spoke low and peered through a tiny space between the window and the blinds. "We have to keep quiet."

"Do we run or what?" Wayne looked at the front door. "The truck's not far."

"No, not yet. If we run we'll draw them. We have to keep to the plan—explore a few more houses along the street until we have enough to make it to Alaska."

"And if a thousand walkers show up?" Wayne raised an eyebrow.

"We'll adapt the plan. No rash decisions." William pointed at Wayne. "We've made it this far by keeping our heads on straight."

Nadene folded her arms and slinked onto a sofa. She was glad she hadn't had any visions lately, but it didn't guarantee one would pop into her head. She knew the close proximity of the zombies could trigger her at any time, and she'd rather be seated if she had an episode.

"You remember back at the lab?" Her eyes followed William.

He nodded. "Yeah, what about it?"

"When Dr. Nelson tested us?"

"Yeah."

"I've been thinking about it more." She leaned against the arm and pulled her legs up beside her. "It doesn't make sense to me how I can see all these things."

"Being close to the virus seems to affect you. We proved that at the hospital."

"Yeah, but there's something else. Before I met any of you, I had something else happen. My school caught on fire a few days before the attacks." One hand draped her stomach out of memory of the pains. "I knew it would happen—I knew *something* bad was going to happen."

William sat adjacent to her. "The more I think about it, the more I think it's got something to do with our senses. I always hear things—well, until I saw a vision of you in St. Louis. It was always by hearing: voices on the wind, the shuffling of walkers, and so on."

"What does that mean for me, then?" She wrinkled her forehead. "I just had visions most of the time."

"Well, my hearing and sight is enhanced. Maybe your sight and something else? Do you hear strange things?"

She pulled her hair behind her ear. "When we were in Grand Bay, I could feel the hunger—like I was hungry myself. It made me scream out."

"Yeah, and her eyes changed colors." Wayne stepped forward and put his hands on the sofa back. "Craziest thing I ever saw."

William licked his lips, then leaned forward. "But you never *saw* anything, right? Just felt the hunger?"

"Wait." She closed her eyes and clasped her hands. "The blood."

"The blood? You mean on Haley and Sally?" Wayne asked.

She shook her head. "No, I smelled it. The scent of blood filled my nose."

William nodded. "That might explain it, then. Whatever our gift is, I'd bet yours is based on sight and smell. Maybe you smelled the fire in your school before you could see it."

"Nobody else did, though." She rested her head on her palm. "I'm the only one that I know of."

"That's part of it, isn't it?" Wayne sat on the edge of the coffee table near her. "You have a gift that others don't. It's helped us to survive."

"But why? Why would I have it?" She shook her head. "It doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't have to make sense. It *just is*, Nadene." William put his hand on her shoulder. "Everyone we've met with some kind of gift has been through traumatic experiences—the army captain was in Iraq, your parents had a very rough divorce, and I..." He stopped.

"You don't have to say it." She tightened her lips. "I already know."

Nodding, he took a deep breath, then he closed his eyes. "Something traumatic happened to each of us, and that could have been the trigger."

Wayne cracked his neck and looked at William. "Did the captain have visions before all this?"

"Not that I know of, but it's not like it matters now. That's what I think, anyway—take what you will from it."

She nodded. "It makes sense. We're all from different parts of the country, and it's the only thing that links us together. I don't understand how you found me, though."

"We may never know the answer to that." William shrugged. "Maybe it's ESP like the others said."

A pause fell over them, then Wayne stood and slapped his knees. "How about some supper?"

"Yeah, but no cooking." William waved his hand. "We don't know how good these things can smell."

"The last time I smelled one, it was awful." Wayne shook his head.

"No, that's not what I mean." William chuckled. "I mean, we don't know if the smell of food cooking will draw them in."

"Oh, right." Wayne walked into the kitchen, and he returned with a mixing bowl, some cans, and a can opener. "How about some tuna sandwiches?"

Though she couldn't stand the taste, she nodded in agreement. Her belly grumbled with emptiness, and it was no time to be picky.

"Better hurry up and do what you need to do before it gets dark." William peeked through the blinds once again. "When the sun goes down, we won't have any light until morning."

Nadene produced the flashlight she had found earlier. "We have this."

"No, we need it to be pitch black in here." William shook his head. "That will give them something to come after if they see the light."

She nodded and tucked the flashlight between the cushions, then Wayne handed out the sandwiches. "Crackers are a little stale, but they'll do."

With the setting sun, they selected places to bed down for the night. While Wayne dragged the last mattress into the living room, William made one last pass through the

hallway and closed any of the doors which were left open. Once the 'good nights' were said, she covered herself and went to sleep.

She slowly opened her eyes to a dull, orange glow penetrating the blinds, and she ambled around the sleeping bodies on the floor to the window and peeked through the window. Spying the pillar of flames rising from the water, William walked up next to her. "It's been burning for a while now."

Though startled, she kept her voice low. "You haven't slept?"

"Just been watching over things." He rubbed his chin and jaw. "Our rescue boat if I had to guess."

"Burning?"

"Yeah, probably those crazy people." William shook his head, then he returned to his bedding. "What a waste."

Nadene looked him in the eyes. "Thanks back there."

"For what?" His brow arched.

"For stopping that man. The one who attacked me."

"Nobody would have let that go down. No need to thank me."

"Yes, there is. Thanks, Will." She lay on the couch and rolled to her side. Though the glow in the window was dim, it was more than enough to keep her from falling asleep easily.

* * *

Nadene woke the next morning and noticed she was the last one up, glancing at the empty sleeping bags and blankets on the floor. She stretched her back, then she saw the others eating another one of Wayne's makeshift dishes. "What is that?"

"Spam." Wayne slipped a long piece of it into his mouth. "Want some?"

"I'll pass, thanks." She winced at the processed meat when he ate another piece.

"There's other stuff, too." William offered her some canned fruit, and she took it.

"What's the plan for today?" Wayne asked.

"The next house." William poked his finger through the blinds and squinted at the light. "More walkers today, but they're focused on the ship."

"Those damned idiots. Do they not realize they lit a beacon for them out there?"

Wayne shook his head, pointing to the window with the bay beyond.

"If they don't realize it, they deserve to die." William released the blinds. "Who cares so long as they aren't chasing us. At least we have a distraction."

"I agree." Robert had been silent the night before and the morning up until then.

"After what they tried to do to Naddy, let 'em get eaten."

"Alright, people. We're still not any closer to getting on a boat." Edgar snapped his fingers. "Let's get what we need from here and get to the next house if that's what we're going to do."

“Not too hasty, Ed.” William stood and put his hands on his hips. “We won't get far by rushing through this.”

Edgar rolled his eyes. “I could've been eating crab in Juneau by now if we'd gone straight to the boat.”

“No, you'd be sitting off Seattle wondering if all those shadows were zombies.” William pointed at him. “You'd be hungry enough to take it into the harbor to find out—then it'd be too late for all of us.”

“Fine, just get ready, alright?” He waved his hands through the air.

Wayne put on a backpack loaded with clothes and what canned goods were left. “Which house you want to try, chief? There's one on either side of us, then the one through the back.”

“Straight next door.” William twisted the deadbolt on the front door. “We'll want to stay close to the truck.”

“I'll be so glad when I don't have to run from these damned things everywhere I go.” Edgar shook his head.

William smiled. “Who's to say that will ever be the case? Just get ready to move and be quiet.”

Chapter 11

William pressed against the door as he turned the knob, and when the door swung open, sunlight flooded their vision. Nadene dipped her head and averted her eyes, and every step she took sent chills down her spine.

Once in the grass and their footsteps muffled, she followed Wayne. He was walking fast and kept close to the ground, and she matched his moves like a shadow. Having reached the porch of the next house in only a few seconds, William opened the door and the others piled in behind him without looking ahead. Nadene did the same—she'd rather be inside with the unknown than outside with the undead.

William secured the door behind them, then Wayne held his hand in the air and whispered. “Do you hear that?”

With a confused look on his face, William took a two-by-four in his hand, and he walked to the kitchen, raising the board over his head. Nadene could only see a look of horror on his face, but she didn't dare make a sound.

He swung the plank and struck something just out of sight. He lifted the board high again, and she could see blood and a black substance dripping from it. He slammed it down three more times, and the contact of the wood with its target let out a sound like a foot splashing a puddle on a rainy day.

She walked up beside him and looked at the floor. One of the walkers had gotten into the house from the back door which was still swinging on its hinges, and it held a candy bar wrapper in its dessicated hand. She raised an eyebrow and looked at

William, but he was in the middle of catching his breath and didn't seem to notice. "Was it eating the chocolate?"

He bent at the knees and leaned closer to its head. Inspecting its mouth, he nodded, then leaned the board gently against the wall and stepped over the creature. She bent down to take a closer look, and William closed and locked the door opposite the entryway.

"I thought they only ate humans." Wayne stepped over the body and picked through the trash scattered about the floor. "Looks like it was eating from the pantry here."

William shook his head. "They *do* only eat people. Doc, what do you think of this?"

"Memories, maybe? Instincts?" Robert leaned over next to Nadene. "Maybe it got hungry."

"Very funny, doc." Edgar crossed his arms. "This is no time for jokes."

Robert maintained a stern expression. "I'm not joking. Who's to say they can't eat other things? Maybe they just prefer eating us."

"It doesn't matter." William drew the curtains on the kitchen window. "Let's look around for supplies. We don't have long."

Edgar nodded. "It's about time somebody else came around. I'm tired of wasting away in this town."

"Get whatever you can from here, and we'll meet in the living room. But be quiet," William whispered. "And don't go near the windows."

Nadene nodded, then followed Wayne to the back of the house. He pointed at a dresser, and she went to it while he searched the closet. Sliding each drawer open and being careful not to make a sound, she searched through the undergarments and socks and found some ammunition. She turned to Wayne and saw him holding a shotgun, and she tossed the shells on the bed next to him.

When she turned around to look in the next drawer, she froze. Through the thin curtains, she could see the outline of someone outside the window, and from noticing the slow movements and twisted posture, she knew it was a zombie and spoke in a whisper. "There's one outside."

Wayne crept across the room to her, then wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He pulled her along towards the door with the shotgun and shells in his other hand. Once in the hallway, she gasped when she heard the sound of a hand hitting the glass, and she could see a shadow cast by the smear of blood where the creature's hand had been, the outline of a palm missing a couple of fingers. He slowly pulled the door closed, and every creak of the hinges gave Nadene terrible images of a corpse ripping out her insides.

Turning, Wayne made eye contact with William and pointed at the door, receiving a nod in reply. Nadene watched William close the other door once Edgar came through, then he approached. "There's one outside that window, too."

"What are we gonna do?" Wayne asked.

"We have to wait here and figure out how many there are. We can't leave if those things are swarming the house."

"Why don't we rush back to the truck? They're slow," Edgar said.

William shook his head. "We still need more food, and we haven't found a drop of water yet."

"The water still works in these houses."

"Yeah, but we don't have anything to carry it in. That's the problem. We need bottled water to take with us, and all of the food here got eaten by the dead guy."

From around the corner at the end of the hall, Nadene saw Robert peak around and wave at her. She tapped William on the shoulder, then followed him to the living room.

"Several outside the window," Robert whispered.

William wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "Same in the back rooms. They're gathering around the house."

"Do you think they heard us, Will?" Nadene asked.

"Don't know. Might've heard the door close in the kitchen."

Edgar walked up between them. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," William said. "If we're quiet, they might pass us by."

"Shh..." Nadene put her hand up, hearing a rumbling sound. "Do you hear that?"

They stood silent and looked at each other.

"Sounds like gunshots," William said finally. "Maybe the raiders. Just stay quiet."

Nadene stayed perfectly quiet with the others, and eventually, the silhouettes disappeared from the living room window. William walked over, stood at the side of the curtain, and carefully pulled the curtain away from the wall. "They're moving on."

With a sigh of relief, she joined him and peered through the opening. In unison, the monsters traveled past their truck and between the houses beyond, apparently drawn to the source of the gunfire.

"That should buy us some time," William whispered. "Let's get whatever else we can find and get moving."

"Where to next?" she asked.

"Straight across." He pointed through the window. "If we need to run back to the truck, I want us to be as close as possible."

Edgar shook his head. "Cross the street? That's suicide."

"It's not suicide. We just have to be careful," Robert said, putting his hand on Edgar's shoulder. "And William's right. We can't move too far from our vehicle."

"Give it a couple minutes to make sure we're clear. Then, we go." William let go of the curtain. "Find anything useful?"

Wayne presented the shotgun and shells, and Robert held out a plastic case full of tools. William gave them a smile. "Good, all of that should come in handy. I found a box of MREs in the back closet."

"Who has MREs in their house? I mean, just a big box of MREs sitting in a closet?" Edgar asked.

"He probably got them from his base," William said. "I found some snapshots of a bunch of military guys in the master bedroom, probably his war buddies."

"Then, we have food, right? The MREs could last us a while."

"Not really, no. The box is a little under half full. We'll need a little more than this."

"The next house, then?" Wayne asked.

William nodded and walked to the front door. Turning the knob slowly, he opened the door, then took off across the yard, the others following close behind. Nadene struggled to keep up, but she didn't call out to them to slow down, preferring instead to maintain her silence and preserve their temporary safety. She caught up when William paused at the door of the next house.

Unlike the other houses on that street, Nadene noticed a boat trailer standing freely under a carport, but she didn't see a boat anywhere nearby. The vehicle meant to tow the trailer was also nowhere to be found, likely taken by the owner or perhaps other survivors looking for a quick way out of town.

"Hand me that," William whispered, gesturing at Nadene's flashlight. He took a firm grip of the handle and opened the door, then raised the flashlight above his head as if getting ready to swing it.

Once inside, Wayne carefully closed and locked the door behind them. She followed William farther into the house and noticed, with a cursory glance of her surroundings, how similar it was in comparison to the other two; the houses along that street seemed to be built with the same floor plan and materials. *Probably the same developer, too*, she thought.

William paused at the door of the kitchen, and from the stillness of the house, she could detect no sounds or noises beyond the breathing of her companions. He entered the kitchen and lowered the flashlight, then crouched next to several packs of bottled water.

"This could last us a few weeks if we ration them." William slid one of the cases across the floor, then inspected it closely. "Not so much as a tear in the plastic. Looks like three full cases of water."

"Good," Edgar whispered from the doorway while glancing between William and the hallway at the back of the house. "Any food in there?"

"A little bit." Rising, William pulled a few cans from a nearby shelf. "Not nearly enough to get us there, though."

"What do you think we should do, Will?" Wayne stepped closer. "Do you think we'll find enough food before we use up what we've got? Should we just get going and ration it out as best we can?"

"Now, you're talkin'." Edgar licked his lips. "We should just get out of here. We're using more food than we're finding here."

William shook his head. "One more house."

"One more? And what if there's nothing there?" Edgar crossed his arms. "We could use up all of our food before we even get to a boat."

"One more. If there's no food there, we'll leave. Okay?"

"Alright," Edgar said, shrugging. "Let's see if there's anything else useful in here before we go."

With a nod, William wielded the flashlight like a baton and went down the hall, checking each room before moving on. Nadene and Wayne went into the first bedroom, then searched for anything of use. She pulled several thick leather jackets from the closet while Wayne rummaged through the chest of drawers on the far wall, and they met at the large bookshelf against the far wall.

Glancing over the titles, Nadene selected a few books that she found interesting to read during the trip, and she pulled down a journal which had a pen attached to its side by Velcro. *Maybe I can write if I get bored*, she mused.

Wayne took and opened a magazine, and Nadene looked over his arm at the page. In vibrant, rich color, a picture of a boat and a family enjoying themselves did its best to entice the reader to purchase a sailing package from a local tourism company. Tossing the magazine on the bed, Wayne reached for a thicker hardcover book, then traced his finger along the title on the cover. *On the Waves: A Beginner's Guide to Sailing*.

"Could come in handy," Wayne said. "That is, unless you know how to work a boat."

She shook her head.

"All that time in Grand Bay, and you never learned about boats?"

"Mom didn't like boats that much. She loved the beaches but not the boats."

"Well, I never did much sailing, either. Not that I didn't want to, of course; I just had more pressing matters on my mind—like where my next meal was coming from."

The door creaked, and in walked Edgar. "Find anything in here?"

"Yeah," Wayne said, nodding. "This sailing book could help."

Edgar took the book when it was offered, then grabbed the magazine from the bed. "This could help, too."

"Nah, just some ads and articles about popular sightseeing spots." Wayne waved his hand. "But the book looks like it could be useful."

Edgar flipped through the magazine. "No, it'll give us a good idea of where we can find the kind of boat we need. I'll check both of 'em out."

"Help yourself. It's not like anyone's gonna come asking for them," Wayne said, following Edgar out of the room, and Nadene grabbed the leather jackets and trailed behind them.

"Nothing in the back," William said, joining them in the living room. "Find anything?"

Edgar held up the book and magazine, and Nadene presented the leather coats.

“Good.” William pointed at the living room furniture. “Guess we’d better get comfortable.”

“Get comfortable?” Edgar asked. “Why?”

“Well, unless you’re a speed reader, you’ll need time to go over that book. And we need to plan out where we’re going, what route we’ll take, and so on.”

“It doesn’t take that long. I could have it done in no time.”

“Then, get started. We’re waiting on you.”

Edgar nodded and sat on the recliner, cracking the book open, and Robert landed on a living chair, propping his feet on the table. Nadene heard the distinct sound of the pages peeling apart and assumed the book hadn’t been opened for quite some time, if ever. It reminded her of opening her textbooks at the beginning of a new school year, especially if it was the first year a new book had been used.

Then, her mind drifted to the carefree days in Grand Bay, the days after the divorce and before the missile attacks, the time Nadene remembered as the first time she and her mother enjoyed their lives following a time of such intense, enveloping pain. Though the hurt was but a distant memory, she readily recalled how searing it had been long after her father’s leaving them to fend for themselves, and she wished, if only for a passing moment, that her father had been killed in Grand Bay in some horrible way, if for no other reason than to pay a debt for her mother’s terrible end at the hands of a hungry monster. More than that, the man deserved some measure of reprisal for his betrayal. She wouldn’t wish death by the cannibals on her worst enemy, but she was frightened at herself when she realized she might make an exception in his case.

She snapped out of it when Wayne shook her by the arm. “Naddy, you okay?”

“Yes, sorry. What were you saying?”

“Just seeing if you wanted some of this.” He offered her a can of food. “Were you having... a vision just then?”

“No, remembering something.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, but thanks.” She took the tin can and relaxed on a sofa.

Nadene turned to the kitchen entryway when she heard a crash of papers on linoleum, then through it walked William, carrying a few pieces of notebook paper and a pen. “Sorry.” He glanced at Wayne’s frightened face. “A bunch of bills were on top of the refrigerator, and they fell when I tried to pull this paper loose.”

He walked around the sofa and sat beside Nadene, then leaned forward and snatched the magazine from under Robert’s feet. Browsing the advertisements, William made notes on the paper, and he tore one of the full-page ads out. Nadene leaned forward and peered over his shoulder, reading the notations to herself. When he was finished, he motioned for the others to gather around.

“According to the ads and the map, this is going to be our best route.” William tossed the page to Edgar. “Do you see any boats in that list we could use?”

"This one here." Edgar turned the page around and pointed at a boat. "This book recommends it."

"Is it easy to operate?"

He nodded. "One of the easiest. One guy could do it by himself if needed, but it can haul up to twenty people, ten comfortably."

"Good. That's where we'll go." William drew a line along the road. "We're here, and that marina is over there. This is the most direct route. Ten, fifteen minutes driving at worst."

"Worst?" Nadene asked.

"Being chased by an army of walkers and going through wrecked cars. That kind of worst." He leaned back. "Who's the best driver here?"

"You've been driving all this time. Why don't you keep on?" Edgar closed his book, keeping his thumb between the pages to mark his place.

"Just making sure everybody was okay with that. This is the end of the road, so to speak, and I don't want anything going wrong."

"We'll make it." Robert sat up. "We've got to make it. We've got the cure now."

William nodded. "Alright. One more house, then we go. Let's get ready to move."

Standing, Nadene followed the others and waited in a single-file line at the door. William, at the front of the line, opened the door, and Nadene was thankful she didn't hear it make a sound. Once on the porch of the other house, Nadene and the others leaned against the outside wall while William tried to open the front door.

"Locked." He looked left and right, glanced behind him to the street, and turned to Wayne. "Hand me that bag."

William unzipped the backpack and pulled out a sweater, then wrapped a pistol with it. He took one more quick look around before smashing one of the panes of glass from the door. Reaching inside, he unlocked it and led the way inside, and Wayne, being the last one through, closed and locked the door behind him.

Nadene noticed the same floorplan in that house, and she was growing tired of the ranch style design. *Hopefully, we'll be out of this place soon, she thought. I want to see that icy beach I keep dreaming about. If only mom had survived to be there with me.*

William ran to the kitchen. Nadene and the others followed, and they reached the doorway just as he was pulling open a pantry door. Like a pile of treasure gleaming in the sunlight, she saw canned food stocked from floor to ceiling on the shelves. Looking over his shoulder, William gave them a broad smile. "Get as much as we can carry."

She packed the cans into her backpack as Wayne passed them to her, and not long after they had started, the entire contents of the cupboards and pantry were stored in one backpack or another. William nodded, then walked into the living room, but he froze in his tracks halfway to the front door.

"What is it?" Nadene asked, coming up behind him.

“Shh...” He held his hand up, and she looked past him. Through the broken pane of glass, she could see part of a body and an arm moving closer, a zombie coming onto the porch.

She gasped when she focused, seeing the numerous bite marks and all the blood on the arm, and she turned her head to prepare herself for seeing its face should it come close to the window. Glancing around, she noticed the others had stopped and were simply watching what the creature might do next. She looked back at the door, and she saw the zombie was standing outside the door.

“What’s it doing?” she whispered as quiet as she could.

William shrugged, then crept across the room to the door. When he reached the other side of the room, the door knob turns slowly back and forth. *It’s trying to get in*, Nadene thought, grabbing Wayne by the arm. After a couple of turns, the creature released the knob, then reached its hand through the broken glass. The shards of glass which remained in the window’s frame cut into the zombie’s arm, but the creature didn’t reel in pain or seem to be fazed by the slicing.

Once the arm was through up to the elbow, it bent and felt around inside the door. The mere sight of this gave Nadene a deep, uneasy feeling, and she wished it would just go away. She said nothing because the slightest sound could excite the creature, and for all she knew, it had no idea they were in the house. She sat silent and watched, knowing the fragile panes of glass were no match for an enraged zombie.

The monstrous hand found the door knob and twisted it, but the deadbolt kept the door from swinging open. William returned to them, stepping carefully on the tips of his toes. “Back door.”

He reached the back door, turned the knob, and opened it, but he quickly closed it back, then sighed. “Two of them on this side.”

“We’re trapped?” Edgar asked. “We should’ve left before we got surrounded!”

“Keep your voice down.” William pointed at him. “Any more outbursts like that, and you’re on your own.”

“Relax, gentlemen,” Nadene said, peeking through the kitchen window.

William ran his fingers through his hair. “Alright, to the truck. We fight our way out.”