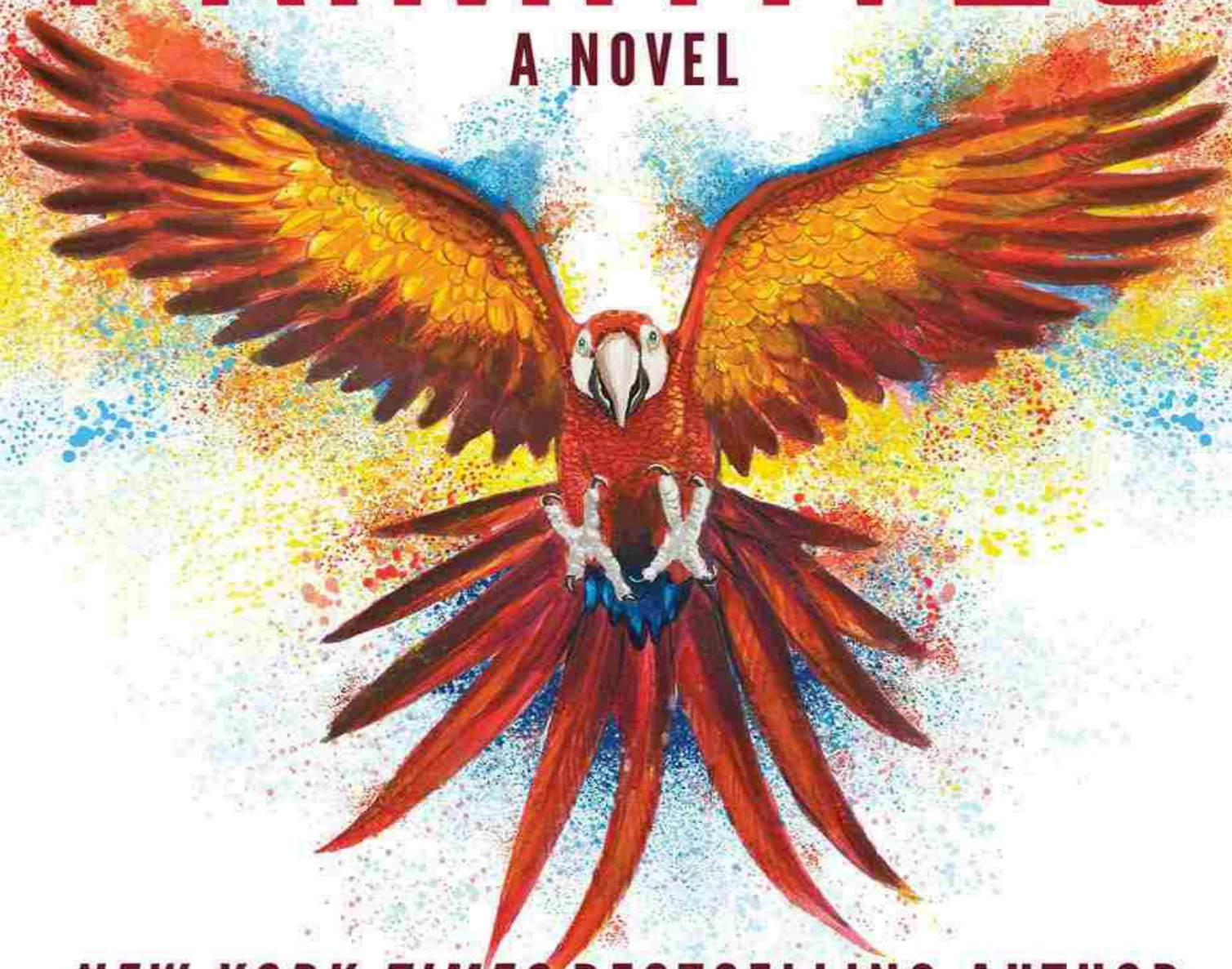


PRIMITIVES

A NOVEL



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Briar Road
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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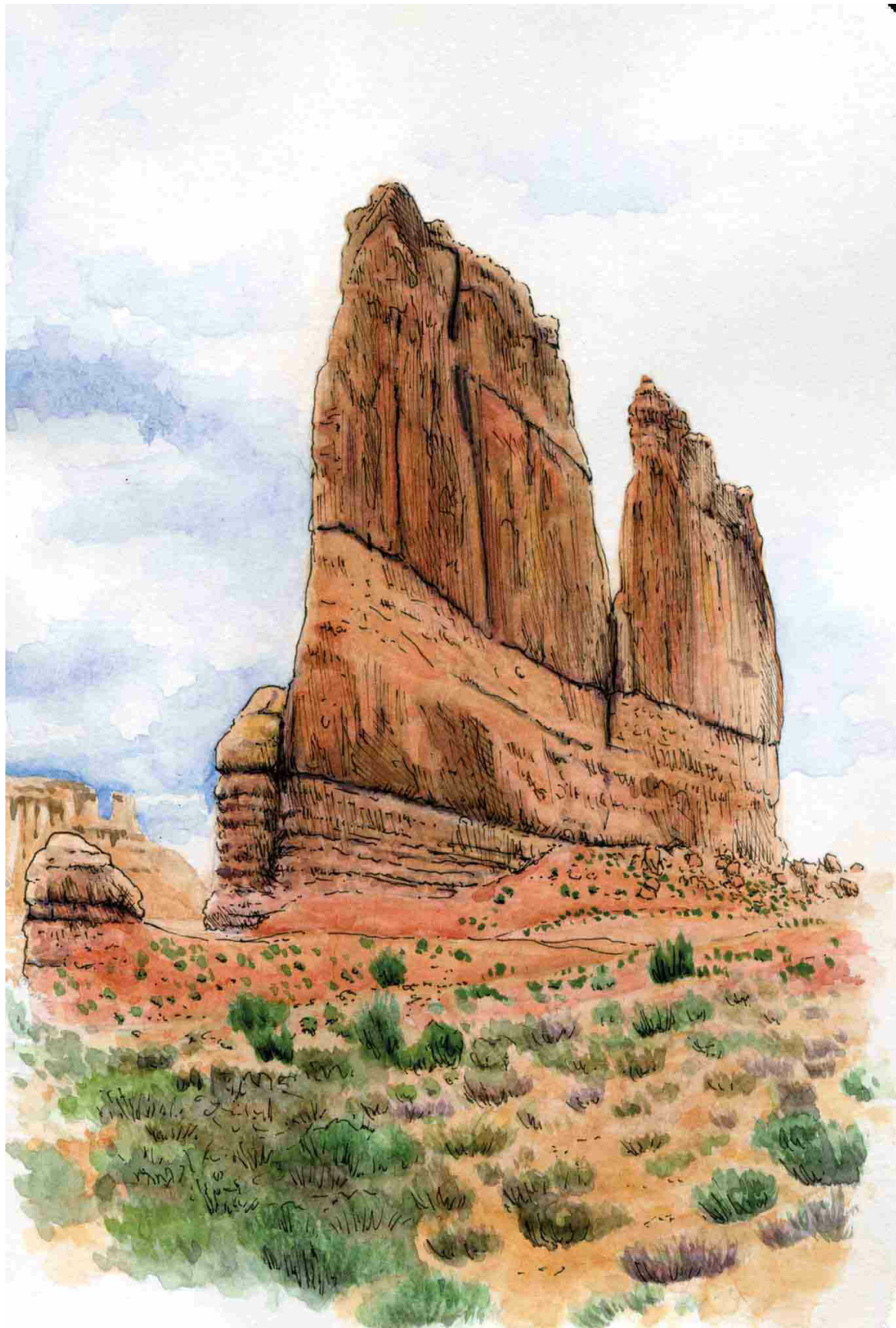
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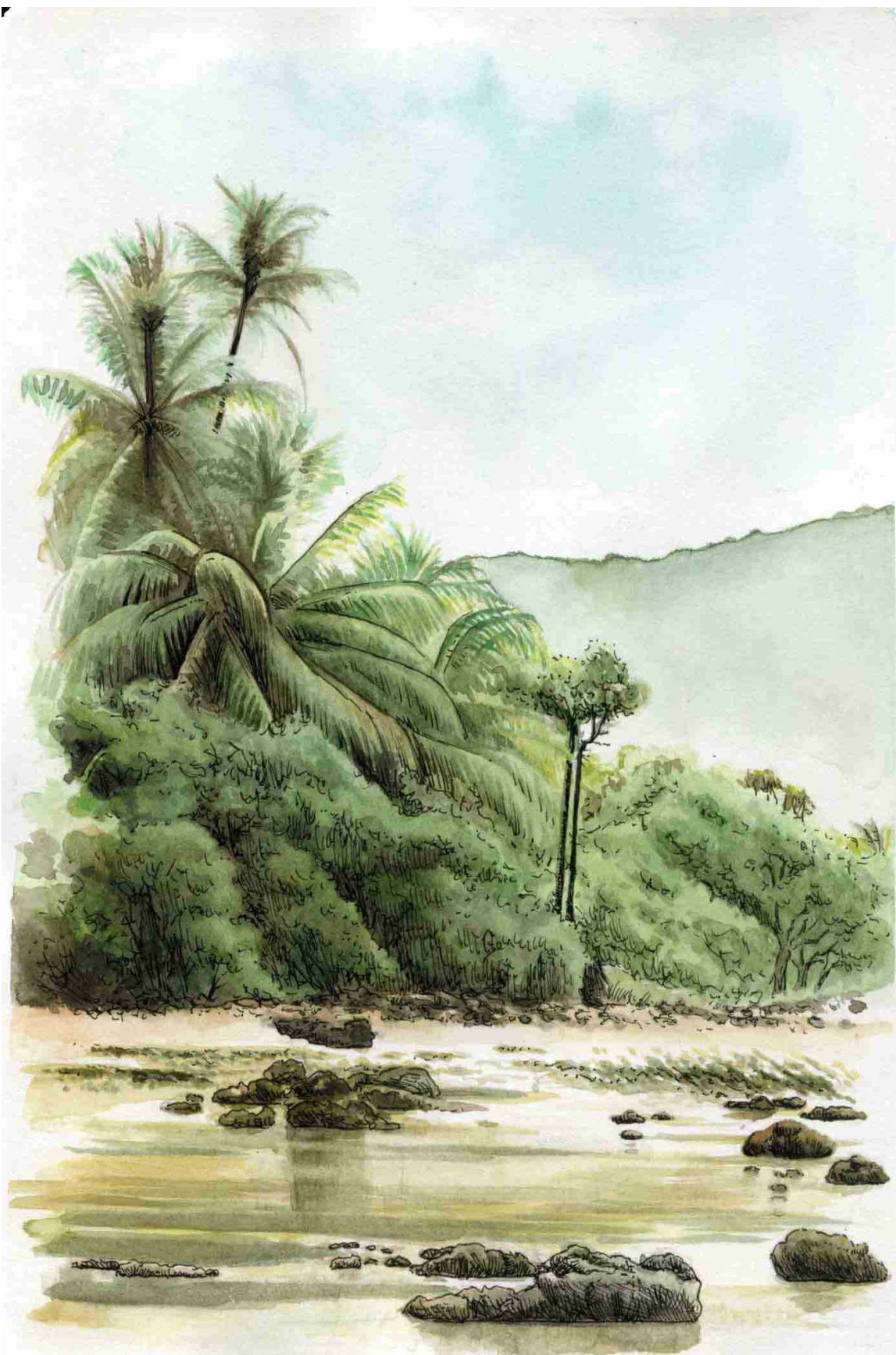
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For Georgina







PROLOGUE

SETH

It's getting late in the day, and the body isn't going to burn itself.

I turn away from the endless expanse of sand and sagebrush and shift my gaze skyward. Sixty feet above me at the top of the butte, a hand dangles off the side of a steel platform.

I grip the metal handle and start cranking. With each rotation, thick cables move, and the platform inches downward. Eventually, the winch stops with a clank, the grinding of its rusty gears replaced by a gentle crinkling in the arid breeze.

As usual, the figure strapped to the platform is double-wrapped in a translucent white sheet of industrial plastic—the Professor bought rolls and rolls of the stuff before the whole world went to hell. The plastic is stained crimson in multiple places. The first set of stains I was expecting—the ring of red around the crown of the head has become a hallmark of the Professor's research. But the second set makes me shudder, even under the blazing afternoon sun.

Haphazard splotches adorn the lower abdomen. Stranger still, this figure is significantly smaller than most. I always release the younglings, so it must be a female. But I haven't caught one in over a year, and his subjects tend to last three months at most.

Not for the first time, I wonder how it came to this. When I was a child, this platform carried my shivering body down at dawn to hunt and fish. Later in the day, I'd stand in the same spot I am now, shouting until the Professor's smiling face appeared overhead, followed by the whirring of the electric motor.

It had been good, once—almost good enough to make me forget we were the last two people left. Then the Professor's illness got worse, and his moods turned dark. Our lithium battery banks started to fade too, as if his disease were infecting all aspects of our lives. One by one, he began dismantling the devices from his former life to put their precious parts to better uses. The television, the stereo,

even the winch's motor, all gutted to keep equipment in his laboratory operational.

Each year we drifted further away from a world I never knew, and as my hand-me-down clothes became tattered, as my survival tools became more primitive, as I resorted to climbing the sheer cliff face to reach our home up on the butte, my life became strikingly similar to the lives of the creatures I hunt. But, looking back, losing our tethers to the old world wasn't what forever altered our reality out here in the Utah desert. What changed everything was the nature of the Professor's experiments.

"What aren't you telling me?" I say to myself. A bad habit, one that tends to develop when the only ears around to hear you are your own.

The cables creak as I mount the platform and start unfastening the straps. As the last one comes loose, the body lets out a sickly belch. The gas burns my nostrils as it leaves the cadaver. A common occurrence at this time of year—one I never seem to get used to.

Staring at the bloody plastic, I can make out the vague outline of a face within. I deserve to know the truth. I fetch specimen after specimen, and for what? Just this once, I want to unwrap that sheet and find out for myself what the hell is going on. He'd never even have to know.

I stare out at the desert. Aside from a fresh sidewinder trail in the dirt, no signs of life disturb the landscape. If you don't count the Andes, we really are alone out here—if I believe the Professor, we're all alone in the entire world.

I look back to the wrapped figure, so efficiently removed from existence. I want to feel pity, but in the back of my mind, I picture a destroyed campsite with blood and bodies everywhere, and a tiny bundle shrieking beneath a juniper tree. I've only ever seen this scene in my imagination, but the Professor filled in all the gruesome details of how he found me. Knowing what I know, can I ever truly feel anything for them? They'd do the same or worse to me if they got the chance. My slaughtered parents are proof of that—and the Professor is the only reason I'm not in the ground beside them.

I dip to a knee and heft the bundled corpse onto one shoulder before trudging off through the brush. I reach a ring of stones with blackened remnants in the center and set her down just outside it. Using the seven-inch blade of my Ka-Bar utility knife—the first tool the Professor ever gave me—I strip and feather several large branches, then build a small pyre and begin stuffing kindling beneath.

The orange sky has dissolved into rich purple hues by the time I finish. I lift the body and place her on top. The wood shifts slightly, and she nearly tumbles off, but in the end, the structure holds. Not my best work, but it'll do the job.

Sparks fly as flint strikes steel. After a few minutes of careful blowing, I stand back to watch the flames lick at the evening sky. I should get back to the butte and put this ugliness behind me. Andes have no love of fire, but I still feel exposed out here, standing next to this beacon in the growing dark. And yet I can't take my eyes off the form lying on the pyre.

As the plastic melts and her skin burns, wrinkling and curling, fat dripping like wax, I wonder if she was old enough to have witnessed the world before. Had she been a little girl when everything came crashing down, or was she born what she is now, wandering the wilderness with no concept of the life she'd only just missed?

I can hear the Professor's voice—*Daydreaming serves no practical purpose!* I head back through the deepening night, toward the butte, the Professor, and the only life I have ever known.

What I wouldn't give for someone to talk to.



CHAPTER 1

SARAH

The voice of reason tells me to turn back.

Shut your smug mouth, I think as I plunge through brambles and branches, sucking air that's nearly as dense as the jungle itself.

The thorns are the worst. A million little daggers tearing at my skin. T-shirt and shorts weren't a wise choice. Then again, neither was carving a path through the brush in the middle of the night. Two stupid decisions, but the night's still young. I'm sure I'll get to three.

I'd wanted to avoid our modest community's well-lit streets. But if I'm spotted now, looking like I tussled with an ocelot, I won't exactly come across as an ordinary twenty-something girl out for a midnight run.

I burst through the underbrush into the cool, drizzling rain of the cobblestone beach. It feels like being born. I scan the shore for silhouettes, but the night is utterly still. Just the sloshing waves, the gentle click-clack of the rocks tumbling, and the occasional nocturnal call from the jungle. Normally I find this melody soothing. Tonight it's static.

I break into an awkward jog along the beach, muddy sneakers sliding on slick rocks. When I reach the spot where the cobbles meet the broad paving stones of Main Street, I crouch behind a cluster of bushes and peer up the road, which cuts a nearly straight line to the jungle gate a quarter mile to the north. Halfway there, lights twinkle in Center Square Park. I expected to see at least a handful of drunks staggering home after a late night at Vibes, but the only movement is a stray dog pattering across the grass.

It's odd, seeing our town so quiet. In just a few hours, the thoroughfare will be crawling with people heading to work. Scientists and their research assistants will stroll toward the big lab just north of the Square, where they'll sit on cushy stools all day, PICC lines hooked to their arms as they experiment with herbal extracts, trying to cure the Great Fatigue. The manual laborers will drift east of Main, toward grueling twelve-hour shifts in the meat processing plant, sewage treatment

facility, and cluster of factories that churn out our clothing and other necessities. And hidden among the flow of bodies will be Caldwell's town supervisors, keeping mostly to themselves, but eyeing the crowd for anyone committing an infraction.

I almost wish there was someone around tonight. It'd give me an excuse to give up this ridiculousness.

I look toward my target—the squat, windowless building with a dumpster pushed against the back wall. Dr. Caldwell's private laboratory.

With my heart thudding in my ears, I dash across the street, climb onto the bin, then jump hard and grab the edge of the flat roof, my wet sneakers comically scrambling for purchase as I pull myself up and over. I roll onto my back, and bits of gravel join the debris already stuck to my clammy skin.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my nerves. Not easy with an ominous glass eyeball glaring down at me. The broken searchlight dangles from a decaying wooden platform suspended high above the canopy—just one of many watchtowers that were installed around the periphery of the peninsula back when the world was falling. Now they're little more than crumbling skeletons, unmanned for decades. Still, they remind me that as bad I think things are, the original hundred and seventy-nine settlers had it worse. They'd fought and struggled, and now here we are, thirty years later. The white coats huddled inside their fancy houses, grunt laborers like me stacked on top of one another in ramshackle apartments. All thirteen hundred or so people, snoring peacefully in their beds—all of them but me, New Haven's very own black sheep, breaking their trust so I can burgle the lab of our leader, the same man who saved my parents all those years ago.

Before I can start guilt-tripping, I crawl to the closest of the three skylights. Slipping off my pack, I pull out a socket wrench and coiled length of rope, then get to work removing the bolts. As the final one spins loose, I drop the wrench and grab two corners of the thick glass. It lifts a half inch, maybe less, and when

my straining arms give out, it sucks back down. Burglar tip number one—rubber seals turn to cement when left for three decades under the equatorial sun.

I glance around the rooftop, looking for anything to provide leverage, but quickly realize there's not so much as a ventilation pipe up here, which means I also have nowhere to tie off the rope. Burglar tip number two—plan better than a toddler.

If I want to get this done tonight, the only option left is to kick in the front door. But damaging the lab was never part of the plan. While Dr. Caldwell might not miss a few scoops of L-tryptophan and niacin, a broken lock could pull at a thread that might unravel our fledgling colony. Meetings would be held, fingers pointed, and someone would be blamed—though it might not be me, it would surely be a fellow grunt.

There's no choice now but to recruit James for help.

Leaving the rope next to the skylight, I drop back down onto the dumpster, then hop to the ground. I'm about to start back toward Main—already dreaming of a shower—when a beam of light spills around the corner of the building. I freeze, breath stuck in my chest. Is this it? Has my burning desire to escape New Haven finally caught up with me?

While lying in bed plotting this caper, I told myself that exile was the worst they could do—a punishment that aligned perfectly with my goals. A convenient cover for the truth, but reality comes rushing back and slaps me hard across the face. I recall the prison cell at the back of our town's repair shop. A cell no one ever talks about, as it's rarely needed in our tight-knit community. Now I'm picturing myself trapped behind those iron bars. Meals served on a tin plate and counting cockroaches for entertainment. What little freedom I have, lost.

My panicked mind tells me to run, but the shroud of the jungle is twenty yards away. My distinctive blond ponytail and Forager's pack would be easy to identify. I might as well pin my name and address to the wall. And so I do the only other thing I can think of—drop to one knee, yank at my shoelaces, and grab the loose ends with trembling fingers.

The flashlight beam rounds the corner.

“Sarah?” asks a male voice.

My muscles tighten as I shield my eyes. “Mind getting that light out of my face?”

“Oh, right,” he says, switching it off. “What the hell are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

When the spots fade from my vision, Josh Vale, my Forager team supervisor, appears in the moonlight. As always, he’s wearing a shirt two sizes too small. His dirty blond hair is slicked back, accentuating sharp features that are twisted into a sleazy grin. While it’s unnerving to be confronted by a cocky pervert in the dark, he knows I go for daily jogs and often come down here to swim. Maybe I can still play this off.

“Oh, you know, just heading to a dinner party,” I say, glancing down at my soiled running clothes. Sarcasm has always been my coping mechanism for stress. “You get an invite too?”

He chuckles. “Recruited for beach patrol.”

“Ah, yes. What with all the drooling psychopaths we have running free.”

“Sea turtles will be hatching soon,” he says. “The ladies at the community center were crying about them getting confused by our lights. Personally, I think they should get their asses down here and save the crawling stew meat themselves ... but I guess I shouldn’t complain. It’s not every day I get to see you in shorts.” He stares at my legs. My stomach turns. “What’s up with the scratches?”

“That?” *Think, damn it.* “It’s me learning a lesson about running in the dark.”

His eyes pan up my legs, then shift to the shore, making sure we’re alone. My tension kicks up a notch.

“What about the Munchkin?” he asks. “He around here too? I can picture him trying to keep up with you on those little nubs he calls legs.”

While I never enjoy hearing Josh belittle my best friend, tonight it’s music to my ears. It means everything is business as usual. Once this uncomfortable

conversation is over, I'll be free to head back to my tiny one-bedroom apartment instead of getting tossed onto the grease-stained floor of the repair shop's cell.

"Sadly, James couldn't make it tonight." I look toward Main, hinting that it's time to go our separate ways.

He points at my feet with the butt of the flashlight. "Um, I think those laces are good and tied by now."

I glance down and realize I've triple-knotted my shoe.

"Right. Thanks."

I stand up and take a step toward the street, but he quickly moves in front of me.

"Since I've got you here," he says, "I've been tasked with putting together a small team for a special project. The big lab is running short on supplies. All the old shops on the mainland have already been pilfered, so we're going south. Thought you might like to come along."

I'm not sure what to say. I'd heard about these scavenging assignments, but I'd never been invited. No one I know ever has been either.

"How far south?"

"Maybe as far as Brazil."

I need to shift gears from freaking the hell out to making a rational decision. After all, this is everything I want. To finally see the world beyond our fence. But the timing is absolute crap. Why now, so close to my grand departure?

"How long would we be gone?"

"A month. Maybe more. It'll probably be dangerous. No one really knows how many Draggers are out there. But it's guaranteed to be an adventure."

He's saying all the right things. If only Josh weren't the one saying them.

"Why do you need me? I'm a Forager."

"We'll be crossing the Darian gap. It's all untouched jungle. If you come, I'm sure the scientists will give you a long list of plants to collect. It'll be a Forager's wet dream."

Classy choice of words, as always.

I'd love to say yes. I have no clue what's out there, and it would be wise to start out with a group. They'll have plenty of gear—machetes and sleeping bags and rations galore. All the things I've been saving up for years to buy. Hell, those items are the reason I'm breaking into this lab. Once I have the lay of the land, I could take some of that gear and slink off on my own.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong.

"Who else is coming?" I ask.

He glances toward shore. "Most likely, just you and me."

And there it is. I want to call him on his bullshit and grill him on the details of this "official mission," but it doesn't seem like a wise choice, considering the circumstances.

"If you're looking for another man," I say, testing him, "I'm sure James would jump at the chance."

"The Munchkin? He'd just slow us down."

"He's tougher than you think."

"Damn it, Sarah. I'm trying to give you an opportunity. This is my assignment, and I'm not bringing that little twerp along."

His assignment. Unless he's been cozying up to Caldwell, there's no way he would be placed in charge of a rare voyage to the outside world. Operations like these are almost exclusively run by Caldwell's personal security team. I'm not sure what Josh is trying to pull, but I can use my imagination.

"I'd love to go," I say, "but I'd probably slow you down too. I twisted my ankle when I took that spill. I'll be OK for work if I take it slow, but all that hiking would do me in. Maybe next time."

He stares at me for a long moment.

"If you turn this down," he says slowly, "there might not be a next time."

Despite it sounding like a threat, I shrug my shoulders. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of stories to tell when you get back."

In the dim light, his expression morphs into one of indifference. In the seven years I've been working under him, strange behavior has been the norm, but his

actions tonight suggest he's a brazen liar. I'd bet all the money I've saved that this official outing isn't real. Maybe he's drunk, or tripping on Ayahuasca, and come morning he won't even remember this conversation.

"All right, well, I'll let you get back to it," he says almost cheerily.

I step past him and out onto Main. I break into a brisk walk, making sure to add a subtle limp. When I'm a good twenty yards up the road, I can't resist glancing back. Josh is standing right where I left him, watching me, wearing a disturbing, thin-lipped smile as he slaps the head of his flashlight into the palm of one hand.

I give a little wave and keep moving. Is he going to make work difficult because I turned him down? Doesn't matter. There's no future for me here. Tomorrow night I'll come back with James and get this job done. Then my days in New Haven are numbered.



CHAPTER 2

SETH

A gust of dry desert air—somehow worse than the heat from our woodburning stove—washes over my face when the front door swings open. The Professor stalks into the living room as my trout sizzles on the pan. He hasn't bothered to change his button-down shirt, which is flecked with dried blood, and his shock of white hair is even more unruly than normal, telling me it's been another frustrating night in his lab.

With his shoulders slumped, he shuffles to the couch, tosses a sheaf of papers onto the coffee table, and flops down on his back. A pill bottle rattles as he opens it and tosses a handful of tablets into his mouth.

"You hungry?" I ask.

He grumbles something indiscernible, then, clear as a canyon stream, "Are you planning to check the pit today?"

"I was thinking tomorrow."

"Make it today. I need another subject, preferably a female."

"Want to tell me why?"

I know better than to ask, but I can't help myself. As expected, he gives me his patented *You're not a scientist* look. "Just bring me a female."

"You know I have no say in what we trap, right?"

Another grunt, followed by, "Keep your guard up out there."

I will—always do. Up here on the butte, which towers above the desert floor, we can move freely. But the pit is part of the world below, and that belongs to the Andes.

I eat half the fish at the kitchen counter, then bring the other half to the Professor, but he's already snoring on the couch, large nostrils vacuuming up motes of stuffing from a tear in the plaid fabric. I know he's been rationing what little remains of his supplements—nicotinamide riboside, a precursor vitamin for nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide, or NAD+. It's just about all that keeps him going anymore, but he still sleeps fifteen, sometimes sixteen hours a day. I lay the

plate on the coffee table, knowing the food will likely remain untouched when I return this evening.

In my room, I scoot around the bed frame before reaching underneath the sagging twin mattress and pulling out my “stink box,” a sealed cube containing a pair of green cargo pants, a tan T-shirt, my dead father’s belt, and several bundles of sage. In the decade I’ve spent traversing the desert, never once have I washed these clothes, which has let my body odor saturate the fabric and blend in with the Andes’ thick musk. But the Professor is repulsed by the smell. Hence the box and the sage.

As I pull on my pants and T-shirt, the tight fit reminds me both will soon need yet another round of tailoring. Like all my clothes, they’re the Professor’s hand-me-downs. With my last growth spurt having abruptly halted three years ago, I’ll probably always remain three inches shy of his six-foot-one, but my body wasn’t built at a desk like his. It’s still being built by the desert, whenever I dig a pit or climb a cliff or carry a corpse to the pyre.

I grab the jar of mica-dominated clay I collected from streambeds and slather a thick layer onto my face, neck, and forearms. In addition to keeping the sun off my skin, it makes me look more like the creatures I hunt. Lastly, I rub a handful into my hair, which at nearly an inch is longer than I like to keep it. But my electric razor got packed away on the same day the Professor became our friendly neighborhood barber, back when he restricted our energy usage to LED lights and the pump to our well. Unfortunately, he seldom has the inclination these days to go to work on my head with the straight razor.

Back in the living room, I strap on my boots, slip my knife into its sheath on my belt, then grab my pack and short bow off the floor and head outside. It’s only half past ten and it’s already blistering. The Professor told me that ever since Andes became the torchbearers for human DNA, global warming became a thing of the past. I disagree. It’s the hottest June I can remember, but then everything seems to rub me wrong these days. The horseflies, the mosquitos, the stickers that

always seem to gravitate toward my socks, reminding me with every footfall that I'll never leave the endless expanse that surrounds our home.

I walk to the edge of the butte, stopping beside the winch system and its empty steel platform. I look out over the gray and red maze of canyons, washes, and mesas. I'll need all my wits to make the climb down, so I begin my box breathing—four-second inhale, four-second hold, four-second exhale—trying to clear the old man from my thoughts. Or, more specifically, trying to clear the nagging questions about his new secret experiments, which have sent me on twice as many hunting expeditions in the past year as any previous season. The more I try to calm myself, however, the more I wish I could go back to simpler times, when the desert was my playground. While I still respect the life it provides—the bulrush, cattails, edible insects, and game—I can't help but feel stifled by its vast emptiness. More and more regularly, my thoughts veer toward the world beyond and all its mysteries.

"Screw it," I eventually say.

Placing my bow and backpack on the slab, I begin turning the crank. When the platform touches down sixty feet below, I find myself hoping I'll have an Ande to load onto it later this afternoon, despite all the work that will entail. It might help brighten the Professor's mood, even if it won't lift mine. After being marooned here for all these years, I have no idea what will. But it certainly isn't catching Andes.

Without another glance back at my home, I start descending the vertical cliff face.

Three miles from the butte, I cautiously approach the edge of the drop-off. It's one of the smaller canyons in the area, just thirty feet deep and perhaps seventy across, but the sheer walls prevent someone at the bottom from reaching the top, which suits my purposes.

I stop ten feet from the ledge and listen. Hearing nothing but the breeze rustling the junipers, I pick up a rock and toss it over. It plunks into the creek

below, followed by the signature grunts of a handful of Andes. Homo sapien grunts, sure, but not a sound I could reproduce if I tried. Short, guttural barks, clearly some type of rudimentary language.

“Jackpot,” I whisper.

First, I get down on my knees, unshoulder my bow, and place it off to my right, along with my nine remaining arrows. I’m a damn good shot, with skills honed hunting rabbits and birds, but this particular objective doesn’t call for killing. Instead, I remove my pack and slide out my trumpet. Despite the dents and spots of rust, it’s the most valuable weapon in my arsenal. Clutching it in one hand, I flatten myself onto my stomach and crawl forward. Just before I peek over the edge, a mantra from my early years works its way into my thoughts.

Their bodies are human, but their brains are not. One wrong step, and you’ll be the one caught.

Four of them. All sitting on their haunches around the edge of the fifteen-foot-deep pit I dug over the course of a month when I was fourteen, their naked bodies blistered cherry red by the sun. Two adult females and two younglings—a boy, shifting his weight as though nature is calling, and a girl, tossing chunks of raw rabbit meat into the pit. All of them staring down into the hole, where one of their members is undoubtedly trapped.

They seem advanced for Andes, with several hollowed-out gourds sitting in a pile near one of the adults’ feet. I’ve seen their kind use clubs before, but creating makeshift canteens is a first. While it’s not as complex as building a figure-four snare, it does require a sharp rock and considerable patience, which reinforces my theory that they’re evolving, even though the Professor says it’s foolish to make assumptions without proof. He claims that, ever since Advitalon ravaged their minds, certain groups probably have been latching onto ancient, instinctive knowledge buried in their genetic code. I’m not sure what I believe, but whatever’s happening to them, they still can’t recognize a trap to save their lives.

The creature stuck in the pit won’t stop wailing. It must be an alpha male. Most bands have one, and they’re usually the first to investigate something curious,

such as the glass prism I use to bait the false floor of juniper branches and sand. The piles of small bones scattered about suggest they've been here for a couple of days. If it were anything other than an alpha, the band would have moved on already. I know the Professor wants a female—he'll just have to make do.

As the two adult females hover around the lip of the pit, struggling to find a way to free their captured packmate, the older of the two tosses her dreadlocked hair over one shoulder, a strangely human gesture. My imagination washes off the caked mud and puts her in a dress—and I see a woman. Then she brings her head the rest of the way around, gazing at nothing with vacant eyes. As she scratches her mangy hair to get at the bugs nesting inside, her jaw goes slack, revealing broken brown teeth.

I'm reminded they're not human.

After glancing up and down the canyon to make sure no other Andes are lurking among the sage and early afternoon shadows, I take a deep breath and bring the trumpet's mouthpiece to my lips. The Professor gave me lessons when I was young, and he swears I got fairly good, but playing melodically is no longer my goal. When I blow, I hammer all three valves with one hand while extending and compressing the main tuning slide with the other, creating a noise so unbearable a flock of magpies takes flight a quarter mile away.

All four Andes leap to their calloused feet and scatter. They kick up sand as they run this way and that, searching for the source of the danger as their damaged brains try to decide whether to fight or flee. But the trumpet's racket bounces off the canyon walls, coming at them from all directions—which is the main reason I chose this spot, aside from the obvious height advantage. Before long, they begin a desperate retreat. The boy shits himself as they flee.

Following them along the ridgeline, I occasionally blast my terrible tuneless screech. Eventually, I'll need to climb down to haul up the alpha, but for now, I have to make sure this band doesn't get a few hundred yards away only to turn around when they realize the truth—that without their pack leader, they will most likely die out here.

I shadow them for a half mile, until the mouth of the canyon spits them out into open desert. I wait for them to become specks on the horizon before I climb down and start hiking back toward the Professor's prize.



CHAPTER 3

SARAH

“Sarah. Sarah!”

A muffled voice shouts my name, and hands shake my shoulders, but my eyes feel taped shut. Dragging them open is like sandpaper on glass. When I finally manage it, Art’s bald head, pudgy cheeks, and concerned eyes emerge through a fog. As one of New Haven’s five dispatch nurses, he’s required to knock. I must have really been out of it.

“I’m up,” I croak. “I’m up.”

I try to reach for my blanket, but my hand barely responds, moving as if it’s encased in gelatin. Doesn’t matter anyway, as the patchy scrap of fabric is wrapped like a turban around my left foot. At least I’m still in my running clothes—my pack is dangling from the doorknob, and my muddy sneakers are stationed at the foot of my bed, but my shorts and ratty tank top are twisted around me. After I returned from my expedition last night, the Fatigue clamped down hard. At least it shoved me into bed dressed.

Art squats down beside me.

“I got worried. I knocked, but you didn’t answer.”

“It’s fine,” I say, my voice hoarse. “Next time, just knock louder.”

“You feel as bad as you look?”

“Like a bag of hammered shit.”

“Want me to do your infusion?”

I muster a smile. “No need to touch the merchandise. Just get your deliveries done. Some people do worse than me when you’re late.”

He hesitantly hands me today’s list of medicinal plants, then sets his canvas tote on the side of my bed and pulls out a leather pouch. As always, inside are a butterfly needle, essential oil antiseptic wipes, a Band-Aid—which, if it’s like all the others, lost its stickiness decades ago—and a fat syringe filled with NAD+. The viscous brown liquid sloshes like a full-bodied tea. Immediately my left forearm starts itching.

“You can go,” I say. The quicker I can get him out, the quicker I can get that magical fluid in. “You know I’m a pro at this.”

“Yeah, but I think you need a rest day. You know how sharp you have to be out there. If you ran into a Dragger in your shape—”

I try to chuckle, but it comes out as a wheeze.

“I’m fine, Art. Really.”

“I could talk to your supervisor.”

I frown, starting to get annoyed. I know he cares, but even though Josh thinks I twisted my ankle, he could still write me up for missing work, which seems likely considering he’s probably pissed I refused to accompany him on his suspicious expedition.

Art hovers, scratching his dome as he searches for something else to say. Finally, he turns and heads for the door, taking one last look over his shoulder at me in my pathetic state. I like Art, always have, but I don’t need his pity. God, I can’t wait to get out of this place.

My first attempt to sit up fails. As I stare up at the ceiling fan, I wonder if I’d been overzealous in thinking I could handle my own infusion this morning. But the thought of lying here helpless makes my fingers curl into fists, and I force myself upright.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I rub my sore neck. My fingers subconsciously run over the hard lump on the left side. All New Haven residents get the implant at the age of five, a small device that sends imperceptible pulses of electricity down the vagus nerve every few seconds. It’s supposed to help restore a Fatigue-ravaged autonomic nervous system, but that’s like trying to jump-start a tractor using a AAA battery. Mine seems about as useful as an extra nipple.

My stuffed macaw doll rests in its usual spot next to my pillow. James calls it “the pathetic blob.” He has a point, but it’s *my* pathetic blob. My mother hand-stitched the silly bird while she was pregnant with me, and though she didn’t live through childbirth, it never fails to make me think of her and imagine what she was like. She was one of the original colonists, so the word “brave” always springs

to mind. The doll has certainly seen better days—the stuffing is nearly flat, the rainbow wool is blanched a dingy gray, and it gives off a distinctive yet comforting aroma, the result of soaking up my night sweats and marshmallow root deodorant for more than two decades.

Opening the pouch, I spill its contents onto my lap. My bladder feels close to exploding, but the bathroom on the other side of my one-bedroom apartment might as well be up in the cloud forest. In my current condition, I'd have to crawl. With that thought, I realize I'd rather piss myself.

I search the mess of track marks on my left arm, looking for a vein. I find just one, a thin streak of blue running between nasty red scars. Disinfecting my forearm and slipping the needle in, I make a mental note to start eating left-handed. Becoming ambidextrous would open fresh terrain on my right arm and prevent me from having to do injections between my toes.

Most people in New Haven don't have the pain tolerance for a push of NAD, the only real remedy we've found to temporarily overcome the Fatigue we all suffer from. They get their fix by intravenous drip, which takes hours. While the slow-drip method removes the gut-wrenching agony of a push, it also forces them into stationary jobs where they can drip as they work. By accepting the pain, I stay mobile. And staying mobile landed me my job as a Forager. This is what I signed up for—what sets me apart.

My record is six minutes and forty-seven seconds. It used to be a way to test myself, but I'm not a kid anymore. I've gotten over trying to prove my toughness. I decide to shoot for ten minutes, a happy middle ground between prolonged discomfort and total agony.

I'm done in nine, pulling out the needle and collapsing onto my side. It will take about fifteen minutes for Dr. Feelgood to arrive; in the meantime, Dr. Torture digs his talons into my chest and sets off a fireworks extravaganza in my intestines. To distract myself, I let my thoughts wander into the jungle, reciting the plants on my list and trying to find them on my mental map.

The first jolt of revitalizing energy starts buzzing in my toes and fingertips. It slowly climbs my limbs, polishing out the aches in my knees before moving inward, soothing my aching liver and opening my constricted lungs. Finally, it reaches inside my head, replacing the dull throb with a sparkling clarity.

I stand up too fast, steadying myself against a wall before shuffling toward the bathroom, where the lights are so dazzlingly bright tracers dance off the bulbs. This is my favorite part—the surreal onset of the energy that should be mine by birthright. Out in the jungle, I'll be consumed by my work, but in these first few minutes after my push, I let myself bask in the transformation.

After peeing and brushing my teeth, I pull my hair into a ponytail, then grab my cargo pants from the bed and tug them on before searching the pile of clothes near the door for my lime green “Do the Dew” T-shirt. When I find the tattered garment, I give it a smell test and then slip it on, careful not to lace my arms through the gaping holes in the pits. My favorite threadbare shirt is barely hanging on, but it's still better than those the sewing factory spits out, which look and feel like burlap sacks.

Outside, the weather is on repeat—the same steady drizzle that refuses to let up despite the scorching sun, making the days ridiculously hot and humid. As I head west on Argos Avenue, my *déjà vu* starts getting *déjà vu*. Same weather, same walk, same huge, dingy apartment buildings, all of them painted the same dull white—which led to many drunken intrusions back when James was distilling the homemade moonshine he called Dragon's Breath. One street down, on Faraday Avenue, there are two-bedroom homes, palaces reserved for scientists and their families ... and others in positions of power. Grunts like me catch disdainful stares if we even walk down their street.

My fellow drones start dragging their asses out onto the sidewalks. I know most of them, have even shared some laughs with a few. Unlike me, most of them haven't had their morning NAD, and I know better than to strike up a conversation at this early hour. Many hang lefts at Main Street anyway, heading

toward dirty toilets, broken plumbing, and factories where fingers are occasionally lost—thankless jobs that provide only the essentials.

Before I take a right and head north toward the jungle, I pull three coins from my pocket and step up to Ms. Vargas's curbside stand, which is little more than two sawhorses with a warped sheet of plywood on top. Behind it she sits hunched on a stump, her ancient brown face hovering over four trays of thoroughly charred cookies.

"What do we have this morning?" I ask.

At the sound of my voice, her glaucoma-clouded eyes come to life above a toothless grin.

"Oh, honey, I made your favorite. Berry Crunch."

"You know how to keep a girl happy," I say, even though all her treats are equally inedible. With no family to help, working with just the handful of ingredients she's allotted, she does her best. "I think I'll take three today."

"Make sure to give one to your little friend. You two need to take care of each other."

"I will," I say. "How are things?"

Her smile widens, and an arthritic hand begins patting the table, searching for mine.

"I've seen better days," she says, finding my fingers and giving them a squeeze.

"They get your shower working?"

"No one ever came. But they're going to move me again, into an apartment without an oven. I don't know how I'll get by."

"I'll see if there's someone—"

"Don't you pay it any mind," she says. "You're young and beautiful. You should be out there making the best of these early years. Trust me, when you get old in New Haven, you get tossed out like yesterday's milk."

"No one is going to throw you out," I say. "I won't let them."

Her hand slips away. "Wouldn't it be nice if you were in charge."

As much as I want out of here, it will break my heart to leave Ms. Vargas behind. In my goodbye note to James, I'll list her favorite topics of conversation so he can entertain her when he stops by her place. I'll even leave him a satchel of colones so he can afford the cookies he calls "skipping stones." Somehow, it doesn't seem enough.

"Take care of yourself," I say, realizing that this will be one of the last times I see her.

Stuffing the cookies into my pocket, I leave the coins on the table and then round the corner onto Main. A part of me would love to hang around for our next community meeting roughly two weeks away. Four times a year, Caldwell stands at his podium in Center Square, addressing all thirteen hundred minions. Even his cherished white coats turn up. He always begins by boasting that he and his team of scientists are doing everything in their power to cure our Fatigue. After a round of applause, he covers the projects for the upcoming quarter, such as building new windmills and planting additional crops, then announces the new list of arranged marriages. Finally, he allots fifteen minutes or so for anyone brave enough to speak up and share their concerns. Although my own list of grievances is a mile long, I'd love to bend his ear about his treatment of the elderly, at least on the laborers' side of town. All my life I've been a ghost on these streets, but if I could be known for anything, it would be as the first New Haven resident to tell Caldwell to eat a shit sandwich. I'm sure Ms. Vargas would find that highly entertaining.

Not wanting thoughts of Caldwell to ruin my morning, I turn my eyes toward the gate a hundred yards away. Just beyond it lies more than a million hectares of wild green. Spending my days under a lush canopy teeming with life has shown me that New Haven is merely a blip on the jungle's radar. This becomes more evident with each northbound step I take, as the jungle's symphony slowly eclipses the clatter from our streets. The buzz of insects overrides the scream of the sawmill, and the howlers' whooping drowns out the workers repairing homes ravaged by time. Soon I can feel that orchestra resonating in my entire being.

“What’s up, buttercup?” comes a voice from behind.

Without looking, I reach straight back, turning my open palms toward the sky, and James slaps them.

“Sorry about last night,” I say as he pulls up beside me.

“You missed out. Played a game of Monopoly all by myself.”

“You win?”

“Nah. Fell asleep. Woke up this morning with a hotel stuck to my face.”

Despite still worrying about Ms. Vargas, I laugh. “James, you’re an absolute badass.”

“I know. My mom tells me so every day.”

We keep walking, and I notice him watching me out the corner of his eye. A pang of guilt hits me—the same guilt I felt that drunken night when James professed his love to me. We haven’t spoken of it since, but there has always been a strange tension between us, which escalated when I became a Forager. Two months after I made the squad, he applied too, despite having always feared what lies beyond our fence. When he failed the first physical, I thought he’d move on. He wasn’t made for grueling hikes through the jungle, standing two inches shy of my five-foot-six and weighing a buck ten soaking wet. But he kept trying anyway, and as I watched him train day and night—and suffer through pushes of NAD—his determination became disconcerting. He knew my time to find a mate was ticking down. He probably thought that the more of it he could spend with me, the more likely I would be to select him as my partner instead of letting Caldwell match me with someone else. But I have no intentions of hanging around for either.

Hiding my plans from him doesn’t sit well with me, but I know if I were to share them, things would get complicated in a hurry. He would want to come along, and that isn’t happening. While he’ll always be my best friend, I need a fresh start. A clean break from this place, this life, everything.

“Let me see your list,” he says.

I hand it to him, and he brings it close to his face for a detailed inspection.

“Damn it,” he says. “Josh screwed us again. Giving us totally different plants, day after day, requires actual effort.”

“What’s on yours?”

“Seriously, that guy’s a devious prick.”

“Breathe ... let it go.”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you,” James continues. “I have a pretty good idea why he wants you alone out there.”

I snatch my list back. “He probably just knows I work faster solo.”

“I know you can handle yourself, but I don’t like you being out there without backup. Not with that ponytail.”

Always with the hair. Most Foragers shave their heads, a trend that started nine years ago, when a girl named Mallory got lost beyond the fence, wandering miles deep into the northern jungle before she supposedly ran into some Draggers. She would have escaped, the legend claims, if not for her long hair, which one of the beasts managed to grab.

It’s probably a crock of shit. Just a story Caldwell uses to keep us fearful of the outside world. I know Draggers are out there, but I haven’t seen evidence of their presence in more than two years. Mallory’s body was never recovered, and I have a sneaking suspicion as to why. She’d grown tired of collecting plants for the magical cure Caldwell’s been promising for more than thirty years. She’d struck out on her own, just as I’m planning to do, and she’s somewhere out there now, no longer taking crap from anyone.

“Don’t you know,” I say, “my hair is the source of all my power.”

“The power of bullshit, maybe.”

“Listen, I’ve got something fun planned for tonight, but I can’t tell you here. You’ve got to come over after work.”

“Fun like Vibes?”

“You know me better than that.”

He sighs. “So, another one of your get-rich-slow schemes. How many colones do you need? I mean, that jar under your bed is damn near overflowing already.

You saving up for something I don't know about?"

"I need some things."

"What things?"

"*Secret* things," I say, hoping he won't press for more.

I respect James too much to lie to him. To survive after I leave this place for good, I do, in fact, need a few more things. I've been saving for years to purchase a new hatchet, a sleeping bag, a better backpack, and the best boots colones can buy. All those items are rare, and their owners will be reluctant to give them up, but after tonight, I'll finally have the money I need.

"Will it at least be legal this time?" he asks.

"Do you really think I'm that boring?"

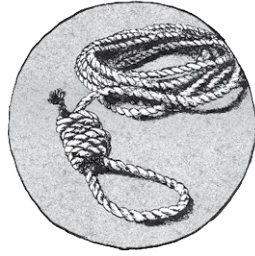
He sighs again, more theatrically this time. "OK, I'll hear you out on one condition. Since I don't know where your damn soursop trees are, you have to get me some guanabanas."

"Deal. I'll bring you guanabanas galore."

"Your place, after work," he says, then breaks into a jog, pulling away from me.

I gaze after him, and I see Josh standing by the gate fifty yards ahead. He's holding his clipboard and smiling at me in the same way as last night. Immediately I add a fake limp to my step, but after ten paces, I remember I had chosen my right ankle to be injured the night before. My lies are getting hard to keep up with. Yet another reason to get out of here.

I turn my eyes to the jungle stretching high above Josh's head. Dr. Caldwell says nothing worthwhile exists out there, that we're the last real humans on Earth, but I've seen the maps. There's got to be something. And just like Mallory, I plan on finding it.



CHAPTER 4

SETH

Mud and feces fly from the pit as I assemble the trestle a few feet from the edge. The Ande knows someone's up here, but he doesn't know where I am. I check the trestle's legs, then secure the pulley to the crossbeam.

Just as I'm about to head back upcanyon toward the shallow cave that holds the rest of my supplies, he goes eerily quiet. Bringing one hand to my mouth, I whistle sharply with my fingers. He immediately resumes his tantrum, slapping the clay walls. Taunting them is cruel, but the more I can tire him out, the less dangerous this process is for me.

By the time I return with the heavy coil of rope, the Ande's bellows have transformed into a pathetic whine. Still not looking over the side, I go to the creek and pull a wooden peg, then slide open a dam. Water begins flowing down a narrow channel lined with stones.

This is the worst part. As the water gushes into the pit, the Ande shrieks like a red fox—a sound that's strangely raw and vulnerable yet utterly inhuman.

As the pit slowly fills, I start humming the tune to "Sweet Caroline," a song by some guy named Neil Diamond—one of the Professor's favorites, what he calls an "oldie." When I stop singing a short while later, the creature has once again gone quiet. I head back to the dam and stop it up. Then I take my first look down into the pit.

The alpha is submerged up to his neck. His muscular arms are making small, panicked circles to either side, dreadlocks drifting in the muddy water like snakes. He turns his head upward, revealing a gaping mouth buried beneath a filthy beard.

I've always wondered what goes through their damaged brains when facing death. Is he cursing some simplistic version of a higher power, some shining sky god who forsook him by casting him into this hole? Or are his thoughts more human than I imagine—looking back on all the miles covered, all the children fathered, and deciding that his life was one well lived?

I snatch up the rope and stretch out the noose at one end until it's roughly four times the size of the alpha's head. Back when I first started catching Andes, flooding the pit hadn't been a part of the process. But, every time I tried to lasso their necks, they'd immediately grab the rope. After nearly being pulled in a few times, I started testing distractions. Turns out, forcing them to keep their heads above water is a damn good one.

I loop the rope around the trestle and pulley, then lower the noose until it's floating in the water around his head. I give the rope a couple of flicks to tighten it around his neck. Taking a deep breath, I grip the winch with both hands and start cranking.

Soon the rope is taut, digging into his carotid arteries and severing the flow of blood to his brain, which makes the Ande start thrashing like a fish on a hook. I begin hauling him up. After about eight seconds, the thrashing stops. A timer starts counting down in my head. The Professor wants his subjects not only alive but also without further brain damage, so I need to pull him up and get the rope off his neck within a minute or less.

I crank smoothly. Any sudden movement could snap his neck. His body rises from the pit, head lolling to one side as grime drips from his battered feet. Rocking the wooden arm, I swing him away from the pit and release the winch. His limp body falls onto the hardpan.

As I stalk forward to remove the noose, another mental timer starts ticking down. Blood is now returning to his brain. I have roughly thirty seconds until he wakes up. If I don't have him secured in that time, there's going to be a fight, and given his size, it's one I'd be lucky to survive, even with my knife. But I've done this more than a hundred times; my plastic sled is already positioned just a few feet away. I kneel beside him, wedge my arms under his massive back, and heave, rolling him onto his stomach. Just one more roll will put him firmly on the sled.

When I dig my arms beneath him a second time, his legs begin to twitch. Then his arms. My jaw tightens; I've never seen one wake up so fast. I shove with all my strength, but as he flops onto the sled, his whole body starts convulsing. The

Professor told me hypoxia could trigger seizures, but this is the first time I've seen it happen. I desperately fumble with the straps, but his convulsions prevent me from latching the buckles.

Ignoring my mounting fear, I throw my body on top of his. I struggle to maintain balance as I reach both arms around him and grab the ends of the first set of straps. I pull them together and lock the buckle just above his Adam's apple, then cinch it tight, securing his head.

Scooting down his body, I start working the straps for his arms. Just as I latch them together, his convulsing stops and his eyes fly open. He unleashes a primal scream, his breath smelling of raw meat gone rancid. He tries to sit up. When his head won't move, he starts kicking his legs.

One of his knees catches me in the sternum, throwing me off him and knocking my wind out. As I struggle to recover, he keeps thrashing. The strap around his arms jiggles, threatening to come loose. I frantically search for something I can use to regain control of the situation. The only thing within reach is the rope.

Snatching it up, I run behind the sled and loop it around his neck. I drop to the dirt, brace my feet against the top of the sled, and pull. After another handful of seconds—I don't count them this time—the alpha's legs give out, and his head droops to the side once again. But I can't rest. With nervous hands, I start feverishly locking the straps. Once they're all secure, I remove the rope and collapse onto my back. He soon wakes up, understandably angry.

As my breath returns, I crawl into the shade of the canyon wall. The Ande bellows in fury, straining at the nylon straps. The water partially cleaned off the grime, revealing a road map of scars, most of them raised, indicating constant battles with infection. Although his arms and chest aren't overly developed, his legs ripple with muscles, and the calloused pads of his feet must be a quarter inch thick. Has this desert always been his home, or did he migrate here with his pack from some distant part of North America? His mangled nose indicates that he's seen his fair share of fights. With what or whom, I can only imagine. As much as I like to consider myself a survivalist, I'm a novice compared to the Andes. Even

without fire or tools, these creatures somehow find ways to endure the harshest environments on Earth.

“Sorry, pal,” I say aloud, then repeat another old mantra of the Professor’s. “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

My best guess is that he’s roughly fifty years old ... one of the oldest Andes I’ve captured. I picture him sitting in a hospital, a nurse sliding a needle into his shoulder—the injection site for the “cure” that claimed humanity. Governments around the world started administering the shot at least a decade before I was born, and the changes began a couple of years after that, so this guy would have been in his late teens or early twenties when his higher learning centers went dark.

I wonder what he was like back then. Was he like me, ready to pick a direction and start running? Or did he have a perfect life—a job that challenged his mind, a family that cherished him, and a community that helped him through rough times? I’ve found a degree of contentment out here in the desert—collecting wood, catching fish, and tending to our garden all give me some sense of accomplishment, but whenever I’m idle, I feel the absence of something more. Key puzzle pieces are missing, leaving the bigger picture of my life incomplete. Perhaps this Ande had that same darkness hovering over him in his youth. If he did, it’s long gone now. He lives perpetually in the moment, and maybe, in his transformation from human to a creature of the wild, he’s found a sense of peace I never will.

Feeling my thoughts start to slide, I quickly prepare the site for departure. After breaking down and storing the trestle, I rebuild the false floor over the pit, then stand back to examine the branches and sand, now shimmering with rainbow patterns as the sun sets beyond the prism in the center. Any human would immediately recognize the scattered branches as something to avoid, but I’m not in the business of capturing humans.

I secure my shoulder harness to the sled and begin the slog home. With the last of the rocks on the trail dug up and discarded years ago, the runners soon fall into grooves etched by more than a hundred such trips. My body moves on autopilot

while my thoughts reach back to the creature on my sled. Once upon a time, he sat at tables to eat his meals and brushed his teeth before bed and did a thousand other “normal” things. Now he’s being dragged across the desert, soon to be placed on a metal slab where his long journey will come to an end.

As my boots dig into the hardpan and my legs strain toward the alpha’s final destination, a simple question takes shape in my mind: *What gives us the right?*



CHAPTER 5

SARAH

The jungle is all moisture, darkness, and heat—a labyrinth of twisting green tunnels with no landmarks or guideposts by which to navigate. It's why most Foragers rarely venture into the tangled maze, instead sticking to well-worn paths close to home, hunting for any flora not already picked clean. I walked those same paths in my early days and fought over those same plants. Not anymore.

A hundred yards out from the gate, where two paths intersect, I duck into the underbrush. A short distance in, I stop and scan the surrounding vegetation for signs I'm being followed. Any of them—except maybe James—would love to cash in on my secret territory.

When I'm certain I'm not being tracked, I head into the open jungle. Within minutes, I reach the creek and start following it north. As I skirt the edge of its foul-smelling bank, the humidity molds my shirt to my skin. Mosquitos find the holes in the fabric, gravitating toward the space between my shoulder blades, as if they know exactly where my arms' reach ends.

For more than a mile, I push through the spiderwebs that stretch from one sagging branch to the next. When I reach the familiar wall of thornbushes blocking my path, my fingers start to itch, as they always do, for the machete strapped to my pack. Using its razor edge, I could carve a path in under an hour that would serve me for years to come. But I resist. Anyone could stumble onto a path like that.

I crawl under the thorns, then scurry down into another creek on the other side. Tepid water sloshes over my boots as I wade upstream for another quarter mile. After climbing back up the embankment, I head west, shoes squishing through the spongy undergrowth. The damp reek of decay fills my lungs, and I quicken my pace, knowing this sad part of the jungle will last only a little while longer. When I push through the last barricade of ferns into the clearing, the sight steals my breath, even though I've seen it a hundred times before.

In the center towers the mighty kapok tree, and from the millions of buds dangling from her limbs, cottony bits of fluff drift downward. Through the tropical snowfall, gray moths the size of dinner plates flutter, their large wings stirring the heavy air.

Not even James has seen this place. As far as I know, I'm the only Forager ever to have set eyes on it. This part of the jungle nurtures more medicinal plants than any other patch I've found. Most days, it lets me collect everything on my list in just a few hours, something few Foragers achieve on their best outings.

The tree herself is silent today, but sometimes, when a breeze whistles through her branches, she sings to me. When I recline against her massive, twisting roots, which flow down from the thick trunk like lava down a mountainside, that peaceful lullaby seldom fails to drop me into a deep sleep. It's the only time I ever dream of my mother, who my father told me loved adventure as much as I do. In the early years of New Haven, she'd taken weeklong trips out into the jungle and even up into the highlands, searching the cloud forests for the perfect plot of land where we could start our own life, just the three of us. Those plans ended the day I was born. I have a few remaining photographs, but in the dreams she's almost real. Occasionally, right after I wake, I can still picture her. Healthy and vibrant and alive, exploring distant lands with a machete in one hand and a compass in the other. These visions are one of the reasons this tree and the surrounding jungle are so magical to me. I'm not religious, but I know if this place was carved up by fellow Foragers' machetes or stamped under the boots of Caldwell's security teams, something strange and powerful would be lost.

The second I'm beneath the tree's reaching branches, I look upward, searching the tangle of green for dazzling pops of color. The family of scarlet macaws huddles together near the kapok's crown, like a cluster of rubies stashed just out of reach. I know it's silly, but because I have cuddled my mother's stuffed macaw all my life, the tropical birds hold a special place in my heart. And when I discovered a family of them living in this magical tree, it was as if my mother was watching over me. I've spoken long and loud to those birds, which can replicate human

speech. I've even recited passages from a book of poetry. The only words they've ever said back, however, are, "Please come home." Crying it over and over, back and forth between them, like disappointed parents calling out to a long-lost child.

The macaws are silent now, so I set my pack inside a root the size and shape of a large canoe, which will serve as a comfortable bed later in the day, then head out into the surrounding jungle. With the humidity trapped by the brush, it's like moving through a stifling fog, yet I can breathe better here than on the breezy streets of New Haven. I know I should see my home for what it is—the only place left with food, shelter, and community. There are days when it seems bearable, but every time I start to think I might be able to build a future here, Caldwell's utopian ideals squeeze me like a boa constrictor. I get it—he wants to avoid humanity's past mistakes. I even partially understand why he banned religion and any political ideologies that don't align with his. But if his goal really is to build a utopia, it should start with equality, not control.

Back when he was alive, my dad personified this social divide. Randall Peoples was a do-it-all workman, and as such, he and my mother were fortunate to have been selected to accompany the hundred and twenty hand-picked scientists Caldwell brought here from his stateside laboratory as the world fell. Yet they were never invited to the evening soirees Caldwell threw for his precious doctors, even though my father spent his days fixing their equipment and running supplies. Up until Dad's death, I saw the white coats treat him with contempt, as if he should simply appreciate the privilege of working alongside such great minds.

Nothing's changed since then. Most of us laborers marry on our own, always within our own caste, and when we are matched by Caldwell, it's never with the elites who live on Faraday, ensuring the purity of their gene pool. We're a necessary burden, and when food or supplies are running short, we're the first to go without. Well, I'm fine taking my "inferior" genes elsewhere.

Dripping sweat—and all worked up by my thoughts—I spot the last plant on my list a few hundred yards to the north of the kapok tree. Using my machete, I gather vines from the bush, which has thick, velvety leaves. A member of the

moonseed family, it has bark that, when boiled, releases powerful toxic alkaloids known as “curare.” Thanks to its paralytic properties, it was traditionally used by hunter-gatherer tribes in blow guns to catch game—you know, back before everything went to hell—but now, Caldwell and his team need it for its medicinal applications. With that collected, I’m free to search for James’s soursop, and it’s not even noon.

When I get to the guanabana tree, however, a troop of white-faced spider monkeys are bouncing around the branches, which have been picked clean of their spiny fruit. I hate to disappoint James. Plus, I was looking forward to biting into that sweet, custardy flesh myself. I’ve never ventured farther than a few hundred yards from the kapok tree, but no other guanabanas exist within that circumference. I’ll need to head into uncharted territory without the stream or other landmarks. Luckily, the days of rain have softened the ground enough that I should be able to follow my tracks back.

I keep heading north, glancing over my shoulder every so often to ensure my footprints are visible. I’m still not seeing a guanabana tree. When I duck through a narrow archway formed by a massive strangler fig, its gangly roots hanging like a Dragger’s matted locks, I hesitate, eyes fixed on a different set of prints stamped in the mud. These are shaped like paws, and too large to be anything but a jaguar’s.

Jaguars are ghosts of the jungle. Even if you spend all day in the brush like I do, they say spotting one is a once-in-a-lifetime event. It’s no wonder. With two hundred pounds of muscle guiding razor-sharp claws and skull-piercing teeth, it could be the last thing you ever see. In New Haven’s thirty-plus-year history, no one has ever been attacked by a jaguar, but I’m under no illusions of how I’d fare in a fight with one. Still, the tracks don’t look particularly fresh. If I don’t find a guanabana tree in the next half mile, I’ll turn back.

That half mile turns into a mile and a half. My stubbornness continues driving me forward. I push through the brush and step out into another clearing, coming to an abrupt halt when my feet touch something abnormally soft. I glance down and find a bed of massive heart-shaped anthurium leaves, carefully arranged in a

perfect rectangle roughly two feet wide and six feet long. I've seen leafcutter ants saw these types of leaves down before, but ants don't organize them into beds.

There isn't just one bed, but seven. All surrounding a pile of ash and charred sticks in the center. Too haphazard to have been made by human hands, yet Draggers can't make fire. But there's something else: on the far side of the clearing, beyond the firepit, is a pile of bones picked clean. And buried in their midst, staring out at me with hollow eyes, is the charred skull of a jaguar.

I back up slowly, eyes darting around the clearing. The longer I look, the more I see. The leaves look fresh, picked in the last couple of days. A sharpened stick leans against a tree. Piles of dung are scattered everywhere. People didn't build this camp. Caldwell's colorful fearmongering springs into my thoughts—bloodthirsty, savage, murderous. Could it really be Draggers? Even as doubt fills me, my eyes keep finding the telltale signs. And they keep coming back to the blackened skull.

A stick breaks somewhere nearby, and I spin. No one is there. Just normal jungle noises, yet my instincts tell me to run. One thought keeps me pinned to this spot. All Foragers are required to report Dragger sightings, and all Foragers know where that leads—to Caldwell's small but well-armed security teams combing the jungle. I'd have to tell him where the camp was, and that would lead them straight past the kapok.

Although my decision only takes seconds, destroying the camp takes fifteen minutes at least. I can't leave it for some other Forager to find, however slim the chances might be. First, I scatter the sticks, bury the ash, and cover the dung in an inch of fresh soil. Then I pick up the leaves in heaping handfuls and toss them into the surrounding brush. Finally, I reach the pile of bones, staring down into those cavernous eyes, wondering how the hell a handful of Draggers managed to kill the jungle's deadliest predator. Not wanting to hang around and find out, I pick up the skull and hurl it into the trees, followed by the rest of the remains.

With all the evidence gone, I retrace my steps to the kapok.

I get home by three and find James sitting on my stoop. He has two scratches on his cheek, suggesting his journey into the jungle was almost as eventful as mine. The story of my discovery wants to burst through my lips, but I know how James feels about Draggers. My tale of abandoned campsites and jaguar skulls would send him scrambling straight to our superiors.

“She wasn’t having it?” I ask.

“What?”

“The lady Dragger that scratched you for getting handsy.”

“Hilarious,” he says, standing up. “The only thing I got handsy with was a thornbush.”

“A thorny bush? Draggers don’t shave down there. You should know that.”

“Ah. Ah ha. Laughing on the inside. By the way, where’s my soursop?” He sees the look on my face. “You didn’t get it, did you?”

“Got jumped by a pack of spider monkeys. Took them right off me.”

“Spider monkeys. Gotcha.”

“Come on in,” I say. “We have planning to do.”

James follows me inside. As I head toward the bathroom, he jumps onto my bed and grabs an ancient magazine off my nightstand: an issue of *People* with brittle pages held together by bent staples.

“So what’s the plan?” he shouts through the bathroom door. “Stealing another pair of shoes for Mr. Thompson’s kid?”

“Keep it down,” I say as I lower my pants and take a seat. “And I told you, we only borrowed those shoes. Once the kid outgrows them, we’ll take them back. But no, I’ve got a special request tonight. Pays good too.”

“How good?”

“For your twenty percent, five hundred colones.”

The magazine rustles and then thumps to the floor, followed by silence. James remains quiet as I empty my bladder and splash water on my face. When I return to the main room, he’s sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at me.

“Sarah, it’s one thing stealing shoes from a guy who has ten pairs too many and giving them to a kid who has none. That’s Robin Hood shit right there. But if someone is willing to pay ...” I can see him doing the math in his head. “Twenty-five hundred colones—”

“Listen, if you’re not up for this, just forget it. I can do it myself.”

That’s not exactly true. I want the cash, and I need James to help me get it.

“Before I commit,” he says, “tell me what we have to do.”

“Simple,” I say, sitting down beside him on the bed. The closer I am, the less likely he is to decline. “We need to break into Caldwell’s private lab.”

“Oh, hell no!” He scoots away from me. “You’re nuts. If we got caught, we’d be royally screwed. Caldwell could give us the boot.”

Wouldn’t that be nice.

“Don’t be so dramatic. You know me, I’ve got it all planned out. There are three skylights on the roof. Already loosened one up. We’ll be in and out in minutes with no one the wiser.”

“Then why do you need me?”

“Because the roof’s flat and there’s nothing to tie the rope to. You help lift the skylight and hold the rope. I do everything else. Technically, you won’t even be breaking and entering.”

“And what will you be stealing?”

“You really want to know?”

He taps the vagus nerve implant on the side of his neck like a microphone. “Is this thing on? Yeah, I really want to know. In fact, it’s a requirement.”

I sigh. “Fine ... L-tryptophan and niacin.”

His face goes blank for a moment, and I can almost see the gears turning. Then it clicks.

“Wait, someone wants to make NAD? Those are the precursor materials, right?”

“Yep.”

“Why would someone want to make something Dr. Caldwell provides for free?”

“Who knows? Maybe their pet paca caught the Fatigue, or—”

“Or maybe they want to leave.” His eyes turn suspicious. “Who exactly is this for?”

“I don’t know that either. Someone slipped a note under my door with a thousand colones’ deposit. I’m supposed to leave it in the bushes outside my apartment once I’ve got it. And tonight’s the deadline.”

“This is nuts,” he says, grabbing his hair with both hands. “It doesn’t bother you at all that you’re known as the person who steals shit? And if word of that has reached the wrong ears, it could be a trap. I mean, that’s how I would do it. I wouldn’t have you steal a pair of shoes or a couple extra bottles of milk. I’d set you up for something big. Like this.”

“I already thought of that.”

Truth is, I’ve been playing it over and over in my mind for days. It’s why I watched the lab from a distance for three nights before trying the roof.

“Sure you did,” James grumbles.

“Like I said, you don’t have to come with me.”

With that, I pick the magazine up off the floor and start flipping through the pages. James stays silent for another minute or two. I can feel his eyes burrowing into me.

“Listen,” he says. “You’re my best friend, which is why I feel the need to say this. These past couple of years, you’ve been ... I don’t know. It feels like you’re trying to distance yourself on purpose, even from me. I know you don’t like Caldwell’s clock on marriage, but this place ... it’s not so bad. It can be whatever you make it. I’m just afraid if you keep heading down this path, you might not like where you end up.”

Nice lecture. I keep my eyes glued to the magazine. He might be content playing board games until the end of time, but I’ll never be. Wherever I end up, it will be better than here.

“Are you in or out?” I ask.

He lowers his head in defeat, then mutters, “I’m in.”



CHAPTER 6

SETH

The sun squats on the horizon as I reach the top of the butte and pull myself up and over the ledge. I sit in the dirt for a minute or more, catching my breath, watching the waning daylight shine on every crack and chip in the place I've called home my whole life.

Shortly after Advitalon started destroying people's minds, the Professor purchased this land smack-dab in the middle of the southern Utah desert. I've asked him why here instead of near a city where I could at least wander the remains of the old world, but all he ever says is, "Does a body good."

The edges of the butte encompass his entire universe—our two-bedroom home, a greenhouse, the laboratory, and the warehouse, which he packed with what he thought was a lifetime of supplies. Factoring in his age and condition, he would have had more than he needed. Then I came along.

Only a few patches of white paint still cling to the exterior walls, and rust from the metal roof streaks the exposed cinderblock with grimy tears. Its dilapidation reminds me that my life here is finite. How many years until this butte is no longer habitable? Five ... maybe ten. Will the Professor let us move on when the roof caves in and the greenhouse soil has been bled of nutrients and overcome by rot? Or will he force us to wither in the heat, to make a slow exit like the electronic devices carried over from his former life?

I walk over to the crank, grip the handle, and begin to turn. My captive slowly ascends. When he reaches the top, I drag the sled from the platform. The alpha battled hard for the first hour of our journey. Now he's docile. His eyes are mostly closed, but I can tell he's watching me.

After pulling the sled under the overhang that juts out from the laboratory, I grab a canteen from my pack, unscrew the lid, and dribble some water onto his lips. He hesitantly opens his mouth, and I let him drink his fill. Later, I'll get him some food.

With the cold creeping in, I pull the sweatshirt from my pack and drape it over the alpha's bare chest. It's a poor substitute for the leaf shelters they burrow into at night, but soon enough his suffering will come to an end. I check his restraints one more time and then head into the house.

The Professor is still snoring on the sofa. I know he lies to me about the progression of his disease, but his body speaks the truth while he sleeps. It twitches as if electrodes were hidden beneath his clothing. Left eyebrow, right shoulder, left leg. Around it goes, one spasm after another. It's nothing new, but it's getting worse. I don't know how he can sleep. Then again, I haven't felt the exhaustion his sickness carries.

The battle raging inside him is no mystery to me. When I was old enough, he taught me all about the bacteria that led to the downfall of man. Not a new disease, but rather one that had existed for millennia. Various forms of the same bacteria thrived on different continents, and the diseases they caused had many names—cat-scratch fever, trench fever, carrion's disease. These maladies plagued humanity for centuries, but with transmission occurring primarily through biting insects, most never became household names. All that changed one summer thirty-some years ago.

Mutated Strain, Antibiotic Resistant, Aerosol Transmission—those were the headlines of the day. After it struck, the disease known as the Great Fatigue took less than a year to infect nearly everyone on Earth, including babies in mothers' wombs, claiming their lives before they could take their first breath. No drugs proved effective at fighting it—not until Advitalon. After a short human trial showed positive results, world governments quickly moved it into mass production and made treatment mandatory.

The Professor may have been the only one who realized the truth—that while Advitalon did rid the body of the new pathogen, it also caused an insidious side effect that went on to ravage the human mind. When the cost of that oversight came due twenty-four months later, the Professor escaped to this desert on a twofold mission—to find a true cure for the sickness that afflicted him, and to

reverse the devastating effects Advitalon had on the masses currently wandering the wilderness.

When I was young, his passion seemed to suppress his symptoms. He'd hold animated conversations about his experiments while sparing four or five hours a day to teach me English, science, and math—but that was with a steady supply of his supplements. Now, his illness, coupled with his dwindling stash and years of failures, has worn him down. The wrinkles burrowing into his forehead have become deep fissures. His once sinewy muscles are soft and pliable, and each day the dark rings under his eyes claim a bit more terrain. Just like the gadgets from his former life, he's not long for this world.

Rather than wake him, I toss out his fish and cook a few more. The smell doesn't rouse him. I eat one and then set the new plate beside him before retreating to my room.

Flopping down on my bed, I pull out the weathered United States road atlas from under my pillow. As a kid, I loved watching the old TV shows, movies, and documentaries from the Professor's DVD collection, hungrily absorbing anything about what life had been like before. But with all our electronic devices having been dismantled and put to other uses, the atlas has become my favorite escape. I carefully flip through the fragile pages, then resume my journey through the streets of San Diego, tracing the thin black and red lines with the tip of my finger. My imagination has walked the streets of every city in this atlas, from New York to Seattle and every Podunk town in between, but I always come back to the seaside city where the Professor once lived.

As I focus on a patch of green labeled Balboa Park, my mind creates towering hedges and sends me down a path cut through a chevron of flowers in bloom. Gradually, people emerge on intersecting paths to join me. A young girl races past on a red bike, excitedly ringing the bell on her handlebars. A man with spindly legs jogs toward me, headphones clamped over his ears. A group of college girls huddle together on a patch of grass, all of them breaking into giggles as a cute brunette in the middle smiles over her shoulder at me.

The more details I see, the more hopeful I become. Ever since my childhood, the Professor has insisted that we're the last two survivors, but how would he know? He's been stuck on this butte longer than I have. Maybe there are other people like him who didn't get the injection. Those people could have had children, just like my parents did—and some of those children could have been born immune to the Fatigue, just like me. Maybe they've spent the last thirty years rebuilding, and I could bring the Professor there. Show him that despite everything, people are living. Really living. They've found some sort of solace—something we could be a part of.

My eyelids start to sag, and my vision of San Diego grows hazy. I slide the atlas back under my pillow and close my eyes, hoping to find the garden of flowers in my dreams.

I jolt upright in bed, my shirt damp with sweat, blackness filling the window on the far wall. Just a nightmare. I dig a hand under my pillow to retrieve the atlas when it dawns on me that I forgot to feed our captive.

I head into the living room, where the Professor is still asleep on the couch, his new trout untouched. The temperature has dropped, so I grab a blanket and tuck him in. Then I snatch up his plate and head outside. Three more fish hang above the stove. I'll cook him something fresh in the morning.

With no cloud cover, the sky is an explosion of stars, and the brisk air cools my body instantly. I stand there looking up, watching the puffs of white formed by my breath. When I turn, I see the alpha strapped to the sled under the overhang, his breath creating the same clouds as mine.

I walk over and crouch down beside him. His wrists and ankles are bloody from struggling against the restraints, but now he's calm, his eyes open to the night sky.

"Can you understand me?" I ask.

No reaction. His chest keeps rising and falling at the same steady pace.

"Do you want food?"

I bring my hand to my mouth to mimic eating. Nothing. I pull off a piece of fish, hold it momentarily over his eyes so it can register, and then lower it toward his mouth. This time, he doesn't open. His face remains devoid of emotion, eyes locked on the stars.

I feel a strange compulsion to let him go.

My eyes find the door to the Professor's lab. I haven't been inside in years, so long it's become an unspoken rule. I know what he does to his subjects—or at least I did. When I was young, he never shut up about his work. But, a few years ago, when things began to change between us, his experiments changed too. When I pressed him, he told me I wouldn't understand. At first, I didn't much care. I'd hated the Andes ever since he told me how he'd found me.

Although he hadn't seen my parents die, he deduced their fate based upon what he'd found at their campsite, which he'd stumbled upon six miles from our butte. I'd gone there many times since insisting he show me ... but there isn't much left now, just the tattered remnants of a tent and two long mounds of stones.

My parents had refused Advitalon and fled with me into the desert, most likely to escape whatever madness befell the city they'd come from. A group of Andes had found us instead. When the Professor wandered into their campsite, my parents' bodies were mangled but intact. The band had probably killed them on instinct, not because they were hungry. Before my parents died, one of their final acts had been hiding me in the brush beneath a juniper tree. I used to daydream of them often, picturing their faces and what their lives had been like. The only connection I have to them is my father's belt, which the Professor removed before burying his body. After he gave it to me, I would stare at the brass buckle, etched with the form of the mythical titan Atlas, bent to one knee with the world on his shoulders. Perhaps I was trying to find some hidden clue as to who my father was.

I still remember the anger I felt each time he told me the story of their deaths. It grew and grew. I wanted revenge, and the Professor eventually gave me a chance to get it when he instructed me to take over catching Andes for his research. With each capture during my teenage years, I felt a shadow rising inside me—something

I doubt my parents would have wanted, no matter how gruesome their deaths had been. It was the overwhelming urge to make my captives suffer.

I acted on that desire only once, when a youngling fell into the pit. Instead of fishing him out, I left him down there for days. Even now my night terrors regularly show me the gruesome results—the Ande’s open mouth, frozen forever in a scream; the broken bone protruding through bloated skin; bloody fingernails ripped from their beds when he tried to climb out. It didn’t give me the satisfaction I thought it would. Instead, it made me feel hollow. I never wanted to hurt them again, but I didn’t feel much remorse when disposing of their bodies either.

Recently, something has changed. I no longer hate them, just as I don’t hate wasps or rattlesnakes. In a way, I envy the Andes. They always travel in packs, and they work together to survive. I have the Professor, sure, but for how long?

“If I let you go, would you remember this place?” I ask softly. “Would you hunt me when I come down off the butte?”

The alpha’s eyes rotate toward me, and my skin prickles. I see nothing aggressive there. Has he achieved something I never could and made peace with his fate?

Stepping over the sled, I check the door to the laboratory to see if it’s locked. The knob turns, but I don’t open it right away. I stand there in the cold dark, trying to decide if I really want to know. The recent corpses the Professor has turned over to me for cremation have been different in more ways than one, their plastic shrouds hiding sinister explorations.

I know something is off. That’s why I’m standing here in the middle of the night with my hand on the knob. But deep down I know there might be another reason. Am I hoping to find an excuse to abandon the man who raised me because the life he has provided isn’t the one I want?

I glance back at the alpha. He’s turned his gaze back up to the sky, his breath producing the same steam as mine. He has no answers to give.

I push open the heavy door.

Muffled shrieks greet me, what sound like the desperate wails of a tiny bobcat. My instincts tell me to turn around, close the door, and lock it behind me, but I stay where I am, frozen, all the hairs on my neck standing at attention. The noise is not one I've ever heard before, yet it's strangely familiar. It fills me with a swirling mix of emotions—dread and a deep, overwhelming sadness.

First, I see the metal door at the back of the lab glimmering in the moonlight coming in from behind me. But my ears guide my gaze to a table a few feet from the door, where two large wooden crates sit among a pile of soiled rags and empty cans of condensed milk.

With each step I take, the cries grow louder. A part of me already knows what's inside those boxes, even before I peer over the lip of the nearest one.

A naked infant wriggles in a nest of rags. Needles pierce her pudgy arms, connected to tubes that drip clear fluid from bags attached to a short metal pole. At the sight of me, her small hands reach out, fingers pumping open and closed. I want to tear the needles free and scoop her up, but my eyes slide to the second box, to the wooden lid propped against its side with rusty nails half hammered in. Another child, this one a boy. At least a year older than the girl. His body is rigid and curled in on itself, his skin a deathly shade of blue.

I take a frantic, instinctive step back. My elbow collides with the closed steel door, and it creaks open. A new sound joins that of the crying child—a woman weeping.



CHAPTER 7

SARAH

James and I leave my apartment shortly after nine.

We spent most of the evening playing dress-up. James picked the red sundress I've got on—I own only two dresses, and the other is a muumuu. We howled with laughter as he applied my black tea powder eyeliner and hemp lipstick, which he learned to do for his mother, whose hands were crippled by the Fatigue. In turn, I dressed him in brown slacks and a blue button-down shirt he retrieved from home, then trimmed his bangs.

This was all part of James's master plan. If it had been up to me, I'd have gone with the same workout attire I had on the night before—or black ninja outfits. James took a different approach. He figured if we got dolled up, we'd look like we were heading to Vibes for an evening out. We could even stop by there afterward to establish our alibi. That way, if someone discovered the missing precursors and started asking questions about who had been out and about, we wouldn't instantly show up in the crosshairs. I thought the makeup was overkill, and told James he'd turned me into a clown, but inside, I can admit he did a fine job. It's kind of nice to look good instead of grungy for a change.

We turn left on Main Street and begin the ten-minute walk to Caldwell's lab. The road is quiet for the first couple of minutes, but when we reach Center Square, it's like stepping into a New Haven parade in full swing. Children are everywhere. They make up most of the crowd loitering outside The Burger Shake, the fancier of our two restaurants (the other is literally named Eats, which is what you get when your entire culture was spawned by scientists). They also play hopscotch beside bright shop windows and buzz around the massive banyan tree as their parents lounge on blankets beneath the glowing lamps, newborns cradled to their chests.

All those rug rats are no accident. Caldwell's strict policy that every woman birth at least three children by the age of thirty is what's allowed us to grow into a thriving community in just over three decades. My fellow laborers are clearly

doing their part. The thing is, they're all operating under the assumption that Caldwell is right—that there's no one and nothing else left out there. How could he know for certain? Before I let some quack match me with a random procreation partner and turn my body into a baby factory, I'm going to find out the truth for myself.

"I'm such a better thief than you," James whispers, pulling my thoughts back to reality.

"Really. How's that?"

"During this whole walk, no one's given us a second look."

He's right. Dressed to the nines as we are, we fit right in.

As we exit Center Square and once again have Main Street to ourselves, James and I breathe sighs of relief—but the tension returns just a stone's throw from our destination, when we see the last person either of us wants to see.

Josh Vale saunters toward us, his dark silk shirt making his slick dirty-blond hair and pale features seem to float through the night. As he approaches, he puts on that same sleazy smirk—the one that says, *I know you want me, darling*. Immediately I feel the need to take another shower.

"Well, who do we have here?" he asks, stopping directly in front of us and blocking the sidewalk. "Where are you two lovebirds going?"

I peer to my right to see if James's expression is giving us away, but he's already retreated behind me. He must be freaking out.

"Just taking a break from Vibes," I say.

"Hope you didn't do any dancing on that bad ankle." He points at my feet.

Shit. Again, I'd forgotten to limp.

"Dancing isn't my thing. We're going back in a few so I can drink through the pain."

"You know, it's fine if you're just out for a little lovers' stroll," he says. "You don't need to lie about it."

This is when I'd normally toss out my fail-safe, *Eat shit and die*, but he's my supervisor, and we're trying not to create any memorable moments.

“James wishes,” I say, and immediately feel terrible. It just sort of spilled out. I attempt to course-correct by adding, “I told him about the turtles, and he wanted to have a look.”

Josh leans to one side to get a better view of James, who’s still standing behind me.

“Smooth move, Munchkin. You should have just come out and asked her for a pity fuck.”

Yep, that does it. My anger slips through.

“Listen, you—”

“Come on, you know she’s out of my league,” James says, wisely cutting me off.

This comment seems to catch Josh off guard. For perhaps the first time, he’s at a loss for words, and I use the moment to escape.

I step off the curb to get around him. “See you back at Vibes.”

This time, I remember to add a hobble to my stride. As James and I continue our southward stroll, I can feel Josh’s eyes on me, and I kick myself for that last bit. Now we really will have to go to Vibes, and sure as shit, Josh is going to do something stupid, like buy me a drink and spout more of his Brazil bullshit. I’ll think of a way to deal with him later. Right now, I need to concentrate on the mission. More specifically, on convincing James to go through with it.

As predicted, once we’re a safe distance away, James stops, glances over his shoulder, and opens his mouth. I know what he’s going to say before he says it.

“Too risky now.”

“No. I’m not letting that asshole ruin this,” I say. “We have nothing to worry about.”

“That excuse about turtles? Damn, Sarah, what were you thinking?”

“Come on, everyone loves turtles.”

“I’m serious. It seems suspicious. Why the hell was he coming up from the beach? He lives all the way up on Faraday.”

“I saw him the other night. He’s just working patrol around here for some extra cash. Probably just got off his shift.”

James's eyes go wide. Whoops. Wrong thing to say.

"What do you mean, he's working patrol?"

"Listen, he'll go to Vibes, get blackout drunk, and won't even remember seeing us." James still looks nervous. "Tell you what, to cover our asses, we'll stop by there later and show our faces. Drinks are on me."

"As great as that sounds, I really don't want to do this. Can't we at least wait a night or two for a better opportunity?"

"As I said, tonight's the deadline. We're almost at the lab. Just take a look around. If you notice anything sketchy, we'll abort."

After another few seconds, he reluctantly nods, and we start moving again.

"Are you sure we can't find this stuff somewhere else?" he asks.

I throw him a quick glare. Everyone in New Haven knows there are only two places where NAD is made—in the massive main laboratory, which sits a block away from Center Square, and down here, in Caldwell's grim, windowless bunker that backs up to the beach.

I tried to talk myself into hitting the main facility, but it posed too many risks. More than two hundred people work there, and while it does shut down after dark, more employees means more chances someone might come back in the night to check on an experiment. So we keep heading toward the rusted old watchtowers aimed out to the sea.

"Where's the dumpster?" James asks as we close in on the building.

"Follow me."

We head to the back, and when the dumpster comes into view, I feel a bit better. There's nothing to hear except the waves pushing and pulling at the cobblestones. I place my hands on top of the bin, ready to climb.

"Wait," James says, grabbing my arm.

"What?"

"We don't have a rope."

"It's already up there. I put it there when I loosened the bolts on the skylight last night."

“We’re really doing this?”

His voice is trembling, which makes me even more nervous for what we’re about to do. We can still leave. We can go to Vibes and have a few drinks. Or, better yet, go back to my apartment and bullshit until the wee hours of the morning, laughing about how we almost did something so incredibly stupid.

But isn’t that the problem? The comfortable routine? NAD, jungle, board games, sleep—it’s all on repeat. If robbing Caldwell lets me escape the monotony just one day sooner, it’ll be worth it.

“We don’t have to,” I say. “But think about how little excitement we get around here. This’ll give us something to talk about in our golden years. I can see it now, two old farts sitting on a porch, reminiscing about the time we broke into Caldwell’s lab.”

James looks at me in a way he never has before. “Don’t lie to me, Sarah.”

My heart sinks so hard I feel it in my toes.

“What are you talking about?”

“We won’t be sitting on some porch when we’re old, talking about the good old days, ’cause you won’t be here.”

His head tilts down, and it hits me that what he said is true. I just lied to him, violating our unspoken agreement. I was always so careful with how I phrased things about the future. This time, I slipped.

“When did you know?” I ask.

“When that jar under your bed started overflowing.”

“This may be the worst possible place to have this conversation. Can we talk about it later?”

“Sure, but before I go up on that roof, you have to promise me something.”

“What?”

“That when you leave, you’ll take me with you.”

To my surprise, he isn’t fidgeting or averting his gaze. He’s standing up straight, shoulders square. I know New Haven doesn’t get under his skin as it does mine, yet here he is, willing to give up that comfort and security just to be with me.

“I need to think about it,” I say, and it’s the truth. My visions of exploring faraway lands have never included someone else.

“Take all the time you’d like. But I’m not going up there until you give me an answer.”

“You have a life here,” I say, feeling the need to be blunt. “If you just put yourself out there, I’m sure girls would jump at the chance to be with you. And even if you can’t find that special someone, it’ll be just a few years until you get paired. If you leave with me, you’ll have your best friend, but that’s all. You won’t have the kids you always wanted, or the little garden you can’t shut up about. As selfish as I am, I can’t be the reason you lose all that.”

“Wow, Sarah,” he says, shaking his head. “You need to learn to let things go.”

“What?”

“Sure, I had a crush on you, but that was eons ago. I’m fine with just being friends. I know I always talk up New Haven, but until now, I thought this place was my only option. You know my mom ... like she always says, ‘If something’s out of your control, make the best of it.’ Maybe I’m starting to see your point about this place. I want to know what’s out there too.”

He sounds sincere, and looking at him now, my image of the future shifts. For as long as I can remember, I’ve dreamt about being out in the world on my own, hacking through the brush, exploring crumbled ruins, and surviving off the land. Sometimes I even fantasize about commandeering a boat and sailing around the globe, visiting lush islands to replenish my supplies and frolic in the surf. But standing here, about to commit a crime, I know my outlook would be several shades darker if James weren’t by my side. He has always offered me so much strength. If I really want to start a new life, shouldn’t I do so with the only person who always has my back?

“We’ll need more supplies,” I say, hoping I won’t regret my decision. “And you’ll have to start saving your paychecks, plus be willing to pull more stunts like this.”

His stern look begins to change into a cautious half-smile. “You mean it?”

“Sure, if you don’t hate me for not telling you sooner.”

“I promise I won’t let you down,” he says quickly. “No matter where we end —”

“OK, OK,” I say. “Save the hug-fest for later. Let’s get this done so we can get the hell out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

I climb onto the dumpster, then onto the roof. James follows me up, feet scrabbling at the brick as he pulls himself up with considerably less grace. Despite the quarter moon, the night is bright thanks to the reflective glass of the Pacific. As soon as he’s by my side, we both pause to stare up at the glass eye of the watchtower glaring down at us.

“I know no one’s watching,” James says, “but man, that thing gives me the willies.”

“You get one side, I’ll get the other,” I whisper, hurrying toward the skylight. “Whatever you do, don’t let go. If it falls into the building, we’re screwed.”

We each grab a side and lift. At first the thick glass panel doesn’t budge. Then there’s a sucking sound followed by a small pop, and it comes loose in my hands. So loose, in fact, that I almost do what I told James not to. Slowly, we shuffle to one side and place the panel on the gravel.

“I never would have let you live that down,” James whispers.

Don’t I know it.

He pulls a small flashlight from his back pocket and holds it out to me. It makes me wonder why I’d been so adamant about not inviting him along on my adventure. James is the type of guy who remembers things, like flashlights. I’m the kind of girl who forgets where I live after a few sips of Dragon’s Breath.

“I kind of need both hands,” I whisper. “And this dress doesn’t exactly have pockets.”

With a grimace, he sets the flashlight on the gravel. “For your sake, I’m really glad you forced me into this. I’ll drop it to you when you get down.”

I step up beside him, and we stand there, looking into the lab. Moonlight reaches down through the opening, illuminating the counter directly below,

which holds two microscopes and clusters of test tubes, burners, tincture bottles, and beakers.

James grabs one end of the rope.

I'm about to tell him that even though I only weigh a hundred and ten pounds, he can kiss the skin on his palms goodbye if he tries to hold the rope with his hands alone, but then he wraps it around his waist, loops it into a figure-eight knot, and gives it a hard tug. Before I can say a word, he plants his butt in the gravel, braces his feet against the skylight's six-inch rim, and stares at me as if I'm wasting his time.

"Aren't you the professional," I say.

I feed the free end of the rope down, then sit on the narrow lip, grab the rope firmly in both hands, and scoot off the edge. James supports my weight well enough, and after a few seconds of swinging from side to side, the swaying stops, and I scamper down.

My feet find the countertop. I take a moment to check my balance before giving the rope two sharp tugs. James peeks over the edge, clicks on the flashlight, and then drops it. I reach up, but the spinning light shines in my eyes. The metal cylinder bounces off my knuckles before shattering glass vials at my feet and rolling off the counter.

"Shit," James says above.

I hop down and start chasing the flashlight as it skids across the room, its spinning beam throwing wild shadows through the legs of the tables. It comes to a stop beneath a cabinet in a far corner. When I finally catch up, I kneel and reach under, fully extending my arm.

I freeze as a strange sound rises and then falls back into silence. I wait, perfectly still, listening until I hear it again, coming from somewhere inside the room—a deep, inhuman moan.



CHAPTER 8

SETH

For hours now I've been studying the Professor's face as he sleeps on the sofa. I can't tell if what I saw in his lab haunts his dreams, as I know it will mine. When he finally wakes around ten in the morning and sees me seated across from him, my eyelids heavy after a sleepless night, he eases up slowly, looking at me warily.

"Same day or next?" he grumbles, flattening his tuft of white hair with both hands.

"Next."

"Morning or afternoon?"

"Late morning."

"Good, good. Did you bring me a female?"

"The pit was empty."

He shakes his head. "That won't do. You'll need to go back out in a couple—"

"I went into your lab last night."

His eyes go from sleepy to alert almost instantly, but he remains silent. I keep my eyes locked on his, hoping to see some sign of emotion—some hint that the man who raised me, the man who'd woven every moral fiber I have, hasn't sunk so deep into madness that he can't come back.

He sighs. "My experiments ... I didn't want you to see those."

I picture the grotesque scene that confronted me in his laboratory. The babies alone would have stayed with me for the rest of my life, but their mother ... one leg shackled to the floor in the back room, wailing as her jagged brown teeth flashed beneath a tangled red mop. She had changed a lot in the three years since I'd found her down in the pit, but her distinctive hair was the same. I'd assumed she'd met a quick death at the Professor's hands—yet another necessary evil in his quest to save both our kinds. If only I'd known of his intentions, I would have released her back into the wild the moment I found her. Late last night, I let her and her baby go—the one that was still alive, at least.

"What I saw wasn't an experiment," I say. "What you're doing ... it's evil."

“Sometimes science requires—”

“Don’t give me that science crap,” I blurt out. “There’s a reason you hid this from me. Tell me you know what you’re doing is wrong.”

His gaze drifts down to the ragged rug beneath his feet. “It seems that way. I know.”

Seems? I close my eyes, hoping to find a way into his desensitized mind and look at the situation through his emotionless lens, but I can’t. His actions have no foundation in logic or the scientific method.

“Those are babies,” I say. “And you killed one.”

“I know how it looks. And I can’t imagine what you must be thinking about me right now. But what’s going on in there, Seth, will determine the future of the human race. If you can withhold judgment, I’ll try to explain.”

This is it. He’s finally going to shed some light on his strange behavior. The dozens of specimens, the new incisions I found on the bodies, his erratic moods. And, most importantly, the dead boy in his lab.

“Go ahead,” I say. “Enlighten me.”

“Back when Andes first started appearing, I watched them running mad on the news. They acted more like wild animals than men and women, and I became convinced Advitalon had damaged a section of their brains. Most likely the frontal lobe.”

“I know all that. If you’re just going to tell me the same old—”

He holds up a hand. “Seth, please. When I came to this desert and caught my first one, I figured that the damage would be evident the minute I opened its skull. But it wasn’t. I couldn’t find anything wrong. Not with that Ande, nor with the dozens that came after.” He stands and walks to the kitchen sink; the faucet squeaks as he pours himself a glass of water. “I would sit for hours, digging through their gray matter, wondering what I was missing.”

What you were missing was your humanity. “It’s called an obsession,” I say.

“You’re right.” He shuffles back to the couch. “But that obsession changed when you were fourteen or so. You’d just dug the pit, and you’d already collected

several specimens. You came home one afternoon asking why you never saw Andes alone. Why they were always part of a pack. Do you remember what I told you?”

“Are you really lecturing me right now? There’s a dead baby in your lab.”

“I know, Seth. Please.”

I let out a resigned sigh, hoping this is going somewhere. “You said forming packs was what saved them. That their brains were too simple to do all that’s required for survival on their own.”

“Precisely. In the early days, it was every Ande for itself. They recognized humans as a different species. A viable food source. Most of us were relatively easy to bring down. A grandmother leaving home to find water, or a child escaping his changing parents, all alone out on the streets. But as the last humans in the cities turned or died, their primary food source dried up. Many of them starved. Others migrated into the wild, where they banded together. With limited mental capabilities, they naturally fell into different roles—some learned to hunt, others learned to forage. As units, they were able to survive.”

He’s going off point, most likely to avoid looking at the harsh realities of his actions. I need to get him back to the chained Ande and the babies in boxes. “How is any of this relevant?”

“Because it finally got me thinking about the human brain. It operates in much the same way. I taught you about the seven parts of the brain—the frontal lobe, the cerebral cortex, and the rest—but I never taught you how those parts work together to let us do all the amazing things we do. Like create art, make tools, or build civilizations. Shut your eyes for a moment and picture microscopically thin wires running throughout the brain.”

He stares at me, waiting for me to comply as I always did when I was young. Reluctantly, I play along and do as he asks.

“Good. Now imagine electrical activity running along those wires. Moving information from one part to another at incredible speeds. This is called the neural network. When isolated, the various parts of the brain are like lone Andes

—incredibly limited. But when connected by this neural network, the parts of the brain constantly share information, and they function like a tribe. Sever the right connections, however, and higher functioning is lost.”

I picture a group of Andes wandering the desert, the alpha’s unwavering stare locked on the terrain in front of him while his pack trails behind, some tasked with finding food, some water, and others brush to build shelters. Then I think of the handful of solo Andes I’ve seen, emaciated, wandering past viable food sources, unable to single-handedly meet their basic needs and find their way at the same time. “So something damaged their networks.”

“That was my hypothesis, and it offered hope. The brain isn’t static; it can form new neural pathways. This gift is called neuroplasticity, and Andes possess it, just like you and me. So, instead of immediately dissecting the specimens you brought me, I began to observe them. I knew the effects of Advitalon passed from mother to child in utero, but I hoped to find signs that the younger ones, one or two generations removed from the drug, might be forming new neural connections. Relinking the various parts of the brain, so to speak, and making them more human. If a specimen showed even the faintest hint of higher functioning, I kept it around for months. But after years of study, it was starting to seem like another dead end ... until you brought me her.”

“Brought you who?” I ask. “The redhead you chained up?”

“I named her Gaia. At first, she behaved as simplemindedly as all the rest. But while studying her, I noticed something, a subtle difference from the other Andes. She was using her fingernails to pry at the base of the rope I’d used to restrain her.”

The Professor leans back, grinning as if he just delivered some profound revelation. He’s always been overly rational, discounting anything that couldn’t be proven with science, and now here he is grasping at straws, convincing himself of something that just isn’t there.

“I once saw an Ande walking the perimeter of the pit,” I say, “staring at the glass prism. I thought he’d figured out that it was a trap. Two minutes later, he stepped

right in.”

“You don’t understand. Every other Ande you brought me clawed at the shackle itself. They never thought to follow the rope to its source. I admit, it could have been just like that Ande at the pit. But something about it felt monumental. For all those years, if anything, they seemed to be regressing. But Gaia ... the more I studied her, the more I noticed.”

Sure, and a lunar eclipse means that the sun is eating the moon and dragons will soon emerge from their caves beneath the earth. “So you used that as an excuse to breed her,” I state.

“I know it sounds immoral, Seth, but there is scientific precedent. In the old world, we bred endangered species in captivity all the time. So I cleared the back room, put her with the next alpha you brought me, and roughly nine months later, she gave birth to a girl. There were signs early on—at three months, the baby could register my face when I stood over her crate. Then, at just over a year, it happened.”

He stares at me with a hint of a grin, waiting for me to guess, like we’re playing a game. The Ande had probably just been picking at the knot because she was bored or liked the way it looked. Worn down from years of failure, he’d seen something that wasn’t there—and using the breeding of animals as precedent for what he’s doing in his lab proves he has lost all touch with basic morality. Letting Gaia and her baby go was the right thing to do.

“It doesn’t matter what happened,” I say. “You’re just trying to justify—”

“She said her first word, Seth,” the Professor interrupts. “‘Baba.’ She was trying to say ‘bottle.’ Something she’d heard me say a hundred times.”

“You’re reaching,” I say, ignoring the shiver that runs through me. “Their grunts, they sometimes sound like words.”

“I said *first*, Seth. Three months later, her vocabulary had expanded to include ‘food’ and ‘hug’ and a dozen other distinct words.”

Alone in his lab for years on end, surrounded by dissected Andes and failed experiments, had he begun to hear voices? “That’s impossible.”

“It isn’t. Her mother, Gaia, must carry an incredibly rare gene that gave her daughter neuroplastic superiority. And with the daughter being more advanced than her mother, it suggested the gene would have even greater expression with each generation. It was a sign that nature was trying to right itself. Of course, every hypothesis must be tested, so I continued to breed Gaia. The two babies you saw are both hers.”

I exhale and wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. “I didn’t hear any talking Andes in your lab. Where’s the girl now? Let me see her. I want to hear her say something.”

“She’s no longer with us,” he says. “I knew she was the key, and I needed a controlled environment. So I deprived her of contact with her mother from the time she was born. But I’m no parent.” His eyes dart toward me and then away. “Over time, she grew despondent. I decided to return her to Gaia’s arms. What came next ... it just happened so fast.”

He pauses, looking down, as if a great sadness has just washed over him. Still, this seems a little too convenient.

“What happened?” I ask.

“She killed her,” he replies. “But first she bit off one of her hands. Then snapped her neck.”

That’s too specific. What he’s saying might be real. But I’ve never seen Andes murder each other like that. “I don’t understand.”

“I couldn’t either. Not at first. It made no sense, a mother trying to eat her baby. Then I put my emotions aside and observed the situation as a scientist. For months, peering out from the back room, Gaia had been watching, listening to her child mumble the words I was teaching her. It must have been otherworldly for her. The information wasn’t processing through her neocortex, as it would for you and me. It was going through her lizard brain—the part that asks, ‘Is this a threat?’ or ‘Can I eat this?’ She could tell the baby was vastly different from her, and fearing that difference, she decided her daughter was both a threat and a food source.”

I stand up, flicking my hands, trying to relieve my tension. I want say something, but my thoughts are going in a million different directions.

“It was a devastating loss,” he continues. “I feared it might be a recessive gene, but the father was already gone, dissected and burned. I bred her again, and I lived on edge for the next year. But when Gaia gave birth to a boy, he too was special. Not like his sister. Words were beyond him, even at sixteen months, but he would play with a pinwheel I made for him, spinning the paper propeller around and around. When he got older, I gave him pegs and a board. He struggled, but eventually he got some of them into the holes.”

I fall back into my seat. “Was he the one I saw out in the lab?” I picture his pale carcass, curled with rigor mortis. The Professor nods. “Did she kill him too?”

“I wasn’t going to give Gaia another chance. But last week—while I was changing him, I noticed that his breath had grown strangely sweet, almost fruity. I suspected the worst, and a blood test confirmed it. He had developed type 1 diabetes. Without any insulin up here on the butte ... well, he passed last Tuesday.”

I think back to the week before, remembering the Professor sulking around the house, his mood even more abysmal than usual. I want to admonish him for keeping this information from me, but his eyes are already filled with remorse.

“Before he passed, I brought him to his mother. Let her see him from a safe distance to test her reaction.” He takes a sip of water. “She showed no signs of aggression, but there were no motherly instincts. In fact, she shunned him, moving as far away from him as her restraints would allow. That reaction confirmed my greatest fear. I knew her genes were rare, maybe one in a thousand. With tens of millions of Andes still roaming the planet, that special gene was out there. But for Andes to bridge the gap between them and us, the children with that gene must reach breeding age. Based upon Gaia’s reactions, however, that’s not happening. The highly special ones, like the girl, are likely killed early on. Less special ones like the boy might reach adolescence before the signs appear. They might not be killed, but they are probably cast out from the tribe at the very least.

Forced to survive on their own, most undoubtedly suffer a similar fate. Which means it's just a matter of time until this special gene is removed from the Ande population altogether. And when that happens, humanity as we know it will truly end."

Before today, I had always assumed humanity had no future, and despite the Professor's elaborate story, it appears I was right. "So it's hopeless," I mutter.

The Professor smiles. "No, son. Not if you agree to help me with my work. At best, I have a handful of years left. You have your entire life ahead ... and it might take all of it. But out there in the lab, we have the key—Gaia and her daughter, who is already showing signs of being special. You can bring her to breeding age, as well as any other children Gaia might bear. Once they reach adulthood, you can release them into the wild as a pack. Picture it, Seth—an entire tribe of special ones. You could teach them how to make fire and use tools. It will give your life purpose. Imagine lying on your deathbed sixty or seventy years from now, surrounded by hundreds of hybrids who can talk, build advanced structures, even create art. You'll leave this world knowing that you played an integral role in rekindling the human race."

Through this entire conversation, I've been clinging to the belief that I did the right thing by letting the mother and her baby go. But my actions also had a greater purpose than saving two Andes—one of which I willingly captured and delivered in the first place. I thought releasing them might help save the Professor from his compulsions. Now the truth of what I've done settles around me like a toxic fog. I've ruined humanity's last chance for a future.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask, my voice cracking.

"The nature of my experiments—I was afraid you would ..." He senses something is wrong. "Seth? What is it? Look at me, son."

Slowly, I meet his eyes.

"Seth, tell me you didn't—"

"I didn't know what to do." My whole body has gone numb. "I couldn't just leave them."

“Not both of them ...”

“I saw the dead boy, the needles in the girl’s arms.”

“That was saline!” he nearly shouts, a hand flying to his forehead. “I was keeping her hydrated, trying to keep her alive. Tell me exactly what you did.”

“The mother, she ... she was already in restraints,” I stammer. “I choked her unconscious, then dragged her to the platform. Lowered her down with the baby at her side.”

The Professor leaps to his feet with greater speed than I thought possible. “This is important. Did you watch the mother wake up?”

I nod.

“And what did she do? Did she hurt the baby?”

“It was dark,” I say, struggling to remember exactly what I had seen. “She picked the baby up. It looked like she was hugging her.”

“Hugging or squeezing?”

“Hugging, I think. I don’t know.”

The Professor rushes to the door, then turns around and heads straight back to me.

“You have to hunt them,” he says, his eyes wild. “We need one of them alive. If the baby is still with her, take Gaia down with your bow. If she killed it, you’ll have to wrestle her to the ground. Do whatever you must to restrain her. If the baby’s gone, under no circumstances do you kill Gaia—even if she has her teeth buried in your neck. Those two Andes are our last hope. You could bring me a thousand more and never find the right combination of genes again. Do you understand me, Seth?”

I find it difficult to stand up, but I manage it, grabbing my pack and bow with weak fingers. What the Professor told me, how he’s talking to me now—

“I’ll find her,” I say. “I’ll make this right.”

“Go! And don’t you dare come back empty-handed.”



CHAPTER 9

SARAH

I remain motionless on my hands and knees, wondering what possessed me to break into Caldwell's lab. As the moaning gets louder, I picture a guard on a foldout couch, roused from sleep by the breaking glass and spinning light. I can see the sequence of events play out—the overhead fluorescents pop on, I rush for the rope, but strong hands grab me.

Then, as quickly as it started, the sound stops. I snatch up the flashlight and get to my feet, sending my beam around the room, looking for that couch and its sleepy-eyed guard. But there's no one. The lab's empty except for me, the faint shadows cast by the moonlight above, and the rows of research equipment.

In one corner sits a massive machine that looks like a coiled python with a table protruding from the hole in the center. It's obviously designed to fit a person inside, but for what purpose, I have no clue. Next to the machine sits a desk with a computer. Behind that are whiteboards scribbled with endless equations, which must be where Caldwell does his thing. When my light hits the north wall, it illuminates a glass cabinet containing clear bins filled with various powders and liquids. Bingo.

Before I'm halfway across the room, the mysterious moaning begins again. My instincts tell me to fly up the rope and hurry my skinny ass back to my apartment. I flick the flashlight around to every corner, and one thing becomes clear—I really am alone. Unless, of course, someone is hiding under a table, waiting to jump out and—

"What's going on down there?" James shouts.

"Keep your voice down," I yelp back. "Do you hear that?"

"The sound of you not finishing the job? Why yes, I do."

"Shut up."

"You shut up and get what we need."

I continue toward the glass cabinet. With each step, the moaning grows louder. I tell myself it's probably one of the dozens of weird machines in here, even

though I know damn well machines don't make sounds like that.

"Nothing to be afraid of," I say, but I can tell by the beam of light that my hands are trembling.

As I reach the glass cabinet, the sound builds into a piercing wail that seems to be coming from the floor a few feet to my left. I tell myself to focus on the bins, find the L-tryptophan and niacin, but the wailing becomes overwhelming. Slowly, I turn the flashlight toward the floor.

At first it just looks like a square piece of metal lying on the ground. But decorative floor squares don't have handles or hinges. I take a shaky breath, then cross the distance to the hatch in two quick steps, get down onto all fours, and press my ear to the steel.

Oh ... it's not one wail, but a dozen. All blending together to create that horrific, unfamiliar sound. Now that I can isolate one from the next, the tension slides out of my shoulders and into my stomach, morphing into a profound sadness. I've heard that howling before, the first time at the age of six.

It was a random Wednesday when Dr. Caldwell brought a Dragger into my first-grade science class like his own demented version of show-and-tell. He always displayed an interest in our education, making sure we remembered the world as it was before and avoided its mistakes, but when three of his men wheeled in that cage on a cart, I knew this would be a different kind of lesson. Even back then, his goal was obvious. He wanted to prevent us from being what we were—rambunctious children who might venture beyond the border fence out of curiosity or on a dare.

While my classmates shrieked, all I felt was pity. If they'd just cleaned the poor thing up, bandaged its open wounds, and covered its naked body with clothes, the Dragger could have walked among us without anyone noticing. Caldwell wanted to build fear of the outside world. It had the opposite effect on me. If creatures like that represented the worst dangers lurking beyond the fence, maybe I had more to fear staying inside it, living alongside the men who'd put that terrified animal in chains.

I never learned where Caldwell kept that Dragger, but I think I just found out—in what seems to be a prison beneath his lab. And not just one Dragger, but many. I can hear their anguish, and for a moment, I picture myself going down there and releasing them back into the jungle. I shake my head and try to concentrate on the job at hand. It's not my place to decide their fate. When it comes to finding a cure, Caldwell probably does know best.

"Help me," a weak voice cries out from below.

I scoot backward from the hatch, bumping into the cabinet and making beakers rattle. I shine the light around the room again, but no one is here.

"Help me."

Two distinct words beneath the swell of sorrow. I tell myself I'm imagining it, that the sounds from one Dragger had blended with the sounds from another, and they somehow formed one of the most powerful phrases in the English language. But the voice was small and frightened. It sounded like a little girl. Doing my best to ignore it, I stand and turn back to the cabinet, where I start checking labels.

"Help me!"

Something inside me snaps, triggering a thousand memories—growing up all alone despite living in a bustling community. People all around, yet no one talks to me or pays attention when I cry out for help.

I rush to the hatch, grip the handle, and heave. The hinges groan as it opens wide, and a hot, humid draft of air washes over me. It carries the stench of shit and fermented piss. I turn away, gag twice, and then clap a hand over my nose before shining my light down.

Rusted stairs spiral into a hallway, where cells with metal bars line both sides. I squat and squint, hoping to see farther down the hallway without needing to enter. I can't see the end or what lurks behind the cell doors, but nothing appears to be out in the open. If a little girl is down there, she didn't wander in by mistake.

Even in New Haven, people go missing, like long-haired Mallory out beyond the fence. Maybe they never ran off or got lost in the jungle after all. What if they're down here, caged beneath Caldwell's lab?

I descend the stairs slowly. Five steps down, I can tell that the hallway doesn't carry on for eternity as my imagination suggested. Instead, it dead-ends at a damp brick wall thirty feet away, with just six cells per side.

When I come down off the bottom step, I almost slip and fall. The cement floor is wet, but the rivulets flowing out of the cells are not water. With the shrieks and the smell and the slippery floors, those thirty feet now seem like a hellish gauntlet. One I'll have to pass through again on my way back.

"Is someone down here?" I call out, my quavering voice lost among the Draggers' howls. If she calls back, I don't hear it.

With my left hand still clasped over my mouth and nose—even though it doesn't stop the ammonia stench from pulling tears from my eyes—I shuffle down the center of the corridor and shine my light into the first cell on my left. It takes just a fraction of a second to realize it's not a little girl, but I look longer than I should.

It's a pregnant Dragger. I doubt she will successfully bear a child in her current state. Most of her hair is gone, either fallen or pulled out. The strands that remain are coated in what looks like mold. Huge blisters riddle her naked body. Her slack jaw exposes rotting gums, and the black raisins scattered across the floor appear to be her teeth.

I move quickly down the line, shining the light into each cell just long enough to check for a little girl. They're all pregnant Draggers, just like the first—until I reach the last cell on the left.

My heart breaks when I see her skeletal body. She's facing the back wall with her knees pressed to her chest and her arms wrapped tightly around her shins. Her stringy hair flows down a back so emaciated, I can see each vertebra and rib.

With her physical state so closely resembling the others, she must be a Dragger too. But unless I'm losing my mind, I heard a cry for help. I checked all the other cells. She's the only child here. To know for sure, I need to see her face.

"I'm not here to hurt you," I say softly through the bars. "Can you do something for me? I need you to turn around and look at me."

Her body twitches at the sound of my voice, like a dog that only associates humans with beatings, but she doesn't turn around.

"Honey, if you can understand me, I really need you to—"

"Help me?" her small voice says.

The inflection is odd, almost like a question. My heart starts racing. Something's not right. But Draggers can't talk, everyone knows that.

I search the bars with the light. A padlock secures the latch in place. I redirect the beam back down the hallway, looking for anything I can use to smash it. Nothing.

"I'm going to leave for just a minute, OK? Just be strong for a little while longer. Can you do that for me?"

"Help me."

"I will, don't worry. I'll be right back."

I rush back down the hallway, wiping tears from my eyes as I slide on the urine-slicked cement, barely maintaining my balance. When I reach the stairs, I bound up them and launch myself into the lab. My eyes dance around the room, looking for anything I can use to break the lock. Finally, I spot an oxygen tank leaning against a counter near where my rope hangs down. As I hurry toward it, James's face appears up above.

"Sarah?" he shouts. His face is tense, verging on panicked. "What the hell is going on down there? Where'd you go?"

"No time to explain," I choke out. "Whatever you do, don't come down. I'm going to need your help."

"What happened?"

"Just listen to me and stay where you are!"

I grab the oxygen tank off the floor and start running toward the stairs, but the attached tube yanks me back toward the counter. As I struggle to pull it free, I can hear James above me, frantically whispering to himself. He needs to get his shit together—we both do. We can use the rope to pull the girl up, but after that, we'll

need some sort of plan. One that will carry us as far away as possible from our so-called leader, who will undoubtedly come looking for the child.

The tube snaps, and I sprint across the lab, hurry down the stairs, and cautiously make my way back to the girl's cell. I prop the light against the bars so the beam shoots upward.

"This is going to be loud," I whisper. "Don't be afraid."

Gripping the canister by the neck, I raise it over my head and bring the bottom edge down on the lock. The shockwave buzzes up my arms and rattles my teeth, but the lock doesn't break. I hit it again, and again. On my fourth attempt, I scream as I bring the tank down. Metal flashes in the beam of light as a piece of the lock flies off into the darkness. When I look down, only the U-shaped shank remains, dangling from the latch.

I toss the canister away and remove what's left of the lock. Grabbing my light, I slide the latch and swing open the door. I want to rush in and cradle her in my arms, but she's still facing the rear wall, trembling, so I creep inside and kneel beside her, ignoring the watery excrement soaking into my dress.

"I'm going to touch you now."

I place a hand on her shoulder and feel nothing but bone.

"Help me."

"Yes, I will. I'm going to turn you around. Then I'm going to pick you up and carry you out of this place."

I pull on her right shoulder, and she doesn't resist. She releases her knees and allows me to guide her small body around. I have the light angled down so as not to blind her, but even with her face cloaked in shadow, I can tell something is wrong. I slowly lift the light. What I see doesn't make sense. Those vacant, droopy eyes ... that slack jaw. But how? She spoke. She said—

"Help me!"

This time, the words come in a snarl as she leaps to her feet. I jerk my hand away and make a desperate attempt to stand, but her small body barrels into my chest, knocking me onto my back. She lands on top of me. Her tiny fists start

pummeling my face. Instinctively, I let the flashlight fall and put my arms between us. Clutching her shoulders, I hold her at bay, still trying not to hurt her. Her filthy hands swipe at my face, but with my arms fully extended, her nails can't quite find purchase.

"Help me, help me, help me," she shrieks, saliva spraying into my eyes.

Her feet kick at my legs. I start to lose control of her wriggling body. In the dim light, I see her small mouth trying to bite me. If I lose my grip on her shoulders, those snapping jaws will go straight for my jugular.

I bend both elbows, momentarily bringing her closer to me. As her jagged nails drag down one side of my face, taking skin over my left eye, I thrust my arms up and back with all my might, tossing her thin body over my head. She bangs into the bars framing the cell door, but I can hear her ragged breathing. I know she'll be back on me before I can sit up and get to my feet. Instinct takes over, curling me into a fetal position as I wrap my arms over my head.

But the attack doesn't come, and I lose the sounds of her breathing among the wails and bellows from the other cells. Then I hear another squealed "help me," this time from far away, and the sound of small feet slapping up the stairs.

I uncurl myself, snatch the light off the floor with a shaking hand, and stagger after her. My own choppy breaths echo in my ears. Bright dots swim across my vision, and blood drips down my face. I pause at the bottom of the stairs as glass shatters in the lab above, followed by something heavy crashing to the floor.

I need to get to the rope and climb out of this madness, but I also need some sort of plan to get past the Dragger. I look back down the hallway and see the oxygen tank lying on its side. I turn back for it, planning to use it as a weapon, but then I stop. A blow to the shoulder or stomach won't be enough. She's been caged for God knows how long. I'd have to land a blow to her head and put her down for good. As desperate as I am to get the hell out of here, I can't take her life. I'll have to risk trying to sneak past her.

Slowly, I climb the stairs. Before sticking my head through the open hatch, I stop and listen. Glass is no longer shattering. I peer up over the rim. The Dragger

is sitting in a far corner, knees against her chest, crying. She'd thought she was free, only to find herself in a slightly larger cage.

I take a few quick steps up, thinking this is my chance. The Dragger's head snaps toward me.

"Help me!" she cries, leaping to her feet and charging.

I drop back down a few steps, spinning and grabbing the door's handle.

"Don't come down here!" I shout, hoping James can still hear me.

As I close the hatch and drop back down into the howling darkness, I hope that somehow I can make up for all this. I take a seat on a step halfway down the staircase, waiting to pay the price for my actions, as tiny fists drum on the steel above my head.



CHAPTER 10

SETH

At the base of the butte, I frantically search the surrounding bushes, scanning for blood or small limbs protruding from the underbrush. I find no evidence that Gaia killed her baby, so I begin following her tracks. She has a nine-hour head start, and based upon the spread of her prints, she started out running. I begin at a steady jog, ready to push through the rest of the day and the night if I have to, but I'm emotionally drained, and the lack of sleep is taking its toll. Soon the best I can maintain is a brisk walk.

An hour before sunset, her tracks lead me onto a sandstone plateau a dozen miles from home. I expected to catch her rooting in the bushes for food or building a primitive leaf shelter to protect herself from the encroaching cold—but now I'm gazing out across a sea of rock waves rising and falling into the distance.

I get down on all fours, but I can't find the faintest sign of her on the stone. Her simple mind can't know I'm following her, but her incredible pace suggests she's locked in flight as if evading a predator. I think of the years she spent chained in isolation, and I worry that she just might run herself to death. My chances of finding her tonight are slim. I need to get to higher ground before I lose the sun. See if I can spot her moving across the vastness, learn the direction she's heading so I can pick up her trail at first light.

A mile away, a mesa rises above the valley floor. I set out for it as quickly as my exhausted body will allow. I reach the base just as the last sliver of sun slips beneath the horizon, and I begin scrambling up the steep slope, loose shale biting into my palms as it shifts and tumbles, making me lose a yard for every two I gain. Finally, I reach the sheer stone face. It's nothing like the butte back home—there are no holes carved out for easy climbing. I locate a vertical crevice and wedge myself into it. As I shimmy up between the rocks, struggling to maintain what few foot- and handholds I manage to find, a frigid wind begins to blow. It plasters my sweat-soaked shirt to my skin and makes me shiver as the last of the sunlight disappears over the mountains.

I roll, exhausted, onto my back at the top. The moonless dark offers no reprieve, its perfect blackness so heavy it seems to carry actual weight. I peer over the side, but even the ground directly below me is hidden in shadow—there's no way I'll spot a small shape moving across the ocean of black beyond. But maybe there's still hope. High up on this perch, perhaps I'll spot her at first light, and with my body well rested, I'll catch up to her by midday.

Sitting up, I open my pack and reach inside for my thick wool blanket. My hand finds only empty canvas. I left so quickly I hadn't packed the essentials. Even my sweater, which I used to cover the alpha's chest the night before, is still lying on the ground outside the lab.

Shivering so hard it hurts, I resist the urge to pull my canvas pack to my chest, knowing that once the earth cools, it will draw more heat from my body than the frigid air. Laying my pack on the ground, I curl up on top of it, drawing my knees in close to my chest. My only other option is going back to the butte, but the Professor told me not to return without Gaia, and I'd rather face the freezing night than fail him again. I shut my eyes, hoping exhaustion will pull me away from my thoughts.

Sometime in the night, my shivering stops. I know it won't be long until hypothermia sets in. Movement is the only thing that can warm a body this cold. I fight to sit up, then pump my stiff arms out to the sides. The steam from my shallow breath is all I can see, and my thoughts drift. I wonder how many nights I'd survived as a baby in cold just like this, swaddled in a blanket beneath that juniper tree, before the Professor found me. I wonder how, out of all the canyons he could have walked down that day, he managed to stumble upon me. I'd been certain for years it was a sign that my life would have meaning. And yet here I am, freezing to death in that same desert.

A flickering glow appears on the horizon. Just a pinprick of light in the endless black. I watch it for several minutes, unsure of what I'm seeing. The light continues to grow, slender orange trails snaking farther upward. A fire. After a quick look at the stars, I realize it's coming from the direction of home.

Is he trying to call me back? He said not to return empty-handed, so it doesn't make sense. Then I recall his face, twisted in anger, and hear the desperation in his words. In his stupor, had he done something irrational? Even when he's clearheaded he can be absentminded. I picture him rushing off to his lab, leaving fish cooking on the stove. Based upon the height of the tendrils, the fire has a massive amount of fuel.

If I return now, all hope of finding Gaia will be lost. I could venture back out with a month's worth of supplies and never pick up her trail. But what choice do I have? Whether the Professor is calling me back or our entire lives are burning up on the butte, I need to get home.

With my limbs needling from nearly thirty-six hours without sleep, I climb the last few feet toward the top of the butte. Pulling myself over the lip, I narrow my eyes at the blinding light from the fire, feeling its precious heat even forty feet away. The Professor stands between it and me—but he's not simply standing. He's moving like a drunk man, or the way I always pictured a drunk man might move. Stumbling back and forth, throwing more kindling onto our massive woodpile, now a mountain of light and heat.

When I stand, he finally catches sight of me, firelight shimmering in his moist eyes. Seeing his mournful expression makes me even more terrified of breaking the news, but he doesn't give me a chance. He hobbles toward me, wraps his arms around my shoulders, and pulls me into a powerful embrace. Not even as a child had he offered me such a sincere display of affection.

"I'm a wicked old man," he eventually says.

He pulls away and drags me closer to the warmth.

"I couldn't find her," I say.

"Sending you out there to capture an Ande by hand—I lost my mind, Seth. Sitting on the couch, sick with worry, I realized the truth. I haven't had any real perspective for a long time. I let it slip away bit by bit, using my work as my excuse."

He's taking the blame for this, forgiving me for letting Gaia go, but I can't forgive myself. I'll carry this burden for the rest of my life. "It's not your fault. You're a scientist."

He shakes his head. "When I found you all those years ago, I told myself I would forget about my past mistakes and focus on giving you a good life. But it became an obsession, just like you said. I couldn't let it go. And so I sent you out there, risking your life day after day. I'm so sorry, Seth. You didn't deserve any of this."

My breath catches in my chest. I hadn't realized how much I needed to hear those words. It validates all my feelings over the past decade—sorrow from having spent my youth capturing Andes, and anger at my isolation. My life would have had meaning, all my sacrifices worth something. But now, having let Gaia go, all those years were a waste.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me," I say. "If you really wanted me to continue your work, why lie about what you found?"

"I may not be a good father, but I'm observant. When you were younger, you loved this desert. You thought of this butte as your home. But as you got older, you began to realize what I never wanted to admit. That there was no future for you here. You weren't born to spend your days peering through a microscope. Always looking at that atlas like you do, you could have been a geographer in the old world." He forces a smile. "But every time I saw that longing in your eyes, I'd throw myself into my work. I feared if I told you about my experiments, all my secrets, it would finally give you a reason to leave."

"I can dig more pits," I say. "Capture more Andes. Eventually we'll find another special one."

He takes my face in his hands, staring straight into my eyes.

"It's over, son."

"What's over?"

"Your days hunting Andes, and my days toiling in the lab. I want to spend my final years puttering around the butte, watching the sun rise and set. Reminding

myself that nature is a powerful force, and that maybe one day she'll set humanity right. When I leave this Earth, I will carry that hope with me. As for now, all that matters is finding you the life you deserve. We both know it's not up here on this butte."

"What are you talking about?"

He lightly grips the back of my arm. "Come with me. Let's get you some food, and then I'll show you."



CHAPTER 11

SARAH

The flashlight flickers, then dies.

I shiver on the metal stairs, hugging my knees tight to my chest, trying to ignore the grunts from the cells lining the hallway below and the mayhem from the laboratory above. I've been doing a fairly good job of keeping it together, but now, having to deal with the added terror of pure darkness, my mind scrambles to find explanations for what's going on down here in this crypt.

Had they really taught a Dragger a few human words? If only I could escape this hellhole, maybe I could think. Right now the only thing that makes sense is that something horrible was done to her. And Dr. Thomas Caldwell is responsible.

Dad had worked in this lab since I was a child. Did he know about this? I think back to all those times I spied him on the front porch late at night, smoking his pipe while staring blankly out at nothing. Pressing my fingertips to my temples, I redirect my attention to my current predicament, on what to say when they find me. My safety, not to mention James's, depends on it. Who knows what Caldwell will do to protect his secrets?

As I'm searching for a lie to get us out of this mess, muffled male voices from above draw me to my feet. Sounds of a scuffle come from the lab, followed by a high-pitched squeal, a heavy thump, and a moment of calm. Even the Draggers in the cells go quiet. I carefully pick my way down into the hallway, then turn to face the staircase. Just as I start to think whoever it is might move the subdued youngling somewhere other than this basement, the hatch opens, raining harsh fluorescent light into my eyes.

"It's me, Sarah!" I shout.

I back farther down the hallway as heavy boots hammer the metal stairs. It's not Caldwell or his lab techs, but rather two men dressed in black cargo pants and thick vests, their faces hidden by ski masks. The only visible skin is that of their arms, which are covered in tattoos. New Haven has never had a tattoo artist, and

only a handful of older residents have them—faded ones inked decades ago. These look dark, crisp, and relatively new.

I'm halfway down the corridor when the first man reaches the bottom of the stairs. He raises an object. My brain shrieks *gun*, and my hands fly up in surrender. I hear a click and a pop, but there's no flash or blood or blinding pain—just a pinch on the right side of my neck, then a strange coolness spreading down my torso. My hand finds a two-inch dart protruding from my flesh.

“What did you—” is all I can say before my knees buckle.

I collapse straight to my ass. I try to stay upright, but my core muscles fail me, and I fall backward. Light explodes in my vision as the back of my head finds the concrete. My face flops to one side, and the urine on the floor works its way into my ear. I scream inside my head, trying to struggle, but I've lost all muscle function. I expect my sight to go next, but it doesn't. I watch two sets of boots circle around me.

“Straight to the jugular!” says the ski mask directly above. “Nice shot.”

I feel my bladder release.

“Here comes the puddle,” the shooter says with a snicker. “Right on time.”

“It's fine,” a voice says from farther away, accompanied by the clank of more boots on the stairs. I know the voice. I just can't place it. “Happens with curare.”

Curare. The extract made from the plants I'd collected this very afternoon. My botanical training is seven years behind me, but I remember enough to know that, when injected, it inhibits certain receptors in your nervous system, paralyzing your body while leaving your mind awake.

I want to tell them I'm not dangerous, that I would have gone with them willingly, but I can't talk. It's getting harder and harder to breathe. Whoever these masked men are, did they take the dosage into account? If they gave me too much, my diaphragm will end up paralyzed too, and I'll die of asphyxiation.

Panic sets in. As I rack my brain for some way to communicate, to let them know my condition is getting worse, the third man walks up and straddles my

body. He leans down and cups my chin in one hand. Turns my face up so I can see him.

Josh.

Oh, thank God, is my first thought. He knows about the drug and how serious it can be. But he doesn't look concerned. He's smiling. And he's not wearing his silk shirt. He's got on the same military-style pants and vest as the other two, minus the mask. When did he have time to change?

"Oh, no," he says, leaning down. "What happened to your face?"

What the hell is going on? Was this all a setup, just as James said? I recall the note under my door, the thousand colones deposit, and the casual run-ins with Josh at the lab and again on the road. He wasn't working patrol or going to Vibes. He had been waiting for me to show up and break in.

"Hey there, sweetheart," he says, now speaking directly to me. "I would ask what a pretty girl like you is doing in a place like this, but I think I already know."

"Wrap it up," the shooter says. The impatience in his voice, and the way his partner twitches when he speaks, tells me he might be the one in charge.

"You bring what I asked?" Josh says.

The shooter pulls out something flat and black, then fluffs it out and unzips it—an extra-large duffel bag.

"OK ... bag her and tag her," Josh says.

The sack drops to the floor by my side, and three sets of hands roll me over like a fresh kill. As they pull the bag up around me, my eyes settle on the face of a pregnant Dragger, huddled in a corner of her cell, staring at me blankly. Then a zipping sound, followed by darkness.

All I can do is listen as their boots bang up the stairs, tap across tile, kick open a creaky metal door, and crunch on the cobblestones. I hear lapping waves, and feet splashing through water. Then they begin rocking the bag back and forth, seemingly to gain momentum to toss me into the ocean. I envision my fabric coffin slowly soaking through as I sink, helpless, in three feet of surf.

They let go. For a second I'm floating. Then my right shoulder hits a hard surface, shooting pain up my arm. What sounds like an engine kicks on, and vibrations run through my entire body. A moment later, we start moving. Not like before. This movement is smoother, even as the rumbling grows and we start rising and falling faster and faster. A boat? But New Haven doesn't have a boat, at least not one with a motor. Caldwell banned internal combustion engines years ago. Who are these men, and where are they taking me?

Could this elaborate trap be a way for Josh to justify taking me by force? My thoughts take a dreadful turn, remembering the little comments about my appearance and the unwanted attention when I was going through Forager training. I try to calm myself with logic. If that's what he's after, he's had plenty of opportunities—the other night on the beach, for example. And he sets my work schedule, deciding when I'll be all alone out in the jungle. There must be something else going on.

The zipper opens, and Josh's face appears against a backdrop of stars. He clicks his tongue and shakes his head. "It didn't have to happen this way," he says sadly.

He reaches into the bag, wraps his arms around me, and tries to lift me. Without any tension in my muscles, it's probably like lifting a twenty-gallon bag filled with goat cheese. He stumbles forward, nearly falling into the duffel beside me.

"Fuck," he shouts. "One of you help me get her into a seat."

A chuckle from somewhere else on the boat. Another set of hands grab me, and together they haul my body out of the bag, carry me a few feet, and set me down on a cushioned bench at the back of the boat. Josh sits next to me, gently placing one hand on the nape of my neck to keep my head upright and the other on my stomach to keep me from falling forward.

"We'll be there soon," he says. "Look on the bright side. You're finally getting off the peninsula. Too bad for the Munchkin, though. What will he ever do without you?"

With my head propped back, I can see the stars. Drawing a line from the Big Dipper to Polaris, I figure we're heading due west across the gulf of Nicoya, toward the mainland. My best guess is we're going twenty miles per hour. The gap is forty ... which means I have around two hours to reclaim control of my body.

Josh leans close so he can whisper in my ear.

"You're in for one hell of a surprise."



CHAPTER 12

SETH

I wake on the couch around noon, clothes reeking of dust and woodsmoke. The Professor is asleep in the chair across from me, head tilted back, mouth open, hands splayed out to his sides. As I stare at him, his words from the night before come back to me. He said he was going to find me a home, but after our recent ordeal, he'll most likely sleep through the day. I don't think I can wait that long to find out what he meant.

I head outside with my collapsible shovel and begin covering the bonfire's glowing embers with sand. Soon the heat of the day and the coals has my head pounding. After catching a few fish from our cement pond, I trudge back inside and stand over the Professor, watching his muscles twitch as his eyes race beneath their lids. I don't know what he wants to show me, but something tells me that, after today, nothing will ever be the same. He grumbles in his sleep, hands clenched tight. I place one of mine on his shoulder and gently shake him awake.

"Come back," he croaks as his head snaps up. It takes him a moment to register my presence. Slowly, the tension slides from his body.

"Bad dream?" I ask.

He nods. "I was out in the desert, looking for you. It was so dark, and then a storm came in. I could hear them all around me. The Andes. They were everywhere, but I couldn't see them through the rain."

The Professor once told me there were people in the old world who would analyze your dreams, and I wonder what they'd say about his.

"Probably just stress," I say. "Remember what you told me?"

Again, he nods.

"I could cook up some fish if you're not ready." A part of me is bouncing off the walls, but another part wants to let everything go back to how it has always been.

"No." He stands slowly, joints popping like snapping twigs. "I've put this day off long enough."

He shuffles into the kitchen, takes a drink straight from the faucet, and splashes water onto his face. Then he heads down the hallway.

“Come on,” he calls.

We head toward the back room of the house—his room, a private sanctuary that, much like his lab, I’ve rarely glimpsed. The space is nearly as austere as he is, with no decoration of any kind, just sheaves of notes piled high on a simple wooden desk and clusters of dismantled instruments adorning rusty shelves. It almost looks like a storage room.

He wheels two chairs up to the desk and moves the stacks of papers to the floor, revealing a small black box. It looks a bit like the stereo that used to sit in the living room, only with six lines of numbers instead of one running along the tuning dial. He plugs it into a battery bank and flips a plastic switch. The aged screen lights up.

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask.

“A shortwave radio.”

My heart sinks. “Why is it still working? You took parts from the winch, even from my TV and DVD player. Why keep this piece of junk around?”

His mouth opens, but he doesn’t speak. One hand begins nervously tapping the desk. As I stare at the device, an unfathomable realization sets in.

“People,” I whisper. “They’re out there, aren’t they?”

He looks at me briefly, then down to the floor. “It’s possible.”

This moment doesn’t feel real. My sleep-deprived body, pushed past its limits, must still be lying on that mesa out in the desert. Everything that’s happened since—the bonfire, the Professor’s embrace, the meal he cooked for me, eaten in silence—has been a dream. I reach out and grip the edge of the desk to steady myself.

“There’s a reason I haven’t touched this radio for nearly two decades,” he says. “The same reason why I’ve kept it hidden in here where you wouldn’t find it. Even now, I’m terrified just turning it on.” He stands and wheels the second chair around behind me. “I need to tell you a story. You should sit down.”

I fall back into the chair. My throat is parched, but the kitchen sink seems a million miles away. “How many?”

“Today? Haven’t a clue. Twenty years ago, when I first built the radio, I found a handful right off the bat. And that number slowly grew. Within six months, ninety-one of us were chatting over the airwaves.”

“Ninety-one,” I murmur. I can’t even picture that many.

“It wasn’t much of a shock at the time, just ten years after the collapse. I originally went on the radio to find willing subjects—people who had taken Advitalon but were immune to its side effects. I thought it could be the key to finding a cure, but every last one of them had refused the drug for some reason. Just another dead end.”

“You found ninety-one people,” I say, “and you saw them as a dead end?”

“For my research, yes. But I didn’t abandon them. I felt responsible, for reasons I don’t wish to share. I tried to help them.”

How has he been able to avoid talking about this for so many years? If I’d discovered ninety-one people were alive and well, I would be shouting from the highest butte I could find. For a guy who’s fixated on saving humanity, surrounding himself with actual people seems to be the last thing the Professor is interested in. “Help them how?”

“I came up with a plan for everyone to meet in Grand Junction, Colorado. The survivors were spread out all over the country, and it was a central location. In addition, with two large rivers, it offered fertile land for growing crops.”

For as long as I can remember I’ve dreamt about being part of a community, being surrounded by smiling faces and having conversations about everything under the sun, not just listening to scientific lectures about brain function. I’d given up hope that it could ever become a reality, and now I learn that while I was in the living room pretending rocks and sticks were toys, the Professor was working diligently to build a community for a group of strangers.

“You were going to start a town?” I ask. “And you didn’t think that was something I should know?”

“I was never going to be a part of it. I couldn’t leave the butte and my research. But I was going to make sure they all got to the new settlement safely. Getting everyone there was the biggest hurdle. Andes hadn’t fully migrated away from the cities, making travel extremely dangerous. I figured there would be safety in numbers, so we created three base camps: one in Louisville, Kentucky, one in Austin, Texas, and one in Modesto, California. Over the course of months, survivors migrated to their nearest camp and began preparing for one big push to Colorado. We were just waiting for the stragglers to arrive at the departure sites.”

He pauses, searching for the right words. The left corner of his mouth twitches. “Something happened, didn’t it?” I ask.

“Yes. One day, radio check-ins from Austin stopped. A week passed before Martha, a woman stuck in Corpus Christi, offered to travel there to see what happened. It took her three weeks to report back. In that time, we lost communication with Louisville as well. When we heard from Martha again, she was terrified. She’d found the Austin camp empty. At first it appeared they’d simply vanished, along with their supplies. Their radio was missing as well. Once she started looking, however ... she found them. All of them. About a hundred yards out in the desert, lying in a mass grave. Hands bound and gunshot wounds in the backs of their heads.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I say, picturing bent bodies piled atop one another.

“Our best guess was it was some kind of militia. A symbol had been spray-painted on the earth near their bodies. Two crossed guns over the words ‘Merry Men.’”

I’d read about genocide, but I always imagined that if there were survivors, they would all come together to pull humanity back from the brink of extinction. Never had I considered that they would intentionally push us closer to the edge.

“Did she say anything else?” I ask.

“I didn’t have time to ask her much. She had returned home to relay the message, but she knew something about high-frequency radios and said that, with

the right equipment, a signal could be tracked. Said she was relocating and going dark. Advised the rest of us to do the same. I still don't know if Modesto ever got her message—they had gone silent the morning before Martha's return. I remained on the radio for a few more days, but the airwaves were dead. That's when I tucked the shortwave into hiding."

In my imagination, I see a group of heavily armed men, combing the desert looking for us. "They were hunted."

"It wasn't a hunt. It was an extermination. Austin alone had twenty-four people. They had weapons, and even a fortified perimeter to protect them from Andes. With a former sheriff and decorated Marine in their mix, they were a formidable bunch. Whoever was after us, they were highly organized and had serious numbers. I wanted to tell you about the radio when you became a teenager, but you were restless. I couldn't risk you trying to use it to find others."

I examine his face, trying to decipher if he actually believes what he just said.

"I wouldn't have jumped on it behind your back."

"It's more than that," he says. "I would have had to tell you about the Merry Men, and I didn't want you to live your life afraid. It's not the kind of thing a child should need to worry about."

That doesn't add up. He didn't want me to live in fear, and yet, at the age of fourteen, he sent me into the desert to capture Andes. I still remember the first time I saw an alpha up close—his starved eyes fixed on me. I can't fathom how learning of a group of bandits could have added another layer of terror to my already perilous youth.

"*Was* there something to fear?" I ask. "Were they coming after you?"

"I would think tracking these signals isn't an exact science, and this desert is a big place. Thousands of square miles. Our remoteness is probably what saved us."

"You think any of the others survived?"

"If they listened to Martha, maybe. I suppose that's what we're here to find out."

A deep sense of regret wells up inside me. I'm nearly overwhelmed by the desire to scream at him for lying to me all these years. Years I spent alone in my room, staring at the pages of the atlas, creating imaginary friends and family. Ghosts I whispered to in the dark. But I'm too emotionally exhausted to question his lies. Too filled with shame for having shattered humanity's last chance. And overwhelmed by a sudden, unexpected hope that there might still be others out there. So, instead of cursing him, I slump down in my chair.

"How do we start?" I eventually ask.

"All we're going to do is listen and see if someone is broadcasting. Are you ready for this? We can wait until—"

"I'm ready," I say, sitting up straighter.

The Professor leans forward across the desk and cranks up the volume, filling the room with crackling static. Grinding his teeth, he begins slowly turning the dial.

Occasionally, what sounds like a voice rises above the noise, perking me up, but each time he dials back, it's just squawks and squeals. As the thin red line nears the end of the display, my hope dwindles. I begin daydreaming about what my life could have been like if the Professor hadn't waited so long before bringing me in here. Instead of spending my youth sitting on that stinking couch, listening to him drone on about science, I could have been running and playing with other kids. I could have had a normal life. Now everyone's dead and gone, and it won't be long until he dies too.

I'm lost in these thoughts of what could have been when the Professor leans farther over the desk, head tilting to one side. I hadn't heard anything, but apparently, he had. He begins surgically scrolling back. Soon a female voice fights through the static.

"This is New Haven dispatcher zero-four-zero. We're reaching out for other survivors. Please respond." The voice cuts out. Just as the Professor reaches for the dial, it returns with the exact same inflection and cadence as before. "This is New

Haven dispatcher zero-four-zero. We're reaching out for other survivors. Please respond."

"It's a recording on a loop," he says.

I slide forward on my seat, hardly able to believe this is happening. "How long do you think it's been playing?"

"No way to know ... but power sources require constant maintenance. Although there's a chance no one is currently listening, someone must be out there."

"New Haven's a city in Connecticut," I say. "Right on the Atlantic. Maybe that's where all the survivors ended up. We should respond."

"This decision is yours to make. If you choose to move forward, you may provide your name and other incidental information but nothing else. Under no circumstances are you to give them our location. Not even the country we're in. Until we know who they are and why they're broadcasting, the less we give away, the better."

He's giving me a choice, which is something new. I think back to what I'd said about not going behind his back, and I realize it had been a lie. I would have used the radio the first chance I got.

I roll my chair forward until my elbows are resting on the desk. The Professor hands me the mic, and as I gently squeeze the handle, my mouth goes dry. I'm nervous—and not just because of the story he's told me. One day soon, I might be leaving this desert, the Professor, and everything I've ever known.

"This is Seth Keller," I say into the mic. "Responding to your message."

I release the handle. What feels like an eternity passes with no response. Again I tighten my clammy grip on the mic. "This is Seth Keller. I received your message. Can you hear me?"

I'm preparing to repeat it again when a click interrupts the static.

"This is New Haven dispatcher zero-twelve-zero," returns a female voice, but not the one from the recording. "My name is Cindy. It's good to hear your voice,

Seth. It's been quite some time since we heard from another survivor. How are you faring?"

I take a deep breath to calm myself, unable to believe I'm about to speak to someone other than the Professor. I've been waiting for this day my entire life. "We're doing fine," I say, but after that, I'm at a loss for words.

"Glad to hear you're not by yourself. The world can be a lonely place these days. How many are in your group?"

"It's just me and my father."

"That's good you're with family. And what's his name?"

"Siegfried."

I hear the Professor scratching something on a piece of paper.

"Siegfried?" she asks, sounding surprised. "Siegfried Keller?"

"Yes."

"That's a ... very distinctive name."

I expect her to say more, but there's only silence. I raise the mic again. Before I can speak, the Professor slides the sheet of paper in front of me. On it are four hastily scribbled words: *Scripted. Trap? No details!*

I give him a nod and then ask into the mic, "How many are with you?"

"Just over thirteen hundred." My skin prickles. "We've been offering refuge to survivors since the very start, and we've become quite a bustling community. Clean water, crops, livestock. We even have a schoolhouse and an outdoor movie theater. We'd very much like for you and your father to join us. There's a team here that travels around North and South America, picking up survivors and making sure they get to New Haven safely. But they haven't been on the road for quite some time. We were beginning to lose hope others were still out there."

"You're in Connecticut, aren't you?"

She laughs. "No, not that New Haven. Our founder wanted an inspiring name for our community. We're actually in Costa Rica, right on the Pacific ... listen, Seth, I'd love to learn more about you and your father, but a storm is rolling in,

and I'm having trouble with your signal. Mind holding tight for a few minutes so I can go adjust the antenna?"

"Sure," I say. "Of course."

"Thank you, Seth. Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

I set the mic down on the desk and lean back in my chair, rubbing my palms on my pants to dry them.

"I don't like it," the Professor says. "Did her voice sound off to you?"

"How would I know?" I snap. "You're the only person I've ever talked to. Please don't ruin this. It could be my one chance at finding a new life. That's what you wanted, right? For me to have a future?"

He nods apprehensively, and we sit in silence. I'm already wandering the streets of their community, backed by crashing waves and a bright blue sky. After fifteen minutes pass, I start to grow concerned that they lost our connection entirely, but then the speaker clicks and the woman's voice returns.

"I'm sorry about that, Seth. Are you still there?"

I snatch up the mic. "I'm here."

"There's a town meeting going on, and I couldn't resist letting them know I found more survivors." I hear muffled footsteps and a person whispering in the background. "Seth, there is someone here who would very much like to talk with your father. Is he there?"

I look at the Professor and hold out the mic. He reluctantly takes it.

"This is Siegfried Keller."

I'm on edge waiting for someone on the other end to speak. The beads of sweat running down the Professor's forehead tell me he is as well.

"Ziggy," says a male voice. "What's it been? Thirty-five years?"

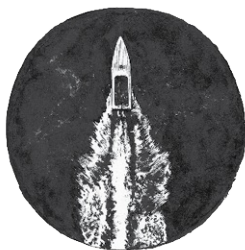
The Professor's entire body goes rigid. He's still holding the mic near his mouth, yet he doesn't say a thing. Seconds tick by without him so much as blinking.

"Trust me," the man says, "I'm just as shocked. Who would have thought we'd actually get a chance to speak again on the other side of the fall? But you have to

admit, this conversation is long overdue.”

All color has drained from the Professor’s cheeks. I tap his shoulder, and he jumps. Without bothering to look at me, he slowly squeezes the mic’s handle.

“Thomas,” he says in a flat, dead tone. “I had hoped your corpse was rotting in the ground.”



CHAPTER 13

SARAH

An hour and a half into the boat ride, I can finally wiggle my toes. Josh has removed his hand from my head, but he now has an arm draped over my shoulders to keep me upright. I haven't tried to move my limbs for fear he'll stuff me back in the bag, but I doubt I'll regain full control by the time we reach the mainland.

The two tattooed soldiers removed their masks minutes into the trip. The smaller one, the man Josh calls Cat, sits facing me on a short bench across from the driver, elbows on his knees and head low. He appears to be in his late twenties, with black hair and a thin, chiseled face. His muscular brown arms look to be inked with the same tattoos as the other soldier, but from where I sit, it's difficult to make out what they are. The few times our eyes have met, he's quickly looked away.

The soldier driving the boat looks like he's lived through a dozen battles. Josh simply calls him "B." The shape of his head, neck, and shoulders resembles a brick perched on a gnarled tree trunk, and the jagged scar running from his right cheek over his mangled nose suggests fighting is something he does for fun. His hands grip the wheel like it's an enemy's throat, and even from the back of the boat, I can see more white scars marching across his knuckles. When he occasionally glances back at me, his pale blue eyes display clear annoyance.

As we bounce over the waves, Josh stares up at the quarter moon, which has almost reached its apex in the brilliant night sky. I take the opportunity to test my fingers, but it's a funny thing, losing motor control—you don't realize how much effort small actions require. When I try to flex the fingers of my right hand, my entire arm jumps. Josh's grip immediately tightens around my shoulders.

"Don't do anything stupid," he whispers, hot breath in my ear. "I wouldn't harm a hair on your head, but I can't say the same for these two. If you make a fuss, they might give you another dose of curare. But if you play nice, you'll soon learn what this is all about. Deal?"

Knowing I can't answer, he takes my chin in his free hand and nods my head up and down—which is when a silhouette of mountains grabs my eye. A few minutes later, I can make out a cluster of buildings on the shore. The moonlight reflects off their white walls and flat roofs, which resemble those of New Haven's buildings, only newer and in better condition. Behind them, stretching deep inland just inside the perimeter of the compound, a dozen or more watchtowers stand, looking just like the abandoned ones back home. Except these towers are manned by figures holding long rifles.

A speaker crackles on the dash, and a voice breaks through.

"Bravo One, confirm intention to dock."

B snatches up a handheld mic attached by a spiral cord.

"Affirmative. We're fifteen minutes out. Bringing one civilian."

He releases the talk button and waits. After several seconds, the fuzzy voice returns. "Did you say civilian, Bravo One?"

B glares over his shoulder at Josh.

"Affirmative."

"We need to check with Caldwell before you dock."

Josh leaps from the seat and takes two long steps to the front of the boat, urgently shaking his head.

"No need," B says grudgingly into the handset. "Josh is with us. He gave the orders."

Another long pause. "Roger, Bravo One. Prepping for your arrival."

My legs strain to support my weight with Josh no longer holding me up. My body may be in bad shape, but my thoughts are in overdrive. Clearly Caldwell knows exactly what's going on in those buildings. In fact, it sounds like he's in charge.

How had Dad not known about this? He'd been here since the start, and he'd always promised to be honest with me, but he had never mentioned anything about a facility on the mainland—especially not one with boats, dispatchers, and heavily tattooed men armed to the teeth. Some of my favorite times growing up

were when he shared stories over dinner or while we sat on the front porch, him clutching his pipe and me clutching the hope that his tale would include Mom. I rummage through those memories now, trying to find clues in something he said. There must be a logical explanation.

Pushing these thoughts away, I focus on the immediacy of my situation. Josh seems desperate to avoid the good doctor learning of his actions. Considering he isn't a scientist or even a research assistant, maybe this ordeal will come to an end if I can find a way to tell Caldwell what he's done. That a Forager supervisor has drugged and kidnapped a New Haven citizen.

Even as that thought provides me a sliver of hope, I hear the tiny voice crying "help me," and I'm immediately reminded of what kind of man the savior of New Haven really is. My whole life I've listened to him speak from his podium in Center Square, promising he's doing everything in his power to keep us safe. While I never believed that was entirely true, nothing could have prepared me for tonight. In his crypt I saw what he'd done to an innocent girl—what will he do to a thief?

The boat glides up to a wooden dock. A barbed-wire fence borders the facility on both sides, running from somewhere deeper inland straight into the sea. Beyond the cobblestones lie three large warehouses standing side by side, each with a large metal roll-up door, backed by the vague shapes of taller structures in the distance.

As B ties a rope to the dock, Josh snaps his fingers in front of my face.

"Hey. Can you walk yet?"

Fuck you, I try to say, but it comes out as, "Uck-oo."

"I'll take that as a no." He looks at Cat. "Give me a hand with her."

Cat loops his arms underneath my armpits while Josh grabs my legs. They haul me out of the boat, then carry me down the short pier like a prize marlin as the metal door on the center building groans and starts rising. Inside, under florescent lights, I count seven more soldiers milling about, plus a handful of vehicles, all

painted in camouflage. I recognize those vehicles from the pictures in my history books. They're military Humvees.

Josh and Cat shove me into a chair at a metal table. I've regained enough muscle control to keep myself upright, and I take the opportunity to scan my surroundings. The warehouse isn't just tidy, it's organized with the cold precision of a scientist. The uniforms on the shelves lining one wall are ironed and folded, not a collar or cuff protruding from the stacks. There are hundreds of metal canisters, all numbered and polished to a shine. While the vehicles are covered in dents, I don't see so much as a single fleck of mud. Even stranger, the hardened-looking soldiers filing in and out show no sign of emotion. They're like ants moving from one task to the next. Not one of them seems concerned about the girl who clearly doesn't belong here.

Craning my neck, I see an oversized map of North and South America on a massive bulletin board behind me. There are at least a hundred red-feathered darts protruding from countries as far south as Argentina.

"Let's get her prepped," B shouts, his voice echoing on the metal walls.

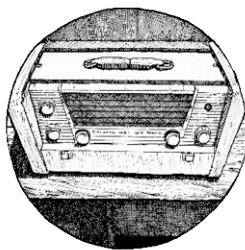
The soldiers all converge on a Humvee parked in the center of the warehouse. All except Josh, who remains by my side.

They hitch a trailer to the back and begin loading it up with gas canisters, guns, water tanks, and labeled steel boxes—ammo, rations, NAD+. Whatever they're packing for, it isn't a quick trip around the peninsula.

Josh calls out a few orders. After everyone ignores him, he grumbles something to himself and stalks off. He comes back holding his own box of NAD, which he stuffs in the trunk before returning to where I sit, my limbs only just starting to twitch back to life.

"Someone help me with this last bit of cargo," he shouts. It takes me a second to realize he's talking about me. But no one pays him any mind this time either, so he finally grabs me under the arms and lifts me out of the chair. "Let's go, sweetheart."

And then Josh, my Forager team supervisor, starts dragging me toward the open rear driver's-side door of a military vehicle, planning to take me God knows where.



CHAPTER 14

SETH

A deep chuckle emerges through the shortwave's speaker. The mystery man is obviously someone from the Professor's past. He'd said it had been thirty-five years, which means he isn't one of the survivors the Professor had found. They must have known each other before the collapse. And based upon the Professor's reaction to the sound of his voice, they had been anything but friends. I want to know more, despite the lingering story of the Merry Men, so I resist the urge to reach forward and kill the power.

"I get it, Ziggy," the man says. "Truth is, you were on my shit list for quite some time too. That congressional hearing ... it caused me all sorts of problems. Had to leave in a hurry. But that was decades ago, and I think it would be good for us to bury the hatchet."

The Professor clamps down on the mic's handle. "Tell me where you are, and I'll come bury that hatchet in your head."

All my life the Professor has been cold, sometimes even heartless, but he'd never been violent. I'm physically exhausted from my desperate trek through the desert, mentally beat down from all that I've learned. Feeling vulnerable, I picture myself running to my room, diving under the covers, and burying my face in the atlas until I drift off to sleep.

A forced laugh from the stranger. "We both know you don't have it in you. Never did. All the hard choices have always fallen on me."

"Why are you on the radio, Thomas?"

"Same reason as you, I suppose. Looking for survivors. I have people monitoring the frequency bands. In fact, your name has been on a list in this room for quite some time. Surprised it took so long for you to pop your head up."

"I didn't know you cared," the Professor says sarcastically.

"I always have. That's why what you did was so disappointing. But again, that was the past. We're in a new world now."

"A twisted one you created."

“Twisted? Open your eyes, Ziggy. I don’t know about you, but when I go outside, I smell clean air, drink from streams free of pollutants, and watch humans wandering the Earth, at peace with their environment for the first time in thousands of years.”

“That’s what you call those abominations? You robbed them of their humanity!”

“Come on, you know better than that,” Thomas says. “Civilization had already stolen that from *all* of us. Don’t you remember our conversations in college? You were the one who planted the seeds for all this.”

“We were just idealistic kids.”

“*You* might have been idealistic.”

The Professor’s brow furrows. “Thank goodness Dora didn’t live to see this.”

“Watch it, Ziggy.”

“What, am I making you angry?” The Professor huffs. “The whole world has already seen what happens when you throw one of your tantrums. Just admit it—this was all a way to get even for what they did to us at Harvard. Your vengeance for Dora.”

I’m not following what they’re talking about, but there’s no hiding from the fact that something sinister is lurking in their past, and it’s not just big—it’s massive.

“Listen,” Thomas says. “Do you remember that café we always used to go to after class? The one over on Kennedy?”

“What about it?”

“Two years after we were kicked out of Harvard, I walked in there with a dozen vials in my pocket, clinking together like marbles. I paid for my order, sat down at a table, and lined them up in front of me. I almost released it right then and there, but your voice in my head stopped me. I heard it so clearly, the words you said so often in those days—*We have to change the way people think*. That statement played over and over in my mind.”

“Obviously it didn’t stop you.”

“It changed the method. Even now, I know a part of you believes in what I’ve done. Knows it was the only way.”

“There’s always another way,” the Professor snarls. “But instead of working with me to change the way people think, you went ahead and destroyed the brains of billions. And now here we are, thirty years into the future you shaped, and you’re still seeking my validation. Like a child.”

A moment passes with only static. Just as I’m about to ask the Professor what the hell is going on, there’s a click from the mic on the other side, and Thomas’s heavy breath spills from the speaker. “I changed the face of the entire planet while you were speaking at fundraisers, regurgitating hollow platitudes about the CDR, spewing that Hollywood bullshit about how we need to tread lightly on Mother Earth. Words, that’s all you were ever good at. I had the courage to make actual change.”

“Then so did Hitler,” the Professor fires back, “and Stalin, and Pol Pot, and every other lunatic who ever thought their crimes could make the world a ‘better’ place.”

These dictators are familiar to me. But until this moment, they were little more than glimpses of a history so far removed, it didn’t seem real. Now, apparently, I am listening to the voice of a butcher cut from the very same cloth.

“You compare me to psychopaths who slaughtered their own people, but there is one clear distinction between them and me,” Thomas says, his smugness oozing from the radio. “I may have changed the fate of humanity forever, but I did it without damaging a single cell or neuron in the human body. I literally changed the way people think. That’s all. What do you have to say to that, old friend?”

For a moment, the Professor says nothing at all. His thumb slides off the mic’s handle, and he looks up at the ceiling, as he always does when he’s deep in thought. Silence passes on both sides, but then, just as a hint of a smile appears on the Professor’s face, Thomas’s voice barges back through the steady sizzle of the radio.

“I can hear your brain working, Ziggy,” Thomas says. His arrogance is gone, replaced by what sounds like concern. “Let it go. I’m warning you.”

The Professor’s smile broadens. “You were right, old friend. I wish we’d had this conversation a long time ago.”

“You should focus on that boy you have with you, on keeping him safe. Or maybe you should tell him the truth.” The Professor goes rigid but doesn’t respond. “I’m certain you didn’t take him in out of the kindness of your heart. Why don’t you tell him where he really—”

The Professor slams the power switch with his palm, and the radio goes silent. He continues to sit there, staring upward, mumbling scientific terms I’ve never heard before. My entire body has gone numb, my brain searching for a reasonable explanation that simply isn’t there. I can’t stand it any longer.

“Who the hell was that?”

“More important than who,” the Professor says, “is what he said.”

“Sounds like he ... ended the world.”

The Professor looks at me.

“Not the world, Seth. Humanity.”

I’m flooded with images of the Professor stumbling into the house after spending all night in his lab. Was he obsessed with bringing humanity back because he was somehow associated with the lunatic who had brought it all to an end? Cold sweat seeps from my pores. The idea that the Professor could be involved in all that is too menacing for me to grasp.

“Have you been lying to me my entire life?”

“I’ll tell you everything, I promise. But you heard it, right? Heard him say that he didn’t damage the brain. Not a single cell or neuron. I didn’t imagine that, did I?”

I can’t believe what I’m seeing—his eyes, sparkling with an excitement I’ve never seen there before. He just told me that the man on the radio was the one responsible for ending humanity. And yet, somehow, the Professor is locked on the present. I want to pull him into my thoughts, show him how desperately I

need him to come clean about the past, but my needs have never been his primary concern.

I hesitate before answering. “Yeah, I heard him say that. Right before he threatened you and started talking about me. You going to tell me what that was about?”

“Put it out of your mind, Seth. He knows he slipped, and he’s trying to distract us.” The Professor stands up and starts pacing the room. “I can’t believe it. All this time, I’ve been working under a set of false assumptions. He didn’t damage the brain. He didn’t even damage the neural network. This changes everything.”

What I’ve learned has *absolutely* changed everything, but that’s clearly not what the Professor is talking about. “I’m not following.”

“If Advitalon didn’t damage the brain, it must have stopped information from flowing through the network. It’s the only possible explanation.”

“Wait,” I interrupt, hands clutching the edge of my seat. “That guy created Advitalon?”

“Yes.”

“Knowing what it would do?”

“Everything that happened ... he planned it all.”

My heart rate quickens, and the sweat covering my body makes me shiver. In one of the Professor’s psychology books, I’d read about a serial killer who spent his nights caring for his family. He was described as a loving father and devoted husband. But during the day, he’d patrol the streets in his work van, looking for girls to abduct. He was a man with two faces, and now I wonder what the Professor’s other face looked like, the one he wore before he came to this desert and took me under his wing.

“Who was he to you?”

“My partner at my old lab, CDR Research. I’ll tell you that story later. Right now, let’s consider what this means.” He looks up again, eyes searching empty space. “What could Thomas have used to stop the flow of information?” he mumbles as he paces. I patiently watch as he moves back and forth. Suddenly he

stops dead in his tracks, pressing a hand to his forehead. “If it didn’t damage the brain ... it could have been a peptide.”

“A what?”

“A peptide. Short strings of amino acids. They play countless roles in the body, but back in my day we were just beginning to uncover their full role in neurotransmission.”

“If it *is* a peptide, what does that mean?”

He walks over and grabs me by the shoulders, a broad smile beaming beneath his bulging eyes. “It means no more hunting Andes. This takes us past the need for research. All we have to do is find that peptide. If I could get my hands on one vial, one drop, even a printout of the amino acid chains used to synthesize it, I could figure out which enzyme will break its peptide bonds. Break the bonds and you eliminate the peptide ... and all its effects.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “Could that cure the Andes?”

“Yes.” He runs both hands through his hair. “It will be like flipping a switch. With no actual damage to their brains, if we can counteract the peptide hindering their neurotransmission, they will become normal human beings again. Not in days or even hours. The transformation will most likely take minutes.”

I want to stand, but my legs feel too weak. “Normal as in just like you and me?”

“They may have gaps in their memories, but yes, for the most part just like you and me.”

I had prepared myself to find a new home, not for this. Despite the weight of my own emotions, the implications of what the Professor’s telling me are too profound to ignore. “These peptides ... how do we get them?”

“Thomas would’ve needed to synthesize it before integrating it into Advitalon. There were twenty or more peptide synthesizing labs in the U.S. back then, but to make enough to fill seven billion doses, he would have needed all of them and then some. That would have triggered all sorts of red flags in the scientific community. His only option would have been to synthesize it himself, and he

could only do that in one place without arousing suspicion—in his basement lab at CDR.”

“So, for more than thirty years, the cure has been sitting there in your old lab?”

“Thomas wanted so badly to handle the construction. I visited the site only a handful of times, and all I saw was a massive hole in the ground. With that much space, he could have had upwards of fifty mini-labs down there, all dedicated to peptide synthesis.”

“If they’re so important,” I say, “he wouldn’t have just left them.”

“He was forced to flee the country in a hurry, and synthesizing peptides requires lots of dedicated equipment and machines. He couldn’t have scrubbed all the labs. Traces of the peptide will be everywhere.”

The Professor looks at me again, his eyes burrowing into mine. I see none of the compassion he displayed when we hugged it out by the bonfire, or even when he brought me into this room.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I need you to go there,” he says, voice sharp. “Quickly. Thomas knows he made a mistake, and he’s no doubt getting his people on the road as we speak. I don’t know if what the dispatcher said is true, but if he is in Costa Rica, he could be there in a few weeks. And if he gets there before you, he will get rid of all traces of those peptides. Then everything we’ve done will have been for nothing. If you truly want to make up for releasing Gaia, this is how you do it.”

I stare at the Professor as he waits for my answer. I want to explode at him—for keeping his old partner a secret, for making me haul more than a hundred Andes to pointless deaths, and for convincing me we were the last people left alive. He’d accused his old partner of being driven by revenge, yet I can’t help wondering what’s been driving him for the past thirty years. But I’m slowly coming to grips with what all this could mean. For the first time, we’re no longer grasping at straws. We might actually have a chance to bring the world back. For now, I need to let some of my questions go unanswered.

“I’ll do it,” I say. “On one condition. You have to tell me everything. And I mean everything. No more lies. No more half-truths.”

A smile tightens the Professor’s weathered cheeks. “You have my word.”



CHAPTER 15

SARAH

“There’s been a change of plans,” booms a familiar male voice as Josh drags me toward the Humvee. This time, every soldier in the warehouse stops, turns, and salutes. Even Josh, after tossing me through the open back door onto the seat, quickly snaps to attention.

Dr. Caldwell marches toward us wearing his usual white lab coat. He looks mostly the same as always—graying hair parted on the left and black-rimmed glasses perched on his pointy nose, magnifying his small, charcoal eyes. Something is different, though. It could be his furrowed brow or his thin-lipped grimace, but in these militaristic surroundings, he no longer seems to be playing the part of the compassionate doctor. As he draws nearer, weaving between tables piled with guns, I get the unshakable feeling that this could be the end of the line for me.

“What change?” Josh asks. He’s positioned himself in front of the open door, most likely to hide me from view. “To *my* plans?”

Caldwell stops in front of him. He adjusts his glasses with one hand, peering at Josh intently. “Brazil is off the table.”

“But everything’s set up. We’re ready to go.”

“I’ll have others handle that. I need you on a different mission.”

Josh starts to look over his shoulder at me but stops himself. “I spent months planning this. What about your research?”

“My research is precisely what I’m concerned about. I need you to go with Cat and B to San Diego. Pay a visit to my old lab and burn it to the ground.”

“You want me to do *what*?”

“Do I need to speak slower? I need you to torch it. Watch it burn until it’s nothing but ashes. There’s enough glycerin and acid in the lab to burn a whole city block. Even you couldn’t screw this up.”

“Can’t it wait?”

Caldwell’s eyes narrow. “I tell you I need a high-rise incinerated, and you ask me if it can wait?” Josh stares at him, speechless. “No, it can’t. I’ve recently learned

that my former partner might be heading there now. There are things in that lab he cannot be allowed to retrieve. If he does, everything I've worked for could be undone."

"Father, this isn't fair."

Father? This new bit of information hits me like a post-monsoon mosquito swarm. New Haven is a tight-knit community where gossip travels fast. No one has ever even hinted that Dr. Caldwell could be Josh's father. His last name is Vale. Why would they keep a secret like that?

"Stop sniveling," Caldwell says. "How you spawned from my genes is one mystery I've never been able to ..." His eyes catch on me, sprawled across the backseat of the vehicle. His expression hardens. In all my life, the only time his eyes have ever fallen directly on me was at my father's funeral. That day it had been an emotionless stare and a false smile, but today the smile is gone, and I feel as though I am truly seeing the leader of our colony for the first time. If my muscles were functioning, I'd run. "Who's this?"

Josh slinks away from the door, lowering his head and crossing his arms. "We caught her in your lab. She let out the youngling, the anomaly. It was destroying everything. We captured the beast and put it back in its cell." He nods in my direction. "But this one saw everything. We weren't sure what to do with her, so we brought her here."

"You didn't answer my question. Who *is* she?"

"She's my ... her name's Sarah. Sarah Peoples. Works for me, best Forager we've got. As punishment, I figured I'd bring her to Brazil and put her to work."

Caldwell places a hand on his son's shoulder, but not in a fatherly way. His long, thin fingers sink into the younger man's shirt, prodding the flesh beneath.

"You expect me to believe that a pretty young woman happened to break into my lab on the same night you were scheduled to leave for Brazil? And you were the only one around to handle it?"

Josh uncrosses his arms and drops his shoulder slightly, trying to shake Caldwell's grip. The old man clamps down tighter. "I swear she broke into your

lab! Ask Cat or B, they'll confirm it."

"I'm sure she did. What I'm wondering is, who gave her the idea?" Josh's pale cheeks redden slightly. "You know, I've always taken immense solace in the fact that, until now, my bastard's crippling stupidity has never interfered with my work. But what on Earth possessed you to bring her *here*?"

"What else were we supposed to do? She'd seen too much."

"Yes, and now she has seen even more."

"She can't go back to New Haven," Josh says.

They're right—I *have* seen too much. Caldwell won't just let me walk out of this warehouse and disappear into the jungle. He can't risk me finding my way back through our gate and informing the residents of New Haven of my discoveries. I'm screwed.

As Caldwell ponders what to do with me, Josh throws me an alarming lifeline. "Maybe she can come with me to San Diego and make herself useful."

"You don't even care about my work, do you? You just want another plaything." The older man sighs, visibly irritated, and all my suspicions about our leader are confirmed. Not only does he look down on laborers—he sees us as problems to be solved. As terrified as I am, I'd like to claw out his eyes. "If I agree to let you take her, will you do exactly as I say?"

Josh nods eagerly, like a child being promised a new toy.

Caldwell glares down at me with calculating eyes.

"What did you give her ... curare?"

"She fought us," Josh says from behind him.

"I'm surprised you got the dosage right."

"I know what I'm doing."

"If that were true, she wouldn't be here."

Images of emaciated Draggers crawl to the forefront of my thoughts. I know everything I need to know about how Caldwell solves his problems. He steps closer, placing a hand on the top of the open Humvee door, and every inch of my

flesh prickles. “Sarah, you wouldn’t happen to be Randall Peoples’s daughter, would you?”

Still lying on my side, I manage to get one elbow beneath me, resting my bobbing head on my hand. I’ve got one chance to get this right. “Yes, sir,” I say, my speech only slightly slurred now.

“A good man and a hard worker. Terrible what happened to him. I was heartbroken that all I could offer him at the end was a eulogy. Was it helpful, Sarah? My commemoration of his life?”

His question catches me off guard. He’d just referred to me as a plaything, and now he wants me to compliment him? “Yes, sir,” I lie.

“My son is quite the storyteller. Explain to me in your own words what happened tonight.”

All of Caldwell’s secrets flash through my mind. Secret military base. Secret son. Secret dungeon where experiments are done on a secret little girl. No—I’m not going back to New Haven anytime soon. As difficult as it is to wrap my head around the idea, Josh is now my sole ally. Being allowed to leave with him seems to be my only chance for survival. If I tell the truth and detail Josh’s whole scheme, Caldwell might retract his offer and deal with me himself.

“It happened just as Josh said.” Tightening my abdomen, I push off with my planted elbow and barely succeed in getting upright. I try to keep my head stable, straining the muscles in my neck, but it continues drifting from side to side. “I broke into your lab, and he caught me.”

“You’re a bold thing, aren’t you?” he asks, sounding mildly impressed. “And why exactly did you break into my lab?”

“To steal ingredients for NAD.”

“They’re not worth much.” His eyebrows rise above the rims of his glasses. “Unless ... were you planning on going somewhere?”

“I was going to leave New Haven,” I say, hoping the confession will make me less of a threat to his secrets. “And never come back.”

“Do you hate the community I built that much?”

“I just want to see the world.”

“And what happens when you find out the world isn’t what you thought? When you run out of NAD and the Fatigue creeps in and every inch of you feels like it’s slowly dying?”

“I’m tougher than I look,” I say. “When I’m gone, I plan to stay that way.”

“If your aim was to leave, why release the youngling?”

Because she wasn’t a youngling, I want to scream. She was a child you turned into a monster.

“I heard moaning and went down to investigate.”

“That doesn’t explain why you let her out.”

“Because she—”

“Talked to you,” Caldwell finishes for me. “She said ‘help me,’ didn’t she? I’ve spent years trying to teach her more words, but those are the only two she’s managed to remember.”

He’s obviously full of shit—he’s the one who told us Draggers can’t talk. But why he’s lying isn’t important right now. If I am going to make it through this, I need to convince him to let me go with Josh.

“I shouldn’t have broken into your lab,” I say. “It was disrespectful. If my father was still here, he’d be ashamed of me.”

Caldwell studies me, his eyes unreadable. I try not to shift on the seat. James claims I have an amazing poker face, but I’ve never played a game with stakes this high.

“I appreciate your saying that. Do you have any family left, Sarah? I think I remember your mother passing early on. Any siblings? Children?”

Will anyone miss you? Will anyone come looking when you disappear?

“No. I was the first and only. My mother died giving birth to me.”

Caldwell nods. “Would you like to go to San Diego with my son and his friends?”

From the corner of my eye, I watch Josh’s face stretch into a lecherous smile. As much as he sickens me, I fear the Caldwell standing over me more. Josh wants me

for something, and as horrible as that something might turn out to be, it's kept me alive so far. If I go with him, maybe I'll get an opportunity to escape. If I stay here with this maniac, I'm three hundred percent certain I'll either rot in a cell or end up back in that duffel bag at the bottom of the sea.

"Very much," I say, hoping the curare masks my disgust.

"It won't be a free ride," Caldwell says. "I need quite a few compounds from my old lab in San Diego. If left up to my son, he'd probably bring back dirt from the planters. Before he does what he needs to do, would you be able to go to the second-floor storage rooms and find the items on my list? There are tens of thousands, but they're all coded."

"I'll find them, sir."

"Good." He leans his head through the door. I smell chemicals on his clothes, just as I always had with Dad's. "One last thing, and this is very important. I've obviously gone to great lengths to hide this facility from the good people of New Haven. I could always trust your father to keep our dealings private, but based upon your actions tonight, I have no reason to trust you. I propose that, after completing your mission, you go free. Explore the world. We'll even give you some supplies in recognition for your years of service as a Forager. But if you ever try to come back here ... let's just say you shouldn't, no matter how desperate you get."

"I understand," I say, feeling a sense of conflicted relief.

Caldwell turns back to Josh.

"As for you, we need to go over a few final details. In private."

As Caldwell takes his son by the arm and leads him away, I let my body flop back onto the seat. I know I just narrowly cheated death. Utterly exhausted from this whole ordeal, I tell myself to relax, that for the moment I'm safe. I'm reminded of something my father used to tell me—*Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

After Caldwell finishes talking to Josh, he steps over to B, who is sorting ammunition at a table. Caldwell whispers something to him, which makes the

burly soldier glance at me with those piercing blue eyes, a hint of a smile on his face. Something about his sinister look tells me that there are no long-lost compounds Caldwell needs me to retrieve. Josh will get me for the ride north, but once I step inside that building, B will execute his own orders.

I have no illusions about the true intentions of Caldwell or his son. And if I remember my tenth-grade geography, roughly three thousand miles of rugged terrain separates Costa Rica from the United States. It could take three days or three weeks to reach San Diego, depending on the condition of the roads. In that time, I'll find a way to escape from Josh and his goons, and my time as a New Haven citizen will end. Not with a pack full of supplies and a walking stick in one hand, as I had always envisioned ... but with me running for my life.







CHAPTER 16

SETH

“How many blankets?” the Professor shouts from my room.

“Two. The wool ones. I damn near froze out there last night.”

He shuffles back into the living room and tosses both onto the couch next to me, where I’m stripping bark from shafts of wild rose, needing to replace a few of my bent arrows for the trip. His hands begin nervously pumping open and closed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I should get our whetstone and sharpen your knife.”

“My knife is plenty sharp.”

“Then let me pack your blankets.”

“Not necessary.” He’s stalling. “How about a little more info on your old buddy Thomas.”

He glares at me for a moment, then takes a seat in the recliner across from the couch. Immediately his hands begin fidgeting in his lap. “How much of the story do you want?”

“Just the important stuff.”

He clears his throat. “Thomas and I met in an organic chemistry class our freshman year at Harvard. We bonded immediately, eventually becoming roommates. Not long after we got our apartment, his mother Dora moved in with us. To understand what happened, I guess the best place to start is with her.”

“You mentioned her on the call.”

“Yes, well, she got sick our sophomore year. The doctors couldn’t figure out what was wrong, which didn’t sit well with Thomas, so he went ahead and did some blood tests of his own. Turns out, she had bartonella.”

My head jerks up. “The same bacteria that caused the Great Fatigue.”

“Not exactly. It wasn’t the mutated strain—that was Thomas’s handiwork later on. Hers was the same bacterial infection that had been around for millennia. Theoretically, it should have been curable, but she continued to get worse, even with high doses of antibiotics. Every organ in her body was failing, and she lived in

agonizing pain. After running a few more tests, Thomas discovered that her body was riddled with toxins. Chemicals like perchlorate and glyphosate ... commonly used in plastics and herbicides. She had been poisoned by modern life itself.

“As controls, Thomas took our own urine and blood samples, as well as those from several other willing undergrads, and ran a toxicity profile. We were shocked to discover that we all had high levels of these same chemicals in our bodies.”

“Did you feel anything?” I ask. “Were any of you sick?”

“No, not yet. It was just a matter of time, though. Every person on the planet was absorbing these same toxins. So we dove into the research of a geneticist named Robert Naviaux, who pioneered the concept of the cell danger response, or CDR.”

“The name of your old lab.”

“It became my life’s focus. Naviaux theorized that when the body is under attack by a virus or bacteria, an ancient metabolic response kicks in. Our cells go into a form of stasis to protect themselves from the invading pathogen. With our cells secured, our innate and adaptive immune systems deal with the microbes. Once eliminated, the cell danger response would shut off, and our cells would resume normal energy production.”

“I’m assuming that didn’t happen with Dora.”

“No, it didn’t. In her case, the CDR had been triggered by environmental toxins, something our immune systems hadn’t evolved to combat. Think of it like a switch. You feel fine, even as your toxic burden grows. Then, one day, you reach your personal threshold, and it kicks in, leaving you vulnerable to disease. That’s what happened to Dora. With her cells permanently locked down, it led to an energy crisis that allowed bartonella to run rampant through her body.”

As I whittle my arrow, it occurs to me that there might be some advantages to life after the apocalypse. Since I was a kid, I’ve been drinking directly from streams, and other than a few cases of giardia, I’ve never been sick. “And this was going to happen to everyone?” I ask.

“Yes, and it looked to be inevitable. We queried databases dating back to the industrial revolution, when companies began creating these chemicals to make products cheaper and longer-lasting, ignorantly trying to make them ‘better.’ Sure enough, the data suggested that there were correlating rises in chronic illnesses—cancer, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s ... the list went on and on. We deduced that within a decade, most of the world’s population would be struggling with a toxicity-triggered CDR. When that happened, antibiotics would be useless, and world economies would collapse. Humanity would lie down, exhausted, while chronic disease chewed through the population.” The Professor leans forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “This realization led to many late-night debates about how we could stop humanity from destroying itself. And, I have to admit, some of our ideas were extreme.”

I always thought the Professor’s obsession with saving humanity had started after the apocalypse, born out of an intense yearning to bring back the world that was, no matter how flawed it may have been. Now I picture him sitting beside a man who appears to have even fewer emotions than he does, brainstorming how to save something neither one of them seemingly had much desire to be part of. Just how far had their imaginations taken them?

“Was one of those ideas to regress the whole human race?” I ask.

“No, never so blunt as that. But we knew the toxins themselves weren’t the true problem. It was the consumers demanding them, the companies making them, and the lobbyists enticing government officials to loosen testing requirements and other regulations.”

“And Dora?” I ask, slipping on a leather glove and plucking a flat piece of obsidian off the coffee table. Securing the shard in my palm, I begin to flake it into an arrowhead using a piece of antler.

“We treated her for years. Tried to shut off the CDR by putting her on a heavy chelation protocol to draw the chemicals from her body. But her toxic burden only grew. It had saturated her bone marrow and even got into her brain.

“Thomas decided to take matters into his own hands. He set out to create a compound that would eradicate the bartonella infection, despite the CDR. Performing a high-throughput screen of more than five hundred FDA-approved drugs, he selected the twenty most effective ones and blended metabolites from each to create a drug of his own. One evening, halfway through our doctoral program, he returned home from the lab babbling about a cure. He just needed my help synthesizing the compound.

“So, we broke into the chemistry lab every night for a month. Thomas had dozens of complex formulas mapped out in his head, and I essentially became his assistant. One night, however, just as we were finalizing the formula, campus police burst into the lab. We were escorted out in handcuffs, our compound confiscated. Someone must have seen us and ratted us out.”

“Did you go to jail?”

“We were released the same day,” he says, waving a hand. “During the next few months, Thomas barely slept. He knew if he could just get his hands on the compound, he could save his mother’s life. But despite pleading with the police, it remained in an evidence locker. I convinced him to come clean with our professors. We were close to some of them, so we sent them our research prior to our hearing. I was sure once they went through it all, they would order the release of Thomas’s compound.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t happen,” I say.

“No. The heartless bastards. Turns out, they’d shared our work with the head of the immunology department, a world-renowned infectious disease specialist and former head of the National Institutes of Health. Thomas idolized him. They showed us his comments. He said we were fools and that our research was imbecilic. He also said we had brought shame on ourselves and the university. We were both expelled at our hearing.”

The unexpected sadness in his voice moves me. Over the years, I’d opened up to him on multiple occasions, sharing my deepest fears in hopes of receiving some

heartfelt advice, but all I ever got in return was cold logic. His emotions now show a capacity for empathy—something he'd never revealed to me.

“And the compound?” I ask.

“They wouldn't give it to him, even with Dora propped up in a wheelchair at the back of the room. None of it mattered. Since we'd developed the compound in the chemistry lab, they deemed it property of the school and ordered its destruction. I think that was when Thomas broke.”

And I thought the desert was cruel. “What happened to Dora?”

“She passed six days later. The autopsy report labeled the cause of death ‘unknown.’”

“Jesus,” I say, thinking of my own parents. Imagining what I wouldn't do to spend just one day with them. “So he wasn't pure evil. At least not always.”

“Thomas could have changed our world for the better.” The Professor runs his hands through his disheveled hair, and I get the feeling he still reveres the man. “If only I had stayed with him, maybe things would have turned out differently. But I convinced myself he needed time to grieve. Despite everything, Harvard allowed us to retain our masters' degrees, so I gathered my savings, moved to San Diego, and founded CDR Research under both our names, as if that could somehow make up for abandoning him. For two years I buried myself in my work, toiling day and night, trying to figure out how to shut off the cell danger response.”

“And what was Thomas doing all that time?”

“Grieving, I thought.”

“For two years? Did you ever reach out?”

He goes quiet for a long moment. “I won't deny that I played a part in what was to come. Looking back, I suppose I was bitter about everything that happened too. I was a golden boy at Harvard, assured to be recruited by some of the top research facilities in the world. All that ended the day I got arrested.” He takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. “Little did I know my friend had channeled his grief into research of his own. You heard what he said ... he had the mutated

strain of bartonella even then. Almost released it. But, in his isolation, he developed an even more insidious plan—one that required a full-scale lab.”

Things are starting to make sense. “The lab *you* founded.”

“When I picked him up at the airport, it was as if a day hadn’t gone by, even though it had been two years. We were like kids again, trying to fix the world’s problems over pints of beer. He kept bringing up what I always used to say, about changing the way people think. But I didn’t pay it any mind. My lab was in trouble. I’d made no breakthroughs, and my savings were nearly bled dry. As I had hoped, Thomas came to the rescue. He recreated the drug we’d synthesized for Dora. When tested in vitro, it eradicated bartonella, just as he knew it would. We wrote up our findings and got them published, and funding for human trials soon followed. A few years later, our drug hit markets worldwide. Soon we were a billion-dollar company. We used the money to construct a new state-of-the-art facility in San Diego.”

“Where he built peptide labs?”

He nods. “While the building was being constructed, I was busy gallivanting around the world, attending conferences. Upon the lab’s completion, I moved my equipment and people into the top three floors, and Thomas moved down into the basement. I’d become somewhat famous in the scientific community, and I’ll admit I was intoxicated by my newfound notoriety. I wasn’t focused on Thomas and whatever he was working on. To think, if only I’d paid closer attention ... eight billion people ...”

“You can’t judge yourself for that now.”

“Yes, well, regret is a cruel mistress,” he says, then pauses as he glances at the floor. “I was happy doing my research and letting him deal with the real world. So, when he suggested we take the company public, I agreed almost instantly. And at first, everything was fine. Every time I needed funding, I went to Thomas, and he happily signed a check.

“Then one day security personnel were waiting for me in my office. They ushered me into the boardroom, but Thomas wasn’t there. It was full of people I

didn't recognize, and they asked me why I was siphoning company funds into personal projects. All I could say was that my best friend, my partner, the CEO of the damn company, had approved the funding for every one of those projects. But they had no record of any of it—all the paperwork showed was a black hole in the shape of my budget."

The Professor's upper lip is trembling, his steely exterior cracking.

"He stabbed you in the back?"

"Yes. And I couldn't even ask him why. That night, I drove to his house. New owners answered the door. I called every one of his numbers. All disconnected. I tried waiting for him outside the lab—*our* lab—but security always chased me off. Finally, a few months later, lawsuits and indictments started flooding in. I had millions in my bank accounts, but my lawyers drained the vast majority of it defending me against false charges of embezzlement."

He leans back in his chair, eyes going unfocused, looking lost in his thoughts. One forearm twitches, and he rubs the muscle, grimacing. His recollections seem to be having a physical effect on him.

"If you need to stop," I say, "we can finish this after we pack."

"No. If I don't get this out now, I never will." He leans forward again. "What came next ... it started out looking like a bad flu. Fever, body aches, the works. Exceedingly contagious, suggesting an airborne pathogen. Although the death toll was low, it never went away. Even more alarming was what happened to pregnant women—more and more babies were stillborn. Not just in the U.S., but all over the world. In less than six months, the global economy had shut down. People simply couldn't get out of bed. As you might suspect, the few labs left functioning were all concentrating on curing this mysterious illness."

"The Great Fatigue," I say.

"I came down with it too, as you know, and who do you think showed up on TV the very day I started noticing symptoms? The CEO of CDR Research himself, announcing that he'd made a remarkable discovery. The illness plaguing the Earth was a strain of bartonella. The age-old pathogen had mutated, becoming

contagious through aerosol. It was completely resistant to Thomas's original cure, of course. He said his company was already working on a solution for this new mutation."

"Let me guess," I say. "Advitalon."

"World governments were so desperate about their crumbling economies, not to mention their shrinking populations, that they waived all but the briefest clinical trials. It was given to the sick, as well as a preventative measure for those who weren't. Billions of doses were administered over the next eight months."

Billions. It's just a word to me. The closest comparison in my experience are the ants that captured my fascination as a child. I would spend hours watching swarms of them pour over the sides of their towering mounds. The Professor told me even the largest of those hills housed less than a quarter million insects. Once upon a time, there had been more than eight billion people roaming the Earth. I used to find that fascinating as well, but only now am I comprehending the true magnitude of the loss.

"The Great Fatigue passed," the Professor continues, "and the world moved on. Everyone but me. I was awash in self-pity. I didn't even take his cure. Thomas had left me behind, then gone on to save the entire planet. Looking back, I actually think I wanted to die."

He pauses, swallowing hard, and for a moment my busy hands freeze. For years, I've watched the Professor soldier through his crippling sickness, never complaining or giving in to it. What he's saying now makes me realize just how deeply Thomas's betrayal must have cut him.

"Two years later, strange things started happening," he says. "Violent crimes skyrocketed, but it wasn't just the violence that was alarming. It was the absurdity of it all, the apparent randomness of each tragic incident. News channels stopped reporting on global politics and turned to nonstop coverage of grandmothers attacking strangers at the supermarket and bus drivers plowing through residential zones. When scientists performed autopsies on the afflicted, they found nothing

unusual. Still, it appeared as if the higher learning functions of their brains had simply shut down. Gone out like a light.”

I can almost hear the ominous voice from the radio as I mutter, “Thomas fucking Caldwell.”

“I had no proof, of course, but I knew how his mind worked, and I could follow his logic. We were killing ourselves with toxic chemicals, and nothing was going to stop that. So, how do you save humankind when humankind refuses to save itself?” He looks at me, eyes wide. “You develop a drug that changes the way people think. And how do you get the world to take it? You create a debilitating bacterial strain, so virulent that it can sweep the globe in a matter of months ... a bacterium you already know how to treat. Then you embed this mind-altering substance into the cure. It was demented in every sense of the word. It was also brilliant.”

“And he got away with all of it,” I say. “Now I understand why you were hoping his corpse was rotting in the ground.”

“I called every news outlet still operating, but it had been two years since Advitalon had been distributed, and I was just some disgraced scientist. Everyone assumed I was trying to settle a grudge. I finally got in touch with a college friend at the Pentagon, and she listened. But Thomas had made his own powerful friends. By the time Congress cordially invited him to come in for a hearing, he had already vanished.”

“Costa Rica.”

“I never knew where until now. Costa Rica makes sense. Extradition would take long enough that society would collapse first. From the sound of things, he’s been busy these past thirty years trying to rebuild civilization in his own image.”

“I don’t get it, though,” I say. “Why tear everything down only to build it back up?”

“When we first discovered the looming threat of the CDR, we’d both been certain things could change,” the Professor says somberly. “But when Dora died ... Thomas lost faith in humanity.”

“The loss of one life ended everything,” I say, shaking my head.

“It was *how* she died. Remember, he had found a way to save her. You see, Thomas had always believed that scientists in positions of authority could solve the world’s problems. But if the former head of the NIH was too arrogant to act on scientific evidence that could save a life, what were the chances that humanity as a whole would act to save itself? That realization, combined with the sorrow of needlessly losing his mother, must have been where this all began for him. But I don’t think even he understood the driving forces behind what he did. He gathered up all his trauma, all his anger, and repressed it. Kept it buried beneath the rationale of ensuring humanity’s survival.”

Unfortunately, I can relate to what the Professor is telling me. When I released Gaia, I told myself that I was doing it to save him from himself. But now I come to a harsh realization—I did it partly out of anger. It was a way to get even with the Professor for all the frustrations in my life, even the ones that were out of his control. I sit with that for a moment, pondering whether the motivation behind an action can taint the action itself. At the end of the day, Gaia is out there, free, no longer being bred like a lab rat. Does the end justify the means?

“Was he right?” I ask. “Were we doomed?”

The Professor takes a deep breath, then lets it out slowly. “I’ve given that a lot of thought over the past three decades. I’ll admit, it would have taken a Hail Mary to get us back on course. The entire world would have needed to come together, and in short order.”

Then in a way, Caldwell *was* right. “Aren’t you worried we’ll make the same mistakes again?”

“Wandering brain-dead in the wilderness for thirty years could be a powerful lesson, at least for the survivors who took Advitalon. Perhaps they can learn from the past and guide the others.”

“You realize if that happens,” I say, “what Thomas did might be what saves us in the long run.”

He nods.

I rub my chin, processing these new realities. "I'm still not sure if he's evil."

"History will decide that. If we end up having a future at all. And that's not going to happen unless we get our hands on those peptides."

That's it, then. The direction of humanity's future now rests squarely on my shoulders. If I fail, civilization will be rebuilt on whatever deranged ideals Thomas Caldwell is preaching down there in the jungle. But if I succeed, we'll at least have a chance to get things right this time.

Either way, I can't just sit here and do nothing.

"I need my atlas," I say. "It's under my pillow."



CHAPTER 17

SARAH

I'm gazing out my bedroom window, watching my dad smoke his pipe on the porch, a ritual he's performed every night I can remember—but tonight is different. He's still wearing his work boots, meaning this is one of the nights he will leave and not return until well after dawn. He never tells me where he goes, but this time I'm determined to find out, even if it gets me grounded until next year.

It's shortly before midnight when he steps off the porch and begins heading up Main. I follow twenty yards behind, moving between the shadows cast by the streetlamps. When he reaches the north gate, I take refuge behind a row of hedges and watch him mingle with a dozen other laborers. They hand him one of several long poles with a loop of nylon cord hanging from one end. They're not doing much, just milling about. Then Dr. Caldwell himself shows up. He always acted too good for our kind before, so what is he doing here with my father?

The gate swings open, and together they disappear into the murky jungle beyond. I creep forward, find a hiding place just shy of the fence, and listen for a long time, hearing nothing but the sounds of the jungle and my own breathing.

Just as I'm getting bored and preparing to head back, a terrible cry erupts from deep in the brush—a sound that has been etched in my memory ever since Caldwell brought that Dragger to my first-grade class. I want to scale the fence and dash through the jungle to see if Dad is OK, but fear locks me in place. The wailing goes on and on, louder and more desperate.

Just as I'm sure the shrieking will shatter my brain, there's the sound of a metal door slamming, and the animal's bellows become muffled. I hear a bestial roar, followed by a rumbling that immediately starts fading away, taking the screams with it deeper into the brush.

A new set of shrieks, realer, closer, drags me out of the dream. My eyes open and I gasp for breath. I see only blackness, and choke on musty air. I'm still inside the

duffel bag, I know it. I must have passed out. Everything after that had been another part of the dream.

As I struggle to place myself in space and time, I hear a series of loud, sharp cracks. The sounds are accompanied by strobing light, and the flashes reveal a wall of green, a tangle of tree branches ... and among them, two naked bodies, contorting and collapsing in a spray of blood. The strobe cuts out, once again plunging me into perfect darkness. I scream.

A gentle hand on my shoulder makes me jump.

"I'm here," a familiar voice says. "You're safe."

An overhead light comes on. I'm sitting in the backseat of the Humvee with Josh. B leans in through the open driver's-side door and glares back at me over the headrest.

"What the fuck is going on in here?" he asks.

"She got scared," Josh replies.

"What the hell is happening?" I gasp.

B scowls, then disappears. The door slams shut, and the darkness returns.

"We just crossed the border into Nicaragua." Josh begins massaging my neck. "You've been asleep since we left."

"Why are we stopped?"

"Draggers."

"They attacked us?"

"No." Josh sneers. "We're basically in a tank. They can't hurt us in here."

None of this makes any sense. "Then what's B doing?"

"He saw a pack of thirty or so cross the road and wanted some target practice."

That's it. Everything hits me—the curare, the confusion, the stress. A wave of nausea makes me reach for the door handle. Josh's grip tightens on my shoulder.

"It's not safe out there," he says.

I clap one hand over my mouth and start dry heaving. He lets go.

I stumble out into the gloom but only make it two steps before I double over and throw up onto my boots. Boots I don't remember putting on. Same for the

black cargo pants and thick vest I'm wearing. They must have changed my clothes.

With my stomach still churning, I stand, searching the darkness but finding only vague silhouettes looming over me like slender giants. I whirl at the sound of movement in the vehicle behind me. The headlights blast on. I shield my eyes as B appears in the beams, backed by trees.

"Fuck!" he cries. With one hand, he strips off a pair of bulky goggles. The other is gripping a long rifle. He walks past me and kicks the Humvee's bright headlamp. "I had night vision on, asshole!"

Josh cackles inside. My eyes are locked on the road, which quickly disappears into the darkness a few dozen yards ahead. Above, the jungle's towering mess of trees and vines lean over us on both sides like two great green waves crashing together. Only a dark sliver of sky separates them, and below, weeds sprout from a network of cracks in the pavement.

I scan the roadside—and see the two Draggers lying ten feet beyond the jungle's edge, partially propped up by bushes, blood still pumping from the bullet holes in their backs. A female around my age and a male child no older than five or six. I can't take my eyes off their naked, intertwined bodies, and the longer I stare at their lifeless forms, the more certain I become that it's just a matter of time until I suffer a similar fate. I survey the wall of green behind them. It looks just like the jungle back home, and I break into a desperate run.

With three long strides, I'm in the jungle, clawing at the branches, trying to clear a path. If I can reach the pitch black beneath the canopy, these lunatics will never be able to find me.

The brush is thick, and I hear rattling metal approaching quickly from behind. Something hits me in the back, and my face slams down on the soft earth, open mouth tasting soil. I try to crawl forward, but a knee comes down between my shoulders, pinning me. Then the butt of a rifle presses into my temple, cranking my chin so the right side of my face is pushing into the mud. My left eye stares up into B's grinning face.

“We got a runner,” he says, sounding almost pleased.

“Get ... off!”

“Are you going to play nice and get back in the wagon?”

His knee eases up ever so slightly.

“Just let me go,” I gasp. “I’ll walk away, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

“Listen, you entitled New Haven bitch.” The pressure on my temple increases. “You’re on a military operation. When I give you an order, you obey.”

“I’m not a fucking soldier! I don’t want to be on your operation. Please, just let me go.”

Crow’s feet take shape around his squinting eyes as he drags me to my feet, and then he’s hauling me toward the Humvee with a viselike grip on the back of my neck. Cat peeks out from around the other side, obviously wondering what’s going on.

“Cat,” B says. “Watch the jungle.”

We cover the distance to the vehicle in just a few strides. I try to defend myself, slapping and clawing at him, but his hold on my neck is too strong. As we reach the Humvee, he slams my head against one of the side windows and pins me there, pressing so hard my jaw pops.

“You think I want you here?” he spits. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re as useless as those fucking beasts. If it weren’t for Kid Caldwell having such a goddamn hard-on for you, I would have left you in that sack.”

Below B’s reddened face, I see Cat’s gloved hand pulling on his shoulder. B’s body hardly moves. He’s strong—stronger than anyone I’ve ever met. And the murderous rage in his eyes reminds me of the look he gave me in the warehouse. If he indeed has orders to kill me, he won’t think twice.

A door opens, and feet scamper across pavement. Then Josh is yelling in B’s ear.

“Don’t hurt her!” he shouts. “Let go of her face!”

B holds firm for a few more seconds, then finally releases me and takes a few steps back. Josh rushes to my side, but I shove him away.

“Everyone back inside,” B orders. “And there’s a new rule. When I stop to kill Draggers, everyone else stays inside the fucking wagon.”

Cat and Josh quickly head back to their respective doors. I don’t budge. B glances at me, raising an eyebrow.

“Are we going to have another problem?” he asks.

Again, desperation urges me to run. But he’d overtaken me so easily. If I’m going to escape, I’ll need to take my time and come up with a plan.

“No, sir.”

He smirks, and we follow the others back inside the vehicle.

For the next hour, no one says a thing, giving me time to calm down and collect my thoughts. I can’t let my emotions get the better of me again, not if I’m going to survive. Closing my eyes and resting my head against the glass, Caldwell’s ominous words come back to me. He’d said something about being able to trust my father. Was he referring to the basement dungeon? I don’t want to think bad thoughts about dad, but he’d spent years working in that lab. It’s not like you could mistake those moans for noisy pipes. Had he also known about the military base? My dream comes back to me in a flash.

My father and those men must have been capturing Draggers out in the jungle, but I’d sat near the gate all night, and he didn’t come home till midmorning. At the time, I told myself I’d misinterpreted what I’d heard—if they weren’t bringing the Draggers back to New Haven, where else could they be taking them? But now I know about the base. There was no way they could have hiked around the gulf to the mainland, not with an angry Dragger in tow—that would take days. The only way to get there and back by morning would be a vehicle, which, until today, I didn’t think existed in our town. But that rumble I heard out in the jungle on that night long ago sounded just like the rumble I hear now as we work our way north.

A thought occurs to me. Something so strange I don’t know how to process it. What if all those years Dad spent sulking on the porch, staring blankly up at the

sky or down at his feet—what if he hadn't been grieving for my mother? What if that was the price he'd paid for keeping Caldwell's dark secrets?

Damn it, Dad. What didn't you tell me?



CHAPTER 18

SETH

“There’s no telling what’s out there,” the Professor says as he we approach the front door. He hands me my knife, which he’d gone ahead and sharpened. “I know you’re curious, but trust me, it’s nothing good. Not after thirty years.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

“Take this seriously, Seth. Stick to the roads, sleep in the desert.”

“You’re worried about the Merry Men, aren’t you?”

“Not just them. Being isolated for years, surviving off scraps ... it changes people. If they’re out there, they’ll be clinging to what’s left, which isn’t a whole lot. You wander near what’s theirs ...”

“You’re starting to freak me out.”

“I’m trying to keep your nose where it belongs,” he says sharply. “We used to have a saying—curiosity killed the cat.”

“I’ll stick to the roads,” I say. “Be back before you know it.”

“Get going, then. We’ve already wasted too much time.”

He’s saying that because I decided not to leave without first making sure he had a month’s worth of food. I collected what I could from our greenhouse, then went down and caught a bunch of extra trout. It took the rest of the afternoon, but at least it got me to stay for one last meal and a good night’s sleep.

We stand there face-to-face, both of us wondering how to say goodbye—something we’ve never had to do before. The only thing I can think of is to walk away. As I start to turn, he grabs my shoulders, pulls me in close, and wraps his arms around me. I give him a couple of pats on the back, but he isn’t letting go, so I commit to the hug. I want to believe his heartfelt embrace is a sign of love for his son, but I suspect it’s payment for what I’m about to do for him.

Eventually he pushes me back. “Follow my instructions and you will be safe,” he says in a shaky voice. “Thomas won’t go alone, and if he somehow gets there before you, turn around and come back. It’s not worth your life.”

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” I say, repeating back his old mantra. “Isn’t that what you told me?”

“I told you a lot of things, most of them to serve my own needs.” He opens the door. “But putting your life in danger was the worst thing I ever did. Yet here I am, doing it again. If this plan fails, I promise you ... I’ll give up my obsession and help you find a home. I won’t leave you alone in this world if I can help it.”

Giving him a nod, I toss my pack over one shoulder and head outside.

I take a small detour and stop by the pit, just to make sure an Ande hasn’t fallen in. Thankfully, it’s empty. Using a long stick, I snag the prism still resting in the center of the false floor and drag it toward me. Once it’s in my hands, I stare at it for a long while. How many Andes had it lured into my trap over the years? I’d always viewed it as a tool, but now I recognize it as a thing of beauty. It makes me wonder if it wasn’t just curiosity that drew them in. If they’d been able to hold it as I am now, what would they have done with it? Would they have used it in lieu of a rock to smash the heads of small animals, or would they have carried it with them, cherishing it and the dazzling array of colors it produces when the sun hits it just right?

I consider leaving it down canyon where a pack passing through could easily find it. I won’t be needing it anymore, and it seems like the right thing to do. But then a thought occurs to me—what if it’s something they treasure, and they begin fighting over it? I can picture it, a brutal battle that concludes with an alpha holding his trophy over his head, the once-shiny glass coated with the blood and brain matter of his packmates.

I walk to the stream and drop the prism in, watching as silt covers it, then skirt along the cliff’s edge until I find a small boulder. Hefting it up, I carry it over and toss it into the center of the false floor, which collapses into the pit with a crash of dried wood. I wish I had time to fill in this ghastly hole, but it had taken more than a month to dig, and I’d had anger on my side back then—so much that I’d hardly noticed my blistered palms, which tore open every morning shortly after I

snatched up the shovel. If all goes well, I'll be back here in within six weeks at most. It's the first thing I'll do upon my return.

I head down canyon, then clamber up and over a series of ridges, which takes me past a butte I've been climbing since I was a child. I've spent hundreds of hours up there, first playing games with imaginary friends, and then, when I got older, sitting on the edge while staring out over the plains. In the evenings, a great horned owl would come out of hiding, and as it soared back and forth on the final thermals of the day, its large yellow eyes scanning the terrain, I'd be struck by envy, imagining what I might find out there in the world if I only had wings.

I've waited my whole life for this day. I just never dreamed of it happening with the weight of the world resting on my shoulders. I know I should focus on my objective, but right now, I'm almost giddy. I want to enjoy the fact that, for the first time in my life, I'm heading toward something that isn't hunting, gathering, or capturing Andes. For a moment, I search the sky, looking for the owl. I want it to witness me step beyond the invisible boundary that has kept me confined to this patch of land my entire life, but it's nowhere to be seen.

By late morning, I reach the backcountry highway I'd only ever seen from a distance. Stepping out onto the blacktop feels anticlimactic. I start out on the road but soon move to the shoulder. The pavement is pocked with craters, and I need my boots to survive the journey—which, according to the atlas, is a bit over thirteen hundred miles roundtrip. I'm only somewhat comforted by the fact that I've probably hiked more than that this summer alone if you add up all my treks between the butte and the pit. And most of those miles had been hard earned, lugging corpses and dragging Andes on my sled. At least these miles won't be so repetitive. For the Professor, wandering the remains of the old world would probably be as enticing as a hammer to the hand. For me, at least the hammer would be something new.

In the early afternoon, I come to a stop at the top of a rise. Off in the distance, on an open desert plain, sits the first home I've ever seen that isn't my own. It's a ranch house at the end of a long, dusty driveway—must be two miles off the road

at least. Dust devils circle a dilapidated barn, the whirling sand scouring the rotten planks like spirits trying to get inside. I stand there for a few minutes, gnawing on some dried fish as I calculate how long it would take me to get there and back. Too long. The Professor had been clear about not having time to waste.

My attention turns instead to the rusted mailbox leaning toward the road at the bottom of the hill. I walk down to it and grab the latch at the top. It creaks open, but I don't discover an old letter or some other message from the past—I find a family of brown recluse spiders, scurrying away from the light. I jerk my hand back. When I was young, the Professor had been bitten by one, and his leg had swelled up to twice its size—a death sentence for me out here in the open desert. Even so, I find myself inching closer. What looks like a magazine lies beneath their fist-sized nest. But each time I reach out, the spiders dart forward on long, menacing legs. Not wanting to tempt fate, I eventually close the hatch with the tip of my boot and walk away.

I cover another ten miles before the sun slides behind the mountains to the west and the temperature starts dropping. After finding a flat spot just off the road, I roll out one of my wool blankets, sit to remove my boots, and start pulling stickers out of my socks. I check the newly formed blisters on my feet, then cut away the dead skin with my Ka-Bar.

As night settles in, my flint and steel get a small fire going. Using its flickering light, I crawl around my campsite on all fours, slapping a palm on the hardpan each time I spot a cricket. The shockwave flips them over onto their backs. In twenty minutes, I've got two dozen in my pocket. One by one, I twist their heads off and pull out their innards, then toss them onto a hot stone I placed by the fire's edge, flipping them once before popping them in my mouth. My stomach still grumbles after they're gone, but I'd seen only a handful of rabbits during my walk, and this is unfamiliar terrain. Food might be in short supply in the coming weeks. Best reserve the remaining dried fish for when I really need it.

Wrapping myself up in my second blanket, I lie down beside the fire's warmth, hoping my exhaustion will pull me under quickly. Thirty more miles stand

between me and Henrieville, and I need rest if I'm going to make it there by tomorrow night.

Despite my slowed breath, my brain keeps imagining what could be waiting out there for me to discover. It might not be much, seeing as the old world is long gone. But maybe I'll find something. A group of survivors that managed to preserve some small piece of what once was, eager to welcome me with open arms. A childish wish, perhaps, but I can't accept that bandits and Andes have killed all those who managed to survive Caldwell's purge. Somewhere amid all the devastation, people must have slipped through the cracks.

As I finally drift toward sleep, these hopeful images slowly leave me. Instead, I find myself standing in darkness with a sliver of light nearby. It curves up and around in an arch. I move toward it, and my hands press against cold metal. It must be a door, and when I push, it falls open with a terrifying screech, revealing a hundred-foot drop. Only it isn't a valley below. It's the blacktop I spent all day trudging alongside, and now it goes on forever, with massive weeds lining it like trees, rocks and aluminum cans towering like mountains. I take a dizzying step back from the ledge, toward the darkness of the cavern behind me, and that's when I hear the clicking. I turn. The silhouettes of several brown recluse spiders, now the size of wild dogs, inch out of the shadows.

I wake up cold. It's hours before I can get back to sleep.



CHAPTER 19

SARAH

Another forgotten town crawls by under the afternoon sun. Crumbled cinderblock walls, collapsed concrete staircases, and exposed rebar litter the landscape. We pass another vine-choked statue of a conquistador on horseback at the center of a timeworn roundabout. Pastels peek through the grayish green moss that covers everything. Nearly all the roofs are caved in thanks to thirty years of monsoons, which have swept the former inhabitants' belongings out into the street. Children's toys, plastic hairbrushes, and clay dishes crunch beneath the Humvee's tires, barely audible over the earsplitting metal music blaring from the stereo.

I pull my eyes away from the ruins and focus on the back of B's thick skull, bobbing just above the driver's-side headrest. It's obvious the man loathes me, but he doesn't seem too fond of our fearless leader either. I need to figure out how to get him to hate Josh more than he hates me.

"Hey, B!" I shout. His hand extends toward the volume knob, and the decibels drop. His sharp blue eyes find mine in the rearview mirror. "I was out of line the other night," I say. "The gunfire woke me up, and I freaked out. It won't happen again."

He nods and reaches back toward the stereo.

"But since we're going to be stuck in here for a while," I go on before he can drown me out, "we should get to know each other. What's your nickname stand for?"

His teeth flash in the rearview. It's too dark to see whether it's a smile or a grimace.

"It stands for 'B a doll and shut the fuck up.'"

Cat snickers in the passenger seat. Josh, sitting to my right, leans toward me to shake his head and roll his eyes. Ever since B burned off some testosterone by knocking me around, Caldwell's little boy has been playing extra nice. But I'm not stupid. I'll pretend to buy into the weasel's bullshit until I can find an

opportunity to escape. However, that might not come as soon as I had hoped. With Cat and B taking turns driving, we've been moving around the clock. We only stop to quickly relieve ourselves, do our NAD pushes, or refill the gas tank using the canisters in the trailer.

It doesn't help that tortoises are passing us. On the best stretches of road, we can sometimes get up to a brisk twenty miles per hour, but with tall grass sprouting through the cracks in the blacktop, potentially hiding objects that could wreck the Humvee's underbelly, not to mention the husks of cars left behind as people fled the cities, we're mostly crawling along at five to ten. If this continues, we'll reach our destination in roughly two weeks. But even hardened military veterans need to rest, stretch their legs, and bathe, right?

While I wait for my chance, I'm being as careful as possible. Trying to get on everyone's good side. Maybe then they'll get sloppy and lower their guard, giving me a brief window to slip off on my own. Josh is Josh, and Cat is a follower—granted, one that's armed to the teeth—but B's barbaric nature is my biggest challenge. Every time I try to strike up a friendly conversation, he either ignores me completely or shuts me down with a crude comment. He regards me as a thorn in his finger—a mild annoyance, but one he can't overlook.

A dozen conversation starters swirl through my head, but I don't want to seem too eager, so I lean my head against the window. As we pass a group of ancient roadside food stands engulfed in vines, my thoughts turn to James.

I need to believe he's still alive, but that means he's probably rotting in Caldwell's dungeon. Josh had seen us on the street together before we broke into the lab, so even if my best friend somehow got away, Caldwell knew who to look for. And if Josh somehow forgot to tell his deranged father about my accomplice, my disappearance isn't something James would let go. He would be out there demanding answers ... but the minute he opened his mouth, he'd become another missing person. Just another cautionary tale.

Regret claws at my insides. I'd manipulated James into helping me, forced him to look behind New Haven's dark curtain, exposed him to Caldwell's

experiments, and now his future—if he still *has* a future—is forever altered. There will be no happy little life in a happy little house with a few happy little NAD-infused kids running around. All he has now is whatever Caldwell decides not to take away.

A bump in the road wakes me in a pre-dawn glow.

I'm slumped against the door, thighs cramped. I attempt to shift, but there's something heavy on my legs—Josh, curled in a fetal position across the backseat, his head resting on my lap. My jaw clenches as I imagine driving my elbow into his cheekbone. Then I spot the hilt of the six-inch knife sheathed on his belt. The first weapon within reach since this ordeal began.

In the rearview, I can see that Cat's bloodshot eyes are glued to a road that's more brush than pavement, and across from him, B is snoring like a buzz saw in the passenger seat. Realizing this might be the only opportunity I'll ever get, I feel adrenaline flood through me, snapping my brain awake. Once the sun comes up, Cat will have a clear view of me in the backseat. If I'm going to do this, I need to do it now. But do I have it in me to take a life?

Ignoring all rational thought, I carefully reach a hand across Josh's body. He grumbles in his sleep, and I freeze, beads of sweat forming on my brow. He shifts slightly, but his eyes don't open. I unbutton the strap holding the knife in place. When he doesn't stir, I gently pinch the handle and slide it free.

Gripping the handle so tightly my knuckles turn red, I hold the blade an inch above Josh's throat. With just a little downward pressure, I could end this son of a bitch right here and now. Even as the thought fills me up, my hand begins to tremble, then my entire arm. I hear my father—*Think it through, Sarah.*

My imagination shows me how this will play out. I watch myself slice the blade deep into Josh's throat. He sits up, trying to scream, but it comes out as an inhuman gurgle. Hearing the sound, Cat slams on the brakes, which wakes up B, all while I struggle to get away from Josh, who's thrashing and spraying blood everywhere. Then B is pointing his sidearm at my face—

I take a deep breath and let it out quietly. As much as I want Josh dead, I want to live more. That said, I also can't afford to be naive. If things go bad before I can escape, I need to be ready.

Pulling the knife away from his throat, I wedge it into the crack on his side of the seat until it's hidden. Everything migrates toward those cracks. If Josh notices it's gone, I can say it probably fell out while he was sleeping. But if he doesn't, I'll have a weapon within reach.

When it's done, I lean back against the door and close my eyes. It takes only seconds to realize I'm not getting any more sleep tonight—not with my heart racing and my kidnapper's head resting on my lap.

So, I turn my attention to Cat. While B may be the true leader of the group, he's also the hardest nut to crack. I know Cat's a soldier through and through, but maybe I can show him that I'm a person, make him think twice about orders to hurt me. Worst case scenario, I might be able to learn something useful.

"If you're tired, I can help drive," I whisper over the steady hum of the engine.

Cat jumps in his seat. "Jesus. I thought you were asleep."

"Just woke up. But seriously, give me a shift."

"Do you even know how to drive?"

"How hard can it be?"

He huffs.

I watch Cat's face, wondering what topics will get him engaged. I'm sure he could go on for hours about military tactics, but I know as much about those as I do about the place we're headed. "What's up with that town where you live?" I whisper.

"Trenton? It's not as cushy as New Haven, I know that much."

Cushy? Not sure where he's getting his information, but nothing about my life in New Haven has ever been easy. "New Haven's rougher than you think."

"Really? In Trenton, we have guns in our hands by the age of five."

"Damn," I say. "They start teaching you to kill Draggers when you're that young?"

“We don’t kill them all.” He eyeballs B, who’s drooling in his sleep. “At least, most of us don’t. We just follow orders and take out the anomalies.”

“Anomalies?”

“Be glad you don’t know.”

Not wanting him to shut down, I scramble for another question. “Were your parents soldiers too?”

“Haven’t you been listening?”

“I meant back in the States, before they came down with Caldwell.”

His eyes appear in the rearview. “From the States?”

“My folks, they came down with all the scientists,” I say. “All the original people in New Haven did. I just assumed it was the same in Trenton.”

He studies me in the mirror for a moment. “Are you fucking with me?”

“No. I swear.” There’s a moment of tense silence. “So where did you guys come from?”

He gives B another quick glance. “Honestly, no one knows. And no one talks about it.”

“Seriously? Your parents never told you stories?”

“Both my parents woke up in Trenton.”

This conversation is taking an unexpected turn. “What do you mean, *woke* up?”

“They just woke up,” he says matter-of-factly. “Gaps in their memories.”

“What, like missing days?”

“More like missing years.”

“And that doesn’t strike you as odd?”

“Look, I’ve got a family ... I don’t know why Josh had us nab you. I’ve lived in Trenton my whole life, and you’re the first Haver I’ve met. I was told not to talk to you. In Trenton, we don’t rock the boat. So maybe you should just go back to sleep.”

“Just one more question,” I say, deciding to just go for it, “and then I promise I’ll shut up. Are you guys really going to let me—”

“What’re you two squawking about?” B grumbles, sitting up in his seat.

My whole body tightens, and I feel Josh stir on my lap.

“Just need some NAD,” I say quickly. “Feeling a bit low-energy.”

B looks at Cat for confirmation. I hold my breath.

“Girl needs a push,” Cat finally says, and relief washes over me. “I could use one too.”

B turns in his seat and shouts, “Joshy!”

Josh bolts upright, leaving a huge drool mark on my inner thigh.

“What?” he asks, sounding groggy and confused.

“NAD. Four pushes.”

“What time is it?”

“Sun’s on its way up,” Cat replies. “We’re about thirty minutes out from Masachapa.”

“Masachapa?”

B sneers. “You mean Papa didn’t make you study our route?”

“I’m not the one driving, dipshit.”

“It’s a small village on the coast,” Cat chimes in.

Coast? An idea starts taking shape.

“Maybe we can stretch our legs,” I say.

B’s mouth has already started forming the word “no” when Cat speaks up.

“I’m for it. Gotta drop a deuce.”

“Fine,” B says. “Thirty minutes, no more.”

Given my job, I’m a solid runner, but I’ve been swimming in the ocean multiple times a week since I was six. Escaping my captors on land would require a head start. In the ocean, I could swim far down the coast, then come ashore and disappear into the jungle.

As the sun rises, pushing shafts of light through the walls of green, I catch a glimpse of the Pacific. Right now, it’s just narrow strips of blue between the trees, but soon, with just an ounce of luck, it could be my path to freedom. Once I’m out there on my own, none of this other crap will matter—not Caldwell’s mysterious military town where people wake up with holes in their memories, and

not my father's own secrets. Still, I can't help thinking about those questions as we rumble toward dawn in our iron chariot.



CHAPTER 20

SETH

As the sun sets on my second day, I stare up at a faded green road sign, which, like most I've seen, is peppered with buckshot. But it's not the bullet holes that grab my attention—it's the message someone took the time to scrawl in red spray paint.

TURN BACK

I stare at it for a few moments, wondering what type of danger could have inspired this cryptic warning. But I suppose it doesn't really matter. Whatever it was lies three decades in the past. Still, a shiver creeps up the back of my neck. Probably just residue from my dreams.

Beneath the warning, the sign's original text is still legible—Henrieville, Pop. 248. Not exactly a thriving metropolis, but I'm OK with starting small. I'm guessing in a town like this, there were no strangers, just friends and family. The size and scarcity must have bred a certain intimacy.

I keep walking, and before long, the vestiges of houses start sprouting up on either side of the road. The whole neighborhood looks like the wreckage of an ancient battle. Entire roofs are missing, and the walls that remain standing are rotten beyond repair. In the fading light, the exposed columns of wood and cinder block resemble the skeletal remains of giant beasts. One house has collapsed completely—all that stands is a chimney poking up through the debris. I approach another that's still somewhat intact. Through the open front door, weeds sprout up through the crusty remnants of carpet.

Farther down the road, I spot a tall brick building rising above the houses. It seems too large for this tiny town, but then I remember all the ranch houses lurking at the ends of long dirt roads. Henrieville probably served as a hub for the surrounding area. Maybe it's a church or courthouse.

I stop to refill my water bottles at a working hand pump in a yard where a "For Sale" sign creaks in a frigid southerly wind. Directly overhead, stars are starting to

emerge—but not on the horizon. An ominous gloom obscures the mountains, and by the look of the wavering shadow beneath the clouds, a fierce rain is coming my way.

Summer storms in the desert are a sight to behold. When I was young, and the Professor was awake and not busy in his lab, we'd go outside and stand near the edge of the butte, waiting for the front to hit. I always felt so incredibly small as we watched those grim black clouds sweep toward us across the plains. We'd hold strong as the gusts threatened to knock us over, laughing with our arms held wide, and once the rain hit, we'd scamper back into the house. The Professor would brew tea from the dandelions I'd collected, and we'd sit together on the couch, clutching warm cups while watching the rain whip sideways across our windowpanes. Without a home to retreat to, I doubt tonight will be nearly as enjoyable. When this storm hits him later tonight, I wonder if he'll think of me.

As I mull this over, I hear Caldwell's voice—*I'm certain you didn't take him in out of the kindness of your heart.* The Professor's explanation for his partner's cryptic words seemed reasonable enough at the time, considering the weight of the other revelations. But if Caldwell was simply trying to drive a wedge between us, why did the Professor shut off the radio so quickly? Wouldn't it have been wiser to gather as much intel as possible? After all, Caldwell had already slipped once during their conversation. I file the concern away for the miles ahead. No time to worry about it now. I've got to find shelter from the oncoming deluge.

A half mile down the road, I approach the two-story building. Out front is a huge metal sign that reads "Henrieville Elementary School." The front doors are missing, but judging by the two large, rectangular imprints in the overgrown grass, they haven't gone far. The rest of the building is in relatively good shape, and I'm grateful for its brick exterior. The clouds have transformed into anvils on the horizon, pulsing with lightning every few seconds, and beneath them the rain has formed nearly horizontal striations. If I started now, I'd have just enough time to build a lean-to before the rain hits, but I doubt I could construct one that would withstand thirty-mile-per-hour gusts. The Professor said stick to the desert,

but he wouldn't want me shivering in a collapsed shelter, buried beneath a mound of sticks and brush.

I walk down the overgrown concrete path, climb the stairs, and step inside. The wind pushes a handful of leaves in behind me. They scurry down the long hallway, merging with the pile of debris at the foot of a pair of steel doors at the end, one of which is cracked open. Above them hangs a sign written in thick black marker—*GYMNASIUM. SAFE ZONE*. The crooked letters suggest it was written by a child.

Rusty lockers line both walls. The tile floor, which had probably once glistened white, is now covered in grime and what looks to be scat from a dozen different animals. Half the ceiling tiles are missing, exposing a network of broken pipes. Not the introduction to the old world I'd been hoping for, but at least I have shelter. Already I can feel the static in the air.

Slinking down the hallway, I peer into a few of the lockers. One contains a small windbreaker, a desiccated apple, and an unopened box of Ritz Crackers. It reminds me of the packaged food we'd had when I was young. Sun-Maid Raisins and Tootsie Rolls had been staples until I was six. Then they were reserved for weekends, then just on my birthday—then, when I turned ten, our stash ran out. I pull the crackers from the box, but through the translucent wrapper, I can see a scattering of dead insects inside.

The first door I come to is locked. The second looks to have been partially bashed in, hanging from just the top hinge. I give it a push and it collapses into the classroom, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Inside, tiny desks have been stacked against the broken windows on the far wall, creating a tangled barricade. The warning from the road—*TURN BACK*—flashes again in my mind. My goal had been to find a nurse's quarters with a bed or perhaps a lounge area with a couch. Now I can't turn away from this strange scene.

I walk over to what must have been the teacher's desk, remove my pack, and take a seat in the squeaky swivel chair. I pull off my boots and socks, revealing new

blisters. As I begin plucking stickers in the fading light, I notice a picture frame lying facedown on the desk. I lift it upright. A pretty woman with long, wavy black hair stands on a bright green lawn, surrounded by twenty or so children kneeling in the grass. The front row is holding a banner that reads “Ms. Jenkins’s 3rd Grade Book Club.” They look so happy that I’m struck by an absurd burst of envy.

The butte isn’t far off, just an hour’s ride by bus. How different would my life have been if one had scooped me up and delivered me to this classroom every morning? Instead of listening to the Professor’s mind-numbing lectures, I could have learned from Ms. Jenkins. I could have had friends, kissed girls, played for hours on end without a care in the world. I could have learned what it meant to be normal.

I stare at the photo for several minutes, reimagining my childhood, filling it with laughter and hugs and the thrilling chaos of twenty other children. Inevitably, my eyes shift back to the tangled barricade. What had happened here? I spin in the chair, searching for answers. They’re on the blackboard behind me, written in faded chalk:

IS ANYONE IN YOUR FAMILY ACTING STRANGELY?

- Making odd noises, like grunts or barks?
- Staring off into the distance for long periods of time?
- Forgetting how to do simple things, like washing the dishes or turning on the TV?
- Displaying a short temper, screaming about nothing, or behaving violently?

IF YES TO ANY OF THE ABOVE:

- Do not approach the family member.
- Immediately gather your other family members and come to the schoolhouse.

- Run if the person acting strangely tries to stop or hurt you.
- Report to the gymnasium. Teachers will be there 24 hours a day, ready to help.

The Professor once told me Advitalon hadn't worked on everyone at the same rate. I'd never understood the full tragedy of that statement until now. It probably started with just a few members of this small, tight-knit community "acting strangely." Ms. Jenkins must have stood up here, using every ounce of strength to steady the chalk as she scratched down lessons about a world that soon would no longer exist. All the while, the kids sat at their desks, fewer in attendance each day. Some softly crying, wondering why Mommy was growling in her sleep or what made Daddy attack the mailman. Every day must have been worse than the last, until one day the Andes came banging on the glass.

I can almost hear the screams as the children frantically piled their desks against the windows, dodging the filthy hands reaching from the other side. It makes me ponder which would be worse—to never have been a part of a community at all, like me, or to have been a part of something wonderful and then lost it in such a cataclysmic way.

The Professor was right—I should have stayed on the road. Hands shaking, I grab my socks as thunder crashes overhead. Beyond the makeshift blockade, raindrops begin pattering on the tall grass. It's too late to build a lean-to, but I don't care if I have to shiver through the night, soaking wet. I can't stay here. If I do, my dreams will be plagued with images far worse than giant spiders.

I've got one sock on when I hear a noise out in the hall. The wind is beating on the sides of the building, and it could just be the vibrations of rusty pipes or a door grinding on its ancient hinges, but it didn't sound like either of those things. I tug my other sock on, pull an arrow from my pack, and move to the doorway with bow in hand. Hearing nothing but the wind, I nock my arrow and step out into the hall.

The front entrance is pitch black. All I can make out is the silhouette of a tree beyond the front stoop, its leafless branches whipping in the wind. The hall

appears empty. Releasing the tension from my bow, I let out a breath and step back toward the classroom to retrieve my boots and gear.

Thunder booms, followed by strobing lighting. In the corner of my eye, I see a low, bulky shape in the entryway. I spin to look. Nothing but black.

I redraw my bow, scanning the darkness for movement. The shape was about the size of a crouched Ande, but an Ande would have already come bellowing down the hall. Whatever this is, it's keeping to the shadows, staying low and quiet and perfectly still—the same tactics I use when hunting in the desert. Every hair on my body stands at attention.

There's a dark, forty-foot runway between it and me. I've got one arrow. If I miss, I won't have time to get another from my pack. Instinct tells me to back up slowly to the double doors at the end of the hall and lock myself in overnight. If the creature is still around at first light, at least I'll be able to see my target.

I put one foot behind me, moving so methodically it's almost painful. Nothing stirs at the entrance, so I repeat the movement with my other foot. The moment it touches down, the low shape rises on four legs, revealing a body that must weigh eighty pounds at least. As it stalks forward, it emits a low, menacing growl.

I slide my feet shoulder width apart, rooting myself as best I can in my socks. I've killed animals from a greater distance than this, but never in darkness this deep—and never an animal that was also hunting me. I need to wait for it to get close. Already my arm is trembling from keeping the string drawn.

For a moment, I lose the shape in the darkness. As I squint, searching, lightning strikes again, imprinting an image of the beast in my retinas—patchy silver fur, exposed skin riddled with open sores, and two rows of half-inch canines dripping saliva. A dog, bigger than any coyote I've ever seen, and clearly starving.

Instinctively, I move my arrowhead a few inches to the left, taking aim at the afterimage, which hovers in my vision like a phantom. I let the arrow fly. It thumps into flesh, and a horrific yelp follows. Then silence. Just the wind and the rain and the occasional rumble of thunder.

Standing taller, I shake out my right arm and take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Despite the chilling air, sweat is dripping from my forehead. I wipe it away with my sleeve and reach for my knife. I'll skin the dog tonight, then cure its meat first thing in the morning.

As I take a step toward my kill, a throaty howl shatters the silence. A jagged bolt of lightning strikes out front. In the momentary burst of light, I see the dog lumbering toward me on three legs, the fourth curled beneath it, my arrow protruding from one shoulder.

I drop my bow, turn, and launch into a sprint. The double doors are only twenty feet away, but I'm running blind, slipping with each stride as sharp nails tap and skitter behind me. My foot lands with a soft crunch. Leaves. I twist to one side and my shoulder slams into steel, which dents inward. My groping hand finds the handle. The doors pull open a few inches, then stop with a rattle of chains.

Dropping low, I wedge myself into the narrow opening. The chain catches around my neck, links digging into my Adam's apple and momentarily tying me up. As I pull back, the chain rakes at my face before I drive forward again. I squeeze under it, narrowing my shoulders and exhaling every ounce of air to make myself smaller. I've pulled myself halfway through when sudden pressure clamps down on my calf.

Pain lances up body as my leg is violently jerked from side to side. I keep crawling forward, but the dog drags me back, my forearms squeaking on the slippery floor. I can't let it pull me into the hall. Bracing myself, I put both hands beneath me and barrel-roll toward my back, torquing my leg in the dog's mouth, trying to break its grip. Teeth twist in my flesh and then tear free. Before the animal can find another hold, I reel my mangled leg into the room.

I'm on my knees in an instant, hands searching for the door handle. The dog's hot breath hits my face. My hands find the cold metal, and I yank the door toward me. It closes on something soft, producing another horrific yelp. I let up, then jerk it back again, hoping to break the dog's neck. This time, however, the door snaps shut with a bang, and the latch catches, sealing it shut.

I collapse backward. As I lie there gasping for breath, the dog lets out a series of frustrated barks. Two consecutive thumps rattle the door. A moment of silence follows, then the sound of claws clicking haphazardly on tile fades away.

With each second that passes, the pain hits me harder. Leaning back against the door, I roll up my pant leg and blindly run a hand over my calf. Blood oozes from the wounds, some an inch long. Unless I stop the bleeding, I'll die here, alone in the dark. I pull off my father's belt and tie it tightly below my knee. Strips from my shirt would make a decent bandage, but it's coated with a decade's worth of filth. I'd rather die from blood loss here than from an infection a few days down the road. I need to find something clean.

I try to stand, but I'm instantly grounded by the pain, so I start crawling. Choking on musty air, I sweep my hands in wide arcs across the grimy floor. Finally, my fingers find something small and soft. It's lightweight, with buttons sewn into the exterior. A stuffed doll. I push it aside and continue to crawl. Next, I come upon what feels like a sleeping bag. Polyester. Too thin.

I keep pulling myself through the suffocating darkness. My searching hand knocks something over. I pat the floor, trying to find it, but it must have rolled away. Another broad sweep knocks over a second shape, and this time I grab it—a cylinder, waxy and slightly soft. A candle. I stuff it into one pocket and inch forward. Soon I hit another candle, and another, until I realize I'm surrounded by them, all standing upright and spaced a few feet apart. They were put here intentionally, which hopefully means matches are nearby.

Creeping forward, my head bumps into something solid. I reach out and run my fingers over cold wire mesh. An object protrudes from one of the grates, and I hear a light ripping sound as I tug it free. It's U-shaped and serrated, but not particularly sharp.

I drop it when I realize it's a human jawbone. And I can smell it now. Not the stench of decaying flesh, but a floral odor, hidden beneath the musty scent of mold. Something terrible happened in this room. For a moment, I'm frozen.

"The dead can't hurt you," I whisper as I slowly draw back from the cage.

I desperately start searching the area with my hands. After knocking over several more candles, I finally hit something small and flat, which slides away. Patting the floor, I soon find it—a small rectangular box made of paper. I push on one end, and it slides open. My fingers find four short wooden sticks inside.

Sitting cross-legged, I pull the candle from my pocket and carefully extract a match. I hold my breath and strike it, hard. A single, meager spark sails into the darkness and disappears. Rotating the stick, I try again. This time, it sputters to life, and I slowly lower it to the candle. The match is half burned when the wick finally catches, sizzling within the wax.

I lift the candle but can't take my eyes off the wavering flame. A part of me does not want to see this room. But I'm bleeding, badly. Although my belt has slowed it down, I need bandages. A room marked "Safe Zone" must have something to offer, but I won't find it with my eyes on the fire.

I look up. Through rusted mesh, a dozen leathery faces stare back at me in the orange light. Tiny bodies, mostly rotted to bone, are piled atop one another in a large cage. It's hard to tell exactly how many—what's left of the flesh has fused together like volcanic rock—but the cage looks to be about ten feet wide and four feet high. *DELUXE BALL CARRIER* is printed on a metal sign welded to the steel. Beneath that, another sign, this one handwritten—*LORD BLESS THE CURSED*. Amidst the candles are notes and pictures drawn in crayon.

Turning away, I catch sight of something above, seemingly floating.

A woman's body hangs from a noose secured to the rafters. Both shoes have fallen from her feet, toes pointed down, tendons long gone. Her eyes are missing, along with one of her hands, which is lying on the ground near one of her shoes. A half dozen other nooses hang empty behind her, forming a long row.

The long, wavy black hair, flowing down over collapsed shoulders, is unmistakable. This must be where Ms. Jenkins fled with her class after the barricade failed. They'd chained the doors to keep the Andes out, but what happened then? Had she hanged the children one by one as they turned, trying to protect those who hadn't, then placed their small bodies in the bin? I picture

those little faces from the photograph, transformed by grief and uncertainty as they gathered around the cage, lighting candles and writing notes to friends already gone.

Ms. Jenkins must have been the last alive, and there was no one left to put her with her students. I have a sudden, overwhelming urge to cut her down, but when I try to stand, the room spins, sitting me back down. I land in a pool of blood—my blood, which is slowly spreading across the floor.

I gather and light a half dozen more candles, exposing the corners of the large room. Basketball hoops stand at either end, and on the far side, past the dangling nooses, rows of bleachers rise thirty feet up the wall. Small sleeping bags are strewn across the floor, surrounded by stuffed animals, toys, and faded paperback books. In the center of the court, a dozen chairs form a tight circle around a stool. Ms. Jenkins must've sat there, reading stories to the remaining children. I thought I was strong surviving out in the desert, but here was a woman who had somehow held it together long enough to guide each of her students through their final moments.

Under the hoop on the far side stands a pair of metal carts. Canned food, jugs of water, and an assortment of boxed snacks fill the shelves of one. The other holds cardboard boxes of various shapes and sizes. I can't read what's stamped on the sides, but I recognize the red crosses.

I grab a candle and begin dragging myself across the dusty floor, focusing on the boxes, mostly to avoid glimpsing any other horrors. As I draw nearer, I start making out words. Gauze, rubbing alcohol, ACE bandages. Ms. Jenkins had thought of everything to keep her children alive.

The room starts to spin again when I reach the carts. Dark streaks mark my path around the room. I put my back against the pole beneath the hoop and roll up my pant leg—that's when I catch my first glimpse of my mutilated calf. Each puncture looks like a misshapen star, what the Professor calls a stellate wound—miniature cauldrons of meat and muscle, oozing blood. I grab a bottle of alcohol

from a box, unscrew the top, peel off the seal, and drench my lower leg. My screams echo in the cavernous room.

Everything goes fuzzy. For a moment I can only see the glow from the candles, small sparkling feathers cutting through the fog. When things come back into focus, I plunge a hand into a box of gauze and press a handful to my calf. It quickly soaks through and sticks to my skin. I snatch up a roll of elastic bandages and begin wrapping it around and around, as tightly as I can. With that done, I get up onto my good knee and start searching the boxes for a needle and thread.

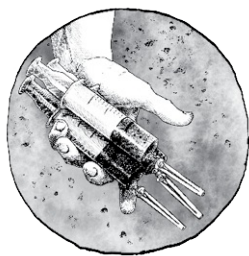
As a child, I'd cut my hand while learning to use my knife. The Professor had brought me into his lab, stitched half the wound, then insisted I stitch the rest. Since that day, I've sewn exactly forty-three stitches into my flesh. These lacerations will need at least twice that many, but all I find are wound-closure strips, which I doubt will stick to my leg while it's drenched in blood and alcohol. I stuff them in my pocket. We'll see how things look at first light.

I crawl to the nearest sleeping bag, drag it back to the carts, and wrap it over my shoulders as I lean against the pole, candle burning at my side. I work to stay in the present by focusing on the pain, but a wave of hopelessness crashes over me. The Professor had warned me, but I hadn't listened. What had I thought I would find here? Whatever it was, it wasn't this. The excitement of reaching this town had carried me all those miles over the past two days. Now I'm hurting far beyond my damaged leg.

Humanity had gone out with a blood-curdling scream, and there'd been no one left to sanitize their messy endings. I stare at the small bodies piled in the cage, mummified faces frozen in anguish. And then I picture my own corpse lying here with all the rest.

As I close my eyes, a phrase the Professor has been saying all my life, one I got sick of hearing, finally starts to sink in. *The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.* My purpose is reaching San Diego in one piece—not searching for survivors or scouring the remnants of civilization for scraps. Humanity might not

come back to a perfect world, but whatever we build together, it will sure as hell be better than what we left behind.



CHAPTER 21

SARAH

“Yeehaw!” Cat shouts as he drives out onto the sand, the trailer fishtailing behind us.

He parks backward on the beach, and beyond the windshield, a wall of green marches up the coast as far as the eye can see. It’s so dense I can’t even find the road that brought us here. There’s nothing manmade in sight. If I do manage to escape, eventually I’ll have to swim to shore, and the only place to hide will be among the trees.

I step out onto the sand, staring at the sea. If they let me in the water, how far will I be able to swim before B pulls his sidearm and starts shooting? Judging by how he gunned down those Draggers, he knows how to hit a moving target. I could try swimming underwater, but I’d have no idea when it’d be safe to come up for air.

My best bet is to get everyone to come in with me. That way, when I make a break for it, B will have to either swim back for his gun or chase me. Those bulky muscles might make him fast on land, but they’ll drag him down in open water. I doubt he’d be willing to drown just to keep me hostage.

The doors of the trailer swing open. I circle around back to find B and Cat pulling out assault rifles. Shit—they’d brought out those weapons on my first night. I’m reminded of the two Draggers B had murdered, their backs a mess of shredded flesh. Seeing the long barrels and mounted scopes now, I realize I’m going to have to swim farther and faster than I thought.

Josh joins us a moment later. He’s holding only three syringes.

B keeps a watchful eye on the tree line while Cat and I do our infusions. The cramps in my gut are already subsiding when Cat finishes minutes after me. He clutches at his stomach for a long while, then takes over for B on guard duty.

“We’re next,” B says to Josh, who’s standing nearby, kicking sand.

“I’m good.”

B gives him a strange look. “What do you mean, ‘you’re good’?”

“Did mine already.”

Josh hadn’t been gone more than five minutes. I’m fast, but even I can barely manage a full push in six and change, and that leaves me out of commission for at least a half hour.

B does his push solo, and when he’s recovered, Cat announces he’s going to take his preordained shit and starts waddling off toward the trees.

“Not in the jungle, you’re not,” B says.

Cat halts mid-stride. “Then where?”

“Other side of the wagon.” B reaches into the trailer, pulls out a foldable shovel, and hands it over. “Dig a hole and squat.”

“OK, but you won’t like the stink.” Cat unfolds the shovel and disappears around the vehicle. “Or the sound effects.”

Josh saunters over to me. “So, are we swimming or what?”

This is my opportunity to get everyone into the water.

“Sure, but honestly, I think we should all go,” I say, crinkling my nose. “The Humvee is starting to reek.”

“Don’t care,” B says. “Not swimming.”

“I hate saltwater,” Cat says from the other side of the vehicle, his words sounding strained. “Dries out ... my skin.”

“You guys sure?” I ask.

“Too risky,” B says to Josh. “If Draggers come from the brush, I don’t want to be stuck in the water. And we can’t trust her.”

Josh scoffs. “Don’t worry about her, I’m a strong swimmer.”

B shakes his head. “Whatever. You lose her, it’s on you.”

When he turns away, sunlight flashes off the scope of his rifle. I picture my head bobbing at the center of its crosshairs. If Cat and B don’t get into the water, do I even want to go through with this?

“Let’s go,” Josh says. He’s already stripping down to his boxers.

“Give me a second.”

I walk over to the rear driver's-side door, open it, and lean against the seat to remove my boots, socks, and vest. I'd hoped to do this with a little privacy while Josh was busy with his push. Hiding my boots under the Humvee would let me return for them later, long after they left, but with Josh watching me like a hawk, I place them on the floor of the vehicle. I begin heading toward the water in my black T-shirt and cargo pants. My plan is already falling apart. I won't get a mile into the jungle without shoes.

I pass Josh's nearly naked form, my bare feet itching to race across the sand and launch myself into the surf, but he grabs my arm and pulls me gently toward him.

"You aren't really going swimming like that, are you?"

"My clothes need a wash as badly as the rest of me. Two birds, one stone."

"Those pants are too heavy," he says. "They'll drag you down. Don't want you getting caught in an undertow."

If he's genuinely worried about me, then I'm a three-headed Dragger. I drum up a list of excuses to keep my clothes on—I have a terrible rash, I'm sensitive to the sun, I'm allergic to psychopaths—but I doubt Josh would care. All that matters now is getting away. I can figure out clothing and footwear later.

I hesitantly slide off the cargo pants but leave my shirt on. When I glance back to see if that's good enough, I notice Josh's boxers lying at his feet. My eyes skip to his face, which is grinning as he leans slightly forward with his hands on his hips. He wants me to look, but I'd sooner gouge out my eyes.

I jog into the water. It's cooler than I'd expected, with waves only a few inches high. After finding a spot where I can keep my head above the surface without my feet leaving the bottom, I turn back toward the shore and draw a bead on my captors. Cat is sitting on the back bumper of the trailer, his rifle standing upright beside him. B is squatting just a few feet away, shitting in a hole and looking in my direction. I sink a bit deeper into the water.

Josh swims over and stops within reach. I don't know how he's even functional if he skipped his infusion.

"You look lonely," he says.

I see his hands reaching toward my waist underwater, and I panic. “Why are you doing this to me?” I blurt out.

He pulls his hands back. “And what am I doing to you, exactly?”

“You set me up, threw me in a bag, and forced me into a Humvee with those two goons.”

“I asked you nicely to go on a scavenging mission. You shot me down.”

“That mission was bullshit, and you know it. If I’d said yes, where would we be right now?”

“Where I’d said we’d be—Brazil. It might not have been a scavenging mission, but close enough.” He clicks his tongue. “Your problem is you don’t know what you really want.”

“And you do?”

“I’ve been watching you for a long time, Sarah. Since before you came to work for me. I knew you wanted out of New Haven probably before you did.”

My body shudders as I remember all the times I’d been out in the jungle and got the strange feeling someone was watching me. I picture Josh lurking behind bushes, that same eerie smile on his face. Had he followed me out to the kapok? If he had, he would have heard me talking to the macaws high up in the tree, sharing my dreams and deepest fears.

“I might have wanted out, but not like this.”

He looks toward the horizon. “You don’t even remember when we met, do you?” he asks, sounding wounded.

I don’t respond.

“The flower,” he eventually says. “I don’t know how old I was, but I remember sitting in the dirt and crying. My father had just ... it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that you walked up to me with the biggest smile I’d ever seen and gave me that flower.”

I’m brought back to that precious time when the world had seemed right. My mother might have been gone, but Dad was doing his best to fill the void. He wasn’t just my best friend; he was my only friend. He’d take me for long nature

walks around the peninsula nearly every evening, and anytime he spotted a flower, he'd name it and list its medicinal properties, and I'd go darting into the jungle to retrieve it. He'd only allow so many on our dinner table, so I'd spend the following day handing them out to whoever I passed, thinking that if I didn't get rid of them, Dad might have a reason to skip our next hike. Somewhere along the line, I must have handed one to Josh.

"I was a child."

"So was I," he says defensively. "Since that day, we've both been through so much shit. With everything my father has done to me, I'm surprised I'm still sane. Our pasts have made us what we are today."

"And what am I exactly?"

"Scared shitless. You might be brave when you're out in the jungle, but you're terrified of making a real connection with someone. Ever since you handed me that flower, I thought if we could just come together, we could start over. You have no idea what that moment meant to me. I fell in love with you that day."

"Kidnapping someone won't make them love you," I say. "If you want to become a better man than your father, you can start by letting me go."

Not liking my reply, he ducks his head underwater. I quickly glance back at the shore, where B has joined Cat on the bumper. Now they're both staring at me. Josh's head pops back up, and he spits a mouthful of water in my direction.

"It's fine if you don't ever love me," he says, his voice now emotionless. "But you can't go back to New Haven, and you won't survive out here on your own. You need me."

"I know how to survive," I say. "Please, just let me go."

"You don't know the meaning of real survival. You always had a home to come back to. Hot meals waiting for you and NAD to get you through the day, all thanks to me and my father. To actually survive out here, you'll need resources and someone who doesn't have ... limitations."

What is he trying to say? The Fatigue is the only limitation I—wait. Three syringes. A full push in under five minutes. I can't believe it, but it's the only

explanation.

“NAD,” I say. “You don’t need it, do you?”

He casts an uneasy glance at Cat and B. “I didn’t say that.”

“You’re asking a lot of me, Josh. A little honesty might go a long way. Like you said, I can’t go back to New Haven. It’s not like I can tell anyone.”

He looks at me for a long moment before responding. “You’re right. No NAD required.”

And just like that, everything starts to fall into place. How I’ve never seen him looking tired like the rest of us, or struggling with the hangover after the few pushes I’ve seen him do. No sweating or lingering signs of pain. If he hasn’t been injecting NAD, what has he been putting into his veins?

“How is that possible?” I ask.

“Anything is possible when you have a father like mine.”

“Does that mean—”

“He has a cure? Yup. He’s had one all along, at least for certain people. And you could be one of them.”

I think back over the years of mutilating my forearms with needles. Of dreaming about my dead mother—a young woman with the Fatigue, struggling to survive a long, complicated labor, hoping to see her daughter’s face but eventually succumbing. She might still be alive if this dirtbag’s dad had deemed her worthy.

“Why would he hold that back?” I force out.

“My father uses science to fix his problems,” Josh says casually. “Take a look at yourself. You’ve been planning to run for years. Do you really think you’re the only one? He’s trying to restart civilization. How can he do that if everybody leaves?”

I can feel my body trembling in the tepid water. “If he has a cure, what was I doing in the jungle all those years? Was I collecting those plants just for show?”

His smile grows wider, as if he takes pride in his collection of secrets. “The Forager program has always been a crock of shit. What better way to control people than to give them a purpose?”

I can't fathom the kind of evil it would take to use a debilitating illness as a tool to maintain power, sitting back while an entire community suffers needlessly, jabbing needles into their veins day after day, for decades.

"You said I could be one of those people," I say. "Tell me how."

"Well, if you're good to me, maybe I'll give you what you want. The cure you need happens to be in my father's old lab."

"And then what? We live happily ever after?"

"Sure, if you're willing to open your mind and see how generous I can be. I know how much you love the beach. I was thinking we could find a nice house somewhere on the coast of California. Fish, make bonfires, maybe have a few kids. Or, if you get bored, we could travel. Go wherever you want, never needing a drop of NAD. All that matters to me is that you're happy."

There's an earnestness in his eyes that surprises me. He actually means it. Or at least he thinks he does. And in an instant I'm more scared than I've ever been.

"Is this your idea of a proposal?" I ask.

He barks out a laugh. "Don't be stupid. I just need a small token of goodwill. It must be clear to you by now that you never would've left New Haven alive without me. My father's teams would have run you down, or you would have died ... but I got you out. Kept you from having to marry Steve Henderson."

"That guy who works in the sewage plant?"

"That's the one. He was going to be your match." So that's what this is all about. King Caldwell was planning to pair me with someone else. "I got you out," he says again. "I think a thank-you kiss would be enough for now to show your appreciation."

The thought of his lips on mine makes me want to barf.

"This is a lot to process. You're going to have to give me time."

"I understand," he responds. He wades several feet back toward shore and then stops, as if I'd meant I just needed a quick minute to choose a whole new life. This guy is next-level crazy. Does he think playing his magical cure card justifies treating me like a bag of meat?

But his offer reminds me of what I'll have to live without if I manage to escape. The previous seventy-two hours have taught me a lot about the world—it's consumed by nature, a rough place to live even without the Fatigue. I've been so fixated on escaping that I haven't thought about the bigger picture. If I do get away, I'll be stranded in the jungle without any tools, food, or water. And even if I find those, I won't have NAD. I've never gone more than twenty-four hours without a push. I don't know how bad it can get.

It doesn't matter. Suffering is what I deserve. James is most likely rotting in a cell beneath Caldwell's lab because of my selfishness. I've let everyone in my life down, and dying a slow, painful death in the jungle would be a fitting punishment.

About fifty yards away, Cat is walking down the beach, looking at seashells. B is still sitting on the bumper, his head angled in my direction. Knowing Josh's endgame, I'm more ready than ever to take my chances. But I need to know how far B is willing to go.

Inhaling deeply, I dive beneath the surface and keep my eyes fixed on the wavering shapes above me. I start counting. If nothing happens by ten, I'll make my break for open ocean.

At six, a pair of muffled pops interrupt my count, followed by two small white lines of bubbles streaking through the water a few feet away. Josh shouts something I can't make out as he struggles through the water toward me. Two arms grab me and haul me up.

"Don't shoot!" Josh shouts, wrapping his arms around me and putting himself between me and the beach. "Why the fuck are you firing at her?"

"She went underwater," B shouts back. Even from a distance I can see his smile. "Relax. Those were warning shots. Now get back here. It's time to go."

"I'm so sorry," Josh whispers. "He's an animal. Are you OK?"

"I wasn't trying to escape," I sputter as I push him away.

"He'll pay for this, I promise."

I begin swimming toward shore, trying to calm myself. When I'm halfway there, Josh catches up and grabs me.

"This is the type of thing I'll be able to protect you from," he says. "Did you have enough time to think about what I said?"

"Your own people just shot at me," I say, searching my jumbled thoughts for an excuse. "I need more than your assurances that you can keep me safe."

"I know. But if you give me your answer, I can take care of B sooner rather than later."

I'm not sure what he's implying, and I don't want to know. Right now, all I care about is buying myself enough time to find another opportunity to escape.

"If you force me to decide right this second, my answer is no," I say. "You want me to be with you, but I don't even know you. Not really. All I know is that you kidnapped me. If you give me some space on this trip—and that means no more putting your head on my lap while we're sleeping ... it'll give me a chance to think. Do that, and I'll give you my answer in San Diego."

Josh's expression hardens—the anger of a spoiled little boy being told no. After a few interminable seconds, he takes a deep breath and grins.

"We'll have our whole lives together," he says. "I can wait a few more weeks. As far as what I told you, just keep it to yourself."

I will ... for now.

B is smiling from ear to ear as we pack our things, and he's still grinning when we get back on the road. Exhausted from the whole experience, I close my eyes and once again lean my head against the window. But I can't sleep. If what Josh said was true, and the Forager program had always been bullshit, the implications run deep. They go back to the very start.

Dad had told me about the early days, when people first started turning into Draggers. He and my mother had been among the original hundred-plus who were offered refuge in Caldwell's stateside lab. The "good doctor" was positive that he could find a cure for those who had already been changed, and since he was the one who had solved the Great Fatigue, my parents didn't hesitate to

accept. In an attempt to keep from changing themselves, they all received daily treatments made from blends of medicinal plants shipped up from Central and South America.

People around the world began turning at an alarming rate, and everyone in my parents' group lived on edge, waiting for the day when one of their own would lose their mind and attack the person next to them—but no one did. The scientists believed that one or more compounds in the blend was protecting them from whatever infection was changing people. So when things were at their absolute worst and Caldwell said the group needed to relocate to Costa Rica—where those medicinal plants grew in abundance—they were more than willing to go along. Their goal was to isolate the compounds that were protecting them and then harvest enough raw ingredients to prevent what remained of humanity from going mad.

My father's hands had been shaking when he described their harrowing trip to the airport. Draggers pounded on the doors of their twenty-car caravan, some climbing on top of their vehicles while others got pummeled beneath. He talked about seeing a National Guard unit get overrun and civilians fighting back with improvised weapons. At the airfield, they all piled into Caldwell's private jet and escaped, watching out the windows as the city burned below. They knew they would never come home.

Like the handful of other laborers in the group, my parents immediately began scouring the jungle for the plants on Caldwell's lists as the scientists worked tirelessly in the lab, pumping out one formula after another. My father said the scientists were some of the best in the world, and they would have triumphed if only they'd had more time, but the day quickly came when a treatment was no longer needed. The entire world had turned, according to Caldwell, except the lucky people of New Haven, who I'm starting to doubt were that lucky after all.

With no reason to keep foraging or testing more compounds, many of the group, like my mother, had become restless for lives of their own. Then a new disease came along. Caldwell had said it was a mutation of the Great Fatigue, and

one that Advitalon couldn't remedy. He introduced NAD to the community, which gave everyone enough energy to survive but also kept them tethered to New Haven. So the foraging resumed and the scientists went back to work, this time in search of a cure for the mutated Fatigue.

But if the early Forager program truly was pointless, Caldwell must have already known which parts of the blend had protected his group from turning into Draggers. He never had any intention of helping the rest of the world. Could he also have created the mutated Fatigue?

At first it seems impossible, but then I consider everything else he's done. If he had the ability to cure the Great Fatigue, it's not a stretch to think he could create a new form of the disease. He's always been a control freak, and with his little utopia at stake, the motivation would have been there.

Even now, farther from New Haven than ever before, I can feel his grip tightening around me.



CHAPTER 22

SETH

The mind is stronger than the body.

It's something the Professor once told me. I was saying it aloud before my tongue turned to sandpaper, and now the phrase repeats over and over in my head.

Today began with a simple goal—reach the next creek intersecting this backcountry highway. I'd battled an increasingly painful limp for every one of those twenty-one miles, all thanks to the holes the dog put in my leg, but I'd dragged myself over the sun-cracked blacktop regardless because I knew a blue line waited up ahead. The last one before the Dixie Mountains. The road atlas had promised me that much.

But now, standing on the bridge, hands clutching the guardrail, I gaze down at the creek some twenty feet below. Only it isn't a creek, not with its bed scorched dry by the summer sun. This ditch—and the other blue lines in the atlas—were supposed to be my lifelines to the mountains. This is the second one in a row without water.

I climb over the guardrail and down the embankment, then begin patting the bed for any sign of moisture. The storm had most likely dumped plenty of rain as it passed over this area, but the earth greedily swallowed it up, leaving no trace. Knowing it's most likely pointless, I begin digging a hole with a stick, hoping the fresh rain hasn't sunk too deep. I get two feet down and all I've managed to unearth is a blue beetle, rolled over onto its back and playing dead. A different beetle might have been a good sign water lay below, but these hard-shelled little buggers can survive on air moisture alone.

Scrambling back up to the road, I struggle to remain calm. I chugged my last bottle this morning, so I should be good for a few more hours. But what about tomorrow? I'm overwhelmed by the shape of the mountains in the distance as I think about carrying this weight of exhaustion up and over them.

The next one will have water, I tell myself, head pounding. It has to.

Problem is, the next one is on the other side of the mountains. That doesn't matter, though. I have no choice but to carry on. After checking my calf—still no sign of infection, thankfully—I continue forward, occasionally gnawing on scraps of smoked dogmeat. I'd found the beast lying dead on the grass when I emerged from the school, reclaimed my arrow from its shoulder, then carved and cured its flesh.

I reach the base of the mountains just as morning light touches the western slope. Familiar desert shrubs surround me, but thousands of feet above, an ocean of pines blankets the mountainside, with the occasional craggy red pillar reaching high above the treetops, glowing in the first light of day.

It's the most majestic sunrise I've ever witnessed—but I fear it's the last one I'll ever see. I pull one of my blankets tighter around my shoulders and begin heading upward on an endless series of switchbacks. As dehydration sets in, my whole body feels like it's coming apart. Even worse, the last time I tried to pee, I only produced a few drops of yellow soup.

I start setting markers for myself—reach that boulder a few hundred feet away, get to that bend in the road just up ahead—but eventually my fever rises, and I can't make myself focus on even the closest landmarks. So I turn my eyes to the ground, keep pushing forward, and let my thoughts wander.

For some reason, I start reliving a game the Professor played with me when I was young. He'd take me out into the desert, and we'd sneak up on rabbits. He was teaching me to hunt, I realized years later. Now those moments are stuck on a loop in my mind, replaying like the mantra was before. The approach, the rush, the burst of laughter. As the harsh sun begins beating down on me once again, the sound of us laughing takes up more and more space in my head. I wonder where all that happiness had gone.

I don't want to think about what my failure might mean for him. He knows the dangers of these desert roads. Thirty years ago, he traversed the hundreds of miles between San Diego and his home on the butte a dozen times with supplies. Only

the toughest creatures can survive out here, but he sent me anyway, on a journey that gambles with both our lives. If I die, it's just a matter of time until he starves.

Strangely, acknowledging that hard truth gives me some comfort. It was inevitable that I'd make this journey. If not now, then when the Professor passes. And it's not like those blue lines would get any thicker a year from now, or five, or twenty. I certainly wouldn't get any younger or stronger in that time. If these dry desert miles are going to take my life, better it happen now, while there's still a chance to heal the world.

I continue trudging up the switchbacks that lead toward a summit I know is just shy of ten thousand feet. With every mile, the landscape morphs into something new—scattered juniper, then oak, then towering pines gently swaying from side to side, their sharp, sweet scent heavy in the air. Hours pass in a delirium as a more alarming set of symptoms join my throbbing head and rapid heart rate. I've stopped urinating altogether, but plenty of fluids are coming out the back. I've lost count of the number of times I've had to squat on the side of the road and deposit precious water in the dirt. Whoever told the Professor that the mind is stronger than the body had obviously never suffered the crippling effects of dehydration.

Thoughts drift through my head like the breeze pulling through the surrounding trees, a sound that's maddeningly similar to water rushing over rocks. The cramps in my legs last longer each time they strike. Chills rake their fingers up and down my body. The ice pick buried since yesterday in the back of my neck feels as though it's been replaced with a log of mesquite. I thought for sure an infection from the dog bite would do me in. It seems I've found an equally miserable way to go.

The sun is standing directly overhead when I take my first fall. My knees rake across the gravel, but I hardly notice. It just feels so good to be off my feet. Instinctively, I lean to one side, wanting more than anything to roll over and go to sleep. Just before the tipping point, I hear a voice in my head. I don't know if it's

the Professor's or my own, but the words come through as clear as the desert sky above.

If you lie down here, you're never going to get back up.

I flop onto my backside instead. Then I just sit there, staring at the pine trees I had waited a lifetime to see, searching for the strength to carry on.

"Just a few more miles," I say aloud, hardly recognizing the croaking voice. "Then it's all downhill to the creek ... the mind is stronger than the body."

It feels like a lie—the creek, the mantra, the summit. Over every crest there will be another rise. Even if I manage to reach the top, I won't find water on the other side.

My eyes wander down the road, hoping to see some indication that there really is an end ahead. They find an old sign offering four numbers: 8,700. I stare at them, trying to wade through the sludge in my brain and figure out what they mean. Eventually, it clicks—it's my current elevation. The atlas listed the summit at 9,643. I try to do the math to figure out how many vertical feet I have left, but the calculation drowns in the fog. All I know for sure is that I don't have much farther to climb.

I attempt to get to my feet. The weight of my pack pulls me back down. I try again, this time getting onto my hands and knees first, but as soon as I get one foot under me, all the muscles in my lower body begin needling.

The body ... is stronger ... wait, the mind is ... the body ...

I stumble forward, falling flat onto my face. The heavy backpack rides up on my shoulders and presses my cheek against the scalding asphalt. I roll over to my back, take a few calming breaths, then use all my strength to get to a seated position. Another few breaths, then I slip off my pack and bow. If I have any chance of making it, I need to dump some weight.

I pull everything out, then begin placing anything that isn't essential for survival off to one side. I start with my old straight razor—doubt I'll live long enough to need another shave, but if I do, I'll gladly use my knife or live with a beard—and

then chuck the old copy of *Lord of the Flies* the Professor gave me. It's a start, but I need to shed pounds, not ounces.

I snatch up the plastic bag filled with what's left of the dog meat. The smell of it makes me want to retch, even though it has a day or two left before it turns too sour to eat. I put it in the maybe pile, knowing that if I do reach water, my hunger will come back.

The heaviest remaining items are my two wool blankets, my jar of riverbed sunscreen, and my trumpet. I pack away the jar and ditch one blanket, which I've been using as ground cover to keep my temperature from dropping during the night. The trumpet is harder to let go. I've never been in the wilderness without it.

I'm sitting there deliberating when movement catches the corner of my eye. I scan the opposite side of the road—where the lone figure of a man is standing on the shoulder, staring at me from the dimness of the dense tree line. The long tangle of hair and naked body bring me immediately back to attention. At first, I'm convinced it's just my dehydrated brain playing tricks on me, but then a gentle breeze brings his smell.

Their bodies are human, but their brains are not.

My first instinct is to lunge for the bow, which is lying on the pavement a few feet away. But the Ande looks young, maybe sixteen or seventeen. By the look of his wiry build, he could cover the ground between us in seconds.

One wrong step, and you'll be the one caught.

I doubt he would recognize the bow as a weapon, but even if I was standing, setting up a shot requires a lot of movement—picking it up, grabbing and nocking an arrow, drawing the string. I'm certain he won't just stand there and watch once I start moving. My best course of action is to stay calm and follow his lead.

He steps onto the road and circles around me, stringy hair swinging over the long, white scars that crisscross his emaciated chest and travel down the length of his arms. The jagged lines on his forearms are particularly distinctive—somewhere in his past, he'd tussled with something that had claws. The fact that he's standing

here is enough to make me second-guess going on the offensive, especially in my current condition.

Andes are creatures of instinct. When presented with something new or unexpected, all they know is fight or flight. But he isn't running or attacking. He just keeps walking calmly toward the other side of the road, farther from the trees he probably calls home. Is he starving like me and too weak to fight? He does look scrawny, but my body offers more meat than most animals in these mountains, and right now I'd be considerably easier to take down. And yet he's displaying no signs of aggression. His posture is relaxed, arms hanging loosely at his sides.

I dig through my muddled thoughts and try to analyze the situation. He's clearly alone, but most Andes his age don't last long without a pack. It means he's a survivor—patient and atypically smart. I bet he's been hunting me for hours now. Watching me from the forest as I stumbled up the road. Why risk injury attacking your prey when it's just a matter of time until it dies on its own?

Deciding the bow is too slow, I move one hand over my hip until it reaches the hilt of my knife. I pop loose the button securing the sheath and slide the blade free. I'm too weak to grapple. If I get lucky, maybe I can go for the heart or at least hit an artery before he comes down on top of me and goes for my neck with his teeth. I try not to think about how, even if I somehow survive this encounter, I'll be in even worse shape than I am now. But my head starts to feel hazy again, reminding me that I also can't afford to wait him out.

"Let's get on with it!" I shout, reigniting the fire in my throat.

The Ande leaps back, startled. My hand tightens around the handle of my knife. He takes two quick steps forward, drops down into a squat, and rests his elbows on his knees. From this new position, he continues to stare at me, a thin strand of saliva dripping from his chin onto the rocks at his feet.

His behavior is different from that of any Ande I've encountered. Could he be one of the special ones, cast out by his tribe? It would explain why he's alone, plus his strange actions. But the Professor said they were rare, maybe one in a thousand. I can't rely on that hope. He obviously wants something from me, but I

have no idea what. Am I food, as I initially thought, or does he see me as one of his own kind?

I scan my belongings scattered across the pavement. My eyes land on the plastic bag of dogmeat. Reaching slowly inside, I remove a scrap of jerky and hold it up. He tilts his head to one side. Reading it as a sign, I toss the food at his feet. He glances down to study it.

With his eyes off me for the first time, I lean to the side and grab the bow. With it firmly in my hand, I drop my knife to pick up an arrow as well. As I fumble with the weapon, awkwardly trying to nock the arrow from my seated position, the Ande looks up.

His expression is as strange as his actions, unlike anything I've seen on an Ande's face before. He pops back onto his feet and begins scurrying back and forth on the shoulder, eyes searching the ground. When he bends down and grabs a fist-sized rock, I take another stab at nocking the arrow. I've done this thousands of times, but never from a seated position ... or with blurred vision and trembling hands.

Most Andes hunt by throwing stones. Those that don't develop pinpoint accuracy usually starve. While this fellow has clearly seen better days, the fact that he's made it this far on his own means he's probably got a slingshot for an arm. As he lifts the rock and cocks back his arm, I search for the strength to roll to the side, somehow make myself a harder target, but my fevered brain short-circuits.

After all I've done to his kind, maybe it's fitting that this is the way I check out. I close my eyes and search for the Professor in my memories. For the laughter I remember hearing as we raced through the brush. For the happiness that was mine and mine alone, once upon a time.

The sound of the rock hitting wood makes me open my eyes. The Ande is leaning forward, arm falling from the end of his throw. But his body isn't aimed at me—it's angled off toward the woods to my left. What happens next seems to take a heartbeat and an eternity all at the same time.

First, my fingers unfreeze. I finally manage to nock the arrow. Pulling the string back takes all my strength. I try to find my mark, but my vision doubles. I see two of him, so I aim in the middle. Then, exhaling slowly, I release.

The Ande doesn't move as he casually watches my arrow sail several feet over his head. In the moment it takes me to ready a second shot, he does the last thing I expect. His brow inquisitively furrows, then he turns and makes a beeline for the forest. I track him as he goes, but my vision is getting worse. Both he and his double disappear into the woods.

Not good. If he isn't special, he'll have a group, and they'll come back in force. And that simply isn't a risk I can afford to take.

I climb to my feet and limp into the forest after him. Moving among the towering trunks is surprisingly easy at first, with adrenaline keeping me upright and no pack weighing me down. I scan the trees as I hurry through them, searching for his filthy body among all that green.

Within seconds, though, all the trunks and branches start blurring together. My vision goes fuzzy and the world spins violently. I command my legs to stop moving, but my body doesn't listen. Dots pulse in my vision as a wave of nausea comes on. I collapse to my hands and knees, landing on a soft bed of sticky needles. A stream of stomach acid rockets out of my mouth.

I focus on my breath, but the spinning won't stop. My eyes dart from one trunk to the next, searching for any sign of movement. Unlike in the desert, there's movement everywhere. Branches sway in the breeze, birds flutter beneath the canopy, and squirrels skitter up and down the trees. The constant motion brings on another bout of heaving.

It dawns on me that I'm an even easier target in here than I was on the road. I should turn around, head back, but I hear something strange out among the trees—it sounds like a babbling stream. Could just be the wind ... but the temperature has also dropped several degrees, and the humidity seems higher.

I grab my bow and arrow and attempt to get to my feet. The flashing dots return. This time they force me down onto my stomach as my vision narrows,

going dark around the edges like an old photograph.

The last thing I see is the Ande standing behind a tree up ahead, another fist-sized rock held in his upraised hand.



CHAPTER 23

SARAH

“I’ve got to get the fuck out of this vehicle!” B shouts, breaking an hour-long silence.

It might be the first thing he’s ever said that I agree with. For seven days, I’ve been stuck in this tin can. I doubt we’ve spent more than an hour total outside the Humvee, stopping only to relieve ourselves and fill up our water tanks. B hasn’t come out and said it, but I’m starting to suspect he has someone in Trenton he’s eager to get back to. That poor, poor woman.

Our original route passed through Mexico City, but we changed our minds after Guatemala City, a similarly large urban area with better-paved roads. Thousands of cars had been abandoned in the streets. For a girl raised in the jungle, it was the most bizarre thing I’d ever seen. It took us two days to cross twenty miles, leaving our beefy front bumper looking like a painter’s palette. After that, B and Josh appointed me navigator so they could sleep while Cat drove. It got me into the passenger seat for a short spell, allowing me to pay close attention to how the Humvee functions, in case I ever have an opportunity to get behind the wheel.

I took us along a coastal route and have spent the past several days viewing a post-apocalyptic wasteland through the inch-thick glass of the side window—Acapulco, Manzanillo, and Puerto Vallarta. I even glimpsed the occasional slice of ocean between the thick trees and crumbling high-rises. Every minute of every day, I’ve felt the pressure of time. While Josh allowed me this journey to think about his proposal, it was just a courtesy. When we reach our destination, turning him down won’t be an option.

The map comes flying over the passenger seat, landing in Josh’s lap. He pulls his forehead away from the side window and looks at it drowsily. “What do you want me to do with this?”

“Find us a safe place to stop,” B returns. “I need to stretch my legs.”

Josh scoops a hand beneath the map, then flicks it over to me and again rests his head against the glass. In seconds, he's snoring.

I spread it out across my lap and begin correlating the twists and turns in the road ahead with our current position. Following roads in a vehicle is harder than following paths on foot, but I think I have a fairly good idea of where we are—still buried in the jungle, but less than an hour from the beach city of Mazatlán.

For days a plan has been materializing. Despite our daily NAD infusions, sitting in the Humvee nonstop has made our Fatigue progressively worse. Cat, having done the lion's share of the driving, seems the most worn down. Josh, on the other hand, seems almost happy. He's been doing injections to avoid arousing suspicion, but since learning he doesn't need it, I've started paying closer attention to his syringes. They look nearly identical to the ones the rest of us use, but he gets them out of a separate box.

I remember the hint of suspicion on B's face when Josh passed on his infusion back at the beach. I'm guessing the burly soldier wouldn't react well if he learned that Caldwell had healed himself and his son while leaving the rest of us to suffer. A dozen times I almost came out and told him, but decided it wasn't the best approach. He may not like Josh, but he trusts Caldwell's spawn more than he trusts me. He'd probably assume I was making up stories to stir up conflict. A much better idea would be for B to figure out the truth on his own, and that means I need some time alone with the Humvee. This next pit stop could be my chance.

After searching the map for ten minutes, I find what seems to be an ideal location.

"I'll give you directions as we get close," I say to Cat.

His bloodshot eyes appear in the rearview mirror. "How far?"

"Forty-five minutes at most."

He doesn't respond as he turns his attention back to the road.

"Where the hell did you take us?" B asks.

We're parked, all of us looking out the windshield at what was supposed to be a bridge. Perhaps it once was, but now it's just patchy asphalt laid atop massive boulders lined up in the shallow waters. It's less than a hundred yards long, ending at a small island. One side features a long stretch of white sand, which transforms into jungle before rising into a hill that must be at least sixty feet tall. A winding trail cuts through the vegetation all the way to the summit.

"It's safer than parking on the side of the road," I say. "Once we get to the island, we'll see any Draggers that cross the bridge."

"Think we can make it?" B asks Cat.

Cat looks like a zombie, his eyes half closed. Instead of responding, he shrugs and stomps on the gas. As the Humvee launches out onto the narrow land bridge, all I can see out my window is water below us and the trailer kicking up sparks behind, its axle grinding over chunks of broken asphalt. Just as I'm certain the whole thing is about to go over the side, the tires sink into the island beach. Cat carefully drives halfway down, then turns around so the front grill is pointed toward the bridge.

We all spill out onto the sand. As usual, Cat and I do our infusions first while Josh and B stand guard. While I'm figuring out how to get everyone away from the vehicle, I push down too quickly on the plunger, and pain explodes in my gut. Clenching my teeth, I pull one of our three towels from the backseat, lay it out on the sand a few feet from Humvee, and curl on my side.

I'm nearly recovered when Josh and B finish their pushes, but I remain curled, waiting for them to wander off.

"Where the fuck is my knife?" Josh blurts out.

As I hear him rummaging around in the backseat, my pulse spikes. I quickly close my eyes, pretending to be asleep.

"Good thing your father's our boss," B says. "If someone in my squad loses a weapon, everyone gets a free shot at his face."

"Shut up," Josh snaps back. "Sarah, have you seen my knife?"

I keep my eyes shut, but a moment later a boot lands on my hip and rolls me onto my back. Josh is standing above me, looking down.

“What?” I say.

“My knife. Have you seen it?”

On my forehead, I feel sweat start to bead. “If I had, I probably would’ve used it.”

B snorts with laughter. “Don’t try to hide beneath her skirt,” he says. “So, who gets the first punch, me or Cat?”

“Fuck you all,” Josh returns, then storms down the beach toward the bridge.

“Where you going, Joshy boy?” B calls out as he starts hurrying after him, still chuckling.

This couldn’t be going better. Just one more to go.

Propping myself up, I glance over at Cat, who’s sitting slumped over on the rear bumper.

“You’ve been driving for what, thirteen hours?” I ask.

“Fuck if I know. I barely noticed that push.”

“Maybe a walk would do you some good.”

“I’ve been thinking about what you said the other night.” He comes over and sits in the sand by my blanket. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about.”

Great. I’m all about gathering more information, but this might be the only time I can get alone with the Humvee. “About your parents having holes in their memories?”

“Have you ever heard of anything like that in New Haven?”

I shake my head. “Is there anything you didn’t tell me?”

“I told you most of it. The only thing I left out was our dispatch station.”

“What’s that?”

“A room full of shortwave radios.”

“Like the one on the boat?”

“No, I’m talking about a more powerful kind. One that can reach across the world.”

“If there really is no one else out there, like Caldwell always says, why would you need one of those?”

He shifts uncomfortably. “I think that might be how Caldwell found my folks. It makes sense, but what doesn’t is their missing memories.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “Are you saying there are other people out there?”

“How should I know?”

He’s holding something back—I can see it on his face. “Has anyone new shown up in Trenton over the years?”

He nods hesitantly. “When I was young, maybe twelve, we lost a whole squad out in the jungle. A few months later, twenty new members showed up. All with the same holes in their memories. I thought they might have been from New Haven. That they’d been brainwashed or something.”

“And how old are you now?” I ask.

“Thirty.”

“So those new people showed up about eighteen years ago?”

“I guess that’s about right.”

I recall my father wandering off into the jungle with Caldwell and a dozen other men. They had obviously been catching Draggers, but those Draggers had never come back through our gate. Just a few weeks ago, I would have laughed at the thought of turning Draggers back into people, but after what Josh told me, it doesn’t seem out of the question.

Cat stands up. “You know something, don’t you?”

If I tell him what I know, or at least what I *think* I know, where will it get me? It will start a conversation and ruin my plan. What I need is to get him away from me, and I have to choose my words carefully.

“Look, I don’t have any information that can help you,” I say. “Caldwell is a shady son of a bitch, we all know that. But as far as what he’s been up to, I haven’t a clue. I’ve lived in New Haven my whole life, and before that warehouse, he’d only said a handful of words to me. If you want information about your parents,

you've come to the wrong place. I don't mean to blow you off, but I really need to get some rest. You might have done most of the driving, but I've been sleeping on the floor."

"Whatever," he says. Without another word, he heads for the path up the hill.

I'd like to digest this new information and place another piece into the puzzle, but there's no time. I wait for Cat to disappear up the path, then look back down the beach for any signs of Josh and B, but all I see are their footprints. Moving around to the driver's seat, I pull the lever to pop the rear hatch as I've watched my captors do a hundred times. Then I walk back and reach past the rows of steel ammo boxes containing rations and NAD to the farthest box on the right—the one Josh always pulls his infusions from. I remove a syringe and study it closely. The darker fluid also has a slightly different weight and viscosity, and there's a small red sticker on the side that's missing from ours.

After cleaning my right forearm, I find one of my few remaining healthy veins and slip the needle in. As I ease down on the stopper, a cool sensation spreads up my arm, but that's all. There's no pain, not even a stomach cramp. It's probably just dyed saline. If B shoots this stuff into his arm, he'll know within seconds that something is wrong.

I begin moving syringes from Josh's box to those the rest of us use, carefully removing the red dots with my fingernail. I place several right on top in the frontmost boxes, then pile on a few more in case the rough road jostles them.

With that out of the way, I go down to the water to wash myself and calm my nerves. I stretch out on the towel, close my eyes, and scan my mental list of what I'll need to grab when the shit hits the fan. First, a box of NAD. One of the rear boxes, the ones I didn't mess with. A gun would be nice, but I doubt they'd pick now to stop locking the trailer. No, my best bet will be to grab a box of NAD and maybe some MREs and make my escape.

My pulse eventually slows and my mind stops reeling. I feel myself drifting off toward sleep—which, of course, is when someone starts screaming. A shrill, terrified sound that makes me sit bolt upright.

Back down the curving beach, Josh is sprinting toward me, his face a ghostly white. Behind him is B—the brute, the monster, the man who kills Draggers for fun—charging like a bull that’s just been branded, his assault rifle swinging wildly from the strap around his shoulder. All the toughness has drained from his face.

“Get in the vehicle!” B is shouting. “Get in the fucking vehicle!”



CHAPTER 24

SETH

Damp grass tickles my nose, and the sound of water gurgles in my ears. My tongue feels like an overripe peach. It's difficult to think through the pounding in my skull, but as my eyes crack open, I realize I have much bigger concerns.

The Ande is squatting on the other side of a small stream, staring at me in the dim light of early evening, a rock clutched in his fist. My back is leaning up against a tree. Had he dragged me to his killing ground and propped me up, like animals sometimes do with half-dead prey? He doesn't look startled or angry to see me awake—what is he waiting for?

I peel my eyes off him and search for my bow. It's nowhere to be found. I slide my right hand down toward my belt, going for my knife. His eyes track my movement beneath those droopy lids, but he makes no move of his own. I feel a glimmer of hope ... until my hand finds the empty sheath. For a moment I think he might have taken it, that his simple mind somehow figured out what it was. Then I recall discarding it in the street when I went for my bow. Another mistake in the series of bad decisions that led me here.

"Fuck you," I say in a hoarse whisper. It earns me a slight tilt of his head. "I know you're going to kill me, but not before I get a drink."

I crawl forward, triggering a cramp in my lower back. When I wince in pain, the Ande bellows wordlessly but remains on his side of the stream. I'm done trying to interpret his strange actions. Struggling through the pain, I pull myself forward until my hands are resting on cold, wet pebbles. I don't bother looking up to see what he's going to do. I simply dip my mouth in, resisting the temptation to take huge gulps even though I fully expect a rock to come down on the back of my head.

Frigid water flows down my burning throat. Each sip is a blessing. I expect to get three or four drinks at best. It quickly turns into ten. When I try for a bigger swallow, I choke, coughing and gasping as I push myself back toward the trees.

The Ande is still standing on the opposite bank, but now his feet are spread wide and his arm with the rock is cocked back. He's much closer to me than he was out on the road. Despite instinct telling me to turn away, I force my eyes to stay trained on his. I'm not sure what I hope to see. Some sign of compassion or pity? The same things I feel for the rabbits I find suffering in my snares before I break their necks? All I see is dull, animal hunger.

With one last grunt, he throws the rock. It hurtles through the air ... and sails yards over my head, thudding against something soft above me. For a second, I can't process how he missed by so much from such a short distance. Then the rock thumps down beside me, followed by a squirrel, its tiny head pulverized.

The Ande stomps through the creek, bare feet splashing, and squats down at my side, mere inches from me. He grabs the squirrel by the tail and drives a calloused finger into its anus. With one powerful tug, it tears straight down the middle. A second later, he's ripped away the fur, pulled out most of the bones, and torn the squirrel into several strips of pale pink meat. He pops one into his mouth, where it hangs absurdly as he chews. He tosses one of the others onto my chest.

For several seconds, I just sit there, staring at him. But it's impossible to misinterpret his gesture. An Ande, one of the creatures I've hunted for most of my life, is offering me food. He's staring at me as if he can hear my thoughts. His eyes no longer represent a dull void to me, but instead possess a curiosity and loneliness I can't fully comprehend ... yet understand perfectly. The scars on his chest and arms now speak less of a battle with some ferocious beast and more of the cruelties of his former packmates. I can't help but see the similarities between us. He'd been cast out and left behind by his people. I'd never even known mine. But he's surviving, and so am I.

He reaches toward me, using a long finger to nudge the scrap of meat toward my mouth. While the Professor warned me about raw meat and parasites, I feel duty-bound to accept his token of goodwill. I take a bite of the slimy meat and swallow without chewing, hoping to lessen my chances of puking it back up. But

the moment it hits my stomach, nausea washes over me. I dive for the creek, no longer concerned about making sudden movements. After another ten or fifteen drinks, life starts flooding back into me. I push myself out of the water and lean back against the tree.

“Thank you,” I say, feeling foolish the moment the words leave my mouth. I don’t expect him to respond, but he gives me three harsh grunts and then places a bloody hand on my leg.

I hadn’t realized just how isolated I’d felt since Henrieville. It wasn’t just the fight with the dog ... no, I’d gone there hoping to find a piece of the old world, but all that remained was leathery bones. I’d left my home searching for a new life. Now I’ve found a companion in the one place I never expected. I close my eyes again. The Ande continues munching on squirrel meat at my side.

Morning sunlight pierces my eyelids, pulling me from a deep sleep. My head still pounds, but I’m worlds better than I was.

The Ande has been busy while I was out. A row of dead squirrels lines the other side of the creek, though the Ande himself is nowhere to be seen. Probably out hunting, whereas I should be retrieving my things, filling up my bottles, and getting back on the road.

I follow my own tracks back to the highway. On the way, I find my bow and scoop it up. When I reach the pavement, birds scatter. Scraps of dog meat are everywhere. Feeling somewhat revitalized, I repack most of the things I’d hastily discarded the night before, including the second blanket and the copy of *Lord of the Flies*. When I finish, all that’s left is my trumpet, sitting on the far side of the road. I walk over and stare down at it. Its shiny brass curves no longer give me a sense of security. Is it a tool? A weapon? No, it’s something worse. With a weapon, you can take a life, but it’s quick and clean. With the trumpet, I had taken a device designed to make music and instead made it roar with my breath—a dragon that didn’t just sow fear but also brought about a slow, painful death.

I examine the instrument for a bit longer. Then I pick it up, take a breath, and put the mouthpiece to my lips. When I blow, it isn't to blast out a horrible, tuneless squeal. I try to remember how playing used to feel back when it wasn't a tool or a weapon—back when it was more like a paintbrush or pen.

The first few notes sputter out in a jumbled mess. After a few do-overs, I hit my stride. One of the Professor's favorite songs, "Sweet Caroline," starts cascading down the mountainside. It's rough, but it gets cleaner as the melody fills me up. It brings me back to my early years, before the Professor told me how Andes had murdered my parents and I'd been filled with hate. About a minute in, I'm no longer thinking about what my fingers are doing. I'm just hurling the song into the wide-open sky.

Hearing a noise behind me, I stop and turn. The Ande is watching me from the side of the road, his eyes wide, flabbergasted by what I've been doing. I step toward him. He takes a fearful step back, eyes flicking down to the trumpet in my hand. I follow his gaze, again studying the shiny metal. I toss the instrument as far as I can into the forest. It clanks against a tree, and then it's gone. Strangely, I feel lighter.

After a few minutes of trying to interpret each other, we return to the stream. The Ande starts dismembering the nine squirrels he's caught. It's clear he has no problem getting protein, but from the looks of his emaciated body, he could use some more nutrients and carbohydrates. I wish I knew more about edible plants in the forest. All the vegetation up here is foreign to me—I should see if I can get him to follow me down into the desert. In less than a day, I could show him a dozen different plants to eat.

He pulls meat from the bones and starts tossing me scraps. I'd eaten it raw the night before, but I'd rather not tempt fate just to show solidarity. I start searching the area for a good spot to dig a small pit. Andes tend to fear fire, but given that he's a special one, I hope it won't scare him off.

He follows me through the forest, eying me curiously as I pick up sticks and pieces of dried bark before stripping their fibers. He watches as I build a small

teepee of twigs and pull my tools from my pack. The first time I strike the flint against steel, I have to stifle a laugh. The Ande's lips form a perfect "O," his eyes searching the air for the vanishing sparks. It's not until the kindling bursts into flame that he lets out a grunt and leaps over the creek, eyes brimming with fright. Not just fright, but recognition. He's seen fire before—and he seems to know that water is his only protection.

He doesn't cross back over until the smell of cooking meat reaches his nostrils. We might not be able to communicate with words, but I understand the look in his eyes perfectly well. I pull one stick out of the fire, blow on the meat, then stretch it toward him. In one quick movement, he grabs the skewer out of my hand; in another, the meat's off the stick and in his mouth.

We devour all nine squirrels, including the bones, which I roast over the coals until they're brittle. After we finish, he gets to his feet, picks up a rock, and disappears into the forest. Guess he's still hungry. I take a few minutes to fill up my bottles, then splash some water onto my face. My belly is full and my fever is down. I lean back on the cool earth beside the creek, wrap myself up in one of my blankets, and close my eyes, just for a second.

Next thing I know, my new friend is shaking me awake. He looks terrified. When I bolt upright and the blanket falls away, he seems relieved. I guess he's never seen a blanket before. Must have thought I'd been buried alive. Special as he might be, the gap between us is still immense.

I look at his naked body and wonder how he's survived on his own. Even in the sunlight of a late summer morning, it's chilly up here by the mountain stream. I grab the blanket off the ground and slowly drape it over his shoulders. The first two times, he shrugs it off. On the third try, he gets it, tugging it tight around his body.

"That's yours," I say, but by the way he's clutching the corners, I doubt he had any intention of giving it back.

As I watch him clean a few more squirrels, my imagination wanders. I see the two of us walking the road ahead together. As we traverse the desert, I teach him a

few words. He shows me how to hunt with rocks. On the first night, we make camp, and I let him try out the flint and steel, guiding him in making a fire of his own. Our friendship will come with its share of challenges, but one thing is certain—I'll never run out of squirrel meat.

As he fiddles with the blanket, I lean back against the trunk, and the Professor finds his way into my thoughts again. His voice, reassuring me that Andes are just animals, explaining how best to capture them. I find myself wondering how he'll react when I show up with a special one by my side, first in line for his miracle cure. Will he welcome this new specimen with open arms or simply see him as another means to an end?

Just as before, I wonder why. Everything the Professor does has a purpose, a hidden meaning that will be revealed twelve steps down the line. Is his goal to change the Andes back into humans truly altruistic, or does he just want to get even with the man who'd stolen everything from him?

I watch the Ande study the hem of the blanket, and it occurs to me that I don't really care what the Professor's true motivations are. This strange creature—he's the closest thing I've ever had to a friend. And I want to help him find a better life.

I stow my things, then pull the pack over my shoulders and begin slowly walking away. Before I get too far, I stop and turn back, waving for the Ande to follow. I figured I would need to coax my new friend into joining me, but he immediately starts trotting along behind, clutching the blanket around his bony shoulders. I'm curious to see his reaction to the clothing we're bound to find in the empty houses on the journey ahead. There are so many things to teach him, I don't know where to begin.

I tread the pavement while he walks along the shoulder. We reach the summit in the late afternoon, giving us a spectacular view of the desert beyond. I throw him a grin, but he looks uncertain. That's all right. The desert below is my world, not his. I put a hand on his back, trying to reassure him that he can trust me to help him survive down there, just like he helped me up here.

But, as we dip below the tree line, he starts behaving strangely, walking with a submissive posture and glancing all around as if he expects an attack. He keeps his shoulders angled slightly toward the mountain, as though he doesn't even want to acknowledge the desert's existence several thousand feet below. He was sporadically grunting for most of our walk. Now he's gone silent.

I look out at the expanse, wondering what it means to him. Is that where his former pack gave him those scars?

As evening sets in, he begins stopping every hundred yards or so. I usually don't notice until I'm well ahead, and I have to walk back to him and nudge his shoulder to get him moving again. This goes on for an hour or so, until one time no amount of prodding can persuade him to continue down the mountain. But the sun has already dipped below the horizon. This is as good a place as any to settle in for the night. Maybe he'll feel better in the morning.

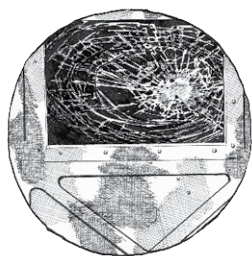
I lay my blanket on the ground. He does the same, watching intently as he mimics my movements. I roll myself up in mine, trying to demonstrate how to do it. But my friend doesn't seem tired. He's sitting on his blanket, staring at me with sad, uncertain eyes. When he knows I'm watching, he gestures with one hand back up the mountain. His mouth opens and closes, as if he wants to form words. I can sense his synapses trying to fire, struggling to send information down those microscopically thin wires so he can explain himself.

I'm not sure what to do. Maybe it's the tense glint in his eyes or the posture that hasn't relaxed since we started walking downhill, but the depth of his fear becomes clear. He feels as exposed on this side of the mountain as I had walking up the other.

I aim a finger of my own downhill, and we sit there, having our silent argument, for several long seconds. Finally, I sigh and lower my arm. Then, unsure exactly why I'm doing it, I pull the knife from my belt. I turn it around so I'm holding the blade and extend it toward him. He stares at it for a moment but doesn't accept the offering. Instead, he lies down on his blanket and pretends to go to sleep. I know he's pretending because the tension never leaves his body.

I lie down again and roll onto my side, giving him privacy. He wants nothing to do with the desert below, and I can't force him to go—not down into that wasteland, not to Las Vegas or San Diego or anywhere beyond. It's another hour at least before I finally drift off to sleep.

When I wake the next morning, the empty blanket lies next to me in the waxing light. Everything is the same as it was the night before—except now, marking the dirt on the side of the road, a set of bare footprints lead back up the mountain.



CHAPTER 25

SARAH

Josh and B hurtle toward me.

I sit up on the towel, scanning the beach for a threat. Nothing. Just the two men, still fifty yards away, their long strides kicking up clouds of sand.

A Dragger stumbles around the curve of the shore behind them. Then two ... then three. B starts pulling ahead of Josh, but my attention is no longer on them. It's on the dozen or more Draggers now appearing from behind the hill. I'm confused. Why would an armed, battle-hardened soldier be fleeing in terror from a handful of skinny Draggers?

But the creatures just keep coming. A massive wave of them pours around the hill and over the beach, their bare legs straining as they sprint after the men.

That gets me on my feet and running for the Humvee. I jump into the backseat, slam the door shut, and stare out the glass. Most of the Draggers are only armed with smallish rocks, but as their full numbers come into view, I recognize that it doesn't matter how many bullets we have. This isn't just a large pack. It's an army.

My finger finds the lock to my door, but I hesitate, calculating the consequences of this simple action. If I lock B and Josh out, the Draggers will tear them apart, giving me a front-row seat to one of my problems being solved. But will I live long enough to enjoy the freedom? While Josh described the Humvee as a tank, this many Draggers might be able to bash their way inside. Even if they can't, I'll be trapped in here for however long they decide to hang around, unable to reach our food, water, and NAD stored in the trunk. My finger slides off the lock as a terrible thought occurs to me—*What if Cat has the keys?*

I look up the winding path. He's nowhere to be seen. When I turn back to B and Josh, who have almost reached the vehicle, I'm drawn to a lone Dragger at the head of the pack. It's a female, her long hair wound up in an elaborate mash of mud and pigment. Her shoulders are covered with rough garments stitched together from animal hides, and in one hand she holds a long stick above her head, topped with colorful feathers hanging from woven fibers. As B and Josh close in

on the Humvee, she seems to examine the vehicle, barks in a way that sounds like a command, and then slows down. The other Draggers race past her.

B's body slams into the Humvee, then he rips open the driver's-side door and dives inside. Josh isn't far behind. He's headed directly toward the rear door with Draggers trailing just a dozen feet behind him. I reach forward again to hit the lock, but I'm a half second too late. He throws open the door and flattens me against the seat as he scrambles over me, sobbing like a child.

Josh crawls to the far side, leaving me staring through the open door at the enraged face of a Dragger rushing toward me. He's so close I can see the scars on his face. I push myself up and yank on the door's handle, but it's only halfway closed when the Dragger thuds into the heavy steel, slamming it shut. He immediately starts beating on the glass with filthy fists. I don't know if they can open doors, but I lock the damn thing regardless.

"The doors!" I shout.

After a moment's hesitation, B starts locking those up front while Josh just sits there, clutching his arms to his chest. I dive over him and push the lock down on his side just as Draggers start to encircle the vehicle. Within seconds, the interior is eerily dark, the windows blacked out by flesh. Josh begins emitting a pathetic whine, but I can barely hear him over the feet stomping on the roof. The Humvee starts rocking as B fumbles with the keys.

Light floods through the window at my side. And then I see her—the strange Dragger covered in pelts. She's pointing her stick directly at me. Behind her, a male Dragger shuffles forward carrying a boulder roughly the size of a human head. He heaves it into the air, and the huge stone crashes against my window, spiderwebbing the thick glass.

"Start this fucking thing!" I scream. B finally manages to insert the key and the engine rumbles to life with what is quite possibly the best sound I've ever heard.

He hits the gas, but the tires only spin on the sand, the rear end drifting from side to side. The Draggers on the roof are stomping harder now. I don't know how many are up there, but it's a metric shit ton.

“Too much weight!” B growls as the tires struggle to find traction.

I rack my brain for a way to force the Draggers to disperse, then a piece of advice I’ve heard over and over since kindergarten pops into my head—Draggers hate loud noises.

“The horn,” I shout. “Press the fucking horn!”

B slaps a palm to the steering wheel, and the horn blares. A moment later, the Draggers start clearing off the hood, allowing us to see past the front bumper. The tires catch and we lurch forward across the sand, but a few of the Draggers don’t get out of the way in time. The front bumper mows them down, the tires bumping over their bodies like pieces of driftwood, their skulls popping. Eventually, we gather some speed. The Draggers ahead scatter.

We’re going twenty miles per hour when we reach the land bridge. The tires skid as we hit the loose sand, the trailer drifting dangerously close to the sides.

“Slow down,” I shout. B doesn’t seem to hear. If anything, our speed increases. If we get pulled in, I’m swimming straight out to sea.

We race out onto the opposite beach, and within seconds we’re back on the road. As B stomps harder on the gas, I glance back at the island where the Draggers swarm. I’ve been going to thousand-person gatherings in Center Square since I was a kid, but those look like tea parties in comparison.

That’s not the strangest part, though. None of them are following us over the bridge. They’re lined up along the beach like a tribe of warriors protecting their camp, and at the center of them all, standing perfectly still, is the female Dragger with the feathered staff. I remember something Cat said—that they only hunted “anomalies.” I can’t think of anything more anomalous than her.

My eyes drift up the hill, and my stomach drops. I had forgotten about Cat—we all had. He’s standing atop the hill’s narrow peak, a tiny figure desperately waving his arms.

“Stop!” I shout, but B isn’t listening. I reach forward and slap his shoulder. After spotting my face in the rearview—and seeing what I’ve been looking at across the bridge—he hammers the brakes.

“What are you doing?” Josh shouts. “We need to get the fuck out of here.”

“Cat’s alive,” I return. “He’s at the top of the hill.”

Josh peers at the island. “It’s too late for him,” he says. “B, I order you to get us the hell away from here.”

I look back at B, whose eyes are saucers in the mirror. The engine begins to rev.

“Just calm down,” I say. “The Draggers didn’t follow us over the bridge. We’re safe here. We have time to figure this out.”

I look back to the beach, where the Dragger Queen is no longer looking in our direction. She’s turned her attention upward, toward the top of the hill. She lifts her staff into the air, and immediately her throngs of followers begin rushing along the beach toward the path, going after the final intruder.

B evidently sees what I’m seeing. “Josh is right. He’s done.”

“He’s your friend,” I say.

“We’re not going back over that bridge.”

I look at Cat standing at the apex. Judging by the speed of the ascending Draggers, they’ll reach him in a matter of seconds. He can’t go back down the path, and I’m not sure what’s waiting for him on the other side. The narrowness of the island suggests a long drop into the ocean ... or down onto a beach. Whatever happens, jumping seems better than facing the oncoming horde.

“Just fucking do it,” I say under my breath.

As if somehow hearing me, he runs to the far side of the hill and disappears. I hold my breath as Draggers flow over the summit.

“Did he seriously jump?” Josh asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “We need to check to see if he made it.”

“That must be a sixty-foot drop,” B says. “He’s probably mulch on the beach. We need to get out of here.”

“Agreed,” Josh says.

I’m not sure why, but my fear turns to anger. Having one less prison guard should seem like a windfall. But right now, I don’t feel like a prisoner. I feel like a human being.

“Give me a minute.” I grab the map off the floor and spread it out on my lap. “If he landed in water, he’s going to try to swim to the mainland. The closest spot would be ... here,” I say, holding up the map. “This road goes right along the mainland beach. We have to try.”

B is already shaking his head. “You see how many there were? We were lucky to get away. If they come after—”

“They aren’t leaving the island,” I say, still collecting my thoughts. “I think it’s their home.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Josh asks. A bit of color has returned to his cheeks, but his voice is shaky. “Draggers don’t have ‘homes.’”

I can’t tell him about the camp with the jaguar skull. That I’d seen evidence suggesting some Draggers can think and work together and even make fire. I glance back at the island, once again finding the winding path, cutting so cleanly through the brush toward the top. How had I not seen it before?

“Look at that path,” I say. “We’ve all seen what the jungle does. It consumes entire towns, every street. But there’s not a bush or blade of grass growing on it.”

“So what?” Josh says.

“I know the jungle better than either of you. Keeping a path like that means feet are walking it every day. They were protecting their home. That’s why they didn’t chase us. If Cat landed in water and reaches the mainland, we can save him.”

“B, get us out of here,” Josh says.

I glare at him with disgust. “You’re a real hero. No wonder Dad’s so proud.”

His expression goes cold. Without warning, he whips his hand out and slaps me hard enough to make my ears ring. I fall back into my seat.

“I’m in charge here,” he bellows. “B, get us moving!”

B doesn’t take the command well. He spins in his seat and locks eyes with Josh, not saying a word—I’m not sure he can even open his mouth with his jaw that clenched. Within seconds, Josh wilts meekly back, going silent.

“Which way is the road?” B asks me.

“Drive back toward the bridge,” I say, ignoring the sting on my cheek, “but turn north just before crossing. It will take us up the coast.”

Soon we’re speeding down the road adjacent to the mainland beach. B calls me up front, and I climb into the passenger seat so I can watch the water through his window. Back on the island, most of the Draggers have vanished, but every now and then I see a flash of movement among the trees.

“Are they coming across?” Josh asks.

“No,” I say curtly.

“Any sign of Cat?” B asks.

I look out at the ocean, searching the vast field of blue. Finally, a hundred yards or so out, something surfaces ... it could be a coconut, or a person’s head bobbing in the sea. Then an arm strains toward the sky before dipping back beneath the waves.

“Stop!” I shout.

B slams on the brakes.

I throw open the door and scan my surroundings. The area is littered with large, pale pieces of wood scorched by the sun. I race around the vehicle, hop the small retaining wall separating the road from the sand, grab the nearest branch, and drag it toward the ocean. And then I’m swimming, my arms draped over the improvised pontoon, my legs kicking fiercely. For a moment I lose sight of Cat, but then I spot his head bobbing in the water ahead of me.

By the time I reach him, my lungs are on fire. But he’s in even worse shape, scrambling frantically and churning the water as he tries to keep his head up. His face is flushed and he’s breathing in short gasps.

“Don’t drown me,” I shout as I approach. “Stay calm. Grab the wood.” He clutches the driftwood and pulls himself up. “Now kick!”

He does, and we start to move. I join in, and after what feels like an eternity compared to the swim out, we’re lying on the beach, small waves rolling over our exhausted bodies.

Strong hands hook under my arms, and I stare up at B as he drags me onto dry sand. He drops me and runs back into the frothing water to pull Cat from the surf. Looking back to the vehicle, I see Josh in the backseat with a sour expression on his face, watching everything play out.

As I stagger to my feet, I look out across the sea and up the sheer cliff Cat had jumped off. The Dragger Queen stands at the top, her long staff held at her side, feathers drifting on the ocean breeze.



CHAPTER 26

SETH

As it grows on the horizon, Las Vegas is becoming more than a city. It's now an obstacle to overcome. Even after the Professor told me what once went on there—the gambling, the whoring, the shattering of souls—I'd been curious about the monstrosities they'd built. The massive themed hotels and gaudy attractions had once drawn people from around the world. How could I not want to see it for myself? Yet now I'm dreading entering that city.

Was it all because of Henrieville? What I'd found there had been worse than all my nightmares combined. I wonder what horrors I'll find in a place that was home to more than a million. One built solely to indulge debauchery.

Five miles from the city limits, I already don't like what I see. The desert is a graveyard of people's stuff. The roadside vegetation is covered in shredded fragments of trash. Shopping bags, diapers, tattered fabric—all torn apart by the elements, then left to cocoon the flora, stunting its growth, creating strange, twisted plants with plastic skin. The surrounding earth has been blanched a blinding white, and the surface cracks underfoot. I reach down and peel some away for a closer look. It crumbles between my fingers—the scent of the paper, however, is unmistakable. It must have blown out here and turned to paste after decades of alternating heat and rain. Time is a blade that cuts all, and Sin City is no exception. The years had torn the place open like a drop-point knife in the belly of a buck, spilling its innards across the desert.

I would love nothing more than to hike straight through on Highway 15, but that's not a great plan if I want to avoid what happened on my way up the mountain. Right now, five of my water bottles are full, but even all seven won't get me from Las Vegas to San Diego, a stretch of desert so dry it makes the one I just crossed look like an oasis. The atlas shows only three creeks in those three hundred and fifty miles. Worse yet, I can't assume any of them have water. I need to find enough for the long haul, and Las Vegas may hold the answer. I'll need to

be careful, though. If a dog survived off bones and leathery flesh in a pissant town like Henrieville, what's become of the predators Vegas once had on display?

As the skyline emerges, looking like a jagged set of teeth, I realize I hadn't known what to expect from a city, not really, despite all my time spent browsing the atlas. I'd neglected the transition points, figuring I would cross an invisible border where the desert ended and the mess of high rises began. But now, miles from the city center, a traffic jam of sunbaked cars clogs the road, and warehouses are sprouting up on either side. Eventually, a gas station with dozens of pumps appears on the right. I start trudging toward it. If nothing else, the attached convenience store will offer a place to rest in some much-needed shade. My leg is feeling a bit better, but it still throbs with every step.

I pry open the glass doors and see shelves and darkened coolers holding only rat droppings. The smell of rot hits me instantly, but at least I'm getting the sun off my shoulders. I head inside and find an open door to what appears to be a storage room with columns of moldy cardboard boxes stacked ten high. I scan the labels until I see the word "water." As I tear open a box at the top, the shifting weight makes them all start to collapse. Leaping back, I narrowly avoid an avalanche of plastic bottles. Eager for a taste of the old world, I pick one up, crack the lid, and take a sip—but the liquid exits my mouth as quickly as it entered, tasting of pure chemicals, most likely leached from the plastic over time. It's clear to me now how we managed to poison ourselves.

Just as I'm thinking I might need to venture downtown after all—to search for a well that somehow isn't toxic—I spot another column of cases. These ones are wrapped in dusty plastic and filled with glass bottles labeled "Perrier." I carefully pull down all six cases, pop a bottle open, and take a sip. It tastes a bit funny, nothing like the crystal clear water from the creeks back home, but this stuff is drinkable.

I go back to the front room and search behind the counter until I find a notepad and pencil. Then I set to figuring out the math of how many bottles I will need to stockpile. Thankfully, my scientist father taught me everything I

know. Though I couldn't spell to save my life, he spent years grilling me on basic arithmetic.

A gallon a day is my goal, even though I've been getting by on far less. If I continue to manage at least twenty-five miles a day, I'll reach San Diego in fourteen days. So, I need to bring fourteen gallons with me. Each Perrier bottle holds just under seventeen ounces. Eight bottles will give me a bit over a gallon. To get my gallon a day, I'll need a whopping one hundred and twelve bottles. A gallon of water weighs roughly eight pounds, which means ... shit. A hundred and sixteen pounds. I'm going to need something to haul it in.

I exit the station and walk the rows of cars out front. After finding nothing useful in the first half dozen, I approach a red SUV that appears to have suffered a head-on collision with a smaller car in front of it. I wipe down the dusty driver's-side window, then cup my hands over the glass and peer inside.

At first, I'm unsure what I'm looking at. Another swipe does the trick, but I wish it hadn't. I see two rows of teeth bordered by withered flesh clinging to the bone like plastic wrap. The desiccated remains of the driver—a woman, by the look—are slumped over the steering wheel, which is crusted with dried blood. I back away, take a few calming breaths, then move around to the rear window. I clear another hole and spy a set of hard rubber wheels through the glass. The doors are locked, but there are plenty of rocks lying nearby. It takes a couple of throws—and one alarming bounce that makes me jump back—before the window gives out in a shower of glass.

Reaching inside, I grab the contraption. As it emerges, I realize it's a folded-up baby stroller. And then my eyes fall upon its former occupant, still strapped into a rear-facing seat, its small head shriveled like an apple left out in the sun. I bend over as the little water in my stomach threatens to come up. I spit a few times on the pavement, wondering whether the child died along with its mother or later, all alone, crying for help after the crash.

Keeping my eyes on my feet, I pull the stroller all the way out, then spend several frustrating minutes trying to snap it into the proper shape. Eventually I

manage it and start wheeling the thing back toward the shop, appreciating the feel of the solid wheels. This thing should have no problem rolling over cracks in the road.

I push the stroller through the open front doors, then return to the cases and drag five over to a wall-mounted sink. I spend the next hour obsessing over the poor woman and her child as I drain and refill plastic bottles with Perrier. I pack as many as I can into the stroller's seat before using the belt to buckle them in. Then I fill up the large fabric shelf underneath. When both are full, twenty-three bottles remain. I find some duct tape in a drawer behind the counter and go about taping bottles everywhere I can. When it can hold no more, I stuff the remaining eight into my pack. Though I don't like the added weight, they'll be gone in a day.

It's early afternoon by the time I finish. I could use some more time out of the unforgiving heat, but if I sleep now, I'll wake up sometime during the night. Shuddering at the thought of facing the city in the dark, I push the stroller back out onto the road, plastic bottles crinkling as it rolls.

Standing in the middle of Highway 15, I silently wish that I hadn't looked up. Then I wouldn't have seen the thin line of smoke rising from the other side of a massive black pyramid. At first I thought the city had caught fire, but the dark line stayed consistently thin. Natural fires change size, which means this one is controlled.

I'm having a hard time picturing ordinary folks settling down in a city with none of the natural resources needed for survival. With the whole United States at their disposal—hell, the whole of North America—why would anyone with good intentions choose to surround themselves with useless monuments to our former vices?

The truth is they wouldn't. But bandits would. Marauders don't need fertile land or livestock; they go out and take what they need from others. So why am I still standing here instead of pushing my miniature water tanker past this wretched city?

I know why, though I hate to admit it. It's because the only person I've ever talked to might be dead when I get back, and the only friend I've ever made was so different from myself that I'd been forced to leave him behind. And if there's even a one percent chance the person or people stoking that fire are normal—maybe trying to make a life for themselves, just like me—I can't leave this place without knowing for sure.

I perform my box breathing routine—four-second inhale, four-second hold, four-second exhale. I do this for several minutes as sweat pours down my face, then hide the stroller between two vehicles. I'll need to move quickly, and that means staying light, so reluctantly I slide off my pack and stash it under one of the cars. Looping my bow over one shoulder, I pull a handful of arrows, leaving one with the pack, just in case. Then I start heading toward the nearest offramp.

I'm used to being able to see for miles in every direction. Here my view is blocked by towering hotels pressing in from both sides, every third window shattered, remnants of tattered curtains flapping in the wind. The blanched bones on the street paint a miserable picture of how people had flung themselves through the windows, desperate to escape whatever was inside the buildings. Or inside their own heads.

I creep down Las Vegas Boulevard as the sun sets, sliding between the abandoned cars toward the tendril of smoke, which seems to be coming from the center of the road a hundred yards or so down. I'm surrounded by dreamlike oddities from the old world—a golden lion statue resting proudly on its pedestal; a rusted roller coaster ducking between buildings in a fake city skyline; and towering glass doors that offer glimpses down mechanical alleyways.

Each time the breeze shifts in my direction, I hear voices. It's little more than mutterings bouncing around the echo chamber of the street—but I can hear men and women, and they seem to be caught up in friendly banter.

I keep sliding between the cars until I can make out individual words. Stopping behind a pickup truck, I cup one ear toward the voices. I can't pick up full

sentences yet, but I do fish three words out of the growing darkness. The first two are “my” and “pleasure.” The third is “slaughter.”

I peer around the bumper. There are too many vehicles in the road to see much farther ahead. If I were to climb up onto a roof, I could probably get a glimpse of not just the fire but also the people around it, although they might notice me as well. Just ahead, however, there are two rows of cars parked side by side, offering a narrow alleyway—a perfect passage to sneak closer without being seen once the sun goes all the way down. After a vigorous internal debate, I lean back against the truck and wait for night to fall.

After the orange glow fades and the sky darkens enough to transform the statues lining the road into dull silhouettes, I peek out again and then press forward, entering the short alley. But something immediately feels wrong. I’m about to turn back when I hear a sound I never expected to hear in real life. A group of people laughing. It fills me with a longing I can’t quite describe. I’m so distracted that I hardly notice when my boot catches on something taut—I hardly notice, that is, until my foot drags the tripwire forward. What sounds like a mountain of pots and pans comes crashing down nearby.

I should have run. I want to try, even now. But it’s too late. I can hear shoes sliding on pavement as the voices transform from conversation into shouts. I nock an arrow with unsteady fingers. Then I hear another sound, an unmistakable sound I’d only heard in movies—the double-clack of a shotgun racking.

“Come on out,” a voice booms, “or we’re coming in after you.”



CHAPTER 27

SARAH

Back on the highway, we drive in silence for several hours as the weight of what happened settles in. Josh is slumped against his door, gazing out the window. B is hunched over the steering wheel, lost in thought. And Cat is sitting in the passenger seat, every so often mumbling under his breath, as if he'd lost his sanity out there in the surf.

Try as I might, I can't muster up much sympathy. For them, this has been just another road trip, but I'd been drugged, stuffed in a bag, and held captive from the start. Now, one of them owes me his life. In fact, as I sit here in the rumbling quiet, I feel a small, vindictive smile spread across my—

"Eeeeeeeeee!" B screeches, making us all sit up straight.

"What the hell was that?" Josh finally demands.

"That was you," B says. "The sound you made when you saw those Draggers."

He makes the sound again, and Cat, whose haunted eyes have hardly blinked since his brush with death, lets out a small chuckle. And then he bursts into laughter. Within seconds they're both howling up front, whereas Josh's pasty face is turning beet red, his mouth contorting into a scowl.

"That's not—" he begins, but B cuts him off with another shriek.

Cat slaps his thigh, then puts his head in his hands as he gasps for air. B's back is convulsing as he leans over the wheel, his booming laughter filling the Humvee. I'm not exactly in a laughing mood, but then I look at Josh's pathetic face. My hate blossoms, and I join in.

I close my eyes, letting the laughter take over. That's when B slams on the brakes, driving my face into the back of his seat. When I open my eyes, he's turned halfway around, gripping Josh's arm, which is raised.

"Don't you touch her!" B booms, spraying spittle into the smaller man's face. "Not after how you acted back there. She was braver than all of us. Show some damn respect."

There's a moment of uneasy silence before Cat speaks.

“What are you talking about?”

B keeps glaring at Josh. “This morning he wanted to leave you behind, even after you jumped. I almost did too. If it weren’t for Sarah, you’d be dead.”

“Watch your mouth!” Josh shouts. “Unless you want me to tell my father about —”

“About what?” B asks. “About how you screamed like a piglet at the first sign of danger? That you nearly shat your pants, then ordered me to leave one of his soldiers to die? That you like beating up girls who are ten times the man you are?”

“Know your place,” Josh hisses. “I’ll have you disciplined. You and your little tramp of a wife. After what happened to your brother, I’d think you’d know better than to cross a Caldwell.”

“Don’t you ever talk about my family. My brother’s a hero.”

“Not for long,” Josh says. “Once we get back, I’ll make those scars my father gave him look like butterfly kisses.”

As if in slow motion, B’s hand goes for his sidearm. I nearly laugh at the thought of all my planning ending in a spray of blood. But before B can draw his gun, Cat lets out a god-awful scream.

“Stop it!” he shouts, banging both hands on the dash. “I can’t deal with any more of this bullshit!”

Everyone pauses. B’s jaw slowly relaxes, and he seems to come to his senses. As I watch his hand leave his pistol, I can’t help but wish I’d let Cat drown.

“Go easy on her,” B eventually says, but there’s no resolve left in his voice.

Josh doesn’t respond as he leans back and puffs out his chest. B turns back to the road, and I lean into my window, gazing out through the cracks in the glass. I can feel Josh’s eyes burning holes in my head. I shouldn’t have laughed—it was the wrong thing to do, especially being so close to escape. Tomorrow, if everything goes according to plan, I’ll never have to see him again. But now that I’ve awakened his inner psycho, morning seems a long way away.



CHAPTER 28

SETH

“I ain’t bluffin’,” the man says, voice echoing across Las Vegas Boulevard. “Come on out. Now.”

For several seconds, I don’t respond, unsure whether he knows where I am. But then a beam of light explodes over the tops of the cars, nearly blinding me.

“You can’t hide,” he says. “We see you in there, between the truck and the red car.”

Adrenaline crashes through me as I race through my options—drop everything and run, stand up and hope I get lucky with an arrow, or do as the man says. If they’re bandits, any choice is likely to get me shot. But running is a guilty man’s game—even good people might shoot me in the back if I flee.

“OK, I’m coming out,” I shout. “Don’t shoot.”

Silence. I stand slowly, both hands raised, my bow in one, my arrows in the other. The light is shining directly in my eyes from a few vehicles down.

“Oh my,” exclaims a female voice from off to my left. “Bill, it’s just a boy.”

“Quiet, Janet,” returns the man. “How many of you are there?”

“I’m alone,” I say. “I was just passing through. Saw the smoke from your fire.”

“How do we know you ain’t one of them?”

“One of who?”

“Don’t play with me, son.”

As far as I know, there are only two types of “them”—Andes and bandits.

“You mean a bandit, like one of the Merry Men?”

Metal clanks softly as the shotgun shifts in his hands.

“Now, how would you know a name like that?”

“My father had a run-in with them. Years ago.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“I can only give you my word,” I say, arms still raised.

“Toss over your weapon,” he barks.

I throw the bow and handful of arrows over the cars toward the source of the light. They clatter across the rooftops. The flashlight beam chases them, then darts back to me.

“All right, then,” the man says. “Come on over. Slowly. And your hands better stay up.”

I keep my hands raised and begin winding between the cars toward the voice. As the spots in my vision fade, I can make out two figures standing nearby—and just like that, I’m staring at the first real human woman I’ve ever seen.

Her floral dress draws my eyes up a stout body to curly gray hair, carefully styled. Her dark skin is weathered, hinting at an age near the Professor’s. She looks like a vision from the old world. A grandmother from the movies of my youth come to life.

“Oh,” she cries out and shuffles on stiff legs around the car, waddling up the narrow alley toward me.

“Don’t get too close,” commands the deep voice.

“Hush, Bill.” She grabs my shoulders, plants a wet kiss on my cheek, and pulls me into a powerful embrace.

My stress drains away. It’s as if the woman’s hug gives me permission to acknowledge the loneliness that’s crept in over the past few years, even before I started wandering mostly solo through humanity’s graveyard. As my breath shudders, her embrace tightens. For the first time in a long while, I feel safe.

Eventually she releases me, placing her hands on my cheeks and looking directly into my eyes, her smile displaying a set of straight but yellowing teeth. Footsteps close in, and I start to turn. She shakes her head slightly, her hands keeping my face forward.

“Don’t turn around,” the man’s voice says, directly behind me. “I’ve got a gun on your back. Once I pull that knife from your belt, I’ll lower my weapon. Then we can go back to the fire and have a chat.”

“Take it,” I say. “I won’t resist.”

Metal rasps as my blade slides from its sheath.

“Where’d this blood come from?” he asks.

“It’s from rabbits. And a dog.”

“You found a dog?” he asks, giving me a quick pat down.

“It found me.”

The man grunts, then raises his voice to speak to the rest of his group, whoever that might include.

“All right, he’s clean. Let’s head back.”

I turn to face him and see the shotgun at his side, hanging from one large, calloused hand. He’s six-foot-four at least. While his shoulder-length silver hair suggests he’s as old as the woman, if not older, he still looks formidable. I suppose part of that is the worn cowboy hat, faded jeans, snakeskin boots, and bushy white mustache.

“You’re lucky you said something,” he says. “Looking like you do, I almost mistook you for a Primitive and took your head clean off.”

“Primitive?” I wipe sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. It comes away smeared with my homemade sunblock.

“You know, former humans. The wild things wandering most of God’s green Earth.”

“I’ve always called them Andes.”

He smirks and leans up against a grime-laden car, clearing a path for me to get by. “Let’s get you off them feet.”

He motions for me to take the lead back toward the orange glow of the fire. Despite his smile, his eyes are cold, and his finger is still resting near the trigger of his gun. I move past him and meander through the few remaining cars until a fire appears in the middle of the street, burning in an old oil drum. Surrounding the flames are four empty lawn chairs, a fold-out table scattered with playing cards and plastic cups, and a large blue cooler. When I reach the fire, the woman from before, the one the man called Janet, comes up behind me and enfolds me in another hug.

“Give him some air, woman,” the deep voice says.

She lets go, then turns me around and looks me up and down again. "You're a real boy!"

"Yes, I am," I say, voice cracking.

"Pinocchio come to life," another male voice says out in the darkness, but Janet ignores him.

"I can't imagine what you've been through," she says. "Sorry about the scare, but we can't be too careful. I'm Janet, and the brute with the gun is Bill."

Bill only moves to tip the brim of his hat. "Bill Dilaro."

"I'm Seth."

"Just Seth?"

"Seth Keller."

He keeps staring at me.

"Go easy on him, Bill," a second woman chimes in, stepping into the circle of firelight. "Looks like he's been to hell and back."

This woman is younger than Janet or Bill by at least a decade, but she looks every one of those years. Long gray hair, recently brushed and frizzy, flows down over narrow shoulders. Her thin frame is clad in hot pink spandex leggings and a yellow tank top. She extends a pale hand, and I shake it gently.

"I'm Tammy," she says in a thick drawl. She's barely smiling, but she emanates an air of warmth just the same.

"Pleased to meet you, Tammy."

"And this here's Brad," Janet says, steering the fourth member of their group toward me.

I step forward and put out my hand, repeating my name. He answers with "Brad Chapman." As we shake, his round face bobs in the firelight half a foot or so below mine. His head is bald, save for a ring of black fuzz just above his ears. He's sporting high-top sneakers, tan cargo shorts, and a white T-shirt that reads *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*. His most striking feature, however, is his pearly white teeth.

"I have to warn you," he says. "These women are grandmothers without grandchildren. You better keep your guard up, or they'll suffocate you with hugs."

"Doesn't sound so bad," I say uneasily.

"Enough chatter," Bill says. "Let's all take a seat and figure out what's what. Janet, would you be so kind as to get this boy Wendy's chair? My knee's actin' up."

"I don't want to take someone's seat," I say.

Janet averts her eyes as she shuffles behind Bill and bends down to grab a folding chair, placing one hand on the small of her back. "Don't worry, child. That's not ... there's no one coming for it."

"Wendy was taken from us about a week ago," Brad says solemnly.

I look down at my boots. "I'm sorry."

Janet unfolds the chair and places it next to hers, then beckons me over with a wave. The moment I sit, the rest of them seem to relax a bit. They take their own seats with a chorus of groans and sighs. Janet scoots her chair closer to mine and sandwiches my left hand between her palms. We're all silent for a few seconds as the wind howls around us, making the firelight flicker on the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign looming nearby. I'd seen a photo of it in an advertisement in the back of the atlas, but it's smaller than I was expecting.

All eyes are on me. They obviously want me to speak, but I'm shell-shocked. Here I am, sitting around a fire with four people. Four normal, albeit elderly, people. After Henrieville, I had given up all hope of finding other survivors. I can't find words to adequately explain to them what this means to me, but thankfully, Brad comes to my rescue.

"How old are you, Seth?"

"Twenty-four."

Bill pushes back his hat to get a better look at me. I can see the questions brewing in his eyes before he even opens his mouth.

"So where is this father of yours?" he asks.

“The Professor’s back home,” I say quickly, “on our butte in Utah.”

“Your father’s a professor?”

“He was a scientist before everything happened. I started calling him that when I was young. He set up a classroom—”

“And what made you leave?” Bill interrupts. “Did your father pass?”

“Bill!” Janet yelps, squeezing my hand tighter. “Where are your manners?”

“I’m just trying to figure out why the boy’s out here. If you got a home nowadays, it ain’t wise to up and leave it.”

“This isn’t an interrogation,” Janet returns. “At least let him ask a few questions of his own.”

Bill mulls it over, then nods reluctantly.

“Go on, Seth,” Janet says, patting my hand. “Is there anything you want to ask?”

I have more questions than I could ask in a thousand nights sitting around a thousand campfires. I want to know everything, but seeing as I can’t ask them all at once, I turn toward Janet and ask the question that matters the most.

“Have you seen any other people?”

She goes quiet, turning away to stare at the street.

Brad breaks the silence. “Well, if someone else asks us that again, now we can answer yes.” I smile at him, trying to hide my crushing disappointment. “But that doesn’t mean they aren’t out there,” he continues quickly. “We’ve spent years puttering around these same streets. The world’s a mighty big place, kid.”

“How long have you all been here?”

“Since the beginning,” Brad says.

“The beginning?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Tammy says. “You couldn’t know about that.”

“He means when everything went wild,” Bill says. “Some thirty years ago now.”

“How did you survive all that time?”

“We have Bill to thank for that,” Janet says.

“In case you haven’t noticed, he’s a cowboy through and through,” Brad says. “We’ve even got cattle. Sometimes we find them roaming the streets, but mostly they stick to the parks. We also have gardens. It’s hard to produce fruits and veggies in this dry heat, but we get by. If you stick around, you’ll get a taste of Tammy’s cooking. She makes a beef stew that’ll knock your socks off.”

“How are you able to do all that work?” I ask.

“You calling us old?” Brad asks, then winks at me.

“I think he was asking about the Fatigue,” Tammy says.

“Yeah, well, we’ve all got it,” Brad says, “but clean living helps us stay active. Back when the Great Fatigue first hit, we were all sleeping nearly twenty hours a day, but now most of us are down to a solid fifteen. I’m not saying it’s easy. The inflammation has gotten into Bill’s knees, and Wendy was in bed most days and nights before she passed. But old folks like us, we thrive on adversity.” He places one fist proudly over his heart, like a salute. “What about you? Coming from Utah, you’ve probably walked three hundred miles already.”

I consider how much I can afford to give away. According to the Professor, I’m an unusual case—a rare human born immune to the Fatigue. Sure, these aren’t scientists who are going to strap me to a table and pick apart my brain, but even so, telling them the whole truth doesn’t feel prudent.

“I’m lucky. Most days, the Fatigue’s not too bad.”

“How fortunate,” Bill grumbles. Janet gives him a look.

“Well, I don’t know what your plans are,” Brad goes on. “But we could definitely use some help around here. Bill still does a good job with the slaughtering, but all our knees are pretty screwed up, and gardening has become a real bitch. If you stick around, it’ll be hard work, but you’ll get all the food you can eat. As well as a daily barrage of hugs and kisses from Janet, I’m sure.”

“He just met us,” Janet says. “Let the poor child get to know us a bit first.”

Brad dramatically holds up both hands, then winces and rubs his shoulder, which gets laughs from everyone except Bill.

“Were you all friends before?” I ask.

Brad shakes his head. "In my old life, you couldn't have paid me to hang out with these yahoos. I was a businessman, a wealthy one, with my head firmly planted between my own ass cheeks. At the time, I lived in Chicago, but when shit started hitting the fan, I decided to come here for one last hurrah. After a handful of strippers went Primitive in the first nightclub I visited, it was obvious those plans were shot. So I jumped in my Porsche and got lucky getting out of town. Twenty miles outside the city, I saw the lights of Bill's ranch, just as the other folks had."

"Others?"

Brad nods. "There were a lot of us at the start. I think it was—"

"Forty-seven," Tammy adds quietly.

"That's right," Brad confirms.

"What happened to—"

"Let's talk about you for a spell," Bill interrupts, sitting up a bit straighter, hand still on his gun. "Where were you heading when you stumbled across us?"

I glance at Janet, but this time, she doesn't intervene. Evidently, she knows she can only hold Bill at bay for so long.

"San Diego."

"San Diego?" Brad asks. "We've been there."

"You have?"

"We've gone just about everywhere along the west coast. Twenty or so years ago, I converted the engine of a motor home to run off biodiesel. We spent a year traveling from southern California up to Canada. We saw our share of Primitives ... but no people. You'll be lonely in San Diego, kid."

I scan their faces, and they're all staring intently at me. They want to know what I'm doing out here, in *their* town, but I'm still not sure how much to give away.

"I'm not looking for people."

"What're you looking for, then?" Bill asks, eyebrows raised.

"I always wanted to see the ocean," I say, hoping the half-truth doesn't sound like a full lie.

They all go silent for a moment before Bill speaks again.

“Listen, son,” he says, peering at me from the corner of one eye. “You look pretty banged up, but you haven’t seen the worst of it yet. The road to San Diego is dry as a bone and hot as a bug in a pepper patch. You seem smart enough not to risk your life to see no ocean. So, how about you tell us what you’re really up to?”

Now even Janet is scrutinizing me, waiting for an answer. I spool out another piece of the truth.

“The Professor’s old laboratory is in San Diego. I need to get something his old partner left behind.”

Bill leans back in his chair. “After decades have passed? It must be pretty important for that Professor of yours to send you damn near a thousand miles through the desert to get it.”

I frantically search for a plausible reason, but nothing comes.

“It is important.” I know I should stop, but all eyes are on me. Tammy is leaning so far forward she looks ready to fall out of her chair. “He just didn’t know how important until a week ago.”

Bill glares at me, running his forefinger and thumb down either side of his mustache before speaking again.

“Back when I was young, I used to have all sorts of harebrained ideas. Thankfully, my father was around to talk me out of most of ’em. He’d been around a lot longer than me, just like we’ve been around a lot longer than you. And experience tends to provide a different perspective on what’s important. So tell us, what’s this thing that absolutely must get got?”

My eyes dart around the circle. I have no idea how they’ll react if they find out what I’m up to. Will they want me to take them along? I picture myself dragging their Fatigue-addled bodies across the desert, hunting and gathering for five instead of one. The thought alone makes me want to give up.

“Go on, Seth,” Janet finally speaks up. “You can tell us.”

I study her face, which beams at me hopefully. She’s looking at me with affection, understanding, empathy, trust—all the motherly emotions I’ve never

had a chance to know.

“It sounds crazy,” I say. “But what’s there could help save the world.”

“Save the world?” Bill asks, then he lets out a guffaw. “What, all five of us?”

“There are more who need saving.”

“From the looks of you, you’re the only one left who needs to be rescued,” Brad says. “How’s that leg?”

“I’m talking about the Andes ... or Primitives,” I say. “There are some old vials there, down in the basement. The Professor thinks if he can get his hands on them, it might help him turn them all back into people.”

Bill spits on the asphalt, then tips his hat farther back, exposing a large forehead dotted with dark spots. “Son, it’s not that I don’t believe you, but you’ve been on the road awhile. The desert sun can play tricks with your mind.”

I should have lied. Made up a story about formulas for antibiotics or something else mundane but believable. Still, now that I’ve told them the truth, I’m gripped by an overwhelming urge to make them believe me.

“The Professor has been studying Primitives for thirty years,” I say. “It’s all he does, day and night. You said you don’t get many of them here, but there are hundreds in the desert around our home. For a while he hoped they might be changing back on their own. You see, every so often a special one is born, one that acts more like you and me, almost like nature is trying to fix itself ... but those special ones, they get killed by the rest. It all seemed hopeless until he got this new information about his old lab. If I can bring him some of those vials, he thinks he can make the Primitives normal again. If not ... well, humans aren’t ever coming back.”

For several long seconds, everyone’s quiet.

“Well,” Brad finally whispers. “Damn.”

“I have some questions,” Bill says, raising his hand. “This new information he got. Did a birdie fly down and chirp in his ear? Because as far as I know, a newspaper hasn’t rolled off the presses in decades, and there sure as hell ain’t no internet.”

“He has a radio,” I say hesitantly.

“What kind of radio?” Bill asks, leaning slightly forward and narrowing his eyes.

“A shortwave.”

The mood around the fire changes. Brad sits up a bit taller. Tammy’s hands tighten on the arms of her chair.

“And who was your Professor talking to on this radio of his?” Bill asks.

“Um ... no one,” I stammer. “Not for a long time. He hadn’t used it in twenty years. But he thought it might help me find a better home. A community out there or something. When we got on it, though ... his old partner responded.”

“And I suppose that partner gave him this new information, that somewhere in their old lab, there are ‘vials’ that can help turn the Primitives back into humans. You can see how all this just raises more questions. The first one being—how did those magical vials get into that lab thirty years ago? Did your Professor have a hand in what happened?”

My unease grows.

“The Professor had nothing to do with it,” I say, only now realizing just how bad this all sounds. “His old partner—”

Bill silences me with a quick wave of his free hand. The other is still holding his gun.

“I believe in the Great Almighty, always have. Even back in the day, didn’t much care for the scientist types, running around trying to play God. When shit went bad, I knew one of them was behind it, and now it sounds like I was right. Worst thing, this Professor of yours and his buddy don’t seem to have learned from past mistakes. Sounds like they’re trying to play God all over again, just to see what happens. Does that about cover it?”

As the tension in the air amplifies, I search for something to say. Bill’s negative reaction to saving humanity is the last thing I expected.

“It doesn’t sound so great the way you say it.”

“All thanks to that old-timer perspective I mentioned,” Bill states. “In fact, this whole thing reminds me of a story from my youth, back when I was still

wanderin' around Texas, looking for some perspective of my own. I was breaking my back every damn day on this ranch just outside San Antonio, putting in thirteen hours a shift, shoveling shit in the punishing heat." He leans forward again, gripping the shotgun in both hands as the firelight sparkles in his eyes. "Well, one of those days, I decided to take what I thought I was owed. Broke into the big house and stole a box of cash off the rancher's dresser. I fled the state and tried to move on with my life, but what I'd done wouldn't stop eatin' at me. Ten years later, I happened to be travelin' back that way with a bit of my own money in my pocket, and I got it in my head to return what I stole. Walked right into his front yard. There he was, playin' with his wife and daughter, all of them as happy as could be. He had moved on with his life. Didn't even remember me. But do you know what happened when I told him who I was?"

I shake my head.

"He went inside and got his rifle. Put a round of .223 Remington in my shoulder as I was running away. Thought I was going to bleed out. You see, Seth, sometimes it's best to let things lie. I may not be as educated as your Professor, but I've seen enough of this new world to know there ain't no going back."

"I wouldn't even want to," Tammy adds.

Bill nods. "What happened was a tragedy, yes, but if you go foolin' around tryin' to fix what was broke, you're only going to cause more heartache. Those folks can't just pick back up where they left off. Humanity ain't going to shake off the cobwebs and go back to their old lives like nothing ever happened. It'll turn into something different. Something I don't care to imagine. Truth be told, if you weren't too young to be directly involved yourself, I would be givin' serious thought to filling your chest with buckshot."

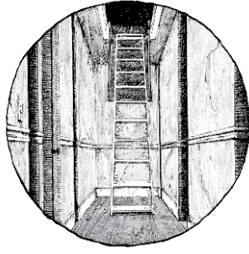
I glance over at Janet, but her eyes are glued to the ground, both hands in her lap. I hadn't even felt her let go of mine.

We all sit in silence, watching the dying fire become a pile of coals. When I finally look up again, I see that Bill's hands are no longer resting idly atop the

shotgun in his lap. Now, one hand is clutching the slide, and the other's fingers are curled around the grip.

Eventually, Tammy breaks the silence. "It's late for us oldies, and with you being on the road so long, I'm sure we could all use some shut-eye. Seth, I'll show you to the kitchen and fix you some grub. We can talk more about this in the morning, after we've all had a little time to think."

"Thank you," I say, even as I decide I won't be here come morning. "I'd love that."



CHAPTER 29

SARAH

I wake to an empty vehicle and the sound of someone rummaging around in the trunk. Instantly I'm pulled into the daylight. Josh is getting our infusions ready, and I nearly slept through the whole thing.

I join Cat and B outside the Humvee, which is stopped in the center of the road. By the looks of them, neither has slept since yesterday's excitement, meaning they're more than eager for a dose of NAD.

I scan our surroundings, searching for the best direction to run. It only takes a moment to realize this location is far from ideal. To the right of the road, a field of knee-high grass stretches for at least a mile before reaching the jungle. I could run for it, but with all the open space, how easy would it be for them to put a bullet in my back? Even if they missed, they could follow my trail through the grass. I picture running for my life, the Humvee's engine revving through the brush, only to get mowed down like the poor creatures on Dragger island.

To the left, however, endless rows of dilapidated mini-mansions form a surreal neighborhood. The identical houses are separated by narrow, overgrown yards. I don't like the idea of hiding in one of those houses—once inside, I'll be trapped. My best bet is to head down one of the side yards and see what's beyond. I don't know where we are, but if there's a town or even just more jungle on the other side, I might be able to get away.

Josh walks around the trailer and holds out two slightly discolored infusions to me and Cat. He didn't notice the difference, so that's good, but now I have another problem to deal with. If Cat does his infusion first, he'll realize it's not NAD. Still meek after his brush with death, the topic of what's in the vials will most likely turn into a conversation. I don't need a conversation—I need a fight. And that means B must go first.

"Cat, could you help me with something?" I ask. "Maybe we could do our infusions second today."

Before Cat can reply, Josh speaks up.

“What are you trying to pull?”

“Nothing. I just want to talk to Cat.”

His eyes narrow. “Why? He’s not your friend.”

I glance at Cat and B, but they both stay silent.

I step closer to Josh. “We’ve been through a lot,” I whisper so only he can hear. “Cat nearly died yesterday, and he’s still wound tight.” I lean in a bit more. “After last night, I learned my lesson. I don’t want any more drama. For that to happen, I think he just needs to talk things out.”

Josh studies my face.

“Fine,” he says eventually. “But if you’re up to something, I’ll put you in line quick.”

He sets one of the useless doses of not-NAD on the bumper and hands the other one to B. Then he retrieves his own vial from another box. His eyes flick down, checking the red dot. I do my best to hide my nervousness—good thing too, because he quickly turns back to me, lifting one hand to shoo us away. I glance at B, who’s watching us with vague concern. Yesterday, I was sure my plan would work. Now I hope I can still trust B’s rage.

I catch Cat’s eye and motion for him to follow. He looks perplexed but does so, and we walk off into the tall grass.

“So, how are you doing?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“That island ... I think it got to all of us.”

He looks sharply at me, then lets out a timid laugh. “I suppose.”

“You suppose? You almost died yesterday. You must be feeling *something*.”

“Just scared. Not really for me so much, but ... my wife and girls. Thought I might never see them again.”

I keep walking. “That must have scared the crap out of you.”

“Sure. But that’s not the worst part. The worst part is knowing that if something happens to me, no one will take care of them. That’s just how Trenton is.”

There's no need to ask what he means. I think of Ms. Vargas, arthritic knees trembling as she sets up her curbside stand in the hopes of selling enough cookies to buy herself the bare necessities.

"I'm sure that's not true," I say. "Someone would look out for them."

He smiles again, sadly this time. "B and his wife might help her out, but they've got a baby of their own on the way." I place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'll never forget the first time I saw my daughter's face," he continues, his eyes far away. "Those memories are all I got out here. It's what kept me fighting out there in the water."

I glance back toward the Humvee, less than thirty yards away—and realize that the shit, as they say, is about to go down. Josh is standing at the rear of the trailer, not even pretending to do his infusion. B is up front, leaning against the grill, glaring down at the syringe sticking out of his arm with increasing frustration. He pulls the needle free and stares at it. I'm sure he's wondering why he's not experiencing the pain or the energy surge of a push. After a few moments, he stalks back around the vehicle, reaches inside the trunk, and pulls out two stacks of NAD boxes. Behind the trailer ten feet away, Josh picks dirt from his fingernails, oblivious to the impending danger.

B removes a syringe from each box and holds them up to the light, looking back and forth between them. After mumbling something I can't hear, he tosses them back into the trunk and stands there, glaring down, a hundred questions no doubt racing through his brain. If my plan is going to work, what happens next means everything. Finally, B's head snaps up, and a second later, he's storming toward the rear of the trailer with fire in his eyes.

That's right, I think. Let it out.

"What are you staring at?" Cat asks behind me. I ignore him.

Josh turns and straightens up as B marches toward him. The huge soldier says something I can't make out. Josh holds up his empty syringe. B takes the tube and brings it to his eyes, just as he had with the others. After a quick examination, he

throws it to the pavement—then grabs Josh by the collar, lifts him off his feet, and slams him into the trailer.

“What the fuck do you think you’re—” Josh starts to squeal. His words are cut off when B strikes him with a heavy open hand.

“No, what the fuck do you think *you’re* doing?” B roars, words crystal clear, even from a distance. “And what the fuck is in those syringes? Because it isn’t NAD!”

Josh tries to break B’s grip, pounding on his outstretched arms, but B just slams him harder back against the steel.

The commotion draws Cat’s attention. “What the hell?”

I grab his arm. “Don’t get involved,” I say. “B figured it out.”

He shrugs off my hand. “Figured what out?”

“That Josh doesn’t need NAD. That his dad has had a cure all along.”

“Bullshit,” he says, but I can tell I’ve got him.

“He told me so back on the beach. I knew it would only be a matter of time until one of you learned the truth.”

Cat’s face goes grim with the realization. He starts sprinting through the grass toward the altercation. Now’s the only chance I’m going to get. Not wanting to draw attention, I walk briskly after him. When I get to the Humvee, I reach into the open trunk and grab one full, unopened box of NAD—the good stuff, from the back—and one box of MREs. I lift them out and make a break for the houses. In my peripheral vision, I see B toss Josh into the grass on the other side of the road. Cat circles around Josh’s body like a hyena waiting to get a piece of a lion’s kill.

“I’m going to break every bone in your goddamn body!” B bellows, moving through the grass with fists clenched.

I turn away and keep walking, my heart beating wildly. When I reach the first yard, I hear a sound sweeter than music.

“Cat!” Josh screams. “Help me, he’s gone completely—Cat? What are you ...”

I don't wait to hear the rest. The second I'm out of view, I run—or the closest thing to running I can manage, carrying two boxes and struggling against my fatigue. I trundle through the tall grass between two houses, and in seconds I'm standing in a front yard. Instead of seeing a sprawling neighborhood in which I can get lost, I'm looking at a two-lane street that runs parallel to a white sand beach that stretches as far as the eye can see to both the north and the south. Shit. I thought we were miles from the coast.

I should have tried my luck going through the grass. Now I don't even have a jungle to hide in. My only option is to take refuge in one of the beachfront mansions. Looks like there are at least a few hundred of them marching down the shore.

I glance to the north, then the south. Both directions seem equally unappealing. I choose south and start jogging, avoiding sandy patches in the street that might leave footprints.

After what feels like a half hour, my lungs, arms, and legs are burning. If I'd been smart about this, I would have figured out a way to get my infusion first. I'm not sure how I'm still upright and moving. I keep checking over my shoulder, expecting to see figures coming up behind me in the late morning sunlight. If they find me in the street, that'll be it.

I've covered a half mile at least, which seems far enough. No way they could search all the houses I passed in a day, and I pray they won't spend more than that looking for me. So I start approaching the multistory homes and trying front doors. The third one is unlocked. I glance around one last time, slip inside, and throw the deadbolt.

My eyes leap around the room, scanning the decaying chairs and dining room cabinets—looking for somewhere to hide but finding no spot good enough. Darkened hallways lead into the recesses of the first floor, but I head up the stairs instead, guided by patches of natural light filtering through a dingy skylight high above.

At the top of the stairs, I stop cold. Hanging on the wall is a watercolor painting of a scarlet macaw. Red paint drips from its wings, looking like blood rolling down the canvas, and more red paint had been splattered to fill the white background. For a moment I consider rushing down the stairs and back out into the street to find another place to hide, but this is no time for superstition.

I walk past the painting and shove open the first door on my left, revealing a room with only a bed to crawl under and a closet with no door. The other rooms offer nothing better. But when I reach the end of the hall, a square panel in the ceiling catches my eye. A string dangles from it—an attic. While it too seems like an obvious place to hide, I hadn't seen it from the other end of the dimly lit hall. Figuring this is the best I will get, I set the boxes on the floor and climb on top, grabbing the string and pulling the door open.

The attached ladder unfolds with a creak. I scramble up, dragging my boxes of supplies with me. Once in the attic, I place them to one side in the dusty, moldy dark—split by a single shaft of sunlight coming in through a small, round window—then reach down, grunting with effort as the attic door folds up and snaps into place.

Immediately I fall onto the wooden planks, breathing hard. After spending a few seconds inhaling who knows what, I get up and push open the attic window, which turns on a center hinge. And that's when I remember the one thing I hadn't thought to bring that I'll absolutely need—water. I can survive two days, maybe three without. Hopefully that will be enough to outlast their search. What I need right this second is NAD. I open the box and set up a push while thinking about all the ways today might play out. Best case scenario, B blasts a hole in Josh's brain, and he and Cat go their merry way.

When my push is done, I roll over onto my side and reassure myself that I'm finally safe. But tears spill from my eyes anyway as the weight of everything I've been through collapses on me like a crumbling brick wall. From the moment I lowered myself into Caldwell's lab until now—all of it feels like a nightmare.

Closing my eyes, I try to find peace in the semi-dark, but my addled mind offers up memories instead. I see my father wandering off through the jungle gate. Then I hear that scream from long ago. It wasn't a coincidence that his nocturnal excursions began right around the same time people started showing up in Trenton with big gaps in their memories. He had to have known that Caldwell was turning Draggers back into humans. And if Caldwell knows how to cure Draggers, is it too far of a stretch to think he also knew how to turn them into what they are in the first place?

Dad told me that when they all arrived in New Haven, everything had already been built. The labs, the homes, the stores around Center Square, even the perimeter fence. As far as they knew, they were on a desperate mission to save humanity, but they must have wondered why Caldwell had built an entire community in the middle of nowhere right before the world happened to fall. Not to mention the underground bunker in San Diego where they had all been living before relocating to Costa Rica. There's only one logical explanation for all of it—Caldwell knew what was coming. And I'm pretty sure he caused it. What I don't understand is why—what could he possibly have gained?

Though I don't believe Dad had been involved in that part of the plan, he sure as shit had seen the dungeon beneath Caldwell's lab. He'd even captured Draggers and probably helped transport them to the secret military base. The truth is, Dad's hands were far from clean.

Did he go along with it to protect me? I wish I could ask him, but I think I already know the answer. I roll over onto my other side, praying for these dark thoughts to disappear. Whatever he knew doesn't really matter now. What matters is that I'm finally on my own, beaten down but still alive.



CHAPTER 30

SETH

“I’m sorry for stirring things up,” I say as Tammy prods a sizzling steak with a spatula. “I’m not the best with words.”

When the others went to bed—after Bill reluctantly gave back my bow, but not my knife or arrows—Tammy guided me through the maze of slot machines and blackjack tables until we reached this stainless-steel kitchen. She said she would be happy to cook me a hot meal, but now, as she sears my dinner over a small propane stove, her eyes tell a different story.

“You didn’t stir up anything.” Her white hair frames her head like bundled straw in the yellow light of the kerosene lanterns. “I think we’re all a little disappointed, but you’re too young to know any better. You never saw the old world. Don’t know what it was capable of.”

As Tammy pokes at the meat, I watch her in silence, trying to imagine what she must have been through. I want to know her story, what brought her and the rest of the group from Bill’s ranch to this deteriorating hotel, and what became of the forty-three others.

“I don’t mean to pry,” I say slowly, “but what happened?”

She spreads her hands on the counter and stares down at her feet.

“Reality happened ... and it took everything from us. All that we built back up after the world went sideways.” She turns and looks at me, her eyes deadly serious. “It’s a powerful lesson, discovering the true nature of people.”

“Was this out at Bill’s ranch?” I ask.

Her gaze returns to the pan. “Those monsters that found us only did what people always do—take. And we had precious little to lose back in those days. Even more true for me. Unlike the others, I didn’t have warm memories to cling to. But that’s a long story.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

“No, you probably wouldn’t,” she mutters, “but I’ll tell you anyway. I was never a millionaire like Brad or even a housewife like Janet or Wendy. Didn’t have

a husband or a home. Just a bad heroin habit that led me to steal or sell anything I could, including my own body. A year after leaving home and coming to Vegas, I was living with a group of junkies in a storm tunnel beneath the streets.”

I don’t know what to say, so I step closer and place a hand on her shoulder.

“I don’t want your pity,” she says coldly, prodding at the meat. I take my hand away, then hop up on the counter a few feet from the stove. “That time of my life ended up saving me. I was stoned as hell when they were giving out those stupid injections, and I was lost down in those tunnels when everyone’s brains turned to mush.” She flips the steak, and smoke billows upward. “One day, my dealer never turned up. When I eventually came up for air, the world was a different place. Buildings burning, cars abandoned. And those damn creatures everywhere.”

“How did you survive?” I ask.

“Living in those tunnels, I learned to spot the monsters. While those beasts might have looked like people, even as dopesick as I was, I knew they were different and stuck to the shadows. I watched one pull a baby from a stroller and start gnawin’ on it as it shrieked. And do you know what I did? Nothing. I kept on moving down the street, searching for someone who could give me a fix and make it all go away. If Brad hadn’t pulled up and opened the door of his fancy car, I would’ve died that day. But he did, and we ended up at Bill’s ranch, just like all the others. That’s when my true life began. And let me tell you, it wasn’t the Primitives who took all that away. People did.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t know.”

She reaches into a cupboard, pulls out a tin, and sprinkles some dried herbs onto the steak.

“Of course you don’t know. You weren’t a part of that family. If you had been, you’d know what we lost. You wouldn’t have shown up here out of the blue, talking nonsense about bringing everything back, like it was somehow better than what we have now.”

Her harshness shocks me. Not liking the direction things are heading, I switch gears.

“What was it like out at the ranch?” I ask softly.

She glances up and lets out the breath she’d been holding. “It wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows at the start, I’ll tell you that. I was going through withdrawal, and everyone else was in a daze. We had all seen terrible things ... lost loved ones. But Bill rallied us. Made us into a team. He worked us day and night building a fence around the ranch using the mountain of barbed wire he kept in his shed. It gave us a sense of safety and let us create our own world. It might have been cramped, but it was lovely.”

“That must have been something,” I say.

She smiles, and it pulls her wrinkled cheeks tight. “I slept in the barn with a handful of others. In the morning, I’d head into the house, and let me tell you, it was quite a challenge getting to the bathroom, stepping over folks sleeping on the floor and then waiting as long as twenty minutes for a turn. That’s what happens when forty-seven people share three bathrooms. But secretly, I loved it. If I woke up early, I’d lie there in the barn for a bit, letting the line build before heading inside, excited to see who I’d be chatting with that day. For the first time in years, I was part of a community.”

Tammy had experienced what I’ve been searching for all my life—an actual family. “It sounds incredible. I’m truly sorry you lost so many friends.”

She shakes her head as if waking from a dream. “There’s always one loss that hurts the most. For me, it was Ken. After I got clean ... about a year after, in fact ... he started making adorable little passes at me.” Her smile broadens. “It was cute, the way he’d laugh at his own jokes. He got there a week after me, but while I was struggling with my own demons, he was grieving. Lost his son, wife, and two brothers...” She trails off, and for a moment, she again looks lost in her thoughts. “Anyway, against all odds, he and I fell in love. We created our own space out in the barn. He helped Bill with the cows, and I worked the garden. I had everything I needed, and for the first time in my life, I wasn’t afraid of the future. Can you believe that? It took the world ending for me to finally make a normal life for myself.”

“I’ve always wanted that,” I say. “I’m not religious or anything, but when I was a kid, I used to say it over and over before bed, kind of like a prayer.”

“Careful what you wish for, kid,” she returns. “It makes you feel like the most fortunate person in the world, until it’s taken away. And then a piece of you wishes you’d never had any of it in the first place. For a time there, when the grief had control, I found myself regretting ever coming out of those tunnels.”

My hands grip the edge of the counter. The desert in which I have spent my life is far from the tunnels she once called home, but this trip has already led to so many surprises—I hope at the end of it all, I won’t have a sad story like hers. “How did it happen?”

“Too many of the others were eager to get back to the way things were. Can’t exactly blame them. They’d lost as much as I’d gained. So they came up with a grand plan to reach out to other survivors and bring them to the ranch so our community could keep growing. Bill’s heart was in the right place. He just wanted to help as many people as he could. So him and a few others went into the city. The next day, they came back with some kind of radio—”

The stench of burning meat cuts her off. Cursing, she shoves the spatula under the steak and retrieves it from the pan, flipping it onto a plate and exposing a charred underbelly.

“My father, the Professor, had a similar plan once,” I say, now understanding why Bill had been so suspicious of the shortwave.

“Well, that would explain his run-in with the so-called Merry Men. Next month will be fifteen years since they took my Ken from me.”

Fifteen years? But that would mean the bandits had kept roaming the countryside well after the Professor’s network of survivors had been wiped out. Could they still be around today? That would explain why this group moved back into the city, where a handful of souls could get lost among the buildings. “The Professor says time heals everything, but I’m not sure if that’s true.”

“I wish that were the case. For the first couple of years, Brad would drive all of us out to the ranch in that motor home he fixed up, and we’d have a

remembrance. But after each visit, the nightmares got worse. I'd see Bill standing over me, shaking me awake like he did that night. Once again, I'd be looking out through the slats in the barn, watching those men in black outfits flood in through the hole they made in the fence and douse the main house with gasoline. God bless him, Bill saved us. But he couldn't get to the ones in the house, including the family of four he'd given his master bedroom to. He was only able to rescue those of us living in the barn. Ken and me, plus everyone you met tonight and a handful of others who've passed over the years. Those bastards set fire to the house with everyone else asleep inside."

"Did anyone—"

"No. They were all burned alive. Bill snuck us out the back, but my Ken decided to be brave. He'd been a dentist, for God's sake. But he grabbed up a shovel, and before I could stop him, he was running back toward the house. I tried to go after him, but Bill pulled me back. I watched as he ..."

She turns away, her hands coming up to her eyes. All I can do is sit there, watching her back tremble as she relives the worst time of her life. Her suffering ignites my own internal battle, and I feel my resolve for this whole mission begin to waver. It's far different hearing someone speak about tragedies than it is reading about them. I remind myself that for thousands of years before Thomas Caldwell, people had found the strength to overcome the darkness that plagued them. Tammy and the rest might have suffered too much, but I have to believe humanity still has some good to offer.

"Your steak's burnt," she says, turning around quickly and pushing the plate at me. "When you're done, head up the stairs I showed you and turn right. Room 237. We rigged up power in the rooms, but there's none in the hallways, so bring one of those spare lanterns in the corner there, and keep your curtains drawn. In the morning, we're going to have a long talk about these plans of yours."

With that, she heads for the exit.

"Thank you," I call after her, but it doesn't seem like enough. "And I'm sorry."

She stops at the big silver double doors but doesn't turn around.

“Sorry is something you say when you’ve done something wrong. You haven’t. Not yet.”

The doors squeak open and then swing back shut, leaving the weight of her words hanging in her wake.

It’s been days since I shared the squirrels with the Ande in the Dixie Mountains, and I’m famished. Still, the thought of eating now, with the weight of what Tammy said churning my stomach, feels wrong. I’d waited my whole life to meet other people. Now that I have, I’m not quite sure how to feel. They’re so much more complicated than I imagined, each with their own perspective shaped by a unique past. On the one side, the Professor is consumed by an obsession to make up for his mistakes. On the other, these people are so traumatized by past events they’d rather watch humanity disappear forever.

I’d been so eager to bring humans back, I hadn’t given any hard thought to what might happen after the world woke up from its thirty-year slumber. I find myself thinking again about the Ande on the mountain. As I cut into the steak, I imagine what he would be like if he had access to his full mental capacity. I can’t picture him raiding a ranch and burning people alive.

I lift my fork, and when the steak touches my tongue, all conflicting thoughts are eclipsed by my starving body’s need for nourishment. The savory goodness blasts through me, and I wolf the whole thing down in minutes. When I finish, I lean back in my chair, trying to decide whether to sneak out now or get a few hours’ sleep before leaving. I owe them for their hospitality, but I also saw the look in Bill’s eyes as he gripped his gun. What will they do when I don’t come around to their way of thinking?

I need to go. Tonight.

Plucking my bow off the floor and a kerosene lantern from the corner, I head out into the cavernous casino. My light shines on the broken slot machines and tarnished coins piled beneath them, but the room is so huge it swallows the light ten paces ahead. I’m soon lost in a jungle of clouded glass and dust-dulled chrome. I should’ve paid closer attention on my way in.

I keep walking, my feet crunching on carpet caked with dried mud, until I spill from the slot machine forest into a sea of blackjack tables. Drop me in a desert and I can find my way, but in here, everything looks the same. I pass a sign hanging from the ceiling, but none of its dozen arrows points to an exit. It's as if the place had been designed to keep people trapped inside.

I reach a long, marble hallway that leads past a dozen or more shops. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, keychains and other knickknacks dangle from hooks like miniature monuments to the waste of the old world. They'd had so much technology, so much power, and this is what they'd chosen to use it for.

I don't think Tammy brought me in this way, so I turn back to the casino floor, this time sliding along the outer edge of the room, staying close to the wall, eyes peeled for signs of moonlight. I can't see anything beyond the glare of my lantern, so I twist the knob to kill the gas, then place one hand on the wall and continue walking.

After fifty yards or so, I spot bricks bathed in natural light down another row of slots. I turn down the alley and hurry blindly between the machines—when my boot catches on something taut yet elastic, sending me to my knees. Instantly, a deafening wail shrieks in my ears, sounding like a thousand baby Andes screaming all at once.

I frantically search the floor with my hands, patting the crusty carpet until I locate the tripwire. I trace it to my right, hoping to find a speaker I can switch off or unplug or smash. Instead, the line plunges into a crack between two slot machines and vanishes. I tug on it again, and after a few tries, the noise stops and the room returns to silence.

Disoriented, I get to my feet and look around, finally spotting the source of the moonlight. It's a huge skylight just up ahead, illuminating a large planter filled with tomatoes. Huh. Don't remember Tammy showing me that.

A flash of light, a deafening boom, and glass exploding off to my right. One side of my face ignites with pain, like fifty horseflies biting into one cheek. I drop to all fours on instinct, then dab at my face with one hand. My fingers come away

bloody, but I don't seem seriously injured. I glance up. The slot machine above is a shattered ruin. Shrapnel must have sprayed me. Had it been another trap? I hadn't felt a second tripwire.

"That was a warning shot," a deep, familiar voice says off to my left. "Show yourself."

I peer through the gap between two machines and catch a glimpse of Bill standing halfway up a set of stairs, wearing nothing but saggy white underwear and his cowboy hat, a lantern in one hand and his shotgun in the other.

He sets down his light and reracks his weapon. "You don't come out, I'll come in."

In the oppressive darkness, I struggle to control my breathing. He has the high ground, which explains how he shot down into the machines. And the way he's dressed suggests those are the stairs leading up to their rooms—the same stairs Tammy had shown me on our way in. That means the exit is close. When she led me to the kitchen we entered through the broken front doors, then cut a straight line through the casino, with her pointing out the stairs on the ... right. I'm sure of it. I know which way to go.

Bill's first shot had nearly taken my head off, so he must have a pretty good idea of where I am. Without wasting another second, I snatch up the lantern and rush down the aisle, crouched as low as I can manage. When I reach the end, I see a glow of moonlight coming from two locations—the skylight above, and through a set of doors in the distance. Just as I'm about to sprint through the sea of tables toward the exit, I hear boots crunching on mud, and a lantern starts bobbing its way down the aisle toward me. It might be dark, but if I make a break for it, I'll end up full of buckshot.

Against all instincts, I turn left, away from the glowing exit, and head three rows down. All the while, a plan is taking shape. Still in a crouch, I round a corner and move down another aisle, hoping they'd laid the tripwire through this one as well.

“I know it’s you, Seth,” Bill calls out as I nearly trip over it again. I peek my head up as his lantern sweeps the slots where I’d triggered the alarm. “You know, you don’t need to do this. Just come out and we’ll talk.”

I place one foot under the wire while lifting a hand to the lantern’s ignition knob. Eyeing the illuminated planter a good twenty feet away, I kick my foot up. The alarm begins screeching again, and Bill’s light spins in a wide circle. I flip the knob to high flame. The moment it ignites, I chuck the lantern as hard as I can, aiming for the planter. Glass shatters, and fire flares. Over the alarm, a voice cries out in wordless dismay. A second later, Bill’s light is rushing toward the flames.

Without another thought, I run back down the aisle and out across the blackjack floor, ignoring the pain in my injured leg as another shot rings out. This one doesn’t land anywhere close, and I keep racing through the casino, never slowing. I hurtle through the silver-blue gap where sliding doors once stood, dashing out into the cool night air as the old folks’ siren screams at my back.



CHAPTER 31

SARAH

The sound of glass breaking yanks me from a dreamless sleep. I sit up and try to get my bearings, but I'm in absolute darkness. It takes me several seconds to remember where I am.

The house. The attic. Oh, shit.

I crawl forward and peer through the open window. My breath catches in my throat. The Humvee is parked outside, all its doors shut except the trailer's. I don't see anyone around.

"Sarah," a familiar voice calls from the hallway below. "I know you're here."

It's Cat. How has he found me? More importantly, where's Josh? I'd run past so many houses, and my body isn't thirsting for NAD, so it couldn't have been more than ten hours. There's no way they searched them all. Maybe they're just running into each home separately, shouting the same line, hoping I'll fall for the bluff and come out.

"I talked Josh into letting me come get you." His voice is muffled by the layers of plywood and insulation that separate us. I remain utterly still, hardly breathing. He'll search the rooms below me, find nothing, and move on to the next house. All I need to do is stay quiet. "I don't blame you for running. I probably would have done the same. But Josh knows you're here. If I don't bring you out, he's going to come in and get you, and trust me, with the mood he's in ... you won't enjoy that. Please. You saved my ass out in the water. I know that. Let me do the same for you."

The position of his voice hasn't changed, which means he's standing in the same spot, directly below me. He couldn't possibly know where I am.

"He said he'd give me five minutes, which probably means we have four. I'm going to pull this string, just to prove that I know where you are. Please, don't drop anything on me."

The trapdoor cracks open an inch, bisecting the space with the beam from a flashlight. A moment later, the springs contract, pulling it closed again. Fuck. He

does know. Swimming in panic, I try to think of some way to turn the situation around.

“Cat,” I whisper, breaking my silence. “Please, you have to help me.”

“Just come down, and we can work everything out.”

“Don’t ask me to do that,” I plead. “There’s something wrong with Josh. You know it. Tell him you looked everywhere, and I’m not here. Please, you owe me that.”

“I’m sorry, Sarah. I can’t do that. You have to come down.”

“How did you even find me?”

A moment of silence.

“There’s a tracking device on you. Please, just come down. I don’t want this to end badly.”

I should have known.

There’s no way I can let Josh get his hands on me again, not after switching the NAD. It took them a few hours to find me, even with this tracking device. If I can somehow manage to convince Cat to let me go, I might have enough time to find and disable it before they catch up with me again. I get to my feet and inch toward the door, squinting into the light between the cracks.

“All right,” I say. “I’m going to open this hatch.”

I push the door slightly open. After my eyes adjust to Cat’s blinding light, I see his upturned face. A frown tugs at his cheeks, and a sidearm dangles from one hand.

“You know what he’s going to do to me,” I say quietly from above. “Can you live with that?”

“He won’t do anything. Not with B and me around. Now come down.”

“I risked my life to save you, Cat, even though Josh and B were dead set on leaving you. I did it because it was the right thing to do.” His eyes drop to his feet. “Now you have the same choice. I’ve got NAD and rations. You have a gun. We can get away. Please ...”

“You don’t understand, Sarah,” he says. “The soldiers in Trenton, we don’t just hunt Draggers. We hunt people.” He hooks a thumb under the hem of his shirt and lifts, revealing a massive tattoo on his chest—two crossed guns above the words “Merry Men.”

“This is the symbol we all get. We’re trained to find survivors and flush them out. If we run, they will find us. It’s just a matter of time.”

I catch an image of Cat’s face bobbing in the water. I remember the pity that rushed through me, then the victorious feeling as we dragged ourselves ashore. Everything about that moment had felt right. But even selfless acts have consequences. Apparently, I’d saved a murderer. A heaviness presses down on me, but it’s eclipsed by my newfound fear of the man standing below. I reach deep, searching for something I can trade for my freedom.

“I think I figured it out,” I say after a moment. “What happened to your parents. Why all the elders in Trenton have holes in their memories. Help get me out of here, and I’ll tell you exactly what type of man you’re following.”

“You don’t think I know?” he shoots back. “Caldwell sends us out into the world to kill people, Sarah. I made my choice a long time ago.”

“Think about your family,” I say. “I know you’re a decent man, and you’ve done what you’ve done believing it was in their best interest. But I’m telling you, they won’t ever be safe, not as long as Caldwell watches over them. Come with me, and we can get them out. Then we can make everything right.”

He shakes his head. “And where would we go?”

“My mother,” I say, feeling a burst of hope, “she found a place up in the cloud forest before I was born. Said it had everything a small group needed to survive. Once we get the tracking device out, we could get lost in the highlands. Caldwell could spend a decade searching and never find us.”

“It wouldn’t work,” he says.

He’s afraid, I can see it in his eyes. “Think of your children’s future, Cat. If you do nothing, one day they’ll end up just like you, doing Caldwell’s dirty work.”

He stares down the darkened hall, as if thinking it over. My heart thunders in my chest. Eventually he slides the gun into its holster and looks up into my eyes.

"I have some friends," he says slowly. "I think they'll want to come with us."

"So you're in?" I ask.

He nods.

I know I shouldn't trust a cold-blooded murderer, but at this point, what choice do I have? I begin climbing down the ladder. The instant my feet touch the floor, Cat grabs me. Before I know what's happening, I'm pressed face-first against the wall. He torques one arm behind my back, then the other. A plastic zip-tie tightens around my wrists.

"I'm sorry," he says, "but there's no way out. No matter where we go, they'll find us."

"B will help us," I choke out. "You saw how he stood up for me."

"That was then. This is now."

"What do you mean?"

"Josh told us about his father and the cure."

"He told you he'd share it with you, didn't he?" Silence. "Didn't he?!"

"Yes," Cat says quietly. "And our families."

"You can't trust him. If we go now, we can take the Humvee, the supplies, and —"

"And go where, the cloud forest?" he demands, spinning me around to face him. "Caldwell would find us in a week. I saw what he did to B's brother, and that was for a minor infraction. You have no idea what you're asking of me."

"I know exactly what I'm asking," I say. "To turn away from everything you know. And I understand how incredibly hard that is, but your family has no future under Caldwell's reign. No one does."

Without a word, he grabs me by the arm and begins hauling me down the hallway.

"I saved your life," I whimper.

"Well, I guess that was your mistake."

“My mistake was not letting those Draggers tear all of us apart. I’d rather have died than let that piece of shit lay his hands on—”

Cat stops cold, then shakes me hard.

“Keep your head, Sarah. I want to help you, but now is not the time. Josh ... I’ve never seen him so mad. But he’ll cool off, and we’ll find some way to fix this, I promise.”

I take a deep breath, and a tear rolls down my cheek.

“He’s going to kill me.”

“It’s not going to come to that. Now let’s go.”

Josh is waiting for us on the porch, awkwardly holding a rifle in one hand. One of his eyes is swollen, and his nose is stuffed with gauze. I don’t see the anger Cat warned me about, though. In fact, when he smiles at me, I see relief. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’s been genuinely worried about me.

Cat pulls a handheld device from his vest, passes it to Josh, and then steps back.

My legs itch to run, even if that would only get me shot. Then I remember the knife wedged into the backseat. I hadn’t had the courage to use it before, but I do now. I’ll go for it the first chance I get.

“You got me good,” Josh says. “Switching the NAD, not a bad play. I knew there was a reason I loved you.” He turns to Cat. “Go get B. We need to get back on the road.”

I glance at Cat, trying to tell him with my eyes not to leave me alone, but he turns without looking at me and disappears around the side of the house.

“You do realize what this means, don’t you?” Josh asks when Cat’s out of earshot.

When I don’t answer, he lowers his rifle and holds up the device Cat gave him, smiling. It must be what he used to track me. My eyes lower as I wonder where the tracker might be hidden on me. It could be sewn into my clothes, or even embedded in the sole of my boot.

“Don’t you?” he asks again, a slight edge to his voice now.

I glare at him, but he only smiles wider. He slides the device into his pocket, then uses his free hand to slap me across the face. Pain shoots down my neck.

"You speak when spoken to," he says calmly. "Is that understood?"

Reluctantly, I nod, which earns me another slap.

"Is that understood?"

"Yes!"

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I understand."

He stands there, watching me, then steps closer, too close, and runs his hand over my shoulder and into my hair, which he pulls painfully back. He leans in, and I can hear his labored breathing through his broken nose.

"You destroyed my trust," he whispers. "Which means I no longer have to keep my promise to play nice."

I'm preparing to thrust my knee into his crotch and bolt when Cat returns with B. Josh grips my hair a moment longer, staring at them like a dog establishing dominance, before finally letting me go.

"One big happy family again," he says cheerfully. "My father needs his lab incinerated, so let's get this shitshow on the road, boys. Sarah, why don't you go first?"

Without a word, I start walking toward the Humvee, focused on a single goal—getting to that knife.

"Oh, sorry," Josh says behind me. "There's been a minor seating change."

His fingers dig into my hair again. He jerks my head back and then shoves me forward. With my hands tied behind me, I can't slow my momentum or shield my face when I slam into the pavement. The taste of iron floods my mouth.

Josh grabs my shirt and yanks me to my feet, dragging me toward the trailer. He stops just short of the open rear doors and pulls my head up to stare into the darkness. I can make out the gas canisters, all-weather tarps, and spare tires, but the guns and boxes of bullets seem to be gone.

“Welcome to your new home, Sarah. As you can see, we cleared a space for you.”

“You can’t put me in there,” I say, thinking again of the knife. “I’ll die in this heat.”

Josh smiles. “What choice do I have? You can’t be trusted.”

“Give me one more chance,” I say, tears blurring my vision.

“Your words don’t mean shit anymore ... but tell you what, if you’re still alive when we reach San Diego, you can prove to me just how dedicated you really are. Cat, how many days do we have left?”

No answer.

“Cat!”

“Three or four days.”

This is really happening. I can’t see Cat or B with Josh holding my hair, but I know I can’t rely on them for help—not with Josh dangling the cure under their noses.

“I’ll die in there without water.”

“Nah, you Foragers are tough,” Josh says, giving me another hard push.

My shins hit the bumper, sending me tumbling into the trailer. Something sharp scrapes at my cargo pants as I land on my stomach. I flip onto my back and glare up at him.

He steps closer. “I’m done acting like a gentleman. In three days, we’ll reach our destination, and you’re going to work for my kindness. Earn your NAD. And, let me just say, I intend to enjoy the fruits of your labor.”

I look to Cat and B, who are standing nearby. They refuse to meet my eyes.

“I know you’re doing this for your families,” I say to them, voice quavering, though whether it’s from fury or fear I can’t say for sure. “But right now, even they would call you fucking cowards.”

Cat flinches, then looks away. But B’s expression goes hard, and he steps up next to Josh at the mouth of the trailer.

“Boss,” he says, “permission to teach this brat some manners?”

Josh smirks down at me, then nods and steps back, crossing his arms. B climbs into the trailer, which creaks under his weight.

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” He sounds just like he did when he slammed me into the Humvee. “Getting us to fight your battles for you. Well, look where you’re at now, you little bitch.”

He grabs me by the back of the neck and pulls me up to a seated position. His other hand curls into a fist and drives into my stomach. I gasp—but then realize he’d used only a fraction of his strength. Enough to force a desperate sob out of me, but not enough to really hurt me. He leans in closer, his face mere inches from my ear.

“Check the tires,” he whispers.

And then he’s pulling away. The trailer bobs as he steps down, and I’m staring at Josh again, who’s beaming.

“I know this seems unfair,” he says, “but someday you’ll see that all of it, the pain and hard choices ... all of it was for your own good.”

The doors slam shut, plunging me into darkness. An exterior latch clanks into place, and the padlock lets out a resonant *click*. A moment later, the engine revs and the trailer jerks forward, sending one of the gas cans crashing down onto me.

I buck upward with a grunt, and after the canister flies off, I sit up and lean back against the trailer doors, wincing at the pain in my everything as I struggle to get my bound hands under my feet. I eventually get them in front of me and start groping for the tires B said to check.

As I search, my thoughts race back over the last few days, and then over my entire life, trying to retrace all the steps that led me here. What did James say the last time I saw him? That he was tired of watching me sink into myself, and that if I didn’t change, I might not like where I ended up.

I’m almost ready to give up my search and collapse into a heap on the hard steel floor, letting the pain and Fatigue usher me into unconsciousness, when my fingers brush against the cold, clean grooves of unused tire tread. Scrambling for

handholds, I pull myself up onto the stack of spares and plunge my hands into the hole in the center.

And then I hear it as my fingers come to a stop against something smooth and hard ... the telltale crackle of molded plastic. My fingers probe at the shapes, counting two, three, four cylindrical containers. One by one I drag them out, and as they roll back and forth on the floor, I hear the gentle slosh of bottled water.







CHAPTER 32

SETH

Several miles from the casino, I finally slow to a walk. My lungs are on fire and the steak is sitting in the pit of my stomach like a boulder. Dawn is hours off, and now that I'm no longer running for my life, the cold has me shivering, but my thoughts remain stuck on what just happened. How my first encounter with a group of humans had nearly led to my death.

It takes me another half hour to reach Highway 15. I walk back toward where I left my water, maneuvering among rusted cars, vans, and semi-trucks—but freeze when I hear someone moving up ahead. First a scrape of shoes across concrete, then a crinkle of plastic and a man's voice muttering. Someone is up there, and he's found my stroller.

As quietly as possible, I search the roadside for something to use as a weapon, but the best I can find is a hefty rock. I pick it up and move toward the sound. Sliding up beside a row of cars, I peer over the hood of the frontmost vehicle and spot a familiar figure.

"Don't move," I shout, just as Brad Chapman lifts one of my water bottles to his lips. "Stay right where you are."

He spits the water onto the pavement, then turns his plump face toward me, already smiling. He sees the rock and quickly lifts his hands in surrender.

"I come in peace," he says.

It took me over an hour to get back here from the hotel, and I was running for much of it. How did he make it here so fast?

"Are you armed?" I ask.

"What? Hell no. Bill doesn't trust me with live ammo."

"I'm going to come over and search you. Keep your hands where I can see them."

"I'm telling you, I'm not armed!"

"That may be, but right now, I'm not in a trusting mood."

I move cautiously toward him, lowering the rock. It feels as though this has all been planned, and the last thing I'll ever hear is the click of a trigger behind me. But it doesn't come, and Brad's hands are empty aside from the plastic bottle. I quickly pat him down, then reach under the nearby car to retrieve my pack and last remaining arrow.

"What happened back there?" I demand.

He slowly lowers his arms. "I haven't a clue. I was out in the parking lot, kicking the tires on ol' Winne, when the alarm went off. I figured it was you making a break for it, so I set off for the highway, which seemed like your best route out of town."

"Bill tried to kill me."

He notices the cuts on my face. "Oh, jeez. I've got a first aid kit in the—"

"Why are you here?"

"Originally, to offer some help. But now I guess I owe you an apology. Bill—he can be ornery at times."

"Ornery? He tried to blow my damn head off!"

"I've seen Bill shoot. If he wanted you dead, you'd be dead. You got a warning shot. Did you piss him off?"

"I didn't do anything. Just decided to leave. You have a problem with that?"

"Listen, kid," he says. "It wasn't me who shot at you."

I silently watch him for a few seconds. "What kind of help are you offering?"

He immediately perks back up.

"A ride." He waves at a huge, dark shape standing in the road nearby. "Meet Winne, the old RV I was telling you about."

"I didn't get the feeling you believed in what I was doing."

"I'm not saying I do. But it was clear you were hell-bent on going to San Diego anyway, and there's no way you'd survive that stretch of desert on foot. I didn't want another death on my conscience."

My gut is telling me to walk away.

"I've lived in the desert my entire life," I say. "I'll be fine."

“OK, but I’m telling you, this desert isn’t like the one you passed through to get here. Even with all that water, I doubt you’ll even make it to Barstow at this time of year.”

“How do I know this isn’t some kind of trap?”

He rolls his eyes. “Are you really this paranoid?”

I squint at him, considering my options.

“Do you mind opening the motor home?” I ask, then add, “You can understand my hesitation.”

“Suit yourself.”

He shuffles over to the vehicle, and I nock the arrow as he unlatches the rear door. When he opens it, a dim light inside flickers, then turns on. I shift from side to side, scanning the interior, my arrow poised and ready. It’s empty as far as I can see.

“Not a trap,” he grumbles.

I stand there for a moment, wondering how to proceed. I think of Caldwell coming up from the south. Then there’s the Merry Men, who could still be out there somewhere. Accepting this ride could save me a week getting to the lab. With so many factors stacked against me, it seems like a risk I have to take.

“I guess I could use a ride,” I say, still not sure I’m making the right decision.

When he nods, I lower my bow, grab the stroller, and start trying to load it inside.

“You won’t need that. I’ve got thirty gallons of water in that rig. It’s clean and tastes a heck of a lot better than that stuff you’re drinking.”

It’s heavy and a burden to push, and for a moment I consider leaving it behind, but I still don’t trust him. “I’d rather not go without it,” I say.

He offers me a hand lifting it into the RV. Once it’s inside, I look over the ragged furniture and ancient appliances, then point to a small room at the back.

“What’s that door?”

“The bathroom.”

“Could you open it?”

He does as I ask, revealing a toilet and moldy plastic drapes.

"If you're satisfied, I'm going to get us on the road now."

I'm not, but I nod anyway, and he heads for the front. Once he's seated, he fiddles with something beneath the oversized wheel, and the engine revs to life. I join him, lowering myself into the passenger's chair while keeping my bow and arrow laid across my lap. When the vehicle starts moving, I rock back, grabbing for a small handle attached just below the side window.

Brad chuckles. "Never been in a vehicle before?"

"First time," I say, glancing nervously at the silhouettes of cars now sliding by outside. "How long will it be?"

"Last time, it took about seven hours. The road's mostly clear from here to Barstow, but there are semis blocking portions after that, and I don't want to push Winne too hard."

"You're going to stay on Highway 15, right?" I ask. "No detours."

He laughs again. "You got trust issues, kid. By the way, there's a first aid kit beneath your seat. Might want to clean up that face a bit so it doesn't get infected. If you need a mirror, flip down the visor."

"Visor?" I ask.

"That's right, you're a vehicular virgin."

He points to the flap above my side of the windshield.

I pull it down, and my head jerks back when I see my face. My patchy beard is matted, every line in my face is crusted with homemade sunblock, and the tops of both ears have peeled, exposing pink skin. I've seen Andes in better shape. I wonder if my friend on the mountain had mistaken me for one of his own.

The shrapnel wounds don't look so bad, and after cleaning them with antiseptic, I decide there's no need for dressing.

When I tuck the kit back under the seat, Brad picks up speed. The massive tin can leans to one side as he races around a bend, and I place a hand on the dash. Never have I moved so fast. Fences and buildings blur past on both sides, and in twenty minutes, we're leaving the city behind.

It feels like magic watching the miles of desert, so dry and merciless during my journey here, flash effortlessly by. It's hypnotic, and within minutes, my thoughts are drifting and my eyelids begin to close. I pinch my thigh, telling myself that I can't afford to let my guard down. Under no circumstances can I fall asleep.

My eyes open to the rising sun glowing a brilliant red through the RV's windshield. A small vent on the dashboard is blasting icy air into my face, and a man's voice crackles through speakers I can't see, singing something about being on the road again.

"Where are we?" I ask, blinking the sleep from my eyes.

"Passed Barstow forty miles ago. You missed most of the desert."

Rows of houses line both sides of the street.

"I think I can walk from here," I say. "Looks like we're through the worst of it."

"No worries, kid. I've come this far, I'm not turning back now. Besides, I've got business of my own in San Diego."

"You do?" I ask, eyeing him warily.

"There's this house in La Jolla I used to own. A mansion right on the beach. It was a wreck when I went back to it a few years ago, but I started fixing it up. I tried to get the others to come live there with me, but after the ranch, they don't like houses. Anyway, I thought I might spend a few weeks with my toes in the sand."

"What will you do for food?"

He maneuvers around a car. "There are gardens all over those hills, and with all that moisture coming in from the coast, you'd be surprised what's thrived over the years. Vegan was never my thing, but I can survive off the local vegetation for a bit."

He doesn't strike me as a survivalist. Looking over at him, I picture Brad covering these harsh miles on foot, and it seems likely the desert would swallow him whole.

When I reach for a water bottle at my feet, Brad blurts, “Hold up.” He’s grinning. “You should try a beer instead.” Taking one hand off the wheel, he pops open a cooler by his legs and lifts out a plain brown bottle.

I stare at it, then reluctantly accept. Lifting it to my nose, I’m met with a surprisingly sweet aroma.

“Back in the day,” he says, “even when I was rich as shit, all I drank was Coors.” He reaches down again and grabs one for himself. “Wasn’t until a decade back that I started brewing my own ale. All my fellow oldies gave up drinking long before that, though, so I’d love to know what you think.”

Before I can take a sip, he’s already popped the cap to his own bottle and guzzled down half of it. Steering with his knees, he pounds his free hand on his chest and lets out a massive belch. I take a small drink and make a face at the bitter taste. Still, there’s something appealing about the flavor. By the third mouthful, it’s growing on me.

Brad glances over. “We used to call this the breakfast of champions.”

“It’s good.”

“Really?” he asks, his eyebrows raised. “How good?”

“Better than muddy creek water.”

Laughter explodes out of him, which brings a smile to my face as well. I’ve always wanted to laugh with someone other than the Professor, but it feels a bit strange, and I turn my attention back out the window. Immediately, I spot a sign announcing Turnbuckle Road. According to the atlas, just a little past that exit is the last creek along my route. I sit up taller in my seat to get a better view, but water never appears. It makes me wonder if all those bottles would have been enough after all.

“So, tell me,” Brad says, “now that you’re out here in the big bad world, what do you think? Is it what you expected?”

I dwell on that for a moment. I’ve seen so much on my journey. The dilapidated buildings, abandoned vehicles, and general decay of the old world had been expected, but what I discovered about its former inhabitants had not.

“Not really,” I say, trying to find the right words to express my feelings. “I mean, I knew things got bad when everything fell apart, but I guess I wasn’t ready to see some of those things for myself. And then hearing Tammy talk about what happened to you all out on Bill’s ranch, and Bill shooting at me ... I just thought people would be different somehow.”

“I get how you feel, kid, but it’s not fair to lump Bill in with those sons of bitches who burned down the ranch. I mean, come on, you can’t really blame him. We hadn’t seen any other survivors since we moved into the casino. Then you show up out of nowhere. He didn’t know your intentions, and after what we all went through, I guess he wasn’t taking any chances. In his mind, he was protecting us.”

I suppose I can understand that. After all, my first impulse had been to shoot the Ande who ended up helping me survive the Dixie Mountains. Self-preservation is a fundamental instinct, and I shouldn’t blame Bill for trying to protect his pack.

“He’s your group’s alpha,” I say, taking another pull off my bottle.

“Our what?”

“Your alpha. I’m sure you’ve seen Andes—Primitives out in the wild. They travel in packs. Their size might vary, but there’s always an alpha who’s responsible for keeping the group alive. Bill, he’s yours.”

“I never thought about it that way,” he says, taking a swig from his bottle. “Not sure if I like what that makes me, though.” He laughs, which brings a chuckle out of me, and this time, instead of looking out the window, I embrace the warmth it brings. For the second time in the past few days, I know what it feels like to be in friendly company. As I continue to sip my beer, relaxation begins to set in, and I slide a little lower in my seat, finally relaxing. The next mouthful I take, however, is only foam. Brad notices me shaking the tilted bottle for its final drops.

“You want another one?” he asks.

“I do,” I say enthusiastically.

He reaches down into the cooler, the bottles inside clinking together as he pulls out another and proudly hands it to me. I twist off the metal top and take the first sip, looking out at a confusing landscape of concrete and chain-link. Every night before sleep, I used to picture what the old world had been like, but now that I'm among its ruins, I can't imagine it as a living place.

"What was it like before?" I ask. "In the old days."

He leans back and rotates his neck, which lets out a series of audible pops. "For me, it was great. I was a young man with more money than I knew what to do with. I traveled the world, ate at the finest restaurants, and, believe it or not, dated some of the most beautiful women you could ever imagine. You see, back then, the folks with money had access to things most others just didn't."

"So, you were kind of an alpha yourself."

"No, I wasn't," he says. "I didn't have a pack. The only person I provided for was myself."

"What about your family?"

"I'm from a small, rural town in Indiana," he says. "Grew up poor and hated everything about it. I got the hell out of there the first chance I got, moved to Chicago and never looked back. I worked to put myself through college, and a few years after graduation I founded my first investment company. I thought my parents would be so damn proud of me, but it didn't work out that way."

"Why not?"

"To them, trading commodities wasn't honest work. In my father's eyes, true men earned their living by putting calluses on their hands."

"But you had friends, right?"

"Oh yeah, lots of 'em. And they all had their hands in my pockets. I know you grew up isolated, but even when surrounded by people, it's still possible to feel utterly alone. That was surprisingly common in the old world."

"I find that hard to believe," I say.

"I'm sure you do, kid. We all romanticize what we don't have. In the old days, you could walk into a crowd of people and never get a smile. Hell, if you were

dying in the street, someone would drive right over you before offering a helping hand.”

“What about you?” I ask. “Tammy told me how you helped her get out of the city. And how Bill opened up his ranch to you and everyone else. That doesn’t sound like what you’re describing.”

“I don’t want to burst your bubble, kid, but it takes a lot of hands to run a ranch, and most of Bill’s workers stopped showing up when the Great Fatigue hit. He needed us. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying he’s a bad guy, but having people live with him helped guarantee his own survival as well.”

“What about you? You didn’t have anything to gain by picking Tammy up, and yet you did.”

“Oh, I had plenty to gain, even though I didn’t know it at the time. You see, I was wrestling with a big ball of guilt. My mom and pop both passed from the Fatigue, as many old people did. Before my father checked out, though, he made me promise to take care of my sister, Melissa. I tried to get her to come live with me in Chicago, but I didn’t try hard enough. A few months before Advitalon came out, she called me crying. The Fatigue had her in pretty bad shape, but I was at a big party, wired on coke, so I said I would call her back. I did ... a few days later. I couldn’t get a hold of her for a week, so eventually I took a road trip home. I found her in the living room, my dad’s shotgun lying on the floor next to her.” He takes a long drink from his bottle. “When I saw Tammy wandering along the road, utterly lost, I guess she reminded me of Missy.”

The Professor had told me about people’s greed and selfishness, but the picture he’d painted hadn’t been nearly this bleak. “It sounds like you believe every good deed has some other motive behind it.”

“No, but most of them do,” he returns. “I’m not saying that people are inherently bad. We were just living in an unbalanced world back then. If the Great Fatigue hadn’t got us, something else would have.”

“The Professor feels the same,” I say. “But he also thought we had it in us to turn things around.”

“I disagree. Like I said, it wasn’t necessarily the people. It was our environment. Back in one of my college psych classes, I read about an experiment that explained it perfectly. A group of researchers took rats and put them in a large enclosure with plenty of food and water. As the rats bred, the researchers extended the perimeter and added more food. During this phase of the experiment, the rats were happy as shit. They never fought. Then the researchers stopped expanding the enclosure and began giving the rats less to eat and drink. Those little fuckers kept breeding, and it didn’t take long for the harmony to disappear. By the end of it all, they were eating each other’s babies. People aren’t much different when the walls start closing in.”

“If what you’re saying is true, that people’s actions are just a result of their environment, explain the Merry Men. When they attacked you, the world had been mostly emptied, plenty of space to roam, and yet they still did what they did.”

Brad looks at me. “I’ve given those bastards too much thought over the years, and I’ve concluded that they can’t be lumped in with the rest of us. They’re something else entirely.”

“Tammy thinks differently. She didn’t come right out and say it, but I think she feels all of us have a Merry Man lurking inside.”

“That’s a terrifying thought,” he says, then tilts back his bottle and drains it. “I don’t know who or what they were in the old world, but creatures like that, there’s a sickness inside them. A few months after they raided the ranch, we went back to salvage what we could and hold a memorial for our friends. The crops were burnt. All the cattle had been shot, and the henhouse and stable were leveled like a bomb had gone off. Even the well was poisoned, filled with excrement from our septic tank. But here’s the kicker, kid—nothing had been taken. Turns out, they had only come there to kill us. My view is that we’re all products of our environment. If the environment is unnatural, we’re unnatural. If the environment is balanced, we behave as we should. If I were to include the Merry Men with the rest of us ... all I know is that they haven’t turned up in more than a

decade. Who knows, maybe they're still out there, or maybe things have shifted back into harmony."

"So, you don't think we can learn from our mistakes?"

"I think we're getting our second chance right now. I saw how things were toward the end, and honestly, we're better off starting from scratch. It will probably go to hell anyhow, a thousand or so years from now, but why rush to the finish line?"

"You told me why you picked Tammy up," I say carefully. "But why are you giving me a lift? I know it isn't guilt."

"No, I suppose it isn't," he says. "I just wanted to show you a different side. I hoped our conversation would get you to think for yourself. Decide for *yourself* what you think is right. Sometimes, when we're under the influence of others, we ignore our own instincts."

"You're talking about the Professor. You think he's brainwashed me or something."

"I wouldn't go that far. But there ain't no right or wrong, kid. Just different views. Sometimes you've got to think for yourself—that's all I'm saying. In my opinion, if you want to change this world for the better, you've got to focus on what's still here rather than what we've lost."

I sit in silence, and after a moment, he sighs.

"I won't lie to you," he continues. "My outlook is at least partially shaped by my demons. But if I were a betting man, I'd drop money that your Professor has a few demons of his own. Have you ever asked yourself what those might be? Why he feels obligated to put things back the way they were? Or maybe you're afraid to look too deep into that, because if you did, you'd realize you're just caught up in another man's need for redemption."

For a guy who'd squandered the blessings he'd been given in his former life, he seems mighty sure of himself. "Maybe you're right," I say. "But there's one thing I know for certain—the Professor hasn't spent the past fifteen years hiding in some rundown hotel, brewing beer."

He doesn't respond. Instead, he eases onto the brakes until we come to a stop in the middle of the road. Putting the RV in park, he turns to face me. "I know it must be hard hearing a different opinion, especially when you've only gotten one your whole life. But I saw something in you, kid. Something I don't think the others did. When it comes down to it, I know you'll make the right choice. We can't afford for you not to." He stands, stretches his arms, and heads toward the back. The motor home rocks as he crosses it. "Just think on it while I drain this ancient tank of mine."

When the bathroom door closes, I slump in my seat. I wish I could see what he sees. Then, maybe, I'd understand where he's coming from. As I peer out the passenger-side window, however, my frustration evolves into something else, and I'm struck by a sense of ... normalcy. A smile spreads across my face. Is this what it feels like to go on a road trip with a friend and get into an argument over a beer?

I turn to holler an apology to Brad—when my eyes catch a glint of metal from the other side of his seat, between the chair and the driver's-side door. I stand slowly and look over the edge.

It's the cold, gray gleam of a pistol.



CHAPTER 33

SARAH

I cling to the thin strips of light outlining the trailer doors. I know once I lose that, my grip on reality will slide, just like it did last night. My hands begin to tremble at the thought, and I snatch an empty water bottle off the floor and clutch it tight.

By my best estimate, I've been locked in this blistering cage for nearly three days. I thought the water bottles B left me would last longer than they did, but every pore on my body has been gushing sweat. My brain feels swollen, pressing against my skull like a bloated sponge, and I have all the signs of dehydration—fever, chills, vertigo. As miserable as those are, it's the lack of NAD that's driving me insane. The first day was tolerable, but on the second night, the pitch black of the trailer invited my mind to wander.

The lines of light around the doors slowly shift from white to orange. Is the sun setting, or am I already slipping? I consider stripping down and once again searching my clothes for this hidden tracking device, but instead I pat the floor until I find the ragged shard of scrap metal nestled between two gas cans. It must have been a fragment of shelving knocked loose during the drive. Whatever its original purpose, it cut through the zip-tie easily enough.

I squeeze it in both hands, letting the edge bite into my flesh, hoping the fresh burst of pain will keep the hallucinations at bay. As I bleed, a thought repeats in my head: *You're in a trailer headed for San Diego. You only have to make it a few more hours, and when those doors open, you'll drive this piece of metal into Josh's throat.*

As the orange light fades, I focus on the pain in my hand. But even that starts drifting away into the dark as the sliver of sunlight disappears. I shut my eyes tight, though the insides of my eyelids offer the same landscape of colors swirling on black. The sounds begin to change as well, just as they had before. This time, the rumble of the engine becomes the hum of generators powering strange, beeping machines.

I open my eyes, and I'm no longer sitting in darkness. Instead, I'm in a room with a single bright light above a silver table. James is strapped to it, and Dr. Caldwell stands over him, holding a scalpel. Dozens of Draggers howl in cages down below, but even those terrifying sounds are hardly audible over the steady chirping of the machines hooked to James's chest. Behind them, a rope dangles from above. Looking up, I realize the surgical lamp isn't a lamp at all—it's a missing skylight.

Caldwell's scalpel dances through the air like a conductor's baton. He smiles as he positions the instrument for his first cut. Finally, the tip plunges into a gully between two ribs and carves down, splitting the skin and producing a fountain of blood. James's head jerks off the table, eyes bulging. His screams fill my head.

"I always thought you were an upstanding citizen." Caldwell rips out the blade, then dabs gently at the incision with a soiled cloth. My friend's head clunks back down as his screams taper off into a soft moan. "But you chose the wrong friend."

"It was me," I scream. "I did it. Please, just let him go!"

Neither one seems to hear me. I want to help, but when I try to step forward, I can't move.

"Those monsters down below," Caldwell continues. "They're quite picky about what they eat. Oh, they'll take lizards or bugs or snakes if they're starving, but human meat ... they can smell it when I bring it down the stairs. They crash into the bars, clawing to get at it. Life follows a cycle, James, and I want you to die knowing that no part of you will go to waste."

Caldwell sets the scalpel on a tray and plucks up a bone saw with quarter-inch teeth. He positions the blade near James's right shoulder, then pauses and leans over him.

"Sarah put that youngling through quite an ordeal by letting it out of its cage," he says. "And since your friend isn't here, you're the one who has to pay. So I'm going to give the youngling your arm. She'll love gnawing on the bicep. But don't worry. As I said, you will not go to waste. They'll start with your flesh, then they'll

devour your heart and brain and all the rest, and finally they'll crack your bones and suck out the marrow."

As Caldwell places the saw to his skin, James breaks. "It was all her idea!" he screams. "She's the one to blame!"

Caldwell frowns. "I don't like thieves, but I loathe disloyalty. It's weak." He drops the saw onto the metal tray. "Now I have no choice but to prolong your suffering."

He plucks up a thick syringe, taps the side with a fingernail, and then slides it into my best friend's arm. As he pushes down on the stopper, James begins convulsing wildly, veins popping out on his neck. Then, slowly, his thrashing stops and his muscles relax, as if Caldwell had simply put him to sleep.

Then the transformation begins. His eyes grow droopy and his jaw goes slack. He begins moaning—the same sound I heard from the cells beneath Caldwell's lab. He's been dealt a punishment worse than death.

"Change him back!" I scream. "I know you can. I'll do anything, just change him back!"

When there's no sign left of my friend, James's face rises again, but this time he doesn't scream. He turns to me, agony replaced by an emotionless stare. Instantly, I'd trade the world for the look he'd always give me, the one telling me he'd always be by my side. The first time I saw it was a lifetime ago, surrounded by people as I looked out over the crashing waves. I close my eyes, listening to the rocks tumbling in the water and smelling the salt on the sea air.

When I open them, I'm ten years old, standing on a rocky beach. People are passing me, walking toward a circular clearing carved into the jungle just off New Haven's eastern shore. Tombstones spiral away from a stone building at the center, its towering door engraved with a crouched man holding up the world—Caldwell's mausoleum, currently empty, but positioned so that he can always watch over us, even in death.

Waves roar in my ears, along with a million birds and insects droning like a massive engine, beckoning me away from the crowd that turned up for my

father's funeral. I don't even recognize half the faces—some had no doubt worked with Dad at the lab, while others probably just want the free food that's always served afterward on fancy platters.

Caldwell pushes through the crowd and takes his place next to my father's grave. As he does, hands shove me forward after him. People circle around me, putting me on display. I look up at our leader and see a hint of a smirk on his austere face, as if this is some kind of show.

"Death might be the end," Caldwell booms, "but what Randall Peoples helped us build in New Haven will last for a thousand years ..."

The doctor continues rambling on, and my attention shifts to the whispers of the children behind me.

"Sarah's an orphan now," one of them says.

"She'll have to move into the jungle," another chimes in, giggling. "Live with the Draggers."

"She'll never make it. They'll eat her down to the bones."

"Good. She's always been so weird. There's a reason she has no friends."

I clench my fists, fighting back tears and resisting the urge to flee to my mother's grave. As one of the first settlers to die, she lies much closer to the center of the cemetery, only a few rings away from Caldwell's tomb. My father and I used to go there several times a week, but I could see the pain it caused him, and I'm pretty sure he saw the pain it caused me, because eventually he said we needed to leave the past behind and look toward the future.

I tried after that, but despite his words, he never did. Every day of the last decade of his life, he simply went to work in Caldwell's lab, then came home to cook dinner and read me a book; aside from his occasional nocturnal excursions, all he did at night was smoke his pipe while staring sadly out from our porch. He never moved on, and it's wrong that he isn't being buried beside her. But there's an order to things in New Haven. Every grave is a link in the chain spreading out

from Caldwell's plot. I glare at Caldwell as he spouts his garbage about loyalty and honor, and decide I'd rather listen to the kids.

"Nah, they'll put her to work in the sewage plant."

"My mom said she'll have to become a maid."

"I bet she's going to pick up my dog's poop in the park."

This place, and everyone in it, makes me want to run into the jungle and never look back. Gazing down at my tiny sneakers, now half buried in unearthed clay, I wonder how far the rubber soles could carry me. I start listing items in my head ... everything I'll need to survive on my own.

When I finally look back up, a boy is staring at me from the other side of the circle. My eyes dart away as I pray silently to disappear, but when I glance back, he's still watching me. It's a boy from school, a year or two younger. He has a pigeon-toed stance, and his parted hair swoops just above his eyes. As awkward as he is, the look on his face fills me with the first warmth I've felt since before Dad succumbed to his Fatigue three days ago. Maybe it's the big, sullen eyes or the sympathy written plain on his face. Whatever the reason, I feel an overwhelming urge to run to him, bury my face in his shoulder, and cry until sometime next week.

"... and so, today, we lay another New Haven resident to rest."

"... I hope she doesn't clean my house. I don't want that weirdo going through my stuff."

My eyes stay fastened on the boy. As my own tears begin to dry, his start rolling down his cheeks, as if he's taking my grief onto himself.

It's not until Caldwell's hand lands on my shoulder that I break eye contact. The leader of New Haven is pulling me forward, motioning to the pile of loose soil—inviting me to drop a handful onto my father's casket and say my final farewell. I do it even though I know I'm not ready, as I'm far too young and afraid to make a fuss.

After the dirt and pebbles rattle onto the wood below, I cross to the other side of the circle and stand at the boy's side. He doesn't look at me as his hand finds

mine and squeezes tight. Only when the people begin filing away does he speak.

“You know how they found you,” he whispers.

“Found me?”

“In the house. Cat told you how.”

“Who’s Cat?” I ask even as my neck starts to itch.

“We all got them when we were young. The vagus nerve stimulators. They claimed it would help with the Fatigue, but I never felt good without NAD. Did you?” I shake my head slowly. “That’s because it’s not helping you. It’s tracking you. And if you ever want to be free, you need to get it out.”

“What are you talking about?” My hand rises to the lump on my neck.

“You’re not here, Sarah. You’re in a trailer headed for San Diego. You only have to make it a few more hours, and when those doors open, you’re going to drive that rusty metal into Josh’s throat and paint the walls with his blood.”

Pain shoots down my arm as I squeeze the device buried in the side of my neck, bringing me back to the pitch-black reality of road noise and engine roar. My other hand is still clutching the scrap metal. It’s only a matter of time until I get pulled back—to Caldwell’s lab, the graveyard, and all the traumas of my youth.

With two fingers and my thumb, I stretch the device away from the muscle as far as my skin will allow. Then I lift the jagged metal to my flesh and start sawing. A burst of pain brings reality into crystal clear focus as blood begins flowing down my neck. Compared to the sweltering heat of the trailer, it feels surprisingly cool.

After several cuts, the skin lets go, but the device doesn’t. I dig my fingers into the gash, and my screams bounce around the metal walls—I pull and pull until something snaps, releasing another burst of agony. And then I’m holding the device in my hand.

My screams turn to unhinged laughter as I stare at it. I can’t see the tracker itself, but I can see the small red light blinking on the top. It’s not much, but it’s exactly what I need while trapped here in the dark—a small beacon of light to keep me tethered to reality.

“You’re in a trailer headed toward San Diego,” I say aloud. “You don’t know when those doors will open, but when they do, you’re going to bury this piece of metal in Josh’s neck. Then you’ll be free, and no one will ever take that freedom again.”



CHAPTER 34

SETH

I'm still trying to rationalize the gun when the toilet flushes.

It could have been stashed there a long time ago, a self-defense holdover from his days spent traveling the western states. But what if it's not? I try to shake the thought, telling myself he could have killed me in my sleep, but the idea only sinks its claws deeper. What if Bill had woken Brad after missing his shot, told him to pick me up and put a bullet in my head? It would explain Brad's desperate attempt to change my mind before we reached San Diego.

The squeak of the water shutting off finally moves me into action. I yank the gun from its holster and flop back into the passenger seat, concealing the weapon behind my right thigh. In the rearview mirror, I see Brad open the door and begin walking back to the front.

"We're getting close," he says, reclaiming his position in the captain's chair. "This might be a good time to tell me where we're going."

"San Diego," I say, hoping my voice doesn't give away my nerves.

"No shit. But San Diego's a big place. Do you even know where this lab is?"

I know exactly where it is. I studied these last thirty miles more closely than any others on my route. Fifteen miles or so after we merge onto the next highway, we'll take the Market Street off-ramp. From there, the lab is just a mile or so down.

"I'll know when we get closer," I say.

A brief pause, then, "Is everything OK, Seth?"

"I'm fine."

"Listen, I know I was pushing you pretty hard."

I glance at him, and whatever he sees in my face makes him take a deep breath.

"It looks like our conversation might have rattled you a bit."

"Everything's fine," I say. "Can we please just get back on the road?"

"You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

He leans forward and reaches his left hand behind his back. Nerves on fire, I'm suddenly sure he has another weapon. I lift the gun and train it on his chest with a jittery hand.

"Bring your hands forward," I demand. "Slowly."

His eyes go as round as saucers, and he freezes. After a tense moment, he brings his hand back to the front, then sets both palms on the wheel. "Never heard of a man getting shot for fixing a wedgy, but I guess there's a first for everything. I don't know what—"

"What were you going to do with this gun?"

"I wasn't going to do anything with that," he says sadly. "I put that there long before you ever set foot inside Winne."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Because one of you already tried to kill me. And I don't believe you actually want me to get where I'm going."

He lets out a low whistle.

"As I said, my only goal is to keep you alive and get you to use that brain of yours. If I were planning to use that, I'd be no better than the Merry Men." I stay quiet, the gun rattling in my hand. "The most important question here, Seth, is, if you have so little faith in people, why are you so determined to bring them back?"

"I have faith in people. I just don't have faith in you."

"Listen, kid, I forgot that thing was even there. But I obviously can't say anything to convince you, so why don't you go ahead and pull that trigger. It's not loaded."

I flip the gun over, looking at the base of the grip, where old movies had shown me a magazine should be, but all I find is a hollow compartment. When I look back at him, his eyes are turned down.

"Do you see now why we don't want to bring people back?" he says. "We're all afraid of the darkness in others, and eventually we become what we fear. If we brought them back today, every single one of them would be just like you."

I'm too shattered to speak.

"Congratulations, you just broke the heart of an old man who saw something worthwhile in you," he says. "But it'll be so much worse if you don't leave the past alone." He shakes his head and sighs again. "Either way, I won't be around to find out. I've done my best, and you've shown me your worst. So I'd appreciate it if you got the hell out of my vehicle."

Looking at him now, seeing the disappointment on his face, I realize everything he just said is true. The pistol falls from my hand and clatters on the floor. I open my mouth, but before I can find words, Brad raises a hand.

"I don't want to hear it," he says. "You turned this nasty. If I were younger, I'd be considering giving you a bloody nose. But I'll settle for you getting out. Now."

I pick up my pack and bow, then make for the stroller. This time, when I carry it down the metal stairs, Brad doesn't offer to help.

I set it down on the pavement and turn back to say goodbye, but he slams the door without even looking at me. A few seconds later, the RV rumbles to life and rolls away, leaving me standing alone under the blistering early afternoon sun.

I need an escape. I've been walking all day and can't stop thinking about what I've done. I'd waited a lifetime to meet other people only to set their home on fire and pull a gun on one of them like some kind of lunatic. I can still feel Janet's arms around me. Hear Brad's laughter as he hands me a beer.

Only eight miles remain between me and the exit leading to CDR Research, but those miles seem longer than all the rest that brought me here. A hundred yards ahead, a massive sign announces Garnet Avenue. I've walked every one of the streets in my head, and I know where that road ends.

As I limp down the ramp pushing my stroller, I notice an odd scent in the air. I once asked the Professor what the sea was like, and he said, *It smells like life and death at the same time*. I'd never known what he meant until now.

Sticking to the highway would be the quickest way to get to the lab, but this detour will only cost me a few hours, and that ride saved me a week.

Pushing my stroller along, I stare through shop windows at racks of decaying clothing and trinkets covered by thirty years of dust. I try to imagine what life might have been like in this calm, suburban beach community, but instead, my imagination shows me glimpses of Brad's version of the future. The street comes alive with people, but they aren't sipping coffee or walking their dogs. They're looting whatever's left from the shops, using makeshift weapons to bash in the windows. Despite my efforts to shut them out, they keep coming, as if what I did to Brad has broken a mental dam that I may never be able to repair.

Then I hear the water—not like the babbling brooks back home, but a rhythmic crashing, like the breath of a sleeping dragon. I break into a run, leaving the stroller behind and ignoring the burning in my wounded leg. My pack slaps against my back, pulling me off balance, so I drop it to one side. I don't stop until I reach the narrow concrete boardwalk. I place my hands on the short retaining wall and stare out over a hundred yards of sand, stretching toward an endless blue-green expanse.

Pulling off my clothes, I leap over the wall and continue running. Some distant part of me realizes I'm laughing even as tears stream down my face. All the stress of the past few weeks evaporates as my bare feet race over the sand.

I charge into the surf, my legs dragging as the water gets deeper. Salt stings my eyes and the half-healed puncture wounds in my calf, but I don't care. The first real wave topples me over, sending me rolling back toward shore. After clearing the water from my nose, I stand up and do it again.

I can't remember the last time I felt this way. The waves are so powerful, yet I feel only joy as the guilt I've been carrying melts away. I stare out at the sparkling water, remembering the swimming lessons the Professor gave me in a river by the butte as a boy. I'd never had a chance to really open up, and without much thought, I start swimming toward the horizon, not stopping until every last muscle burns. With the sun beating down on me, I regard my surroundings and see that I am only a speck on a vast plane of rippling turquoise. Suddenly feeling out of my element, I turn back toward the beach.

Exhausted, I drag myself from the waves and flop down on the sand. The saltwater begins to evaporate in the afternoon heat, leaving my skin feeling oddly sticky. I stare up at the broad blue sky until the waves start to settle and the stars come out, twinkling like fireflies on a sheet of black glass. I really should get back on the road, but I've been walking all day in the heat, and with my leg now throbbing, I convince myself it would be a good idea to get some sleep before finishing my trek.

I pull out my remaining blanket and spread it over the sand. After forming a small mound beneath one end, I lie down and place my head on the makeshift pillow, gazing up again at the stars. As the gentle lapping of waves lulls me toward sleep, the old folks from Vegas vanish from my thoughts. Instead, I find myself thinking of the Ande on the mountain. I imagine him sitting here with me now, looking out over all this water. Would he find it as peaceful as I do? Or would he be terrified by its vastness?

Maybe one day, after this is all over, I'll get a chance to ask him.



CHAPTER 35

SARAH

They've stopped again. My eyes cling to the slivers of light around the trailer doors as boots begin scraping across pavement outside. I attempt to sit up but fall flat onto my back.

I hear Josh's voice. I can't make out what he's saying, but it sends a shiver down my spine just the same. Then there's a new sound, like the squawks I heard from the radio on the boat. I don't remember seeing a radio in the Humvee. There's a momentary burst of laughter, then silence. A few moments later, someone shouts, followed by a brief commotion.

Something is going on.

A shadow passes by the lines of light.

I've spent days lost in either nightmares or hallucinations—the darkness in here made it impossible to tell which—but when I was lucid, I envisioned every detail of this moment. When the doors open and Josh is close enough, I'm going to drive my shard of metal into his jugular and watch him bleed out. All that matters now is finding the strength to make that vision a reality.

As keys jangle outside, I pat the floor around me, still unable to sit up. Finally, I find the metal fragment, sticky with dried blood, but the fine muscles in my fingers can't grip the shard. My erratic heartbeat thunders in my ears. Unlike before, I embrace the fear, feeding it with thoughts of what will happen if I fail. Again, I try to pick up the fragment but only manage to push it between two canisters of gas. If I can't even pick the damn thing up—

When you see him, I tell myself, you'll find the strength you need.

Metal grinds on metal and the trailer doors open, flooding my dilated pupils with sunlight. Two hazy figures stand in the space. The trailer dips as the larger of the two climbs inside. Even through blurred vision, I recognize B's bulky silhouette. He's holding a knife at his side. As he steps forward, I grit my teeth and manage to slide my hand between the canisters toward the shard.

“Jesus Christ, Sarah,” he says, and begins chucking aside gas cans. When he’s cleared a space, he kneels at my side. “Where did all this blood—” He spots the hole in my neck, then slides his knife back into its sheath. “So you found your tracking device. I was going to cut it out. Looks like it’s clotting well enough.”

“How is she?” comes another voice. I peer out the open door, my eyes already starting to adjust to the light, and Cat comes into focus.

“Bad shape,” B returns. “But you’re a fighter, right, Sarah? We’ll get some water and NAD in you, then stitch up that neck. You’ll be good as new.”

“Josh,” I manage to croak.

B smiles. “Right now, he’s hog-tied in the backseat of the wagon.”

I look back to Cat. “No joke,” he says.

I close my eyes. When I open them, Cat and B are still with me. If this is another hallucination, it’s the most vivid one I’ve had.

The trailer rocks as Cat climbs inside. He hands a water bottle to B, and B quickly spins the top and brings it to my lips. I must have had a hundred dreams of water. Drinking it, bathing in it, listening to it flow as I sat beside a creek back home. But at this moment, I couldn’t care less about what my body needs.

“Why?” I rasp, then cough up a glob of phlegm.

B slides a hand behind my neck and elevates my head. Warm water quenches my burning throat.

“Because I found this,” Cat says, stepping forward as he pulls a folded paper from his back pocket. He opens it and holds it out to me. My palm is still resting on the piece of scrap metal, and despite what they’re telling me, I’m not ready to move it away. When I don’t take the paper, he leans over and positions it in front of my face.

It looks like a map of the west coast of the United States. A red circle is drawn around the city of Humboldt, California.

“While B was beating the snot out of Josh, I went through his things,” Cat says as he sits cross-legged by my feet. “San Diego to Humboldt is seven hundred

miles. Way off-mission. And I'm pretty sure Josh wasn't planning on bringing the two of us along."

"You knew he wasn't going to give you the cure," I say, coughing up more phlegm. "Even before he put me in here."

B nods. "We couldn't risk telling you. Josh is surprisingly perceptive. We had to wait until we got here, to the lab, so he could radio his father to check in. When we get back, the official story will be that you and Josh didn't get out of the building in time before it burned. There might be some repercussions for me and Cat, but I don't think Caldwell will touch our families."

"We have to kill him," I say, then try to sit up. Pain shoots through my everything and I collapse back down.

"Don't worry, he's a dead man," Cat says. "But first, we want some information about Trenton. He'll probably pretend to be a tough guy, but I have no doubt he'll squeal once B goes to work on him."

B again moves the bottle toward my lips, but I turn my head away. What little water I've drunk is already threatening to come up. "I want to be the one to end him," I say.

"No way," B says, shaking his head. "You've been enjoying his company for what, a few weeks? He's been making our lives hell for years. Do you think Cat and I wanted to creep into New Haven and kidnap you? And there was far dirtier work. Besides, you don't want blood on your hands, Sarah. I suggest you recover your strength and then start walking. Leave this mess behind. Distance has a way of helping you forget."

My hand finally closes around the scrap of metal. "Why are you helping me?" I ask, trying to read B's eyes. "I'm a liability. If Caldwell finds me—"

"Believe me, I know. If you hadn't saved Cat's life, I never would have opened these doors. But you did. So we can only hope you're as good at disappearing as you are at running your mouth. Because if he finds you, our families ... anyway, we're counting on you to stay gone."

I don't want to trust them, but what choice do I have?

“NAD,” I say.

Again, I try to sit up, but B places a hand on my shoulder and pushes me back down. “Get our pushes,” he says to Cat. “We’ve got a building to burn.”

Cat stands and jumps down to the pavement. I listen intently to his footsteps as B pours more water into my mouth. A door opens, and I hear muffled voices. One sounds angry, but when Cat returns holding three syringes, he has a smile on his face.

“What’d he say?” B asks.

“Some pretty creative things, actually. He’s going to stab me a hundred times. And you ... he’s going to watch you die slowly.”

“He never knows when to shut the fuck up,” B returns, accepting two syringes from Cat.

As Cat leans back against the sidewall and begins setting up his push, B spends a few seconds cleaning my arm. In the light, I can see just how filthy I am. Eventually he asks if I’m ready, and I nod. The needle goes in.

“Think you can handle the rest?” B asks.

I nod again, and he turns to set up his own push. I move my hand away from the scrap metal to press down on the stopper. When the plunger hits bottom, I close my eyes and wait for the pain and energy to materialize.

It doesn’t take long for me to realize I *wasn’t* ready. My heart rate slows, and my chest tightens, making it difficult to breathe. I tell myself that I’ve done this a thousand times, and any minute now the sensations I know so well will flood through me. But those sensations don’t come. Something is terribly wrong. Within moments, I’m unable to open my mouth and speak. All I can do is scream in my head for Cat and B to stop pushing down on their plungers.

Cat realizes it first. Unable to even blink, I watch him struggle to get to his feet, only to stumble back into the wall and slide down to the floor. For a second, B looks at him, confused, then he too tries to stand. He makes it halfway up, sways there for a moment, then drops to one knee as he brings a hand to his throat.

This is the way it ends.

With each breath, my chest rises just a little less. When it stops rising altogether, my vision is already blinking out. As it fades, I struggle to imagine myself sitting beneath the kapok, but all I can see is Josh's face. Hatred is the last thing I feel.

My eyes fly open, lungs sucking in a massive breath.

Josh is kneeling at my side. He pulls a syringe from my arm.

"Oh, thank God," he says. "I wasn't sure the acetylcholine would work. I had it on me when I caught you in the lab, just in case. But with as much curare as you just ..."

He looks at Cat and B, both sprawled out on the trailer floor, then slides a knife from a sheath on his belt. His knife, the one I'd stolen and stuffed between the cushions in the backseat. He must have found it and cut his restraints. This is all my fault.

Feeling is quickly returning to my body, and I'm able to slide my hand back between the two canisters. The shard of metal scrapes against my fingertips.

Josh gets to his feet and steps over to Cat. After staring down at him for a few moments, he grabs one of his arms and drags him to the edge of the open doorway, then shoves him out with the heel of his boot. Cat's limp body slaps the pavement. As Josh looks down, I see B's head slowly turn in his direction. Somehow, he still has some strength. He rolls over onto his stomach and begins pulling himself toward Josh with his forearms. One hand is nearly on his boot when Josh turns around.

"Oh, my father is going to hate losing a soldier like you," Josh says. "Let's see how far you can make it."

He hops down to the pavement, and B continues to drag himself forward. Foam drips from the corners of his mouth. When he reaches the edge, he pulls himself out, and his body hits the ground hard. I'm certain he's done, but then he reappears below, pulling himself forward as Josh slowly backs up across the parking lot.

"Eeeeeeee," Josh screeches. "That's the sound I made, right?"

B reaches out one last time, then his face falls to the pavement. With Josh distracted, I test my hand, and my fingers curl around the scrap. Whatever he injected me with is working. My strength is coming back.

“I’m going to let you suffer,” Josh says. He bends down, rolls B onto his back, then positions his head so his blue eyes point back toward the trailer. “But you’ve got to see what I’m going to do to Cat. I promised him something special.”

Josh steps over B’s limp body and up to the bumper, looking down. I can’t see Cat, but I can hear him wheezing. Josh lifts the knife over his head, then drives it down, over and over. With each stab I can hear the impact of the blade, and more of Cat’s blood sprays into the air, splattering Josh’s face.

Adrenaline brings me to life, and my fingers tighten on the shard of metal, pressing the edges into my palm.

Josh is breathing hard when he climbs back into the trailer. He stands over me for a moment, just as he had with Cat, his chin dripping red and the knife hanging at his side. Gradually, his panting slows, and he kneels beside me.

“I didn’t want you to have to see that,” he says calmly. “But they had it coming. I spiked the NAD last night while they were filling the water tanks, but you were never supposed to get a dose of that shit. Their actions nearly cost your life, as well as mine. I should be angry with you for stealing my knife, but if you hadn’t stashed it between the seats ...” He spots the map lying at my side. “I see they ruined the surprise,” he says. “So, what do you think, starting our life together in Humboldt? A bit cold, maybe, but great land for farming, just like back home.”

I can’t listen to another word. I force a small smile, then move my lips as if I am trying to speak. He moves a bit closer.

“Give it some time,” he says. “Your voice will come back.”

I keep moving my lips, allowing two words to escape: “I need—”

He leans in, turning his head slightly to one side.

With all my strength, I whip the shard forward, slashing at his throat with the jagged edge of metal, but he draws back. The tip carves down the length of his cheek instead, producing a thin strip of red, before the shard catches on a bone in

his chin and is torn from my grasp. He falls back against the sidewall screaming, dropping the knife as both hands shoot to his face.

Too weak to finish him, I crawl toward the sunlight. My body falls from the trailer, and I land on top of Cat's corpse, his blood soaking into my clothes. Sliding off him, I attempt to rise, but my legs collapse beneath me. With running impossible, I need to hide. Fifty feet away is a massive building paneled with tinted glass. I begin pulling myself toward it, dragging my useless legs behind me.

I'm less than a quarter of the way there when I hear boots stomping behind me. The last thing I see is a massive statue made of tarnished bronze just inside the front entrance. It's the same as the symbol carved into the door of Caldwell's mausoleum—a man bowed low with the Earth on his back—and my thoughts reach back to that graveyard where both of my parents are buried.

I'll be with you soon, I think just before my world goes black.



CHAPTER 36

SETH

I'm too late. Caldwell got here first.

Peering around the front bumper of a car that's wrapped around a light post, I stare up at a towering glass-paneled building that glows orange as the sun sets behind it, casting a five-story shadow over a massive parking lot. The lot itself contains just one vehicle—a military truck of some sort with a trailer hitched to the back. But even more disturbing—what has me frozen in place—are the two bodies lying behind it.

I don't have a great view from out here on the street, but I can tell one of the dead men has muscular, heavily tattooed arms that are splayed out to either side, and the other is curled into the fetal position. Neither has the blackened skin I saw in Henrieville, and their blood glistens on the pavement, only partially dried.

These two men died today.

The Professor was convinced that Caldwell would destroy the building before he left, yet here it stands, which means he's probably down in the basement lab right now, gathering those peptides for reasons of his own.

I didn't come all this way just to let Caldwell succeed.

I begin my box breathing, but my thoughts remain on the bodies.

Nothing is going to make sense from this distance. I need to get to that vehicle and have a closer look. I know I should wait until nightfall, but Caldwell could walk out of that building at any moment and drive away with the peptides.

I squint across the lot. The building's main doors are propped open, but I see no movement among the shadows inside. There's another car a bit farther down the street, and I hurry over to it, putting the military vehicle between me and the open doors, then pull off my pack and slide it behind the rear tire of the car. Gripping my bow in one hand and my remaining arrow in the other, I sprint across the lot.

When I reach the side of the truck, I drop to one knee and check the rear driver's-side door. It's locked. Inching forward, I try the driver's door, and it's the

same. The other side is in plain view of the building, so I crawl on all fours down the length of the vehicle and its attached trailer. Peering around the rear bumper, I have a clear view of the two corpses, with the closer one being only a few feet away.

His body has been mutilated—he's covered in blood, with deep, jagged holes punched into his torso. One side of his head is caved in. He's wearing cargo pants and has an empty holster at his waist.

My eyes shift to the other soldier not a dozen feet away. He's lying on his back, his piercing blue eyes staring blankly toward me. Like the first, his gun belt is empty, but I see no signs of trauma—just some dried froth clinging to the corners of his mouth. What the hell happened here?

At best, the vehicle could hold seven or eight people. Two are dead, which means I'm up against no more than six.

I look down at my single arrow, then at the empty sheath hanging from my belt. If the Professor were here, I think I know what he'd say—*Come home, it's not worth it. We'll figure something else out.* Thing is, he's been trying to figure something else out for more than thirty years. If there's a still chance to get those peptides, then I've got to take it. But if I run into Caldwell's team, I won't stand a chance. I need to find a gun.

I crawl over to the open trailer door, exposed to the front of the building. Quickly, I climb inside. The smell of human waste hits me instantly. The floor is smeared with blood, and gas canisters are scattered everywhere. I spot a broken zip-tie and, not far from that, several bloody clumps of long blond hair. Behind a gas can I find a small pair of boots. Someone was held prisoner back here, and by the looks of things, it was most likely a woman.

I knock over a canister and it clangs loudly on the metal floor. Freezing in place, I listen for footfalls outside while my eyes return to the clumps of hair. Sneaking into the building to retrieve the peptides is one thing. Going in there to rescue someone from armed soldiers is another. Even with a gun, chances are I'd get shot. But going in with only one arrow is suicide.

The Professor's words come back to me: *The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few*. I believed that once—it's why I pressed on despite all I've endured. Do I still believe it? If I do, I should forget about this person. Figure out how to get in there and find the peptides, nothing more. And yet I keep staring at the long strands of hair.

Then I hear Brad telling me to focus on what's still here instead of what we've lost. He believes humans are destructively selfish and single-minded creatures that aren't worth bringing back. And here I am, considering ignoring someone who obviously needs my help, about to prove him right. As he said, I've got to figure out for myself what I think is right. And in this moment, standing in this trailer, I know what I believe.

Taking a deep breath, I slide out of the trailer, then steadily move toward the entrance. The lot seems to take an eternity to cross. Finally, I reach the building and press up against the tiles that frame the open front doors before peering inside. My eyes move across the white marble floor, searching the large room for any sign of movement. In the center stands a huge bronze statue of Atlas, grimacing as he bears the weight of the world on his shoulders.

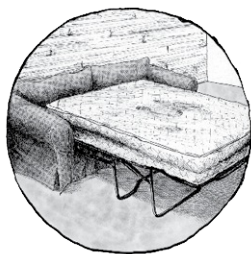
Elevators march down the far wall, and there are dozens of chairs and coffee tables scattered about. To the left of the elevators, behind a reception desk, a stairwell heads toward the upper floors and the Professor's old office. To the right of the elevators are double doors. From what the Professor had described, those open to another staircase that leads three floors below ground, ending at Caldwell's basement laboratory.

I remain motionless, scanning every inch of the room. Twenty feet in, a dark spot stands out against the white floor. I carefully move inside, then crouch lower, dab at the spot with my finger, and lift my hand for a closer look. Blood—mostly dried, but not completely. More droplets form a path toward the double doors.

From this angle, with the last rays of daylight filtering through the tinted glass, I can also see three decades of dust on the marble—and, more importantly, fresh boot prints. Not two sets of tracks, or four, or six. Just one. Whoever took the

prisoner must have killed the two soldiers outside, then carried her down. I've been lugging bodies for more than ten years, and it's not easy.

Whoever I'm up against, it's not an old man. It's not Thomas Caldwell.



CHAPTER 37

SARAH

The smell of food cooking drags me into consciousness. My head throbs, and when I move even a little, pain radiates down my legs. In an instant, everything that's happened comes rushing back.

As I wiggle my toes, I notice my limbs are bound. At least my hands are in front of me this time. I touch my neck, which has been stitched up, then blink hard to clear the fog from my vision. As my eyes focus, I realize with horror that I'm staring at Josh's naked back.

He's standing shirtless at a counter across the room, using a spatula to prod at a pan on a hot plate while he hums a happy tune. We're in an office, and I'm lying on an old desk coated with dust. Next to me is a framed photo of Caldwell, albeit decades younger, standing beside a taller man, their arms around each other's shoulders.

To my left are bookshelves packed with what appear to be medical texts, but what I see on my right sickens me—a fold-out couch backed up against a wood-paneled wall, its bed pulled open and its sheets stripped off.

There are two doors, one on either side of where Josh stands. Through the one on the right, white tiles shine under florescent lights. Through the one on the left, I see a large open space. That must be the way out of here.

I roll onto my stomach, then silently swing my bound feet over the edge. Once they're on the floor, I painfully lower myself down and begin dragging my body forward, the plastic ties drawing fresh blood from my wrists. My eyes stay fixed on Josh's back.

After a few feet, I can see more through the door up ahead—dozens of countertops and glass cabinets stretching beneath rows of flickering bulbs. On the far side of the room hangs an enormous rectangular door made of steel, cracked open a few inches.

I keep pulling myself toward it, slowly passing behind Josh's feet, which are shifting from side to side, doing a dance as he hums. As I slide my way into the

lab, it suddenly seems possible that I'll make it. Just fifty feet more and—

“Oh, look who's awake,” Josh says cheerfully behind me.

My stomach twists as his voice reminds me of what happened in the parking lot. I keep pulling myself forward, frantic now. I only make it another foot before he straddles my back, his weight pressing down on me.

“And where do you think you're going?” he asks, running his fingers through my hair. “I've spent all day getting everything ready. Your manners really are atrocious.”

“Josh,” I wheeze, trying to lift my face from the floor. “Just let me go.”

“No, I have too much fun planned for the two of us.”

He stands back up, but before I can even find my wind, his hands clamp down on my ankles and he drags me back into the office, my fingers squeaking on the floor. When he stops, I crane my neck and see one hand release my leg to turn off the burner, the pan already placed to one side. Attempting to break his hold, I thrash my legs, but his other hand snaps back with a viselike grip.

“Whoa,” he says, then chuckles. “You know, I respect your fighting instinct. But at some point, every bitch has to learn to stop biting the hand that feeds it.”

“Josh, so help me God, if you don't let me go, I'll—”

“You'll what?” he growls, torquing my legs so I flip onto my back. I recoil at the sight of him. I saw blood when the scrap metal slashed his cheek, but it dug deeper than I thought. Judging by the pinkish white stuff peeking out between his poorly stitched flesh, I cut him all the way to the bone. “Stab me in the back with my own knife?”

He grabs my feet again and jerks me toward the bathroom.

I struggle as violently as I can. For a second, he just watches me, maintaining his grip with a bemused smile on his face. Finally, he lets my legs drop to the floor, then gets down on his haunches as if speaking to a child.

“Listen, I get it,” he says. “You're a fighter. I knew that from the start. But everything I've done has been for *you*. I poisoned B because my father gave him orders to kill you. My actions might have seemed ruthless, but I saved your life.”

He looks around the office, then turns his eyes back to me. “I promise you, Sarah, somewhere in this lab, my father has the cure to your Fatigue, and once we’ve had our honeymoon, you and I will find it together.”

“I don’t want the cure,” I say. “Not like this.”

He sighs and stands back up. “I tried to get you to come around gently, but you’re not leaving me many options here. I’m going to have to break you. You may struggle at first, and that’s OK. I’m confident you won’t once we really get started. But let me make one thing absolutely clear—you’re *mine*.”

I draw my knees up and thrust my heels at his face. He jumps backward just in time, and my feet strike empty air. His hands shoot forward and grab my wrists. He yanks me to my knees, then seizes a fistful of my hair and begins dragging me toward the bathroom. I clutch at the door, but he tugs me through. As I slide over cold tile, moving closer to the frosted glass and the curb of the walk-in shower, I scream.

He violently tosses me past him, and I fly forward. My face strikes the glass, and light flashes behind my eyes.

He steps over me and into the shower. A knob squeaks, and pipes rumble then pop, releasing decades of trapped air. Soon, water splashes into the basin. Desperately, I try to crawl away, but before I can make it a foot, a heavy boot slams into my ribs, once again robbing me of breath. My hands claw at the floor but find no traction.

“You know, I was really looking forward to that place on the beach, but until you accept that our futures are intertwined, we’re going to need to spend some time down here. Good thing my father thought of everything—food, generators, propane. Even our own personal well. You’ll come around eventually ... or you won’t.”

“People are coming,” I plead. “Your father’s old partner. It’s too dangerous to stay here.”

“I’m sure you’re very concerned ... OK, enough chitchat. Let’s get you out of those clothes.”

He drags me to my feet and pins me against the glass. I lift my tethered arms to protect myself, but I'm too weak, and he bats them away. Then he pulls the knife from its sheath on his belt and places the edge against my neck.

"No amount of washing will get this shirt clean," he says calmly. "So I'm going to cut it off. If you keep thrashing like that, you're going to get cut, and it won't be my fault."

Forcing my arms over my head with his free hand, he hooks the knife through the collar of my shirt and jerks down, splitting the fabric. He stares at my chest for a moment, then repeats the process with my bra. I do the only thing I can think of—I spit directly into his seeping face wound. His expression sours as my saliva drips over the stitches and down his chin.

"Right," he says coldly. "Rough it is then."

He casually places the knife between his teeth. Then he grips my head with both hands and, without another word, hurls me into the shower. My face collides with the tiled wall, and more lights explode in my vision. With two swipes of his knife, my restraints fall away, and he strips off what's left of my clothes in quick, brutal tugs.

Water, so cold it brings me spinning back to Earth, rains down on my naked body. I gasp and try to get my hands beneath me, but they slip on the slick floor. All I can do is close my eyes and curl into a ball. When nothing else happens, I open them. Josh is standing just outside the shower, also naked, a wooden scrub brush in one hand, his handgun in the other.

"I'm going to scrub that filthy body down," he says. "If you try to hit me, I'll put a hole through your hand. If you kick, I'll put one through your foot. Understand?"

"I won't fight," I lie, twisting around and scooting back toward the other end of the shower, where I bring my knees tight to my chest. My eyes flick around, searching for anything I can use as a weapon. There's nothing. Just a single bar of soap drifting in the shallow water at my side.

Josh smiles wider, stretching his stitches and exposing bone beneath. He lifts one foot into the shower stall, but before he can step all the way in, I let go of my knees and lash out at his shin with both heels. The impact rolls his ankle on the tile, and he yelps as he momentarily loses his balance. The gun goes off, and shards of plaster rain down from the ceiling. Regaining his footing, he closes in, leans over me, and shoves the gun in my face.

“Just fucking kill me!” I howl.

“No.” He shakes his head grimly. “Never.”

In one last attempt to defend myself, I put up my hands, but he viciously knocks them away with the brush. As the last of my strength leaves me, all I can do is watch as the butt of the gun plunges toward my head.



CHAPTER 38

SETH

A harsh white glow from below gradually replaces the soft orange light from above. As I round the last landing on the stairs, an austere lobby emerges. At most, it's a quarter the size of the one upstairs. There's no movement or sound, just flickering fluorescent lights. There's also a surprising scent. It could be a trick of my overstressed mind, but I swear I can smell food cooking somewhere inside.

There are three doors. One is to the left beside the bank of elevators and one is to the right just before a reception desk. Each holds two signs—*Caution*, *Biological Hazard*, and *Authorized Personnel Only*. The third is straight ahead. It looks like the door to a vault, with heavy steel panels and thick hinges. That's the one the Professor said leads to Caldwell's private lab, which he is certain doesn't contain the machines needed to create peptides. Those must be behind one of the other two.

The door on the right is slightly ajar, and I move to it with my arrow drawn, then push it open with my boot. Broken glass scrapes the floor as it swings inward, revealing a stainless-steel kitchen gleaming under overhead lights. A dozen refrigerators are lined up against one wall, and there are enough cooktops to feed a small army.

People lived here, and they left in a hurry. Shattered jars litter the ground, their unrecognizable contents hardened to the floor. Cardboard shipping boxes stamped "Costa Rica" lie everywhere. Making my way through the debris, a hallway emerges to my left—it's at least a hundred feet long and lined with dozens of doors.

Moving along the corridor, I open the first door on the right. A decaying twin mattress sits on a metal frame next to a nightstand. There's a dresser, and a desk with a small lamp on it. Family photos are scattered across the floor. I turn and continue down the hallway. The next door opens on a similar scene, only in this one, the dresser drawers are pulled completely from their tracks, and clothes are strewn about the room.

This must be where Caldwell housed the scientists who generated the peptides. And with this hallway running parallel to his main lab, the other door in the lobby most likely leads to a similar hallway on the other side. That must be where the mini labs are.

I head back into the lobby, but as I move past the reception desk, a thunderous boom erupts from the direction of the vault. I turn and stare at the slab of steel.

“Just fucking kill me!” cries a muffled female voice.

I rush toward the door but stop a few feet shy. What the hell am I thinking? This is my opportunity to find the peptides. I could grab them, head back above ground, and be miles away before my adversary even knows I was here.

Then I recall Brad’s words, telling me to think for myself. I’ve come all this way to create a new beginning, but if it’s going to lead to something different, it shouldn’t start with abandoning someone in need, even for the greater good. That’s not the future I want.

I lean my shoulder against the slab and push, revealing a laboratory a dozen times the size of the Professor’s workshop on the butte. I scan the tables laid out in rows, the hundreds of cages stacked on shelves, most of which contain the skeletal remains of animals. When I spot no sign of movement, my eyes settle on an open door at the back of the lab.

It appears to lead to a small office. Butterflies begin swarming in my gut. Bows are designed for large open spaces, not close-quarters combat. Missing my knife, I rush to a nearby table and nervously set down my bow, trading it for a heavy microscope. While it might be less maneuverable than a knife, it carries enough weight for blunt force trauma.

Everything has gone quiet, so I stalk toward the far door. When I reach it, I peer through the threshold. Nothing but books, a desk, and a fold-out bed, stripped bare.

I step into the room, where the sound of running water draws my eyes to the gleam of white tile beyond yet another doorway. With each step toward it, more

of the bathroom comes into view. I hear a new sound—a male voice humming. I lift the microscope and step inside.

The man, around my age, kneels naked in the running shower. Beneath him, red-tinged water swirls around a pair of slender legs as he aggressively scrubs at the exposed skin of an unconscious woman. She's naked, and I can see that her face, under a tangle of golden hair, is severely bruised.

The sight sets me in motion, and with three long strides, I've got one foot inside the shower. The man turns his head, a look of shock on his face, and that's when I see the gun resting on the woman's stomach. He reaches for it, but his hand is only halfway there when the microscope comes down on the crown of his head. Splitting skin and cracking bone, the impact reverberates all the way up to my shoulder. Immediately his arms go limp, and his body collapses onto the woman.

I stand over the grisly scene, breathing hard, unable to believe what I've done. The grotesque indentation above his hairline is leaking blood. I scan his glassy eyes for signs of life as the water in the pan turns from a subtle tinge to a bright red.

Tossing the microscope aside, I turn off the water, then grab his legs and drag him off of her. As I pull him onto the bathroom floor, his head bumps over the lip of the shower, and he lets out a horrible moan. Given how hard I hit him, he should be dead. For a moment I consider giving him another whack, but all the color has drained from his cheeks. If his brain hasn't shut down already, it will soon.

I look back into the shower. The girl's eyes are open but glassy, and while she's not moving or making any sounds, her chest is rising and falling. There must be a first aid kit in that truck up top. I grab the man's clothes off the floor and begin fishing through his pockets for the keys. I find them in his vest, then turn back to the girl in the shower.

The gun is still resting on her stomach. I grab it and tuck it under my belt at the small of my back, then crouch down and slide my hands beneath her. Hefting her up, I carry her out of the bathroom and through the lab.

Once she's patched up and safe, I'll come back for the peptides.



CHAPTER 39

SARAH

My face should be pressing against wet tile. I should hear Josh humming and feel bristles scrubbing raw skin. Instead, crickets are chirping. The air is cool, smelling of dust and sweat and the briny scent of the sea. When I move, my skin scrapes over wool.

It takes all my will to open my eyes. I'm alone in the backseat of the Humvee, sitting upright and wrapped in a musty blanket. Where the hell is Josh? The last thing I remember is fighting him in the shower.

The door to my right is open. Without wasting a second, I swing my legs out and place my feet on the pavement. Night hangs over the parking lot, and my eyes trace a straight line to the deepest shadows in the distance. Ready to run as fast and far as I possibly can, I slide off the seat. But before I can take a single step, my legs give out and my knees rake across gravel. The blanket falls from my shoulders—I'm still naked. As I pull it back around me, my head snaps toward movement off to my right, where a figure lurks in the shadows behind the trailer.

"Why don't you just kill me?" I scream.

He raises his hands as if in surrender, and I peer into the dark, trying to make out his features. He's shorter than Josh but has wider shoulders.

"Are you OK?" the stranger asks, then steps into the moonlight.

He's about my age, and nearly as beat up. His forehead is blistered from the sun, his scraggly hair is matted to the top of his head, and stickers are tangled in his patchy beard. If not for his tattered clothes, he could be mistaken for a Dragger. Cat told me there are other survivors out here, and judging by the looks of this one, he's had a rough go of it. There's no telling what he'll do.

"Don't take another step," I command in a shaky voice. "Take what you want, but it won't end well for you if you try to hurt me."

He puts his hands up higher. "I don't want anything."

Keeping my eyes on him, I think back. How had I gotten out of the shower? And more importantly, where is Josh? None of this makes any sense.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“My name is Seth. Seth Keller.”

“Why are you here, Seth?”

“I ... well, I was searching that building for supplies.”

“There was a man. Did you see him?”

He nods, then turns his head down and slowly lowers his arms.

“What happened to him?” I ask harshly. “Where did he go?”

“He didn’t go anywhere. I—”

“You what?” I ask, then take a breath to calm myself.

“I saw what he was doing,” he says hesitantly, “and hit him on the head.”

“Where is he now?”

“Still down there. He’s not going anywhere.”

“So he’s dead?” I ask. The words sound impossible.

He shifts to one leg, then the other. He’s nervous. Even if what he’s saying about rescuing me is true, it doesn’t mean he’s not dangerous. God knows how long he’s been out here on his own.

“Seth, please, I need to know if he’s dead. It’s important.”

He takes one step closer but stops cold when I flinch. “He was dead,” he says. “I could go back down there to make sure, but first we need to get you patched up. You’re in bad shape. I’ve been looking for a first aid—”

“Are you alone, Seth?”

He nods. “I’ve been on the road for a while now.”

I’ve studied a map of this city, and it’s huge. Out of all the places he could have wandered into looking for supplies, why would he choose a laboratory? Caldwell’s old partner is coming for something in this building. This man is far too young to be him, but he must be connected in some way. After all the mistakes I’ve made over the past few weeks, trusting a stranger is the last thing I’m prepared to do. I won’t feel safe until I regain my strength and get my hands on a weapon.

“It looks like the miles took their toll,” I say as warmly as I can. “There’s NAD in the trunk, and I’m willing to share, but my legs are shot. Could you go see if it’s

unlocked?”

He doesn't move. “You have actual NAD?” he asks. The confusion on his face looks real.

Actual NAD? How has he been surviving out here without a steady supply?

“You'll find it in one of the metal boxes,” I say. “They're labeled, but find one that has syringes without the red dots. If the trunk is locked, there may be something in the trailer you can use to jimmy it open.”

“No need, I've got the keys,” he says, then heads for the rear hatch.

He had the foresight to take the keys off Josh, which means he probably wants the Humvee. I watch him walk around to the trunk. He looks fit. Even if my legs were working, he could probably run me down.

Worse still, when Josh fails to report back, Caldwell will send another hit squad. And from what Cat told me, they're experts at hunting people down. If I'm going to escape—truly escape—I'm going to need those keys.

“I don't see anything marked NAD,” he calls out.

“Keep searching,” I return. “There's plenty left in the wagon.”

Wagon? Did I just say that?

My eyes dart down the length of the trailer, and though I can't see B's entire body, I do see one of his tattooed arms sprawled out on the pavement. Despite all he did to me, my heart aches. He might have been a killer, but he also saved my life by leaving me the water. If I'd only had the courage to use Josh's knife when I took it, he and Cat would still be alive. Maybe out here in the real world, only killers last.

Seth returns carrying a box of NAD.

“Stop there,” I say when he's five feet away. “Please, just put it on the ground and back away.”

He does as I ask. Pulling the blanket tightly over my shoulders, I crawl forward, unlatch the box, and take out one of the preloaded syringes. I hold it up to the quarter moon, studying the fluid I know so well. It's NAD all right—and since

Josh planned to keep me around for a while, it stands to reason the rest of these are clean.

Letting the blanket fall partially off one shoulder, I set up my push.

“You might do good with some water,” he says awkwardly, looking past me.

“Yeah, that would be great,” I say. “There should also be boxes marked MRE.” Immediately, he hurries back toward the trunk. “Could you see if there are any clothes in there?” I ask, then drive the syringe into my arm and begin pressing down on the plunger. I brace myself for the oncoming pain, but what once was agony is hardly noticeable among all my injuries. My head is especially bad—like my skull has been split in two.

Seth comes back as I’m finishing up and tosses over some clothes, three MREs, and a couple of bottles of water. He’s also retrieved my boots, which I vaguely remember taking off in the trailer. After a few sips, I lie down on my side and close my eyes. The flood of energy comes on quickly, and the feeling is so normal, for a moment I let myself believe that I’m in my bed back home. The rustling at my side is just Art, who’s standing guard after I’ve done my morning push. My own sheets are wrapped around me, and soon I will get up and hit the streets looking for James. I might even take a trip to the kapok and lie against her twisting roots until I can feel my mother’s arms—

“Are you sure that stuff isn’t hurting you?” Seth blurts out.

I open my eyes and sit upright. Ignoring the twitches rippling through my body, I down the rest of the water and tear open an MRE, shoveling a handful of dried food into my mouth. Then I grab the pants he brought, holding them up and eyeing the waistband. They must have belonged to Cat. I’m already feeling stronger. Once dressed, I’ll come up with a plan.

Seth is standing a dozen feet away, watching me with apparent concern. I hold up the pants and shake them in the air. He doesn’t catch on.

“Could I have some privacy, please?” I ask.

His eyes go wide, as if he’d never been asked such a thing, and he quickly turns his back to me. That’s when I notice something tucked into his belt—he has

Josh's gun.

I quickly tug the shirt over my head, then get to my feet. Letting the blanket fall all the way off, I step into the pants, pull them up, and cinch the belt tight. Carefully, I bend over and tug on my boots.

I stand there for a few moments, testing my balance. The NAD and water had done wonders. I need the gun, and if this guy is as naive as he seems, I think I know a way to get it.

"You can turn around," I say, and when he does, I conjure a smile. "Now for the big test. Wish me luck."

I step forward, and though my leg holds just fine, I deliberately collapse to one knee and let out a howl of pain.

"Let me help!" he nearly shouts.

"Please," I say, grimacing.

He rushes forward. Bending down, he wraps both arms beneath mine and lifts me up. I wrap my arms around his back, and by the time he has me upright, I'm gripping the handle of the gun. I plant my free hand on his shoulder and, using every ounce of strength I've got, shove him away. The gun slides effortlessly from his belt as he staggers backward.

When he's regained his balance, I have the barrel pointed at his chest.

"I don't want to hurt you," I say. "But I want to be very clear—I will kill you if I have to. Now, quit the bullshit. How are you connected to Caldwell's partner?"

"I'm..." he says, then looks up to the sky, searching for a lie.

With my other hand, I steady the gun. "Don't test me."

His eyes drop back to mine. "I'm his son."

Another mad scientist's son—this shit just won't end.

"What are you looking for, Seth?"

He glares at me for a moment. Then his breathing changes, switching to a steady, rhythmic pattern. Inhale, hold, exhale, hold. He's trying to control himself.

"I came to fix what Caldwell's done."

I study him. “And what’s that?”

“You really don’t know?”

“I’m sorry. A few days ago, I started a ‘Caldwell’s evil shit list,’ but it’s already as long as my leg. You’re going to have to be specific.”

“Listen,” he says, “I’m not used to being around people. I’m sorry if I said or did something to upset you. Maybe we could sit down and talk this out. You still need to rest.”

“This isn’t a fucking picnic,” I say. “Tell me what you know.”

He waves a hand at the lab. “In there, more than thirty years ago, Thomas Caldwell created the Great Fatigue. And the drug that cured it. But that’s not all the cure did—it turned nearly every human on the planet into ... well, into what they are now. He’s responsible for all of it.”

Now my knees threaten to give out for real. I lived with my suspicions for days while locked in the trailer, but having them confirmed by a stranger makes it impossible to deny the truth. Three weeks ago, I had no love for Caldwell, but he was still the one who had governed my home all my life. He’d saved my parents from a plague that ravished the world, as well as given my family jobs and a roof over our heads.

“Are you OK?” he asks anxiously, somehow still concerned for my well-being.

“Don’t worry about me,” I rasp. “Now I’m going to ask you one more question. If I even suspect you’re lying, so help me God, I will shoot you dead ... did you really kill that man down in the basement?”

“I split his skull with a microscope, but ...”

“But what?”

“When I dragged him out of the shower, he moaned. I’ve been hunting all my life, and sometimes animals make noises as they check out. He’s dead, or will be soon.”

“Well, that isn’t good enough for me,” I say, then pause to think of what to say next. “You seem like a nice guy, Seth. In a different world, maybe we could have been friends. But I hope you understand, I can’t afford to take any chances. So

here's what you're going to do—you're going to toss me those keys and then walk away. And you're not going to stop until you're miles from here. Do you understand?"

Already he's shaking his head. "I didn't get what I came for," he says. "There are a lot of stairs, and I can help you get down there. I'll only need a few minutes to find what I need, and then I can take you to my home. We live up on a butte in the Utah desert. The Professor can patch you up. He's been tending to my wounds since I was a child."

"I don't want anything to do with you or your butte," I say. He looks mortified. A bit of the ice around my heart thaws, and it hits me, what I'm doing to another person. One who saved my life, no less. But that vehicle is my ticket to freedom, and I can't just let Captain Do-Good here drive off in it. "Now toss me the keys."

He fishes the keys out of his pocket. "Listen ... I don't know where you've been or where you're going, but I can help you if you let me."

"Shut up," I snap. "I don't want to hear it. Just throw me the damn keys."

He tosses the ring, and they clatter to the ground at my feet.

I pick them up, then say coldly, "You can go now."

"You don't understand. I need to go back in there."

"Feel free, after I'm gone. Come back tomorrow or the next day. I don't care. But right now, I need you to walk away from here. Far away."

He hesitates for a moment, eyes filled with concern.

"Will you at least tell me your name?" he finally asks.

In that moment, for reasons I don't understand, this filthy young man reminds me of James. He doesn't deserve this—but I didn't deserve what happened to me either. Life isn't some fucking fairy tale, and we don't always get what we deserve.

"My name's none of your goddamn business. Now do as I say."

He stands his ground. "Tell me your name and I will."

"Why is that important?"

"Because saving you was the first thing I did right in a long time."

Motherfucker isn't making this easy. I look at him again, really seeing him for the first time. Beneath those sunken eyes is a guy who had been through hell to get here, yet he jeopardized his goal to save my life. I doubt any harm can come from telling him my name, but I'm not ready to lower my defenses. I might never be again.

"My name is mine," I say. "Now get moving. And don't even think about trying to steal my supplies. If I see you when I come back out, I won't ask questions. I'll start shooting."

He walks twenty feet away but then stops, glances back over one shoulder, and says a single word that echoes across the parking lot.

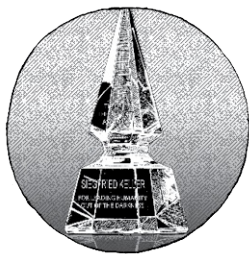
"Escalante."

"What?"

"It's near my home. If you ever need help, go to Escalante. You'll see an old barn off the side of the road. Light it on fire and I'll find you."

He continues walking, and as his form vanishes into the shadows a few buildings down, I use the keys to lock up the vehicle, then turn back toward the lab.

It's time to finish this once and for all.



CHAPTER 40

SETH

Shivering in the coastal breeze, I return to the vehicle where I stashed my pack, pull it out from under the rear tire, and then flop down onto the pavement. Even with my arms wrapped tightly around me, the shaking won't stop.

I can almost hear the Professor's scientific explanation for my miserable state. After being overloaded for hours, my adrenal glands have finally petered out. Combined with a lack of calories and sleep, my blood sugar is crashing, resulting in light-headedness and chills. But even he couldn't explain the ache that won't leave my chest.

Wispy clouds crawl across the night sky. Once the girl is gone, I can go back down to that basement and find the peptides. I've nearly completed my task, and after all I've been through, I should be overjoyed to still be in one piece. But I feel broken. Why else would everyone I meet instantly reject me?

A distant pop pulls me out of my self-pity, and I quickly get to my knees, preparing to run. A second gunshot rings out, but it's far away. I peer over the hood as another shot echoes, this time flashing in the windows near the top of the building. I search for movement behind the tinted glass, but my eyes are drawn instead to the lobby, now lit by a faint orange glow.

Fire.

I grab my bow and start running back toward the lab, cool sea air biting at my lungs. Racing into the building, passing the grimacing face of Atlas, I don't slow until I see the source of the orange light. It's emanating from the double doors leading down to the basement, which now stand open. Smoke is pouring up through them, covering the ceiling in ashy gray clouds. Three stories below, the peptides are burning.

My emotions nearly send me dashing down into the flames, but then I notice a dark red trail smearing the white marble. It winds away from the basement doors, across the lobby, and into the stairwell that leads to the upper floors. And there

are small boot prints in the blood. I hadn't killed the man after all. The girl must have seen him when she came in and chased him up the stairs with the gun.

I peer into the stairwell. If I don't warn her, she'll burn alive. But I rescued her once before, and she went back in on her own. I should get out of here. Now.

I glance toward the front entrance, then back to the stairwell.

Focus on what's still here. Not what we've lost.

Nocking my final arrow, I hurry up the blood-spattered steps, only slowing when the light from the lobby fades. Another shot echoes from above, followed by a scream. It cuts off so quickly I can't tell if the voice was male or female, a cry of pain or anger. I start climbing faster through the darkness, leaning one hip into the railing for guidance.

I don't know how many landings I've passed when a hollow click reverberates from above, followed by the creak of a door opening. A second later, the door clicks closed again.

A faint squeak comes from above. I strain my ears. Another squeak, and another, coming louder, quicker, closer. Rubber on concrete. Boots. Each footfall shakes the stairwell, telling me the person wearing them is much heavier than the girl.

Holding my breath, I lift my bow and aim into the black. He's moving fast, despite the head wound, and I'm shooting blind. There are so many factors—it will be so easy to miss.

Sweat drips into my eyes. I draw the string all the way to my ear, willing my hands steady. I remain motionless until I sense the air stirring. And then I let years of training and instinct guide me. I let my arrow fly.

I know the sound an arrow makes when it thumps into flesh, and the squeal that comes after. But the only noise I hear is the shaft splintering against stone.

The footsteps stop. I wait in silence, not moving. He knows I'm here now, but there's no way he knows where I am. Slowly, I turn the bow around in my hands, gripping it like a club.

A bright light ignites in front of my eyes. Instinctively I shield my face with one hand. Boots bang down the last few stairs. I can't see anything as something heavy hits me, colliding with the right side of my jaw and knocking loose something sharp inside my mouth. The light switches off, submerging us in darkness again. Then the man slams his body into mine, sending me flying down the stairs.

Sharp angles batter me until I tumble onto the landing below, my back exploding with pain and my bow gone. I sit up, and the blinding light reappears, barreling down toward me. Before I can stand, the heavy object strikes me again—this time on the shoulder, knocking me back down. I curl into a ball, wrapping both arms over my head to put bone and muscle between the blunt object and my skull. But the man just laughs, shining the light on me.

“Hey, it's you again,” he slurs. “Not so tough now, are we?”

Peering up at the light, I expect another attack from above, so I don't guard against the boot he buries in my ribs. As I struggle to find air, another kick lands to my groin, making me curl even tighter. If I don't do something, I'm done.

Jerking my arms away from my head, I grope into the darkness. My palm slaps his boot, which is slick with blood. I wrap my hand around his heel, then get up onto my knees and drive my shoulders into his hips. Still clutching his foot, I surge forward, trying to push him off his feet as he hops backward. I manage to get my feet beneath me and keep rising, driving my shoulder up and lifting his heel. This is it. He's about to topple.

The heavy object strikes my cheekbone, and a bright red glow explodes in my vision, the by-product of a concussed brain.

I'm lying on my back when reality blinks back on. I know I'm awake because I can smell smoke. The rubber of a boot is grinding into my cheek, keeping my head pinned against the concrete floor. My ears are ringing, and blood is running over my face.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” he snarls, his words muddled. “You think you can take what's mine? You sniveling little—”

Another quick pair of clicks from above. Immediately, he goes silent and turns off the light. The pressure from the boot lifts away. Lost in an ocean of darkness and blood, I use the last of my strength to stumble to my feet. But the moment I'm up, wobbling on weak legs, hands grasping for a railing that's not there, I feel him behind me. An arm wraps around my neck and jerks my body back into his. A sharp object presses dangerously close to my jugular.

"Josh!" someone shrieks from above. A distant part of my mind recognizes the girl's voice, although now it sounds drunk with rage. "Stop running, you goddamn coward!"

I might not have a chance at surviving this, but I can do everything in my power to make sure she does. I start trying to count the levels I climbed and then fell.

"Down here," I croak. "Two or three flights below—"

The point digs deeper into my neck as the man hisses a curse in my ear. Feet slap down the stairs above—one flight, two, and then she stops.

"Talk, you sick fuck, or I start shooting!"

The light switches back on, and the beam plays on the drifting smoke, although this time it's not pointed at me. Instead, I spot the girl standing on the landing above. She's breathing hard, one hand holding the gun. Her other hand rises in a shield against the beam.

In the reflected light, I see an arm leading back to a face, one eye drooping, its pupil nearly as large as its iris, watering as he blinks away the soot in the air. Blood spills down from the dent in his hairline. The weapon he holds to my throat seems to spin, but I can read the words engraved on the sparkling glass of the arrowhead-shaped trophy:

TIP OF THE SPEAR AWARD

SIEGFRIED KELLER

FOR LEADING HUMANITY OUT OF THE DARKNESS

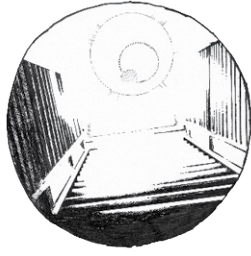
Feeling blood running down my neck, I'm mesmerized by the colors dancing in the glass. And beyond it, the way the light shines on the thickening clouds of smoke, and in the eyes of the girl as she aims between splayed fingers. I open my

mouth to call out and let her know I'm here behind the light, but the only sound that comes is a hoarse squeak.

Another light sparks, illuminating the stairwell in a bright flash of white. It's accompanied by a boom that thunders off the walls with a deafening crash, making my ears ring.

What happens next isn't clear—it feels like something small bouncing off my lower abdomen, as if someone tossed a tiny rock at me. I don't realize I've been shot until warmth starts spreading over my shirt and pants. One hand instinctively finds the wound—and touches my father's heavy belt buckle, blood oozing from the bullet hole punched in the center.

As I start to panic, pulse thumping in my ears, the man shifts the light onto my face. Even though I'm fading, I know why. He wants to show her what she's done.



CHAPTER 41

SARAH

“What a shot!” Josh slurs.

He pulls the light from my eyes, leaving spots swimming in my vision. I smelled smoke as I chased him all over the upper floors, and now clouds of it billow through the stairwell. He set the place on fire. I don’t have much time.

Keeping my feet shoulder width apart, I blink hard several times, searching for my target. Then, through the haze, I find myself looking at Seth. He’s wobbling on the landing below and clutching his stomach. Why on Earth had he come back? It takes me a moment to realize the blood flowing between his fingers is from my bullet. I just shot the man who’d saved my life.

Josh stands behind him, an arm wrapped around his neck and a pointed glass object pressed to his throat. His other hand is holding the light, and in its glow I can see there’s something horribly wrong with him—a grotesque gash in his forehead, spilling blood. The one eye I can see droops downward like a Dragger’s, and saliva drips from the sagging corner of his mouth.

“Got him right in the gut!” Josh shouts gleefully. “Drop the gun, and I’ll put down the spike. You still might be able to save your friend’s life.”

“He’s not my friend,” I seethe.

“Maybe not, but how many innocent people are you trying to kill? Face it, Sarah, you couldn’t save any of them. Not James. Not Cat or B. But you have a chance to save this guy. Put pressure on his wound, stitch him up, and he might still make it. But you’re on the clock. Any moment now this whole building will blow.”

There’s enough glycerin and acid in the lab to burn the whole city block. Those were Caldwell’s exact words.

“You think I’m just going to let you go?” I shout.

“Fine. We’ll burn together, then. How romantic!”

“Shoot him,” Seth cries out.

Josh dips his head lower, taking refuge behind his shield. "Shut up," he snarls, digging the tip of his weapon deeper into Seth's neck. "You can both still make it out of this."

The light flits away again, scanning the smoke like a searchlight before flashing over their faces. First Josh, who would be wearing his father's shit-eating grin if not for his strangely contorted mouth. Then the young man, his grizzled face grim yet strangely resolved. All New Haven residents are trained in first aid, but a gunshot wound is far beyond me. Even if I let Josh go, Seth could still die.

"I'm telling you," Josh continues, "he doesn't have long."

I can't let him walk away after all he's done, but I can't see shit in this stairwell. I need to get him to the lobby where I'll have a cleaner shot.

"How do we do this?" I ask.

"You stay right where you are. I'll back down the stairs and leave him in the lobby."

"Fuck that. We walk down together."

Wasting no time, he starts stepping backward, dragging Seth with him. "Just keep your distance until I'm in the Humvee," he commands. "Oh, that reminds me, I'll be needing the keys."

I start following them down. "Let you drive off so you can tell your psychopath father to send one of his hit squads after us? That's what he does, right? Murders anyone still left out there alive?"

"If you give me the keys, I'll tell him you're dead. The lab will be incinerated, which is all he cares about. He'll have no reason to come after you."

"You're not getting the keys," I say.

We round another landing and silvery moonlight appears below, cutting through the smoke like tractor beams. I can see Josh better now. I close one eye and carefully take aim.

"Wait!" he bellows, ducking behind Seth. "I swear, I'll bury this point so deep into his neck you'll need the Humvee to pull it out."

Reluctantly, I lower the gun a few inches.

They step backward down the last flight of stairs and into a cloud of smoke.

I scurry down the last few steps, then stop, spread my feet wide, and steady the gun. With Josh pulling Seth toward the exit, I have a clear shot at his upper torso. I squint one eye and look down the barrel, but before I can level the gun, the floor shakes as something ruptures deep underground. The building rumbles, its steel rafters groaning as if we're in the mouth of an enormous bell, then the marble floor explodes open at the center of the lobby. Sapphire-colored flames spit upward, hitting the ceiling and spreading outward in waves. The great statue of Atlas lurches to one side, then falls halfway into the huge crevice as the smell of harsh chemicals washes over me.

Josh vanishes into the billowing smoke. I race blindly after him, intense heat pounding my skin, but I trip over something on the floor. I scramble back up to my feet, searching for the exit. When I see the faint glow of moonlight through the haze, I raise the gun and pull the trigger three times, shooting into the plumes of gray ash. My bullets punch swirling holes in the smoke, but I don't hear anyone cry out. I start to go after him when a hand grabs my pant leg and brings me to a halt. Seth is staring up at me with wide, desperate eyes.

"They're not like me," he mumbles, his face looking like death in the blue light. "I'll prove everyone wrong. They deserve saving. They're not like me."

I can't decipher his babbling. If I don't go after Josh now, I'll never have another chance. Then Seth's hand falls limply to the floor as he slips into unconsciousness, now truly helpless. The building will soon be engulfed in flames, all burning drywall and molten metal. I'm the only person who can get him out alive.

"Goddamn you," I say, stuffing the gun under my belt.

Seth eyes remain closed as I grab his ankles and start dragging him through the smoke and heat toward the Humvee and its first aid kit.



CHAPTER 42

SETH

Brittle leaves scrape my body as I shuffle through a field of corn. A breeze rustles the stalks, sounding like rain falling around me. I scan the ground for any water I might be able to lap up with my swollen tongue, but I don't see a single droplet.

I'm no stranger to dehydration, but I don't recall so much pain—a deep, searing bite in the pit of my stomach. And never have I been so cold.

As I quicken my pace, swatting away grasshoppers stirred into flight, figures soon appear through the thinning vegetation up ahead. I drop to one knee.

The agony intensifies. I grip my stomach with both hands, but I keep my eyes fixed on the blurry world beyond the field. I have no weapons and little strength left. There's no way I can fight my way through a pack of Andes to find the water I so desperately need. I consider waiting until nightfall so I can move in the shadows, but I don't think I'll last until then.

As I creep closer, colors emerge—blue and orange and red. Sounds too. I nearly cry out in joy when I hear children laughing. I fight through the last few stalks and burst into the clearing.

Spread out over the rolling green hills is a village. Not the crumbling remnants of a world that's forever out of reach. It's a community in the making. Paths lined with river stones twist like roots across the terrain, leading to chicken coops and windmills and corrals filled with cattle. Hastily constructed huts with thatched roofs line the closer paths, but beyond those, dozens of sturdy homes stand proudly, their logs still bleeding sap. What steals my breath, however, are the people. Hundreds of them. Men and women, young and old. All of them walking in small groups toward some job that needs doing.

"You made it," comes a familiar voice from the crops behind me.

Before I can turn, Brad appears at my side, his pearly white teeth on full display. Everything about him looks the same, from the ring of fuzz circling just above his ears to his high-top sneakers. The only thing that's different is his white T-shirt, which now reads, *What happens in New Haven stays in New Haven*.

I stare at him in disbelief as beads of sweat roll down his plump face.

“How did you get here?” I ask.

“The same way we all did. That shortwave of yours. You feelin’ OK?”

“I’m not. I don’t even know where we are.”

“You been sipping the hard stuff?” he asks, then smiles and places a hand on my shoulder. “We’re in New Haven, for the record.”

“But ... New Haven is in the jungle,” I stammer.

“Not that New Haven,” he laughs. “The real one, here in beautiful Grand Junction, Colorado.”

“I don’t understand how you—”

“Don’t worry about that right now. I’ve got something to show you. Follow me.”

He guides me down the network of paths. We pass a schoolhouse with its doors swung open, revealing twenty or so children roughhousing inside. Something feels familiar about the large windows. Before I can place it, Brad points out a garden of flowers planted in sweeping chevrons.

The farther we walk, the more the community comes to life. A young girl blazes by on a bright red bike. A handful of joggers run past. There’s an elderly man sitting in a rocker on a porch. His hand dips to pet the patchy fur of a huge dog that’s licking fresh stitches running down one shoulder.

It’s all too much. The sweet cedar puffing from every chimney, mingling with the yeasty aroma of baking bread wafting from entryways. People giving us friendly greetings and calling out to one another. Thousands of seemingly disjointed movements flowing in beautiful synchronicity.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Brad says as he leads me toward a large canvas tent set up on a gently sloping knoll, its walls held taut by thick ropes staked into the earth.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“It’s what you risked your life for, kid. I always knew there was something special about you. The others didn’t see it, but I did. And I was wrong—they *were*

worth saving. Now get in there and see what you've done."

Brad nudges me forward, and I reach out to open the swaying flap. Smoky darkness greets me, but as I step farther inside, figures begin to materialize.

Even in the dim light, I recognize the slim woman in hot pink spandex, her gray hair flowing down over bony shoulders. Sitting next to her is an unfamiliar man of similar age. Their wooden chairs are pulled close, and their fingers are intertwined. Tammy gives me a thin-lipped smile, then turns back to her companion and squeezes his hand. He kisses her gently on the cheek. I'm glad to see she's met someone new.

Janet sits on her other side. She's gazing at me as if she wants nothing more than to bound over the chairs, wrap her thick arms around me, and squeeze till my eyes pop out, but whatever's going on in this tent, she obviously doesn't want to disrupt it. Bill is next to her, leaning back on two legs of his chair, his large hands folded on his lap. I hold his stare for a few seconds. Then he reaches up and gives me a tip of his hat.

Simultaneously, all heads turn toward the front of the tent, where a familiar figure stands with his back to me, his white hair neatly combed. The sight of him begins to thaw the iciness that's been eating through my midsection. I want to run to him, share everything about my journey, but the hush in the room tells me to stay quiet, so I just stand there. He looks different now. He's wearing a green argyle sweater, and he's put on at least twenty pounds. His spine is straighter, and while deep wrinkles still surround his eyes, they angle upward rather than down, as if formed by a lifetime of smiling.

The Professor points to a rolling chalkboard nearby. From one of the front-row seats, a young man with short, parted hair stands up and steps forward. He's wearing sneakers, jeans, and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. I don't recognize him at first, but then I spot the jagged scars on his forearms. It's the Ande from the Dixie Mountains, and in one hand he's holding a piece of chalk.

I watch in awe as he moves to the blackboard and begins scratching out basic equations. Thirty divided by six equals five. Twelve times four equals forty-eight.

“What did I tell you?” Brad says from behind me. “He’s a good kid, and one hell of a farmer. You were right. He was worth saving. We all were.”

Despite the pain in my stomach, I’m filled with an indescribable gratitude. I could bask in this moment forever, but then a distant growl disrupts the serenity in the tent. Soon the ground is trembling, then the blackboard, and finally the canvas walls. Janet grabs the edge of her chair to keep her balance. Tammy buries her face in her companion’s shoulder. And one of Bill’s hands slides down to his belt, but the holster hangs empty.

At the head of the room, the Ande squats and hugs his knees to his chest, just as he did when he refused to wander farther down the mountain. When my gaze returns to my father, he’s reverted to his decrepit self, his face hollow. Eyes wide, he mouths two words.

Merry Men.

I know why they’ve come. Everything these people have built here, and all the beauty they’ve shared, fuels the bandits’ existence. They’ll never rest until they turn the whole world to ash.

I rush out through the tent flaps. Night has fallen, the cold air filled with screams. Hands once held tightly have broken apart, and the great rumbling in the ground is collapsing the town’s structures. The schoolhouse has fallen in on itself, and small limbs are poking out from under a mess of beams and rebar.

Off in the distance, I see the headlamps—dozens of bright eyes piercing the dark, backed by thousands of pounds of impenetrable steel. The battalion of military vehicles chews through the carefully laid paths. Their heavy bumpers snag on chicken wire and plow through fences, sending hens flapping into the dark and cattle stampeding through the fleeing crowds. Even from a distance, the roar of their engines shakes the Earth.

The pain in my stomach becomes unbearable, and I shut my eyes to all of it.

“You have to fight, goddamn it!” comes a voice so loud it hurts.

My eyes fly open. A girl is standing mere inches from me. Her face is caked with dried blood, but there's no fear in her gaze. I attempt to look around her and see how much time we have left, but her hands clamp down on my cheeks and keep my head straight.

"Do you hear me?" she cries.

"There are too many of them."

"Never mind that. You have to hold on and fight."

I don't want to listen to her, so I close my eyes. The darkness persists, but the Merry Men, the village, and the people are gone. Filled with a sense of peace, I begin to let go, but a hard slap across the face rouses me. I'm not standing as I thought, but rather lying on my back in a vehicle. I attempt to sit up, but the pain is blinding.

Something is terribly wrong. I can see the tips of my scuffed boots, but before those, there's a pile of bloody gauze matted to my lower stomach.

"Goddamn you!" the girl repeats, then grabs both my hands. She presses my palms firmly into the top of the mound, and blood oozes between my fingers. "We're just outside of St. George. Only another few hours. If you're going to make it, you've got to do as I say. Tell me you understand. You can't die in the back of this shit-wagon."

I remember it all. The lab and the stairwell. I want to tell her that I understand, but I can't find my voice. I nod instead, and a spasm shoots down my spine.

"I'm going to leave you now," she says. "But you have to keep up the pressure. I don't care how tired you get, don't let go. If you move your hands, you will die. Do you hear me?"

Then she's gone. I close my eyes and search for the friendly faces from Grand Junction, but all I see are strange dancing lights.

A metallic clunk jolts me back to reality. The girl is in driver's seat. Steel vibrates beneath me when the engine kicks on. She curses as she struggles to put the vehicle into gear, and then we're moving. With every bump in the road, pain explodes in

my gut, but watching her gives me the determination to grit my teeth and maintain pressure with my hands.

Somewhere along the way, my eyes shut. Her shouts immediately bring me back. My head is lolling to one side, and I'm looking at my father's belt, lying on the metal floor and covered in blood. The longer I stare, the stranger I feel. Then a hazy truth comes to me—the figure etched into the buckle is the same as the statue that stood in the lobby of CDR. Atlas, holding the world on his shoulders.

Everything spins, and for a moment, I'm overcome by vivid memories—I can smell our musty threadbare couch back on the butte, hear our kettle whistling, and see the grim look on the Professor's face when he told me how he'd found my family. Then a single thought begins reverberating—*It's all a lie.*

I remove one hand from my stomach, reach down, and scoop up the belt.

"You've got to keep pressure on it!"

I look up and see her eyes in the mirror. "My belt—"

"Forget the damn belt."

"Promise me you'll find out what it means."

She cranes her head and gazes down at the buckle. Her eyes narrow, then widen a bit. "I don't know what you're—"

"Promise," I repeat.

"I promise you I'll try," she says, then smiles shakily. "But for now I can tell you my name. It's Sarah."



CHAPTER 43

SARAH

Easing on the brakes, I spot a large shape to the left of the road. It looks like a barn, but in its current state, it barely qualifies as a one—it's just a rotting wooden skeleton with half a roof. Seth had said to go to Escalante, a word represented by a small dot on the map. I was expecting some sort of town, but this is the only structure I've seen since turning off the highway onto this backcountry road.

I carefully pull onto the shoulder and park the Humvee. The headlights slice through the blackness, illuminating strange, scraggly trees that look like the silhouettes of Draggers out in the murk. There's no sign of the butte Seth had mentioned. It must be out there somewhere, with a little home perched on top and an old man eagerly awaiting his son's return.

I turn around to check on Seth. His eyes are closed, and his face is pasty white, reminding me of a porcelain doll I'd found buried on the beach back home. I used up the last of the gauze during our previous stop. His bleeding has slowed, but I don't know if that's a good sign or bad. Either way, time is critical. I wish there were some way to know I'm in the right place.

Shutting off the engine, I anxiously scan the horizon. A billion stars twinkle above, but their light barely touches the impenetrable darkness below. All I see are stunted trees marching into the gloom. Should I continue down the road and see if there's anything more substantial than this?

Seconds tick away, the scent of blood heavy in my nostrils.

"Please, God, let this be it," I mutter to myself, then toss open the door and step out into the bitter cold. My breath puffs white as I rush toward the trailer. I grab the handle and jerk the doors open. The stench of my suffering hits me immediately. Pushing aside the memories, I climb inside and snatch a canister of gas. It feels light in my hands, no longer the anvil that had toppled down on me.

I hop out, circle the barn, and then step inside its frail frame, all the while dousing the wood with gasoline. When the canister runs empty, I toss it aside. With stiff fingers, I dig in my pocket for the flint and steel I found in B's bag.

Sparks shower the rotting floor. Fire ignites and races along the crumbling beams and up the remaining walls, stamping my vision with vibrant orange shapes. I take a step back as what's left of the roof catches. Heat licks at my face as the steam from my breath mixes with the smoke from the flames.

I gaze out into the night. Will this be enough? Anxiety blossoms once again. I don't know what's out there, but it must be more than just one old man, and I've lit a beacon that can be seen for miles.

Returning to the Humvee, I grab the handgun from the driver's seat, then move around to the front bumper, leaning between its glowing beams. As I wait, I try to convince myself that I've done everything I can to save the man I shot. If he dies, it won't be alone in some burning lab, but rather with someone by his side. And yet I can still hear Josh's voice. *You couldn't save any of them.*

"Come on!" I scream into the night. "Hurry!"

I'm half frozen when I hear footsteps. The barn has been reduced to glowing embers, leaving the headlamps as the only source of usable light. But those too have faded, dulled by the smoke hovering around the Humvee like fog. My hand tightens on the gun.

"Is that you, Professor?" I shout.

"Who are you?" returns a hoarse voice from somewhere to my left.

"I'm trying to save your son. He's been shot."

A guttural moan.

The staggering footsteps grow louder, then a tuft of white hair appears. A tall, slender man emerges, shielding his eyes. His shoulders are hunched, and his large hands are gripping a harness around his chest. Behind him trails an empty plastic sled with a small medical bag strapped to the top.

"When I saw the fire, I knew something was ..." he trails off, wincing as he removes the harness. I've seen what the Fatigue does to the elderly, and judging by his posture, he has it worse than most. "Where was he shot?"

"Just below his stomach," I respond.

The instant the harness falls at his feet, he limps toward the vehicle and throws open the rear door. He stands there for a moment, staring at his son.

“Get the sled and load it into the back,” he orders. “We’re going to need to drive closer.”

I do as he says, dragging the sled around to the trailer and then angling it inside. When I return to the Humvee, the Professor is already sitting in the passenger seat.

“Hurry up!” he shouts. “We need to get him to my lab.”

I climb in, fire up the engine, and force the gearshift into drive.

“That way,” he says, pointing off into the desert.

“But there’s no road.”

“There’s a wash. It will get us close.”

I ease on the gas, and as we leave the hardpan of the shoulder, the tires sink into loose gravel. Embankments slowly rise on either side. I follow the bends of the narrow channel as the strange, stunted plants scrape at the underbelly. As we move into rougher terrain, the Professor gives me instructions, telling me when to increase pressure on the gas pedal and when to let off. When he seems content that I’ve got it on my own, he turns and leans into the backseat.

“Is he OK?” I ask.

“Where are they? The peptides.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“The peptides,” he repeats. “It’s what he went to San Diego to find.”

“I’m not sure. I was unconscious when he found me. When I came to, we were already outside of the building.”

I hear him rummaging through Seth’s pockets. Eventually he turns back around and goes silent, lips set in a firm line, as I maneuver the Humvee around a juniper tree that had fallen into the wash. If there are more obstacles like that ahead, I don’t know how much farther I’ll be able to take us.

“Seth obviously told you about burning the barn,” the Professor says slowly. “Which means he wasn’t shot until after you woke up. I need you to tell me

everything that happened.”

The story spills out of me in frantic bursts as I struggle to navigate the wash. How I’d been kidnapped from New Haven, and that Seth saved me. And how I followed Josh up the stairs, eventually confronting him in the stairwell, pulling the trigger and shooting the wrong man.

There is a moment of tense silence before the Professor finally speaks.

“So you shot him before he could get the peptides?”

His preoccupation with these “peptides” is upsetting, and I don’t know how to respond. I had expected him to be furious at me for shooting his son. At least have some kind of emotional reaction.

“That’s all you care about?” My temper flares. “I don’t know what the hell these peptides are, but they sure as shit aren’t as important as your son’s life.”

“They are. More important than mine or yours or his. If he didn’t get them ... someone will need to go back.”

“No need,” I say bluntly. “The lab is gone. Burned to the ground.”

He goes silent. I peel my eyes away from the wash to look at him. I’ve never seen a face so grim.

“Then it’s over,” he whispers, turning his gaze out the side window. “Thomas has won.”

I ignore him as I struggle to steer around a sharp bend. On the other side, the headlights come to rest on a wall of gnarled bushes blocking the path. I slam on the brakes, forcing up a cloud of dust that whirls around the Humvee.

“Which way?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer—just keeps staring out the window. I smack his arm, then repeat my question.

“The rest will have to be on foot,” he finally says. “Help me get him onto the sled.”

We exit the vehicle, and I race toward the trailer. I drag the sled out and over to the rear driver’s-side door, which the Professor has already opened.

“You’re going to have to lift him out,” he says. “I don’t have the strength.”

The Professor moves aside so I can reach across the backseat. Seth lies motionless beneath the blanket I draped over him during the wait. The thick wool is now wet and molded to his frame. I pull it off, revealing the mound of bloody gauze.

When I slide my hands beneath him, his skin is cold to the touch. Using all my strength, I pull him toward me, but my arms nearly give out as I lower his limp body onto the sled. Immediately I begin drawing the nylon straps over his torso and fastening them.

Seth is ready to be moved, but the Professor is leaning into the backseat, searching the floor and the cracks between the cushions. A wave of contempt washes over me. He should be over here helping his son. I place a hand on the side of Seth's cheek, just to let him know that he's not alone and that someone actually cares.

"He's the bravest person I've ever met," I say as the Professor finally kneels down beside me. Both his knees pop, and he winces. After wiping his bloody hands on his pants, he nudges me aside.

"Do you have any morphine?" he asks.

"No. And we're out of bandages."

"Give me my kit. If he wakes up on the sled, I don't want him thrashing."

I grab his bag and open it for him. He reaches in and pulls out a syringe and a glass vial, its paper tag weathered with age. His hands are shaking so badly he can't get the needle in. I kneel at his side and take them from him.

"How much?" I ask.

"Whatever's left."

As I pull back the stopper, the Professor rolls up Seth's sleeve.

"What is this?" I ask, tapping the side of the syringe to release the trapped bubbles.

"Ketamine. It's a dissociative anesthetic. I'm hoping it's enough to keep him under, but if he wakes up, at least he'll be calm."

Seth has no shortage of veins. Picking the thickest one, I slide the needle in. Even as the plunger hits bottom, the lifeless expression on his face doesn't change.

"How far do you have to take him?" I ask.

The Professor looks at me. "About a mile."

"There's no way you'll make it that far."

Without asking permission, I pluck the harness off the ground and slide my arms through the straps. I don't know if I can make it a mile either, but I have to try.

"Follow me," the Professor says, and begins shuffling out into the night.

I remove the slack from the harness and drive forward. The sled immediately hits the embankment's slope and refuses to move. Tightening my abdomen, I dig in my heels and give it everything I have. The sled lurches forward and slides up and over the hill. The Professor moves farther ahead, and I start following his white hair, bobbing in the dark.

As we march through the desert, my heavy breathing is all I can hear. Every so often the sled gets stuck, and each time it's harder to pull free. My thighs burn, sweat drips from every pore, and my clothes cling to me like ice.

"Hurry," the Professor says in a hushed tone.

I look up for the first time in minutes. There's no sign of him. My boot catches on a rock, and I trip, collapsing to my knees. As I struggle to my feet, the darkness closes in. I've lost all sense of direction. I hold my breath, trying to listen for the Professor's footfalls—and that's when I hear another noise in the night. A bestial grunting somewhere in the distance. As my muscles stiffen, I tell myself the sound came from far away, perhaps a half mile off. But then another bellow answers the call—this one much closer.

"Professor!" I call out, my voice cracking. "How much farther?"

"Quiet." His white hair appears over a rise. "We're not alone."

I stand up and push forward on rickety legs. Within minutes a towering butte rises into the night. I continue toward it, and soon the Professor reappears. He's

standing atop a metal platform, its heavy cables stretching up the vertical face. I pull up beside him, and he bends down to help me lift the sled.

“I’ve got it from here,” he says dismissively once Seth is on the platform. He turns his back and begins fiddling with a mess of wires at his feet.

He’s telling me to go. I look down at Seth’s motionless body, his face seemingly devoid of life. I’ve done my part and brought him home. Now it’s time to save myself. With a trailer full of gas, I could be in Alaska within a week. Find a cabin so deep in the woods Caldwell could spend the rest of his life searching and never find me.

SIX WEEKS LATER



CHAPTER 44

SETH

Forty-one. That's the number of clouds that have passed by my window in the past hour. I've been watching them drift aimlessly to avoid my thoughts, which are focused more on the past than the present. They always lead me back to the desert, where I'm being hauled on the sled. I can still feel the straps biting into my limbs, the knuckles of one hand dragging through the sand, bumping over rocks, as the howls of Andes echo through the night.

Now, those memories are just confusing pieces of a puzzle that's been eating at me for weeks. I was hopped up on ketamine, so the whole ordeal had felt like a thousand moments outside of time. Still, some distant portion of me knew where I would end up—on a cold steel table in the Professor's sanctuary. Everything is hazy now, but I still get glimpses of him standing over me, surgical gloves bloody, holding a scalpel that had been used on the flesh of hundreds of Andes in the name of science. In that moment, the sedative pulling strings in my mind, I felt the suffering of every creature I'd captured and delivered to his lab. It seemed a fitting punishment for all I'd done.

I'm under strict orders to rest, but my body feels rested enough. What I need now is a reprieve from my memories. Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I hold one hand to my stitches and get down onto my knees, reaching underneath for the stink box. I go through the ritual as I have a thousand times. Boots, pants, shirt, a thick layer of clay on my arms and neck. The routine makes me feel somewhat normal.

Grabbing the nylon pack I unearthed from the shed, I head into the living room, stretching my legs as I go. Everything is in its usual spot. During my journey, I often wished for the familiarity of this room, but now it just seems like a hollow space filled with furniture well past its prime. Had the warmth I'd experienced here even been real? For a second I close my eyes, searching for those stormy nights when the Professor and I sat on the couch, drinking tea. Instead of

feeling a connection, all I see is his faraway stare, as if he wasn't there with me at all.

I wander down the hallway until I'm standing at the Professor's bedroom door. I push it open gently, knowing he's in his lab, as he has been most of the time since my return. The small black box is sitting on the table, just where we left it. I can still hear the strange radio call that started all this. But the words that stick in my mind like thorns aren't the ones that led me west—no, it's the last bit Caldwell had said, something about me, about where I came from. I couldn't afford to give it much thought at the time, what with the fate of the world at stake, but now I wonder what he had meant. The Professor had promised to share everything, but on the few occasions he's turned up for dinner, he's dismissed my questions, telling me instead to concentrate on recovering.

Throwing my backpack over one shoulder, I head out into the early afternoon heat. I pass the door to the lab and wonder what the Professor is doing in there now. Even without a sample of his precious peptides, his obsession seems stronger than ever.

I walk toward the steel platform. The Professor hasn't removed the electric motor he hastily reassembled on the night of my return. I stand there for a minute or more, looking out over the expanse, just as he must have done when the barn in Escalante lit up the horizon. I imagine him pulling his Fatigue-addled body through the dark, trying to reach me before it was too late, and for a moment I feel the warmth I've been searching for since my return. Then I remember his hands rummaging through my blood-soaked pockets, searching for the peptides I had failed to bring home.

Three hours into my shoveling, the pit seems just as deep as before. It had taken nearly a month to dig, and it will probably take twice as long to fill. Revenge had fueled its creation, pushing my then spindly arms past their limits as I removed one bucket of clay after another. Ignoring the oozing blisters on my palms, I had

dug deep enough to make damn sure an Ande could never claw its way out. By telling me how my parents died, the Professor had ignited my hate.

My abdomen starts to ache. I stab the shovel into the sand, pull a water bottle from my pack, and sit cross-legged on the ledge. Autumn isn't far off, and not long after that, this canyon will be blanketed in snow, forcing me to spend most of my time indoors. I scan the cliff walls as I listen to the babbling creek, absorbing the beauty of the oncoming fall, but inevitably my gaze shifts to the shadowy pit below. As I stare into the hole, I imagine what it must have been like for them. Trapped neck-deep in water, arms flailing. I can almost feel the noose around my neck when the sound of feet scuffing dirt behind me yanks me back to reality.

Reflexively, I reach for the shovel.

"You're supposed to be taking it easy," a familiar voice says. "I swear, if you tear your stitches, I'm going to be pissed."

"You startled me," I say, my hand sliding from the shovel.

"Really? Where's your head at?"

"I don't know."

"I get it," she returns. "It's going to take a while. For both of us."

I turn to face her, and her smile fades a bit. I must look haggard. Not her, though. With her hair tied back and a bandage concealing the wound on her neck, she looks like some kind of desert warrior. In this moment, I can see her completely—she's stubborn and selfish, but at the same time, she's caring, and deeply lonely. I've always dreamt of finding of a new life, hoping it was waiting for me out there in the great unknown. Now I'm back in the same desert, surrounded by the same open plains, but this time I have someone standing right here with me. During the past few weeks, we've had dozens of conversations, but somehow we'd shared nothing of importance. There's so much I want to say, but I have no idea how to say it.

For a few seconds we just stand there, staring at each other.

“Lower your pants,” she eventually says. She swings her pack around and pulls out a small, round tin. When I hesitate, she rolls her eyes. “Come on, Keller, really?”

I scowl but do as she asks.

“The stitches are holding,” she says, prodding at my flesh. “But there’s some new redness around the incisions. Wait here for a second.”

I watch her as she walks to the stream and begins washing her hands. How many days like this do we have left? There’s no need to ask why she hung around. Every time she looks at the bullet hole in my stomach, her eyes give away the answer. But over the past couple of weeks, she’s spent more and more time in the desert alone. Part of it might be the strange tension that has been building between her and the Professor. Something must have happened while I was unconscious, but it’s more than that. There’s a restlessness about her. She hasn’t talked about her ordeal, but from what I saw in that trailer, she went through hell. If she’s anything like me, the memories must haunt her. I fear it’s just a matter of time until they drive her away.

She comes back, unscrews the cap on the tin, and begins dabbing homemade ointment onto the skin around my wound.

“So,” she says, “why exactly are you down here all by yourself?”

“Just getting started on filling in this hole. You know how I feel about it.”

“I get it, trust me, but you still have a slight fever.”

I nod but don’t say anything else.

She keeps staring at me. “Is everything OK, Seth?”

It’s a shitty feeling, realizing you have no clue how to be a friend. I guess I’m just afraid of opening that dam, because once the water starts flooding through, I might not be able to stop it, and the last thing I want is for her to get washed away. For the first time in a long while, I know what I want, and it’s to focus on what’s right in front of me. Now I need to figure out how to do that.

“Of course. Just tired, I guess. How about you?”

She smiles but looks disappointed. “Aside from rationing my NAD and being pissed that you keep moving around like you don’t have a hole in your stomach, I suppose I’m all right.” She screws the cap back on the tin, then stands and picks up her pack. “I’m going to see if I can scrounge up some bulrush for dinner. See you back at the house later tonight.”

Without waiting for a reply, she begins walking back down the canyon.

“There’s this place,” I blurt out. She turns, her smile gone. “I’ve been going there since I was a kid. Was wondering if you’d like to join me? It has an incredible view.”

“That describes this whole desert.”

“This view is special ... and it’s a good place to talk.”

Even at a distance, I can see her eyes light up. But she still looks wary.

“What do we have left to talk about, Seth? If there’s something important you need to say, just say it.”

I feel the floodwaters pressing. “I want to talk about what happened.”

She takes a few steps toward me. “We both know what happened. I shot you.”

“Not that. I want to talk about ...”

When nothing else comes out, she begins walking away again.

“I want to talk about the Professor,” I shout after her. “About everything. This whole shitty mess.”

When she turns back around, I see her first genuine smile.



CHAPTER 45

SARAH

Seth leads me out of the canyon, then along a narrow trail that takes us over a handful of ridges until we're standing at the base of another butte. Not as tall as the one on which the Professor built their home, but tall enough to cast a huge shadow over the desert as the sun sets. Seth steps confidently up to the nearly vertical face.

"Really?" I ask.

He smirks back at me, grits his teeth, and begins to climb.

After we make it to the top, he takes a seat on the ledge, doing his best to hide the pain he's in. With a gentle evening breeze drying my sweat, I pull a propane lantern from my pack, light it, and place it on a nearby rock before taking a seat next to him. Letting my legs dangle over the edge, I look out over the massive network of mesas and creeks.

"You were right about the view," I say.

He smiles and nods, but keeps looking at the horizon. "When I was in my teens," he says, "I practically lived up here. That was around the time the Professor pretty much disappeared. I'd see him for maybe twenty minutes a day, and then he'd go right back into his lab. That's when I really started wondering where my life was headed." He pauses, then points a finger toward the sky. I look up in time to see a dark shape swoop down, but I lose it against the silhouettes of the mountains in the distance.

"What was that?" I ask.

"A great horned owl. He started hunting here shortly after I found this place."

I think of the macaws in the kapok back home.

"You were saying?" I eventually ask.

"Back in those days, I couldn't stop obsessing over the fact that the Professor would eventually die, and I'd be the last person left alive, wandering the desert with the Andes. So I'd come up here and sit for hours. Sometimes ... I'd think about jumping."

“Escape is never easy,” I say. “I’ve been failing at it my whole life.”

“Why did you want to escape? You weren’t alone.”

“It’s possible to be part of a community and still feel isolated,” I say, and I can tell by his face that my words register. “I know it must seem strange when you’ve been searching for people your whole life, but I guess that’s the human condition, right? We’re never fully content with what we’ve got. So I would go and sit under this big tree, sulking about all I’d lost and dreaming of how good things would be when I was finally on my own. God, that seems like so long ago.”

“Caldwell won’t live forever,” he says. “Would you consider going back someday?”

Just the thought of returning to Costa Rica scares the hell out of me. “I’m done with that place. I doubt you remember, but in the stairwell, Josh said I let everyone around me die. As hard as it is to admit, he was right. I’ve made a lot of bad decisions in my life, mostly because I was being selfish. That’s what got me into this mess in the first place. It’s what got you shot, and what I’m pretty sure got my best friend killed. Now, even though I’m safe, all I can think about is getting as far away as possible. I’m scared to death of making another bad choice.”

He looks at me and smiles. “Well, apparently, we’re both incredibly fucked up.”

Laughter pours out of me, and within seconds Seth joins in.

“Insanely fucked up,” I return, hardly able to get the words out.

When our laughter finally dies, I lightly punch his leg. “Your turn.”

He looks at me, eyebrows raised. “My turn for what?”

“To tell me why you brought me here. After twenty-something years of isolation, there’s got to be more you need to get off your chest than wanting to take a swan dive off this rock.”

“Well, there is something I want to show you.” He reaches into his pack and pulls out his belt. Sometime in the past few weeks, he must have hiked back to the Humvee to get it. “What does this look like to you?”

“It looks like the belt that kept me from killing you.”

“No, the etching on the buckle. Does it remind you of anything?”

I take a closer look. In the center, just below the bullet hole in the upper right corner, is the figure of a man on one knee, holding the world on his shoulders. “It’s the statue from the lab,” I murmur. “Caldwell had the same figure carved into the door of his mausoleum.”

“Yeah,” Seth says. “Except the Professor told me that this belonged to my father. He said he found him and my mom dead out here in the desert.”

“Why would he have had a belt with the exact same figure on it?”

“Maybe it wasn’t my father’s belt after all. The Professor could have wanted me to have something to remember my parents by. If that’s the case, I can think of worse lies. But something just feels wrong.”

“I had the bad habit of ignoring my intuition, and it always got me in trouble. What does your gut tell you?”

He places the belt on top of his pack, as if it pains him to hold it. “If he’d given it to me when I was young, that’d be one thing. But he waited until just a few days before he asked me to start hunting Andes. It’s too big of a coincidence. The whole thing makes me feel like—”

“Like you’re a pawn in some fucked-up game of chess?”

He glances at me, then nods. “Something like that.”

Looking out over the desert floor, now cloaked in shadow, I figure this isn’t the time to hold back, and I ask a question that’s been bothering me for weeks. “Did he ever tell you why you don’t have the Fatigue?”

“He told me I was born immune.”

“And that didn’t strike you as odd?”

“Not until just now,” he says. “On the shortwave call, the one that started all this, Caldwell said something about me. Said the Professor should tell me where I really came from.”

“Have you ever asked him about it?”

He shakes his head, and I know I need to tread lightly. The Professor has stood at the center of Seth’s universe since the start, and it’s not an easy thing to consider that the man who raised you might not be who you thought he was. I had my

whole journey north to come to grips with the fact that I never really knew my father, and I'm still processing all his lies.

"You know Caldwell," Seth says quietly. "What do you think he meant?"

I nearly laugh at the idea that I know that evil son of a bitch.

"Maybe Caldwell knows something about you, maybe he doesn't. I guess my question would be—why didn't you ever ask the Professor?"

Seth goes silent, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch his face. He's spinning around and around, chasing his own tail. What he needs now is a friend—a real one.

I scoot a little closer to him. "I have no idea why he said it, but I have something I want to tell you too. A secret I've been keeping. Caldwell," I say, then pause, struggling to put everything into words. "I'm pretty sure he has a cure that can turn Draggers back into people. And I think he's been doing it for years."

He peers at me. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because ... come on, Seth. You know why."

He turns his eyes back to the darkening expanse. "The Professor."

"If you tell him, he'll send you down there to get it. Right back into danger again. And I ..."

"It's OK, you can tell me."

I take a deep breath. "I wouldn't let you go alone."

He continues to stare out at the desert. "Two months ago, I probably would have gone charging down there without a second thought."

"And now?"

"Since I've been back, I've been having this nightmare. I haven't talked about it, because if I did, I'd have to admit it wasn't a nightmare at all. I was in the Humvee, and I could feel the Professor hovering over me, and I was so certain he was there to take away the pain and comfort me like he did when I was young. And then I felt his hands ... he was searching my clothes, Sarah. Digging through my pockets." He goes quiet. I reach over and place a hand on his. "I don't know what to do now," he says, then draws a shaky breath as he looks up at the stars.

He's looking for perspective, just as I would be if I'd been raised out here alone. The Professor has all but abandoned him, leaving me as his only option. After all my mistakes, it terrifies me to give advice, but at the same time, I want to be here for him, so I put my reservations aside and speak from the heart.

"Would it be so crazy if you did nothing?" I ask. "Let those two old men play their stupid game on their own? Who knows, maybe together we'd be better at escaping than we are alone."

"And what? Waste away out here in the desert?"

"We can do whatever we damn well please," I say a bit louder, my voice echoing down the cliffside. "Go wherever we want. You've spent enough time studying those maps. There's got to be some places you've imagined seeing someday."

For a minute, he doesn't respond. Then he lies back on the stone and dirt, folding his arms behind his head. At first I think he's avoiding what I said, but then a smile spreads across his face.

"How 'bout New Orleans?" he asks.

I lie down beside him. "What's in New Orleans?"

"History, architecture, you name it."

"Huh. I was thinking more like the Oregon Coast. Somewhere out there, there's a surfboard with my name on it."

"You do realize the water off Oregon is damn near freezing."

I give him a nasty look. "Fine. Sit on the beach all day. Take walks in the rain. But first I'll need to teach you how to forage. You've been living out here all your life, and I've seen the measly shrubs you call food. Where I'm from, greens like that are used as toilet paper."

He elbows me in the ribs, forcing out a giggle I barely recognize.

We bullshit for another few minutes. Then we just lie there, side by side, in comfortable silence, gazing up at the evening sky. Within a half hour, Seth is gently snoring.

I sit up, staring out at the starlit desert. It's calming, like floating in an ocean of night—but then I see something. A spark of light moving across the landscape. I

nudge Seth's leg, and he turns his head and looks at me sleepily.

"What is that?" I ask, pointing toward the light.

Sitting up, he peers into the dark. "I think ... I think it's a flashlight."

"Could it be the Professor looking for us?"

He shakes his head. "When you set that fire, it was his first time coming down off the butte in a decade."

"Have you ever seen people out here before?"

"No. Never."

My attention returns to the lone fleck of light. In an instant, I'm transported back to another time. I'm trapped in the trailer, listening to the Humvee's engine and the rumble of the road. In one hand I'm clutching my own skin. In the other, a jagged piece of steel. I'd wanted to smash the tracking device the instant I pried it free, but the blinking light had offered a bit of salvation. Then all hell broke loose, and I lost track of it in the chaos. It must be buried somewhere in the trailer, still transmitting its signal, even now. My mouth works silently as I try but fail to speak.

"What is it?" Seth asks.

As he looks at me intently, I distantly acknowledge that I need to come to terms with this awful new reality—my long nightmare is not over. They're coming for me, and I led them right to Seth's home.

I will myself to speak. "It's Caldwell's soldiers. The Merry Men."

He hesitates for a moment, his eyes flicking between my face and the light. Then he dives for my lantern, but in his frenzy to conceal us, his hand knocks the light off the rock. Glass shatters, flames flash, and then everything goes dark. Everything except the flashlight in the distance, which freezes in place.

We sit in desperate silence, waiting for the light to start moving again. When it doesn't, I turn back to Seth, whose face is stern in the pale moonlight.

"What do we do?" I whisper.

"We need to get the Professor," he says. "He'll know what to ..."

He doesn't finish. Instead, his eyes go even wider. When I turn back to the desert, I see why—the pinprick of light has broken apart, splitting into three, five, ten different beams. And they're moving again. All fanning out and headed in our direction. Caldwell might be thousands of miles away, but I should have known we would never be able to escape his grasp.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

They say to write what you know, and unfortunately, I know all too much about crippling fatigue and chronic illness. For years, I struggled through my own personal apocalypse.

After nearly two decades traveling the globe—living with an Indian tribe in the Amazon, fighting professionally in Thailand, and hang gliding up and down the Central American isthmus—I had a run-in with a tick. This parasite, the size of a grain of rice, was gracious enough to pass on Lyme disease, as well as its horrible cousin, bartonella. Thus began an entirely new type of journey. Instead of backpacking through cloud forests, I spent my days scouring medical papers and immunology textbooks, desperately searching for a way to combat my illness. Because one thing became strikingly apparent early on—the medical establishment had no clue how to cure this horrendous disease.

I admit, it almost had me beat. I recall sitting down in a chair one day following an NAD+ infusion and, after the crippling stomach pain had passed, spending the next twelve hours staring out the window, dreaming of returning to all the faraway places that had shaped my youth. The fight had left me, vaporized along with my health. After longingly gazing out at a world that had seemingly passed me by, I decided that quitting wasn't an option. Too weak to sling a backpack over my shoulder, I dragged my chair to the computer and began to write again. I'd spent years teaching survival school in the deserts of Utah, and I'd had a handful of near-death experiences while living solo in the jungles of Costa Rica. Those memories were the sharpest in my mind, so the locations for this story were set.

The year it took me to finish this manuscript was filled with highs and lows. Every day was a struggle just to get out of bed, but I sat down at the computer and managed to find that flow state, rekindling my passion one sentence at a time. With my brain not firing on all cylinders, I recruited the help of a lifelong friend and fellow author, Bret Aita. We picked apart every line together, and I found myself doubled over in laughter for the first time in many years.

My frustration faded, and I found contentment. My life might never be physical again, but at least it could be cerebral. And then, just as the book was getting ready to head off to print, it was suggested that I check out the work being done on long-haul COVID. A group of brilliant researchers discovered that it wasn't the virus keeping people sick, but rather their own immune system overreacting to dead viral particles. Since I had done extensive research into immunology over the years, I wondered if this theory could also apply to Lyme. So I went on their protocol, which consists of two relatively benign medications, and five days later I was once again training in the gym.

Just like that, I had my old life back.

There's another saying—you won't find something until you stop looking. Not sure if I believed that before, but I sure do now. Having recovered my health, I've dedicated my time and resources to helping others who suffer from chronic illness. And you, dear reader, have pitched in as well, as all my personal proceeds from this book will be donated to research projects devoted to unraveling the immunological overstimulation caused by Lyme. I'm currently working with a group of doctors, researchers, and geneticists who are rethinking the way we treat disease.

In many ways, the process of writing this book saved my life, and I can't thank you enough for coming along for the ride. Until the next time we meet, out on that lonely butte in the Utah desert, I hope you enjoy every moment of your life.

IF YOU ENJOYED THE READ AND HAVE A FEW MINUTES TO SPARE, IT WOULD MEAN THE WORLD TO ME IF YOU COULD LEAVE A REVIEW.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was fortunate enough to have four incredible editors on this project. If you liked the book, much of the credit should go to them. If you didn't, well, that's entirely on me.

Once the rough draft was finished, J. S. Miller, author of the amazing book *Obsidian Blues*, helped sculpt the manuscript into a fluid narrative. Along with being my editor, he also became my writing coach, graciously sharing his knowledge of the craft. There are many dark hours in writing a book, and he was there for me during the darkest of them, when I found myself staring down at the words I'd put on paper and wondering if they'd ever materialize into an actual story. Without his guidance, this book likely would have fallen into the archives of unfinished novels, so, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, Scott.

Bret Aita, co-author of my very first book, *Brawl*, made the mistake of jumping into this project for "fun." Thus began eight months of grueling work fixing plot holes, scrutinizing every line, and reading each chapter aloud a dozen times or more. While it might have been a painstaking process, reconnecting with a lifelong friend after years of suffering with Lyme disease brought my spirit back to life. I can't count the number of times I found myself with my head on my desk, doubled over in laughter. On the days I was too sick to work, he picked up the slack, his notes riddling the side margins upon my return. For the entirety of this project, he held a pen in one hand and a scalpel in the other, and he helped me write and sculpt the narrative into something I will forever be proud of. This book is as much his as it is mine.

And then there is Katia Kappale, who started out as a beta reader but quickly became so much more. Each time she read a chapter, she returned the pages filled

with suggestions on how to develop the characters, their voices, and the plot. She held Bret and me to the highest standards, and through dozens of iterations, she helped bring our two heroes, Seth and Sarah, to life.

Finally, there is Pam Mourouzis, an editor extraordinaire whom I have been fortunate enough to have worked with for years. Sitting down to write a book is a terrifying process, especially when your brain isn't firing on all cylinders. What kept my fingers typing was knowing that at the end of the long journey, no matter what shape the manuscript was in, Pam would be there to clean everything up and help bring the project to the finish line. And boy, did she deliver. With the book just a few weeks from print, she worked her magic, removing extraneous words and tightening the flow. She isn't just an editor—she's an editor who *cares*. That's everything in the world of writing.

Long before this project and my battle with Lyme, I spent most of my time traveling the globe alone. While my days were filled with adventure, there was always something missing. Who knows, maybe everything does happen for a reason, even things as shitty as chronic illness. Through the process of writing this book, I have come to realize just how much stronger we all are together. I started this project nearly bedbound with entire systems in my body failing, and as I write these words, just one day from print, I have regained complete health. The medication helped, absolutely, but I can't ignore the healing aspects of being part of a community who supports you every step of the way. To the editors I've already mentioned and everyone on the Briar Road Books team—Lance Freimuth, a dear friend and savior; Susan Lloyd, communications genius, and quite simply an incredible human being; Justin-Aaron Velasco and Kat Lannom, book design gurus; Samuel Mills, the talented artist who created all the illustrations; and too many others to name here—thank you for helping me live again.

Finally, to Dr. Bruce Patterson from covidlonghauers.com, who cracked the Lyme disease puzzle and helped me reclaim my health. To my father, who led by example and shaped me into the man that I am. And to my wife, Georgina, who

took care of me when I couldn't take care of myself. You are, quite literally, my everything. I will love you far beyond my dying day.