



PREPPERS: ORDER FROM CHAOS

Protecting Family

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Chapter 1

I could smell sulfur and hear chanting. I opened my eyes to a world of black and white, punctuated by masses of swirling red fog lazily drifting through the air above me. As I sat up, realization dawned on me. I was on top of the mountain that loomed over Baldman. It was another nightmare... Fan-fucking-tastic. I let out a long exhale as I sat up and surveyed the area. There I was at the very peak of Buzzard's Mountain, which, from a distance, looked remarkably like a man's bald head. I'm not sure why the mountain was named "Buzzard's Mountain", but it wasn't hard to figure out how the original settlers came up with the name of the town.

From my location, I could see most of the valley and my entire town. I could easily see my neighborhood, nestled on the highest hill in the valley, on its own little peninsula. The snaking river that flanked my neighborhood on three sides also cut the town in half, as well as most of the valley. From where I stood, I could see the two bridges that allowed for vehicle traffic and the two railroad bridges that allowed freight to make its way west. Everything before me was on fire.

Occasionally, the wind would gust-up, and I could smell the smoke mixed with burnt bacon. I want these nightmares to end. I want peace. But more than anything, I want rest. It has been at least a month since I had one of these nightmares.

There was muffled chanting from my right, and I knew who it was. I knew, but I didn't want to look. How much more of this can I take? The world is in shambles, and I am white knuckling every day, just trying to keep it all together... I can't even dream in peace. I know I must turn and see what he wants. I know this, but I can only take so much.

I turned to face the entity that was haunting my dreams... Diablo.

It would seem Diablo had grown. He now stood at least seven feet tall and had to weigh every bit of 450 pounds. He still had those multiple rows of shark teeth. He was still nude, covered in blood with no eyes, not even eye sockets. It was like his forehead started at the bridge of his nose. It was a little comforting to see at least those features hadn't mutated into something even more disturbing.

I suppose it's the minor victories that count most sometimes. "You've grown, but you're still ugly. What the fuck do you want now?"

Diablo smiled at my faux courage; we were in my head after all. It only makes sense that he would know how terrified I am. As he smiled, I watched his razor-sharp teeth slice his lips to ribbons, pouring blood from the fresh wounds down his bare chest. I tried to look away but couldn't. In fact, I was totally immobilized... I couldn't even fucking blink.

Diablo cocked his head to the side like a confused dog and then smiled wider, ripping open his cheeks. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to cry or scream... Anything, anything to make this end. Diablo slowly reached up and pulled out one of his razor-sharp shark teeth, with which he proceeded to use to carve into his massive chest.

The insane sight held me with fear so perfectly, I couldn't even shake with disgust or rage. It forcibly locked me into being a voyeur of the sadistic and deranged. Before my mind broke, I realized he was carving a letter into his chest. It was a capital P, followed by a capital A, then a U.... "NO!!! NO, YOU MOTHERFUCKER! NO!" I shouted with all the rage I could muster.

Then I was free, no longer bound by my fear and some unseen force. I rushed the demonic giant, putting my shoulder into the thing before he could start the last letter. I knew what that letter would be. It was going to be a capital "L". He was carving the name of my oldest son into his chest. Fuck that noise. As I slammed into him, I used everything I had to drive this abomination over the edge of the cliff at the crest of the mountain. I would not let this thing near my family, dream or not. I would take this thing with me into hell.

As we fell, Diablo laughed. His laughing turned into crying, then screaming. It sounded like someone screaming my name, "HENRY!!!". I opened my eyes and light crashed through the darkness at the bottom of the cliff.

"HENRY! Put him down!" Dee shouted as I snapped out of my nightmare.

I was holding my son suspended in the air by his shoulders. He was crying, and Dee was shouting. What had I done? I swiftly pulled him into a hug and tried to calm him down. "Shhh, it's okay, Buddy. It's okay. Daddy is so sorry, Little Buddy. I am so sorry!"

My son reached his arms around me and hugged me back. "I'm sorry Daddy. I didn't mean to make you mad. I just wanted to tell you something," he said, sobbing.

“I know Buddy. I know... I am so sorry... I didn't hurt you, did I?” My words were raw. I could never forgive myself if had hurt him, any of them.

His little voice answered from my chest, “No, but you were growling and shouting... It scared me, and then you grabbed me and I... I... peed.” He started crying again.

My heart was breaking. I had terrified my boy. What was I becoming? I held him until he calmed down. Then I took him into his room and helped him clean up and get changed. “Alright, Little Buddy... Remember, don't wake Daddy like that anymore. If you need to wake me up, just throw a shoe at me. Okay?”

He giggled, “Okay, Daddy.”

“Alright now. Go play.” He ran out of the room and joined his sisters and a couple of other small children Dee had recently started watching for some neighbors. Times were hard and everyone capable was putting in effort.

I went back to our master bathroom and showered off. Mostly, I was trying to collect my thoughts. This was too close.

“Henry? ... Are you okay?” Dee asked.

I think part of me was hiding in the shower. I didn't want to respond. Instead, I just sat down on the tile floor of the shower.

“Henry?” Dee asked again.

“No... No, I am not okay.” I answered.

“I didn't think so. Want to talk about it?”

“Not especially.” I said softly.

“Nightmare?” she asked.

“Yep,” I answered as I straightened my legs and touched my toes, stretching my back and hamstrings.

“Same person?”

“Yep.” I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs as hot water washed over me and hid my tears.

“He is okay. He is shook-up, but fine... Do you know that?” Dee asked, I could hear the concern in her voice.

“This time... I am going to start sleeping downstairs on the couch. I should have been doing that anyway, with all the break-ins in the neighborhood... It just makes sense. Maybe we could put the baby gates up to keep the kids from running around downstairs too early?” I insisted.

“Yeah... That’s a... Yeah... We can do that, if you think it’s necessary.”
Dee sighed.

“I do.”

“He’s okay,” she reassured.

“This time.” My voice was breaking. “I don’t know how much of me will be left... I...”

“Henry,” she broke in. “We will find out together. I need you. Our kids need you... Shake this off. We will not make it without you... None of us.” Her sweet southern voice cracked with emotion.

That hit me hard. I took several deep breaths, stood up and turned off the water.

As I exited, Dee held my towel. “So, come here often?” she asked with a playful wink.

I laughed hard... It felt good. “Prego-Hormones, huh?” I chuckled.

Dee smiled widely. “Maybe,” she said with another wink. “Or maybe it’s all that walking around carrying heavy stuff you have been doing lately... Or maybe it’s both?” she giggled as I grabbed my towel, but she didn’t let it go.

“Easy there, horny-pregnant-lady... There are small kids downstairs and probably a Mormon teenager, since you’re up here and not down there... Am I right?”

Dee let go of my towel and moaned petulantly, “Yes... you’re right.” She took a couple of breaths. “I came up here to make sure you weren’t beating yourself up too hard...” She paused and tilted her head to the side, “Hard?” she giggled.

“Stay on track, Woman,” I laughed.

“Right... I was just checking on you. I know how you can get,” she said with a smile.

“Yeah, thank you... You were right, but I’m better now... Promise.” I smiled down at her and gave her a kiss, which was a mistake on my part. I had to peel her off me and remind her multiple times we could catch up later. Right now, we had things to do.

Finally, she relented. “FINE! But you shouldn’t tease a pregnant woman like that!” As she turned to go, she stopped and turned back to face me with a somber look. “Henry, once you’re ready, you need to go down to your mom’s house. Katy radioed.”

I looked at my small and very pregnant wife. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know, because she wouldn’t say. She didn’t sound good, though. That’s what Paul came up to tell you. It’s why I came up with him.” She shook her head for a moment. “But with everything else... and the hormones... Anyway, when you’re ready to go, head there first.” With that, Dee swiftly walked out of the bathroom.

I didn’t need to be clairvoyant to guess why Katy was radioing me. My mother had been out of her blood pressure medication for over a month now. I need to make sure I grab a couple of industrial sized trash bags and duct tape before I leave... Fuck.

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Chapter 2

As I walked downstairs, I finished securing my gun belt, tightening my bulletproof vest, and performing a quick comms check. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw Matt sitting at the dining room table.

“Sup, Big Fella?” he asked as I reached the bottom of the stairs.

“I take it my supervisor reached out?” I asked him, already knowing the answer.

Matt gave a sympathetic nod, “Copy that Brother.”

“Well then, let’s get at it.” I put on my heavy coat and slung my patrol vest over top. Then I grabbed one of the AR pistols for which we had replaced the original lower receiver with one of the full autos from Magnus’s range. It made for a formidable piece of hardware.

It was officially winter in Tennessee. It had to be 35 degrees out, but it didn’t matter to the kids. There was a herd of children in my backyard, where somehow a trampoline had found its way along with all the kids. I saw Dee standing with one of the neighborhood teens who had been helping lately.

“It would seem we have more kids here than normal,” I said as I walked over to her.

“You would be correct, my dear husband.” Dee said.

“And a trampoline, huh? I noticed we now have a trampoline now.” I asked.

“Right again Dear,” Dee said as she smiled at me.

“Do I want to know?”

With a wide smile she answered, “Probably not.”

“Well, ignorance is bliss,” I said.

As I leaned down to kiss her ear, I whispered, “You know we can’t feed them all, right?”

She gently reached up, placing her hand on my cheek. “I make their parents drop off snacks with them,”

she whispered back to me. “Times are different. People understand... And before you ask, yes. I am armed, and so is Rose.”

As I pulled my face back, my wife kissed my nose and with her free hand, gave the inside of my leg a pinch.

I let out a squeak and jumped back, “Damn, woman!”

“Best get going husband... I only have so much restraint,” she exclaimed with a devious wink.

I straightened myself out and walked away with a bit of grumble, only to have Dee give a long wolf whistle and another wink as looked back at her. I shook my head and continued over to a laughing Matt. I nodded to him, “Shut up.”

We went around the side of the house and down to the road.

“You okay, Big Guy? Looks like that little lady made you jump,” Matt said with a subdued smile.

“Pregnant women, Man... Sometimes they are... motivated,” I said awkwardly, as we walked the short distance to the back alley that led to my mother’s house.

“It’s like that?” Matt chuckled.

“It can be... You’ll see.” I said as I turned down the alley to what was now my sister’s house I supposed.

Matt stopped walking. I turned to see his face, which had just turned white. “You coming Killer?” I asked.

Matt stared at me for a moment. “Have you heard something I haven’t?”

“No Bro, but it is inevitable.” I laughed as we continued to walk down the alley.

Matt jogged to catch up, “No it’s not.”

“Yes... It is.”

With a touch of panic, Matt responded, “No, no it’s not.”

I stopped walking and turned to Matt, taking the extra moment as an opportunity to look behind him to make sure no one was following us. “Look man, do you intend to stop having sex and take a vow of chastity?” I asked.

“Hell no, that’s ridiculous. Sex is awesome!” he insisted.

“Well, there are only so many condoms floating around. And there is only so much birth control... With all this death, I highly doubt producing contraceptives is high on anyone’s list of things to do, Bro... So, if you and Ryan plan on continuing, best be thinking of baby names.” I turned and continued walking.

“Fuck!” Matt shook his head and continued walking with me.

“Damn, I forgot trash bags and duct tape. Fuck it. We will figure it out... I can’t turn around now. Dee will molest me, and I don’t think I will get away this time.”

Matt just laughed at my awkward situation.

“So, you okay?” Matt asked. I could sense his discomfort.

“Yeah, I’m a sexy man. I got used to women pawing at me a long time ago,” I said with a grin.

“HAHAHA, not *that*, you dick-cheese... The other thing, or things, I guess I should say...” Matt was silent for a moment more, “Dee told me. You know that, right?”

“I know Bro, I know... I just don’t want to talk about it right now.” I said as we approached my mom’s house. Or was it Katy’s house now? That thought felt foreign.

“Okay, but when you’re ready, I’m here man.” Matt said with a touch of vulnerability that was a far cry from his normal state.

I stopped and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you, but I have enough issues with Dee chasing my dick. I don’t need you on there as well...” I turned to walk away and said with a smile, “Besides... If I were going to entertain men, I could do better than *you*.” I laughed as I walked down the steps to my mom’s porch.

“Oh yeah?” Matt asked, red faced.

“Yeah.” I said calmly and with a straight face. “Now come on. We’ve got serious shit to do. I can’t have you hitting on me all morning. I mean, it’s flattering and all... But it’s time to work.” Matt’s face was now fully flushed red, and he was mumbling. I made out a “fuck you,” and promptly said, “For the last time, man, I can do better! So, thank you, but no thank you.”

Before Matt could respond, I knocked on the door. Almost instantly, Katy opened the door, sobbing.

“You okay, Little Sister?” I asked.

Katy lunged and hugged me with so much force that if Matt hadn’t been there, we would have gone over the railings. She was bawling her eyes out. I turned her away from the open door and reached out to shut it, hoping to give us some privacy. At least, as much privacy as anyone can have on a front porch. Matt stood as still and silent as a statue behind us.

I just held my little sister as she unleashed waves of tears and muffled screams into my vest and jacket. She shook with the force of the screams. It made sense. She had been trying to be strong and positive for everyone. This must have been just one straw too many, and she couldn’t hold it all back anymore. I had one of those moments myself not too long ago. So, I

just held her as she let it all out. This torrent of tears just had to run its course.

Ten minutes had passed before Katy could pull herself back together. She was still trembling, but her tears had stopped. I took that as my opportunity.

“Which room is she in, Katy?” I asked as softly as I could. I didn’t want her to sob again, so I waited for her to take a couple deep breaths and finish collecting herself.

“Her bedroom.” Katy took a deep breath and walked past Matt and me to sit on the steps.

I opened the door to what was my mother’s house with Matt in tow. I could hear crying from upstairs, from what I assumed must be Sahara and Timber. The air in the house felt heavy and thick, almost like the sadness was tangible. I put that out of my mind to focus on the task at hand. We crossed to my mother’s bedroom, where the door had been shut. As I opened it, the smell of shit and piss assaulted me. Her bowels and bladder must have released. She was dead. There was no mistake... My mom was dead.

“Matt, uh... Will you go to the basement and look for something we can use to...”?

“Yeah Bud, absolutely. I’ll be right back.” Matt said as he headed for the basement door.

I walked over to the side of my mother’s bed. I could see her face. She was a blueish pale in color. Other than that, she just looked like she was sleeping. I brushed her graying hair back from her cold cheek. Her heart must have given out in the night. Good... I am glad it wasn’t painful.

Matt arrived with a large, heavy black bag. It took me a second to recognize it for what it was.

“Where did you find an actual body bag?”

“Amongst a big pallet of stuff, right next to two large pallets of food, which seemed to have been kind of tossed around.”

“Shit, I forgot... We had bought her a supply of long-term food when she moved in. The deal came with a bunch of extra stuff... water purifiers and shit like that. Huh, I didn’t know there would be a body bag in there...”

“Well, there are couple more of them down there... I didn’t know if you would want to use it for this or...” Matt said with some hesitation.

“Nah, they were made for dead people... She is dead.” I let out a long exhale. “Okay, let’s do this.”

I went to the corner of the bed and pulled up the sheeting. Matt did likewise. We pulled the large comforter off and set it on the floor. We used the sheets to lay her in the big black bag. Luckily, she had rubber sheets on the bed. She had a genuine fear of incontinence. I couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

Matt looked at me puzzled, “You okay Bro?”

I was still laughing, “She was always worried about getting old and losing control of bowels... And here she is dead, and she shit herself.”

“I don’t see the joke there, Bud.”

“Yeah, neither do I... But it just kind of hit me strangely. I don’t know, man. I can’t explain it,” I said as I shook off the giggles. “Stress induced dark humor, I guess. I don’t know.” As I zipped up the body bag, the heaviness in the air seemed to lift immediately.

Matt looked at me, “What now?”

“We clean this rubber sheet. Then take the body to the alley and notify Josh. That way he can get the Grave diggers to come by and collect her.”

“You don’t want to...”

I cut him off, “Get special treatment?... No, it’s tempting. But that is what was wrong with the old world. I don’t want to start off the new one like that. I love her, and I will miss her... But many people have lost loved ones. Even more people will lose loved ones in the future... Getting special treatment now will cause a backlash. We have enough problems now.”

Matt looked away for a second then back to meet my eyes. “Which one is it?”

I cocked my head, trying to understand the question. Before I could ask him to clarify, Matt filled in the rest of the question.

“Are you worried about getting special treatment or being seen getting special treatment?”

“Yes,” I replied sharply.

I grabbed the handle of the bag. Matt took hold of the other handle and we picked up my deceased mother. We carried her out the front door and down to the sidewalk. Everyone in the neighborhood had been told, if they have anyone die, they must bring the body down to the sidewalk by the street and let josh or a member of the security team know. This had been working well so far, except that collection was now daily instead of weekly.

Most of the deaths were from lack of important medications, others were suicides.

“Would you mind going down to Josh’s and letting him know? I should be here for a moment, and if we radio it in, people will start showing up, asking me to do shit for them... And with the mood I’m in right now...” I shook my head, “it would go poorly.”

“Copy that Brother. Just radio if you need me.” Matt turned to walk the several blocks to Josh’s house.

I turned back towards the house and saw Katy standing in the doorway. I walked up behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder, “I got this Little Sister. Why don’t you got check on the kids and Bill?”

Katy let out a long breath. “I don’t know where Bill is.”

“What?” That puzzled me.

“He has been going out lately and doesn’t come back for a day or two... Honestly, it’s for the best...” Katy said, still blankly staring at our mother’s bedroom door.

“Okay, that is... Well, to be honest, Katy, I don’t know what to say. I’m not sure it would come across genuine if I tried... I am sorry though.”

“It’s not your fault, Big Brother. It’s just all fucked up. No one is to blame. It’s just a shit sandwich and a glass of sour milk.” Katy looked up at me and smiled. “Thank you for coming over,” she said as she walked over to our mom’s room.

“We are going to need some bleach, Katy. I think she kept it under the kitchen sink.”

Standing in mom’s doorway, Katy nodded and went to get the sanitizer. I walked into the bedroom and grabbed her comforter that Matt and I had placed on the floor. I put it in the middle of the mess that was left. I figured it would absorb the leftover liquid on the rubber sheet, then I pulled up the rubber sheet from the corners and tossed them toward the center of the pile. Soon, the rubber sheet looked like an old-school hobo knapsack. Katy was in the doorway, watching me work.

“Sorry I’m not more help Henry.”

“It’s not a problem. Did you find the trash bags?”

“Yeah,” she said as she handed one to me.

“Thanks Katy. Will you do me a favor and fill mom’s sink with hot water and a splash of bleach? I will need to disinfect my hands.” I cinched up the trash bag holding the rubber sheet and comforter. Then I walked it

out and sat it beside my mom's body. My stomach felt like there was a squirrel loose in it. There was also a strange heaviness that seemed to hang from my shoulders.

I found Katy standing in front of the kitchen sink with the hot water running. I moved her gently aside and plugged the drain. Once the water half-filled the sink, I turned it off and added some bleach. Then plunged my hands deep into the hot-disinfecting water and just held them there for a few moments. The hot water burned, but it felt good.

"Henry?" Matt called from the living room.

"In the kitchen."

Matt walked in and saw what I was doing. "I can smell bleach."

"I added it to the hot water."

"Good thinking. Mind if I get in there?"

I pulled my hands out and dried them on one of the hand towels hanging from the oven door handle. Matt repeated my actions, as did Katy, only she pulled the plug to drain out the bleach water as soon as she finished.

"Well, this is fucking depressing," I said as I left the kitchen. "And the house smells like shit."

Katy began laughing in the other room, and it felt like the air of sadness was lifting.

"Y'all are fucked in the head... You know that, right?" Matt asked.

"Like that carries any weight coming from the guy who thinks Patrick Swayze is the greatest thing since sliced bread." I laughed.

Then, out of nowhere, Katy let out a deep belly laugh, "Matt!... You still have a crush on Patrick Swayze?"

Matt just turned to see us both laughing, "He was a brilliant actor."

"He was okay, but brilliant? Damn that's stretching it a bit, Bro," I said through my chuckle.

Katy was still laughing. "Matt, really? He is okay but..."

Matt cut her off. "Think about it. Think about that man's range! *Ghost*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Point Break*, and let's not forget... *Red Dawn*."

I muffled my laughter enough to say, "Bro, half of those are chick-flicks."

"My brother is right," Katy said, still just laughing her ass off.

"Okay then, who would you say is the greatest actor of all time, Katy?" Matt asked.

"Easy, Keanu Reeves." Katy said. With that, I just smiled widely.

Matt turned and walked outside, then came back to the front door and said, "He is literally the same in every movie!"

Without missing a beat, Katy replied, "If you're good enough, people write movies for you... if Swayze was better, you would know that."

"Fuck you both. I don't have to listen to this. Something is fucked in both your heads." With that, Matt walked down to the road and waited for me, still mumbling to himself. Katy and I continued to laugh so hard we were crying.

"Oh, I needed that..." Katy said as she wiped away the tears from her eyes.

"Yeah, me to..." I turned to Katy and before I could say anything else, she gave me another fierce hug. After a few moments passed, "Alright fucker, I have shit to do... In fact, I can guarantee it since Matt is still waiting out there and didn't walk off."

"How mad is he?" she asked.

"Oh, he'll cry himself to sleep tonight," I said with a chuckle. "Nah, he's fine... He's used to being wrong." I said with a grin. "But I do have to get going. If y'all need anything, come over or send one of the twins. Don't use the radio, alright?"

Katy nodded her response and let me go. "What about the house and Mom's stuff?" Katy asked sheepishly.

"What about it?"

"Half of it is yours." Katy staring at my chest to avoid my face.

I could see the concern on her face. "I have what I need, and if you're smart, so do you." I said, pointing to the floor.

"Thank you, Henry." She gave me one last hug, then wiped her tears from her face.

I nodded and walked out the door, meeting Matt in the road. "Ready Buttercup?"

"Come on, Prince Humperdink," Matt said as he started walking toward Josh's house. "We have more shit to shovel today."

"I'm no Humperdink... if anything, I'm the dreaded Pirate Roberts... I mean, that seems obvious." I explained as we walked toward Josh's house.

Chapter 3

As we approached Josh's front steps, he came outside. "Sorry about your Mom Henry... I don't know what to say, Man... It's a crappy situation all around..."

"Thanks Bro." I cut him off. "It is what it is... Matt said you had something for us?" I didn't want to think about my mother's death any longer, so I changed the subject.

"Yeah, yeah... Uh, couple things... So, I have been listening to Alex Jones and his news reports every night. You know that."

I just nodded in response. I really wanted to go crawl back in my bed, not be here dealing with whatever cluster fuck was steaming down the pipe next.

Josh continued, "Well, Alex announced there is now another radio channel and television broadcast channel up and running. It's the Mormons. Turns out, they have a massive communications hub set up in Salt Lake City, Utah. They just went live last night and relayed some disturbing information..."

"Wait, just a sec... There is an alternate news source? And it's run by the Mormons?" I was a little taken aback. "So, just so I am 100% clear on this... The two sources of national and global news are Infowars and a bunch of Mormons out of Utah?" As Josh nodded affirmatively, I continued ranting. "Yep! Shit has definitely jumped up a couple places on my weird shit-o-meter..." I just waved my hand in a "let's get this over with," motion. Josh could be very long-winded in getting to the point and I was not up to hearing a bunch of unnecessary details at this moment.

"Yeah, crazy right? So, Utah has declared itself sovereign and has organized its own militia."

For once, he got right to the damn point. Hearing this, my jaw dropped. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I heard that right. My tinnitus must be acting up. Did you say Utah has declared itself sovereign?" I decided I needed to sit down, so I walked up on the porch and just kind of flopped into a chair. "Sovereign, like... standalone? As in, go fuck yourself, Feds?" I was dazed. "I always figured it would be Texas," I said, bewildered.

"So did I. And so did everyone else..." Josh gave a bit of a laugh. "It gets stranger..."

“Well, let’s not dillydally Josh. Just bite my ear and get it over with. What else?” I felt a bit exasperated after that news, mostly because I suddenly wished I lived in Utah.

“Florida is apparently following in Utah’s footsteps. It hasn’t been confirmed...”

“Confirmed by who?” I interrupted.

“By Alex Jones... The Mormons are saying Florida is going to declare itself sovereign, or at least mostly sovereign.”

I put my hands on my face. Alex Jones and the Mormons in Utah were now the gatekeepers and collectors of information. I took several slow breaths. “Josh, I love ya’ Bro. You know this... But I am five seconds away from strangling you with your own shirt... Please just give me the entire story, okay?”

“Sorry Henry. I’m a bit excited... Utah is apparently leading the way in a secessionist movement. Florida is declaring independence and may join with Utah. If we believe the SLC Broadcast, there are a bunch of states that are doing the same. It’s crazy out there. Some states have counties that are declaring sovereignty from their own states. I don’t know if this is an amazing thing or the worst thing. Either way, there will be two very important broadcasts tonight. First will be the Mormons, and then Infowars. It seems that Alex Jones is working with the Mormons, helping them rebroadcast their message. It turns out they were only set up for radio. We will know more tonight.”

We all just stared at each other and at the floor for a few minutes, not saying a word. Then our radios broke the silence. “Henry? Anyone seen Henry?” It was Ryan.

“Yeah Ryan. Come on down to Nervous Nellie’s house.” I released my talk button to see Josh staring at me. “What?”

“Nervous Nellie’s house? Real mature Henry.” Josh gave a huff.

Matt laughed. “That is a pretty good description.”

Josh just shook his head, “You guys are dicks.”

I laughed, “You’re not wrong Josh. But as to what you were saying... Let me see if I have the full picture. We were a shit sandwich... We are now a snotty k9, colitis-shit sandwich. Does that sum things up?”

“Yeah, pretty much. We will know more tonight... I hope.” Josh said.

I nodded along, “Yeah, just wait and see... Josh will you do me a favor?”

“Sure Henry, what do you need?”

“I need you to get...” Ryan interrupted me pulling up in her cop car. It was very rare to see anyone on the roads in a vehicle. Gas was almost as valuable as gold right now. We all stood and stared at the sight, marveling at it as though it were some long-lost magic. “Gotta be honest, Ryan, it is really weird to see anyone driving.”

Ryan laughed as she got out of the BPD Explorer. “I know. It feels even stranger to be driving.” She walked up to the porch to say, “Henry, the Sherriff wants to see you... Now.”

“Does he really?”

“Yep... I went in today to do my weekly check-in, and Nate stopped me before I entered the building. He told me to get back in my vehicle and pull around to fill up my tank,” she went on.

“I thought you filled up last week?” Matt asked.

“Exactly... Nate had a weird look on his face when he said it, so I just played along. I got back in my car and pulled around. Jack was waiting out by the pumps.” Ryan fidgeted with her hands, “He said I was to return with you ASAP, no excuses... Then he gave me this.” Ryan pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me.

I opened the folded paper. On the inside was written one word: “*coup*”.

“Well fuck...” This was going to be a long day.

Chapter 4

“Coup? That doesn’t track Bro. It sounds more like an ambush.” Matt started looking up and down the street with a hint of paranoia, as he said that.

“I don’t like this either, Henry,” Josh said as he took the paper from me.

“I don’t know Fellas. He actually seemed nervous,” Ryan responded as she sat on one of the porch chairs.

“Tell me everything, Ryan. No detail is too small.” I sat back down in my chair, less relaxed and more focused than when Matt and I had originally sat down.

After twenty minutes of Ryan retelling her story and everyone questioning her, I stood up and took off my rifle, vest, and gun belt and handed them to Matt. “Do me a favor, Bro. Don’t tell Dee... I’ll handle that when I get back.” I started down the stairs toward Ryan’s Explorer.

“No way Man. You can’t go without me and without your guns!” Matt stood to follow, but Ryan put out her hand, stopping him cold.

“No Sugar-Bear. It’s only supposed to be me and Henry.”

“You heard the story, Killer. Something’s up... Jack is a good man. I don’t think he is out to get me. There are easier ways.” I opened the passenger door to get in as Ryan climbed into the driver’s seat and closed the door.

“I agree with Matt. Henry, if you feel you must go, then go armed.” Josh was twitching with nervous energy.

“I appreciate that, Brothers. I do. But I have a suspicion... And I really hope it is a trap. If I’m not back tonight, I know you two are coming for me.”

“Damn skippy!” Matt said with conviction.

“Oh, *SUGAR BEAR*... You’re so sweet.” I said with all the seriousness I could muster.

Matt turned bright red. “Fuck you!”

I couldn’t help but smile, “Fuck you, too.” I gave Josh and Matt a last nod as I got into the Explorer and shut the door.

Ryan started the vehicle. “You think this is a trap?”

I could hear the tremor in her voice. “No, I think it’s a cry for help. If they wanted me, I mean fuck... He has a small militia all his own. He could get me... Nah, this is something else. When I consider all these states and

various counties breaking away... I don't know, but I think something is up. There has to be a reason beyond just opportunity."

As Ryan sped down the road towards Kingston, "Wait, what now?"

I relayed the information to Ryan that Josh had told Matt and I before her arrival. She was silent.

"So, when you take a step back and look at this mess... There is a hole." I watched out the window as the terrain flew by. I hadn't been in a car in more than a month. It almost felt like we were flying. Crazy how much the world can change in so short a time, but it's even crazier how fast people have adapted to this new world.

"What kind of hole?"

"That's the concerning part, Ryan. I don't know, but just follow my lead. There is a reason Jack didn't want you to come inside. And with any luck, Nate is still out front."

As we pulled into the Sheriff's parking lot, I saw Nate standing out front. "Ryan, let me out by Nate and then pull the SUV around back by the pumps. Make sure we can pull straight out in a hurry if needed."

"Want me to keep it running?"

"Normally, I would say yes. But that would attract too much attention right now. With as valuable as gas is, people would notice." I continued to watch Nate as we pulled in. He kept glancing at the County courthouse. The courthouse was a giant three-story building that seemed to just go on and on. They built it back when small towns in the south tried to show their power by building monstrous temples to law and order. I never could understand why that was ever a thing, but it was. Now, nearly every small southern town has a giant courthouse. Most resemble a southern mansion. This one, however, resembles a medieval fort.

As Ryan pulled to the front of the Sheriff's office, Nate started toward the curb. Before I got out of the car, I leaned over to Ryan. "If you hear gun shots, head directly to the Rorschach brothers. Tell them everything you can think of and answer whatever questions they have. Then do the same with Matt and Josh. Do not, under any circumstances, try to come and help. Just get the fuck out of here in a hurry... I have a bad feeling."

Ryan stopped the SUV and Nate opened the door. "Hey Nate! How's your pop doing?"

Nate smiled a little. "He's fine... He was enjoying retirement until all this bullshit."

“I hear that... Say Nate, what am I about to walk into?”

Nate frowned, looked at Ryan, and then looked back at me. “I’ll tell you on the walk what I can, but we need to get moving or they will get suspicious.”

I did not like the sound of that. “They will get suspicious?” Fuck... We were being watched. I nodded and exited the SUV. Before I shut the door and with a loud and commanding voice I told Ryan, “Go fill it up and try not to be slow about it.”

I heard Nate let out a slow exhale. I shut the vehicle door and turned to Nate. “So, where is Jack? I ain’t got all damn day, Son!”

Nate squinted his eye and cocked his head a bit to the side. We had known each other for several years, and I had never spoken to him like this before. I moved just past Nate on his left and began walking to the front door of the Sheriff’s department. Then I stopped and turned to face Nate again, but this time facing away from the Courthouse. “Let’s go, Son!” Then, much more quietly, I asked, “They’re watching, right?”

A flash of understanding showed in his eyes, and his body language immediately changed. “Oh, uh... Yes, yes sir! Right this way. The Sherriff is in the courthouse with some representatives from the Federal Government,” Nate said as he walked up beside me, and we started our walk across the street.

Hearing that the Feds were here, I was overcome by a feeling of dread. The note Jack gave to Ryan, Nate waiting on us... Whatever the fuck is going on in Utah, and seemingly everywhere else, is making my stomach upset. As we walked, I looked down and did my best to speak softly, “so, how bad is this?” I didn’t have long before we were at steps of the courthouse.

“Terrible.” Nate said as he looked down to respond, which only confirmed my suspicions about our being carefully observed. “Your comms are compromised. The Sheriff wants you to listen and play along.”

I was puzzled by the second part of that, because I was never foolish enough to believe that BaoFeng radios were anywhere near a secure form of communications. “Play along... Why? What’s going on?”

Nate glanced back down and ominously said, “You’ll see.”

With that last answer we arrived at the steps of the courthouse and the doors opened. Out came Hillis Swindle and behind him Oswaldo Swindle,

along with a swarm of armed men wearing black body dress uniforms (BDUs). I immediately regretted not wearing my gun belt and hard armor.

“What the fuck is this all about? I am here to see the Sherriff,” I said, as locked in my poker face. I’d be damned before I would let these two inbred morons know I was even slightly uncomfortable at the sight of them or the armed men. “Y’all gonna get the fuck out of my way or are we gonna have a problem?” I looked Oswaldo directly in the eye as I spoke. Oswaldo narrowed his eyes and studied me, then looked past me to the tree line about 400 yards away. He always was the smartest of his clan, so I was hoping for exactly this response. After they came through the doors, I knew I needed to just keep this bluff, allowing the lie to continue to grow in Oswaldo’s mind. I didn’t dare aim my confrontational stare at Hillis. I knew he didn’t have the intelligence or survival instinct to calculate the possibility that I had someone in the wood line with a rifle. Hillis would, without a doubt, ignite the situation.

Oswaldo was the first to speak. “Henry... Why don’t we all go inside and have a chat with Jack?” He snapped the suspenders holding up his pants.

“Fuck that! I’m staying right here in the open... Why don’t ya’ll go get Jack and have him come out here? The cool air feels nice.” At that statement, the armed men looked from me to the wood line... I seized on the opportunity. “Times are crazy... The world is crazy right now... When I come down to meet with Jack, I don’t come armed. It’s my way of showing trust. But that doesn’t mean I come unprepared ... or alone.” With that, even Hillis was now looking at the wood line.

“So, I don’t know why you two are here, and frankly, I don’t care. I am here to see Jack. I am supposed to be picking up some supplies my neighborhood needs. Hillis, Oswaldo... We have had our issues in the past, but given the state of everything...” I gestured to the sky and the empty roads and shops, “why don’t we bury the hatchet?” I stuck out my hand.

Hillis just stared at me, open-mouthed, which was his normal state of being. Oswaldo looked from me to the tree line and back again, then nodded and turned to go back inside. “Hillis, let’s go tell the Sherriff he has a visitor.”

Hillis, now looking lost and confused, turned to me with a bit of snarl and spit on the ground. I just retracted my outreached hand and smiled at the fat man. I watched as he and his father waddled back inside, breathing

heavy from the exertion of walking 30-ish feet. The men with facemasks and black BDUs stayed outside and took up a position just past Nate and I. Most of them facing and starring at the wood line. After a few more awkward moments of silence in the cold air, out walked a small man wearing a tailored suit. Next to him was the Sherriff, and behind them both was a large man wearing a gun belt and long-sleeve black polo shirt. Everything about this was wrong, from my initial greeting by Hillis and Oswaldo with the armed men, to the long wait out here in the cold. My mind started running through the data I had. I was not a real excited about the picture that was being painted before me. I decided to be blunt and maybe throw these, whoever-the fucks, off their game.

“So, did I pass your little test?” I eyed the small man in the suit, as I figured he was running things.

He gave me a wolfish smile. “Yes, yes you did. I am sorry about that, but there are so many reactionary people out and about these days. You know the like... The old strongman tropes?”

I just nodded at the small man. I couldn't figure out his accent. It was Midwestern, but with a hint of something urban.

“Well then Henry... May I call you Henry?” I nodded in response. “Thank you. I feel like I know you already. The Sherriff has painted such an amazing picture of you. I apologize for the unusual welcoming. That was me, making sure you were a reasonable and levelheaded individual.” He gave me a wolfish smile.

“So, what would have happened had I not been so levelheaded?” I kept my expression blank.

The small man just laughed. “That was then. This is now, and I am here to talk about the future... But where are my manners? I apologize, here.”

The small man handed me a what appeared to be a black wallet. When I opened it, I saw a strange badge on one side and an ID on the other. It read: *Special Agent Phillip K Turgin, Office of Home Guard, Federal Americas.*

Looks like I'm not in Kansas anymore... Fuck. “So, this only gives me more questions and no answers.”

The big fella finally spoke. “You don't need answers.”

“Hmmm, I would have to disagree there, Biggin.” I shifted my focus to the large man. He was an inch or two taller than me but with a similar build. He didn't move well... I took him for more of an ex-cop or government leg-

breaker than an actual fighter. Just to add a little spice into the bizarre situation, it would seem he did not appreciate my attitude.

“You wanna say that again, Punk?” His face was getting red.

This made little sense. I know I’m an ass, and I know I have a gift for pissing people off. But not this easily... Again, I looked at the small man only to find him studying me. It was another test. But why? “Best cool your jets there, Hoss. You are about to start something you ain’t gonna be able to finish.”

The large man moved my way, but Phillip stopped him. “Enough Peter. You were right Sherriff. This is our man.” With that, the small man turned to go back inside.

“Like fuck I am Phil...” I proclaimed, “I am not to be dicked around. Since the moment I arrived, y’all have been trying to provoke me... Consider me provoked.” I looked at Jack’s face. His eyes were wide, and his face was pale... He thinks I just fucked up. “I would like a few answers.” I raised my finger and thumb in the air like a gun. “Next person to move will be shot.” Strangely, Phil and Peter didn’t look worried.

“There is no one in the tree line, Henry. I know that... You know that... But it was an excellent bluff. Very clever.” He said that calmly enough, but he didn’t move. Because he wasn’t certain.

“Oh, and how, pray tell, do you know that? Thermal?” I playfully asked. “Thermal, don’t do shit against homemade ghillie suits with a double lining of mylar emergency blankets... At best you have a couple of thermal scopes on rifles... Those are nice but limited. Nah, it’s more like, you hope I don’t have guys out there... Right now, you should pray I don’t have guys out there. So, back to my question... What the fuck?” I demanded with all the confidence I could fake.

Phil looked at Pete and Petey-boy gave him a slow nod, as though validating my statements about the limitations of their equipment. That was an interesting exchange. It told me a lot about their dynamic and an insight into their backgrounds.

“Henry, we are trying to bring order out of this nightmare. We are with the government and are here to help... We need a local to help us go north to Morgan County. We need someone with local assets and connections, as your area borders the county line with Morgan. Someone from your area makes the most sense. In these lawless times, it would be exceedingly dangerous to make a trip like this without local support.”

“And this is how you go about getting local support? Phil, you may want to rethink your approach.” I couldn’t hide the scowl on my face.

“I understand your frustrations Henry, but let me reassure you, we are only here to help.” He sounded like a sleazy used car salesman closing a deal.

“Okay... I’m reassured. So, why me and why not deputy Ryan?”

Phil and Pete immediately started laughing, “I give it a 50-50 chance you actually have someone out there with proper camo and a rifle... I give 0% that Deputy Ryan oversees anything. I have read her file. She couldn’t possibly get your area running as smoothly as it seems to be on her own.” Phil just stared at me coldly.

“Ah, you have been monitoring our radio traffic...” I pursed my lips and nodded. “Why not just call in and say ‘hi’?” I was genuinely curious about that.

“Believe it or not, Henry, there are plenty of people who like the way things are now... and that doesn’t work for anyone. We need your help and I wanted to make sure I was dealing with someone who had an IQ above 80.”

I lowered my hand, “Alright, when do we leave?” I asked.

Phil laughed out loud again, “We will let you know... probably in a week or two. We will radio you and confirm.” Phil gave me another wolfish smile and walked back into the courthouse. Pete relayed one more word of wisdom before returning inside. “Watch yourself fuck wad, or I will fuck your face... Take care of Dee and the kids.” With that he went back inside, followed by what I now understood to be federal agents or soldiers of some sort, all dressed in black BDUs.

Jack came over and put his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go load you up with those supplies.” He led me away from my brewing confrontation.

As Jack and I walked to the back parking lot, I waited until we rounded the back corner of the far building before I said, “Alright Jack, what in the fuck is going on?” I was trying not to think about all the things I would like to inflict upon Petey-boy back there.

The Sherriff rolled his neck and looked to the sky, “They came in two days ago. They arrived with part of the National Guard out of Chattanooga. Phillip and that other fella Peter just started giving orders. I don’t know, Henry... They caught us off guard. Once they arrived, somehow the

fucking Swindle boys got word and showed up. They have been kissing ass ever since. They have left me out of whatever they are doing here.”

I stopped walking. “This is not good, Jack. How many men do they have?”

“I counted 25,” Jack said as he spit a big ole glob of chewing tobacco on the ground.

“Fuck... How well armed are they? What supplies do they have?”

“Couple pallets of supplies, a bunch of ammo, a couple of S.A.W.’s mounted on two Humvees, a couple dudes with fancy rifles and scopes... looked like Barrett .50 cal.”

“Okay, that’s not as bad as it could be. I mean, it’s not real fucking good, but it’s not as bad as it could be.” I was trying to sound positive, but I was failing. “He wants to go to the Morgan County Sheriff’s Department... Why?”

“Same reason he came here... He wants to install a temporary ‘Manager’. I have no doubt Hillis will be named manager for our county. They need to go the back way, the highways are too dangerous up there... too many robbers and crazy people taking pot-shots at any vehicle that moves.”

I ran my hand through my hair and over my beard. “Well, fuck me sideways with a large pineapple... This went from a fucked-up situation to a world-class, A-number-1, fucked-up situation... Well, I’m sure I don’t want to know. But what’s the deal with his badge? And where the fuck is everybody? The county commissioners? The other deputies? I mean... What the fuck, Jack?” I was doing my best not to raise my voice, but it was a struggle as I verbalized everything wrong with this picture.

“It’s all fucked, Henry... The commissioners are home taking care of their families. They only come in once a week right now, and I had what deputies I could get a hold of go tell all the city council, commissioners, and law enforcement to stay home and patrol and protect their immediate areas. I asked them only to come here for fuel and supplies because we have a dangerous situation here. That’s worked so far.”

“Why would you do that, Jack?” He lost me with his reasoning.

“Because some of those sums-a-bitches would probably throw in with that lot, and we don’t need more enemies right now. You said you noticed that fancy badge, right?”

I nodded in the affirmative.

“When do you suppose they made it? When was that department organized, uniforms ordered, shipped and issued?”

“What?” Then it hit me, “Oh no... No... No, it can’t be. Can it?” I felt stunned.

Jack just shrugged. “Seems an odd time to do a little rebranding to make *NEW* badges and uniforms... Don’t you think?”

I felt like I was going to vomit. “They already had them made. They knew this was going to happen... They are just now making their move, figuring most of the country has been weakened just enough from poor diet, high stress, and no prescription medication... And that most of the weak or what they would deem useless people have died or are about to.” I definitely wanted to vomit, but I leaned my head back and took several deep breaths.

“Yeah, I felt the same way when I figured it out.” Jack had a look of sympathy on his tired old face.

“So, why here and why now? That doesn’t track. There were only 60,000 people in this county when the event happened. We are small potatoes.”

“Maybe, but you heard about what’s going on out in Utah?”

“Yeah, I heard this morning.”

“I think they are connected somehow, like they moved the plan up before it was ready.”

I was able to settle my stomach and focus on the problem. “Okay, but why here, now? Why Morgan County next? There are less there than there are here. We at least have part of the national labs...”

Then it hit me like a wave, “The Labs...They are trying to get a foothold in the counties that surround the labs. Oh no, this is a serious problem, Jack. They know they can’t just seize the nuclear assets and various other black-project-shit there, so they are going to surround it.”

“Yep... Or at least have influence in the counties that surround it... That occurred to me. I planned on trying to radio the labs or capital with a message, but they moved into the courthouse which is where the emergency comms are located. That’s not to mention they are monitoring all the channels with some of the fancy equipment they brought.” Jack spit another glob of tobacco juice onto the ground.

“No way they are doing this with only 25 men. They will have to have support come in at some point. They are the advanced team.” I had calmed

down. Now, I had an objective. “We cannot allow them to live.”

“No Henry, no we can’t... But it would be good if we could get some more information out of them before they take the express elevator to hell.”

“I can handle that, but you will have some additional work on this deal.” I said, raising my eyebrows at the Sherriff.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” He gave me suspicious and somehow knowing look.

“Hillis and Oswaldo... We don’t need people like that around.” My voice carried the icy chill of death.

“Hmmm, why? I need a why, Henry. Apart from the obvious fact they are worthless sons of whores?” he asked.

“Ole Petey-boy, back there knew my wife’s name, and that I have kids... We have never mentioned Dee’s name on the radio or that I have kids. How the fuck does that guy, from who knows where, have that kind of information? That’s local info.” There was death in my tone, and Jack knew it.

“Yeah, makes sense...” After a long moment, he nodded his agreement. “You got a deal.” Jack stuck his hand out.

I shook it and said, “This will not go well. You know that.”

Jack just laughed, “Wait till you find out that *this* is the *last* month we are getting food for general distribution...”

“Well, shit on a stick... Can this day get any worse?” I felt sick to my stomach.

Jack just shrugged his shoulders, “Government can’t take care of people forever, Henry. Sooner or later, we knew this was coming.”

As I walked over to Ryan waiting in the expedition, I said under my breath, “No, I suppose they can’t.”

Before I could even close the door, Ryan started-in with the questions. “What happened? What did they say? Why did the Sherriff walk back here with you? And why did they put all this food in my explorer?”

That last question caused me to turn around to see the back seat and cargo area loaded with 50lb Bags of rice, beans and boxes of, what I had learned over the last two months, were dehydrated milk in mylar pouches and small bottles of oil. “Ryan, who loaded this in here?”

“Nate and I... But what does that...”

I put my hand up to stop her. “I don’t want to tell the story multiple times, Ryan. No offence, but I need to think right now... Take me to the

Rorschach brothers... We need all hands-on-deck, or at least all trustworthy hands-on deck.”

“Do you want me to radio ahead?” She asked.

I shook my head no, “Radios are compromised... We have new kids on the playground, and I don’t think they want to be friends.”

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Chapter 5

We rode in silence until we reached the relatively new development that Mike Rorschach and his wife lived in. As we slowed our approach to the dead-end road that was the only actual way to enter or exit by vehicle, we saw the barricade and men with guns standing in the bed of trucks. “Turn on your lights Ryan.”

She did and the posture of those with rifles eased a bit. Ryan stopped about 30ft from the actual barricade, and I slowly got out, “Hey there fellas, no need for that... I just need to talk to Mike and Jamie.”

Once some of the men recognized who I was, there was visible relief among them. “Hey Henry! One second, we will radio for them...”

I recognized the tall man with a great big beer belly. He was a local mechanic named Barry. “Barry, please don’t do that! Our comms are not safe to use right now.”

“Okay, then it will take a minute for us to go get them. No offence Henry... but we need you to stay here.”

“No worries, Barry, I get it...” I walked over to the truck where two guys with AKs were standing. “Things getting rough?”

“Shit, you *could* say that... we have had a couple break-ins and one attempted house fire.”

I was shocked. The brothers never mentioned that on our radio check-ins. “Anybody hurt?”

“Just them sumbitches who were making trouble, you know’em... those fuckin tweakers that lived in the old trailer, down the old dirt road, past the red barn... constantly cause problems and getting arrested.”

“Well fuck, good to hear y’all handled it.” I said.

“Hell, it was the brothers that took care of it. I tell ya what Henry, people were a little uneasy when Jamie and his family moved in with Mike... but damnit, those two are handy to have in a scuffle.”

I looked Barry in the eye, “Don’t I know it!... listen Barry, if you see anyone you don’t know walking or driving around here, or better yet, they stop to ask questions and say they are with the Government... shoot them.”

“It’s like that now?” Barry looked concerned.

“It’s like that Barry.”

The Rorschach Brothers were walking up to the barricade, “Mike, Jamie... it’s been a minute. How the fuck are ya?” I couldn’t hide my smile.

“Hey man!” Mike said as he gave me bro-hug.

“What’s going on Bro?” Jamie asked, as he followed it up with an additional bro-hug.

“I wish this was under better circumstances, fellas, but I need you guys to grab your battle-rattle and meet me at my house.”

Mike and Jamie looked from me to the BPD Explorer. “New York?”

I smiled and answered, “Fuck it.” With that, they relaxed and nodded.

Jamie nodded his head. He looked at the guys at the makeshift gate, then back to me. “Just making sure man, we will be there in a couple hours.”

I nodded and gave them both parting bro-hugs, “Sure,” I chuckled, “... a couple of hours. See you two then.”

As I walked away, a thought occurred to me and I turned back to the blockade, “Hey Barry!”

“Yeah, Henry?”

“If you see anyone, even if you know them... and they say they are working *with* the New Government... shoot them in the fucking face.”

Barry just looked at me with a puzzled and concerned expression, “Okay Henry, will do.”

I turned and continued back to the Explorer, as I opened the door to get in, I saw several of the men talking to one another and the Rorschach Brothers double timing it back to their house.

...

When we finally arrived back at my house, I jumped out and asked Ryan, “I need you to go get Matt and Josh, also let Josh know you have all this food and that it needs to get locked up at the high school ASAP... I have some stuff to do before everyone arrives.”

“Sure, Henry.”

“Oh, and spread the word, no radio’s unless absolutely necessary.” With that, I shut the door and jogged to my back door.

Dee, a teenager I didn’t recognize, and at least 10 small children, were all sitting at my dining room table eating mac-and-cheese as I walked in the house. “What happened to *not* feeding them?”

Dee turned red, “I... I have to.”

I nodded knowing there was no way to win this argument with a pregnant lady in the middle of a room filled with, clearly, hungry kids.

“Let’s table this for now, I need to organize some...” I looked from Dee to

the unknown teen, “Stuff upstairs... I know it’s chilly but if you could get this hoard of animals outside, it sure would help.”

Dee looked at me carefully. “Alright, but I want the full tea later.”

“And you shall have it my dear wife.” I walked over to whisper to her, “The Rorschach brothers are on their way, we have gigantic problems... we need to get all these kids out of here, ASAP.” I gave her a kiss on the cheek and went up the two flights of stairs to the third floor. I had much to do and not much time to do it.

After an hour had passed, I heard Matt call for me from the second floor, “Henry?”

“Yep, I’m up here.” I replied.

I could hear Matt coming up the stairs, “I figured. I just called out so you wouldn’t shoot me.”

I laughed, “That’s called wisdom old friend.”

Matt looked at what I had laid out. “We going to war?”

“We are already at war, and we have a battle coming up... we have to win.”

Matt was silent for a moment, “Great, it’s not like things are hard enough as it is already.”

“Yeah, well... If we don’t pick this fight, it will pick...”

Just then, a shout cut in, “HENRY!!! THERE ARE MEN IN THE FRONT YARD!” Dee yelled.

Matt and I ran down both flights of stairs. When we got to the bottom I called to Matt, “Go out back and around, I will go out the side-door, anything seems strange, shoot it.” I moved swiftly to the side door, reached in the communications closet, where we used to keep our cable router and alarm panel. We had removed all the crap we didn’t need after the event and now stored extra gear in there. I grabbed one of the full auto-AKs that we got from the range, put a mag in, and racked it. Before I opened the side door, I stuffed two additional AK mags in the back pockets of my five-eleven pants. Thankful the pockets were big enough to accommodate them.

I opened the heavy wood door and glass storm door, then exited swiftly, checking behind me before I broke-out around the corner of the house. Weapon up and ready, I moved fast with practiced steps from years of playing around at the range, augmented by years of serious training with people who did this for a living.

I moved with purpose and violence of action. Once around the corner, I saw them. There were six men total, or what appeared to be 5 grown men struggling with a young man. “STOP MOVING AND PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR FACE! ALL OF YOU! DO THIS NOW OR I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU AND RAPE YOUR FUCKING COURPSES!!! NOW MOTHERFUCKERS! HANDS ON FACES!”

The men were shocked, clearly not expecting this type of welcoming. Soon Matt was around the other corner, he had grabbed the CZ Scorpion Mini from above the back door, “HANDS ON FACE!!! HANDS ON FACE!!! HANDS ON YOUR FUCKING FACES!!! I SEE YOUR EYES I PUT A BULLET IN THEM!!!”

Matt’s arrival snapped them out of their shock. The men raised their hands in the air.

“HANDS ON FACE!!!” I shouted again, this time they got the message and put their hands on their faces, “GOOD, NOW GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES AND CROSS YOUR FEET... I WILL SAY THIS ONLY ONE MORE TIME, HANDS ON FACE... GET ON YOUR KNEES... CROSS YOUR FEET... ANYTHING ELSE AND YOU WILL DIE!!!” The men complied. Matt and I took up better positions in the yard. We formed an L, with Matt to the men’s’ right, while I was directly between the men and my home. Once I felt like we had them under control, I did a visual inspection of the immediate area, looking for an ambush. If this was a setup, right now would be the moment the shooting would start. Matt and I had taken up positions and were semi-static. We were at our most vulnerable now. We were still and our focus was divided.

Nothing, just a couple of neighbors who came out to see what the yelling was all about... so, I squatted down in front of the lead man and noticed none of the men were armed. “You, red shirt guy... take your hands down slowly, but leave them on your neck. Do you understand me?”

He nodded and lowered his hands to his neck, “The rest of you, keep them on your faces!” No one else moved.

“What the fuck do you idiots think you’re doing?”

“Ah, we, ah, caught this son-of-a-bitch in my shed.” He motioned toward the young man in the middle of the group.

“Wait, I know you... from the park clean-up a year ago, right?” The man nodded at my question.

“Jared Nelson. I live down on Hope, by the church.” He replied.

I tried relaxing my tone. I remembered this guy. He was an IT guy out at the labs. “Okay Jared, you caught the young guy in your shed... and what am I supposed to do about it?”

Jared looked at me like a confused dog. “You are the law man here now, right? Well fucking do something!” Jared snapped. He was so angry that he was almost barring his teeth. This was not the same kind of man I remembered from last year. He had changed... then a thought occurred to me... or ran out of his meds.

“What am I supposed to do, exactly?” I asked, a little lost. It had been about two months since the event and thankfully, everyone had been mostly decent and orderly. I suspected that the “free” food every week and the fact that the lights were still on had a lot to do with that. Frankly, I am shocked this hadn’t happened sooner, but maybe it had, and people had dealt with it themselves? We did occasionally hear gunshots in the night.

“I expect you to administer the law!” For a man on his knees and only moments ago was probably shitting himself, Jared mustered a fair amount of “Karen” attitude.

“Well, first off Jared, you had best drop that fucking ‘I need to speak to the manager’ attitude. Second, at most this position is a volunteer kinda thing... Ryan is officially in charge of the law enforcement stuff, and Josh is kinda the neighborhood Mayor. You should have taken this shit to them...”

Jared interrupted, “What’s the point? Everyone knows they will just call you. I want this *handled*.”

I just starred at the fuming Jared, “I can see now, we will not be friends... Fuck-it, I got enough friends... All right, since you interrupted me, third thing you should know is, never fucking ever... *come to my home*. This is a warning I will give all of you once. If you need help, find one of the neighborhood patrols. It’s why they were formed.”

One guy from the back called out, “It’s not like there are a lot of those guys around. What do we do in a life-or-death situation?”

I stood up, “Maybe you should volunteer to help, then there would be more of us... and if you find yourself in a life-or-death situation, I suggest you fucking opt for *life*... times are hard fellas, for everyone. You all are not special. With that, gentlemen, please stand on your feet.”

The men all slowly got to their feet, still weary of what had just occurred. “You there, shed break-in boy, come here.”

The young man was terrified as he walked through the group. “Did you break into this man’s shed?”

“Yes sir.”

“Why?”

Jared cut in, “Who gives a shit! He is a thief!”

I looked at Jared, “I care... And if you had a fucking sack, you would have handled this yourself. Now shut the fuck up.”

Jared was fuming but said nothing.

“Why did you do it?” I asked.

“I didn’t steal anything, but I went in his shed. I was bored. There is nothing to do and nowhere to go... I didn’t mean any harm... It was dumb, and I know it ... I tried to apologize, but every time I said something, they hit me... Please Mister! I don’t want to die for this!” He was crying.

“How old are you, son?” Matt asked.

“Sixteen, sir.” The boy answered.

“You got really fucking lucky, kid. If I had caught you in my shed...” I just shook my head. “But fate smiled at you, and you went into this guy’s shed. So... judgement call. You will be disciplined here and now or..”

Jared cut in, “FUCK THAT!!! I KNOW YOU’RE A KILLER! DO YOUR FUCKIN...”

Jared didn’t get to finish that sentence. I butt-stroked him in the mouth with my AK. He went down like a sack of bricks. Well, a crying sack of bricks, anyway... “Watch your mouth, Jared.” I warned.

Matt held his rifle at low ready, watching the rest of the group. They just took a step back. One of them spoke up, “Whoa there, fellas. We heard Jared calling for help, so we came to help... We don’t want any trouble.”

“Matt, you know where a Stinger is?”

“I have one on me.” He reached around his back and pulled the stinger, consisting of eleven inches of braided steel cable, covered in a thin vinyl, and attached to an aluminum handle.

“Excellent, toss it here please.” With that, Matt tossed me the unique looking self-defense tool. “What’s your name, son?”

The young man was starring hard at the tactical whip. “H-Hunter, sir... Hunter Thompson.”

Matt cocked his head. “As in Hunter S. Thompson?”

Hunter looked to Matt, “Yes sir. My mom liked that movie about him in Vegas – the one with that pirate actor.”

I just shook my head, “Son, start hanging in the local library when you’re bored... Alright Hunter, here is the deal. You fucked up. You will pay a price, and I hope you will learn from this. When you get home, if your parents have an issue, send them to me... But before you do, you make sure they know the other option was a bullet.”

Hunter was pulling himself together.

“Alright son, take off your jacket and shirt.” He did as I asked and that’s when I saw the scars. His back had small round burn scars and long scars from God only knew... This wasn’t his first rodeo.

“Son, bite down on your shirt. It will help. Hunter rolled up his shirt and bit down. His courage and strength amazed me.

I shifted my rifle to my left hand and raised the Stinger. I hit Hunter three times in the back – all in quick succession. The kid only grunted slightly.

“Alright son, put your shirt and jacket back on... Then go stand by Matt over there.”

“Good enough for you boys?” They all nodded in the affirmative. Well, except for Jared... He was holding his bleeding mouth. “Good, I have real shit to do, so please get the fuck off my property... Thanks.”

The four men who accompanied Jared gave a little head bob of acknowledgement and turned to leave. Jared, it seemed, felt different about the situation. “Fuck you!” Jared mumbled through his still bleeding mouth, so it sounded more like “thuck ooo”, but I understood his meaning. He moved forward with rage in his eyes.

“Jared, before you say or do anything else, you should know this – that was a love tap. I know you are mad and emotional. Things are all fucked up. You best get that temper of yours in-check before it gets you fucking dead. Now turn and leave. You don’t want this to escalate.” I tossed the stinger over to my right and moved my rifle back to my dominate hand, at the low ready position... I just waited for Jared to do something stupid that would change his life permanently. His neighbors were already down the street, content to leave Jared to a situation of his own making. They were just his neighbors, clearly not his friends.

Jared spit a glob of blood to the ground and gave Matt and me a look that I recognized... He would not let this go. After weighing my options, I decided that I would let him cool off. Maybe in a few hours or days, he will reflect calmly on these events. Then again, maybe not. One thing I knew

with absolute certainty, I was not some blood-thirsty fiend who would gun this man down over a “maybe”, not yet at least. I had enough ghosts haunting me as it was, and I had serious work coming my way, in a big damn hurry.

Once Jared walked off, beyond our line of sight, I lowered my rifle and walked over to Hunter and Matt. “So, Hunter... Where do you live?” Hunter just looked down, like a dog that had long been abused.

“Sir, I live down behind the high school.”

“The projects?”

Hunter nodded. “Okay then, son, where are your parents? Your friends? Any family around?” Hunter was still and barely breathed.

“I don’t know... My mom went to see her dealer in South Knoxville, about 3 weeks ago. We only moved here a week before everything broke down... So, no family... The kids I have met, most have left with their families to hunker-down with extended family... others, well, they don’t know me, and they have enough to deal with... I guess.”

Matt looked at me, then back the young man who was still staring at the ground. “Why did you break into that man’s shed?” Matt asked.

“I was walking down the alley... I saw his shed door kinda opened, so I looked inside. That’s when he came out and went crazy. I mean, I get it. I should have stayed out of his yard, definitely out of his shed... I don’t really have an excuse.”

Matt looked at me. I knew what he was thinking. “Hunter, idol hands are the devil’s playground. So, I take it you are out of food and alone?”

“Yes sir, I have been getting food at the high school on Fridays though, so I’ve been okay.”

“One more question... Hunter, do you do drugs? Share your mother’s weakness?”

For the first time, anger flashed on the kid’s face. “No sir,” he insisted.

“Good.” I nodded to Matt, then went over to pick up the stinger tactical whip from where I had tossed it earlier. When I returned, I saw Matt with a hand on the kid’s shoulder.

I overhear Matt asking, “...so, does that sound like something you can deal with?”

“Yes sir, but I don’t understand. Why, why help me?”

“Because the world is on fire and there isn’t really anything we can do about that. There is something I can do about this... It’s that simple,” Matt

explained.

I nodded at Matt's answer. "Hunter, you are at an important age. Matt and I both had someone to help us at around your age... If they hadn't, I don't think we'd be here."

"But I was trespassing, and that man's shed..."

I interrupted him, "Kid, everybody does stupid shit. You're a kid – it's a right of fucking passage... Hell, when I was your age, I got caught naked in a hot tub by the police. When they pulled me out, I told them to toss *it* a peanut and maybe *it* would do a trick for them – 'it' being my penis, of course." Hunter laughed at that. "Sadly, times being what they are, there isn't a lot of room or tolerance for normal teen hijinks. But when you got caught, you took your medicine like a man. As far as we are concerned, you have a clean slate... Question is, what are you going to do with it?"

"Go home, I guess, and wait for things to get better? I don't know... maybe my mom will come back?"

Matt was shaking his head. "Hunter, my offer stands. If you want help, we will help you. If not, that's fine. Just don't go snooping in people's sheds or you will get shot."

"There it is, Hunter... big decision time." I said as Matt and I waited on the young man to decide. To his credit, he took a few minutes to answer and was really thinking it over.

Hunter took a in a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Yes, sir. I accept your help. Do I need to go get my stuff now?"

Matt suppressed a laugh. "Yeah Hunter, go ahead. When you get your stuff, just put it in the camper. We have some things to do, so make yourself something to eat. My laptop is in there. It's unlocked and has a bunch of movies on it. You will stay in the room at the back of the camper with the bunk beds." With that, Matt and I turned to head back into the house and finish sorting things out before the Rorschach brothers and Josh arrived.

As we were walking up the stairs, Hunter called out, "How do I know this isn't a weirdo sex thing or something?"

I just laughed, "Kid, even if I said, "*no, it isn't*" ... which is absolutely the truth, how would you know we weren't lying? Trust your instincts." With that Hunter nodded, then went on his way to collect his things. Matt and I went inside the house.

Chapter 6

As we entered the house, I heard a familiar voice saying, “Ah, you two are sooo sweet! Feeding the neighborhood kids, taking in strays... You’re my heroes!” That was accompanied by laughter from the living room.

“Go fuck yourself Jamie! You too Mike!” I walked in the living room to find Mike and Jamie and gave them accompanying bro hugs.

Matt followed suit, but as he hugged each man, he laughingly told them they could go straight to hell.

“So Matt, you have nothing in there the kid doesn’t need to find, right?” I asked.

“I am going to go sanitize it of any extra guns and lock up the kit under the bed in that storage box.”

Jamie laughed, “I don’t think he was talking about that Bro. Did you stash the porn on your computer?”

“I don’t have any porn downloaded on my computer. I have a woman these days, and she doesn’t dig that stuff.” Matt said with a bit of swagger.

I laughed. “Do you have a bunch of Patrick Swayze movies on there?”

“Absolutely, everything he has ever been in! The man is a fucking legend.”

Jamie, Mike, and I died with laughter. Mike was the first one to pull it together. Jamie and I were just laughing too hard. “So, wait a minute... no porn... but every *single* Patrick Swayze movie ever made?”

Becoming visibly irritated Matt protested, “What is your fucking point?”

Jamie cried out, “He doesn’t get it! OH SHIT! That is too fucking funny!”

We all fell back into laughter. After a solid five minutes of laughing and crying, I composed myself. “It’s simple you idiot. Porn on your computer would be normal. I mean it would probably be a little awkward for the kid, but he seems the red-blooded type... so no big deal.”

“And?” Matt asked with heat. He despised us ragging on him about this.

Mike finished where I had left off. “And, you have offered to take him in, give him a hand... He asked if this some kind of weird sex thing or whatever... You two convince him that it’s not... Now when he opens your laptop, he will find every Patrick Swayze movie ever made.”

“Yeah, what’s your point? He is an amazing actor!” Matt was now pissed.

I tried to calm myself, “Matt, what we are trying to say is, it’s strange enough that a man your age offers to help a teenage male in his situation. But, when he finds your massive collection of Patrick Swayze movies, most of which have a romantic theme... I mean come on bro, think about it!”

Matt froze, and his face went pale.

Jamie chimed in, “Ah, he gets it now!”

We all died laughing as Matt left the room to hide his Patrick Swayze collection, so Hunter wouldn’t think Matt was a bigger weirdo than he really was. The Brother informed me that when they had arrived, Dee told them about the men in the front yard. Once they saw Matt and I had things under control, they told Dee. She took the kids to the park. I was a little concerned about that, but the boys reminded me she could take care of herself, and she had taken one of the full-auto Stribog’s, as had the young teen.

Turns out the young teen was named “Sara”. She was the daughter of a Mormon family that lived 3 blocks away. Dee had been taking turns with them, watching many of the small neighborhood kids while their parents fished or hunted or went to different towns trying to trade or buy what they needed, usually food. I didn’t really know the family all that well, as they had moved to the neighborhood within the last year from Chattanooga. After the brothers told me that the teen looked like she knew how to handle a weapon and was carrying an AR pistol of her own, I knew I needed to get to know that family better. Once I knew all else was well, I drafted the brothers into service and had them help me bring down all the gear I needed for my plan from the third floor.

Soon after we finished, Josh and Ryan arrived. They apologized for their late arrival, there was a bit of an issue at the High school. A few hungry and angry people were outside arguing with some of the neighborhood watch volunteers. It took a while for the people to be talked down and dispersed. This was not a good sign.

Now that everyone was present, I relayed the information I had gathered. I explained the events as they unfolded, and the Sheriff’s request of us. No one was thrilled by the news or by the request for us to kill several well-armed men to capture a few alive. The real kick in the teeth was that no more food would come to be dispersed to the community.

Josh broke the silence. “This is not good.”

“Which part?” I asked sarcastically.

“All of it... especially the *no more food allotments*... Things will get dangerous around here. I would say, 90% of people are out of food... And while we are breaking bad news, I have a little of my own. I found Caleb trying to hang himself.”

No one said anything for a few minutes. The news about Caleb didn't really surprise any of us. Those kids had been through a hell I couldn't even begin to contemplate, and given my recent nightmares, that really said something.

I broke the silence, as we still hadn't gotten to my plan yet. “Fuck man, let us know if we can do anything.”

Josh gave me a half grin and nodded.

“Well, as for our current predicament, I have a plan... and I want to know what you all think.” I told them the details of my plan. They took it better than I thought they would. Josh and Ryan put up a fight about being left out of it, but ultimately, they agreed. My reasoning was sound, and they knew it. The neighborhood needed Josh to help keep them together and they needed Ryan to be the face of the law. They knew everyone, and everyone knew and liked them.

“Everyone knows you too, Henry.” Ryan countered.

“Yeah, and apparently I scare them or they think I'm some kind of executioner... or both. Actually, when I say it out loud... it's probably both. That's why those idiots came to my house today... Damn it, after we wrap this current crisis up, I need to look into maybe fixing my reputation.”

Josh tried to say something kind. “No, Henry...”

“Josh, I appreciate what you are about to say, but facts are facts...” Jamie, Mike, and a bit to my surprise Matt, just nodded in agreement.

“So, let's just focus on our current problem and deal with my infamous reputation another day?” Everyone agreed to that.

“So, we need an engineer or serious mechanic... preferably both. We also need someone with intimate knowledge of the local area. We need people who will know shit almost no one else would know. So, where do we find these people?”

Ryan was the first to respond. “The local area knowledge part is easy, kinda. I know a couple of fellas that live up on the mountain. No one knows that area like they do... If we could get them to help, they will know the perfect place.”

“Ahem, I know who we can use for the vehicle modifications. I’ll stop by his place tonight and have a chat with him.” Josh said.

“Perfect, Josh. I will go with you, since the modification will be to my vehicle. Ryan, when you go to talk to the mountain boys, take the Rorschach brothers with you. That way, when you make a deal and get them to help, you can get started right away.”

“What kinda deal am I allowed to make?” Ryan asked hesitantly.

“Hell Ryan, I don’t know. Whatever they want, I suppose. Without the right information, this doesn’t work. We cannot afford that outcome. Something is wrong about this whole thing.”

Mike gave a chuckle. “What would seem strange about being asked by a dully elected sheriff to kidnap and assassinate government officials? Who, by the way, are from a government we have never heard of... No, everything seems pretty kosher to me. Very, *just another Tuesday night*, kinda vibe...”

Mike and Jamie both had stupid grins on their faces. “You and you,” I pointed to the Rorschach brothers. “Go fuck yourself.” They both chuckled. “So, when are you going to try and make contact with, ah,...” Looking over at Ryan, I asked “what their names on the mountain, Ryan?”

“Cliff and Bobby.” Ryan mumbled.

“THE FUCKING LONGDYKES?... Ryan, you can’t be serious?” I suddenly felt as though this whole thing was going to turn to shit.

“Who are the Longdykes? Or should I say, what is a Longdyke?” Matt was obviously puzzled.

Ryan took in a breath. “They are locals. Their families have been here every bit as long as the Swindle clan. They are brothers. They live at the top of the mountain – the big one on the way to Oakdale. They are mostly harmless and generally nice people... They are, however, a bit different.”

“That’s a really nice way to put it Ryan... They were still starting random fights on Tuesday nights before the Event, right Ryan?”

Ryan gave me an icy stare. “Yes, but they hate the Swindles. That could help convince them.”

Jamie spoke up, “So, what makes them so strange or whatever?”

“Jamie, they had been alone up there way too long even before all this happened... They’re not bad people.” I admitted. “They are... what am I trying to say here, ah, I know... they are nucking-futs. But, Ryan makes a valid point. Those boys hate the Swindles. Oswaldo tried to muscle in on

their mineral rights a couple years ago. To be honest, it kind of shocked me to learn they owned the damn mountain... I once saw Cliff pick a fight with a dumpster over by the Dollar store.” I just shook my head in astonishment. “Any enemy of the Swindles is my friend I suppose... but tomorrow, y’all watch yourselves. Those boys are unstable. Alright, you fellas are welcome to crash here. Help yourself to the pantry. Dee should be back soon, so please tell her I am with Josh and Matt at the...”

Mike spoke up, “Thanks for the offer, Henry, but we will head back tonight. Now that we know the plan, we need to get some different kit.” Jamie nodded in agreement.

“Copy that brother, I get it... In that case I should leave a note on the fridge for Dee.” I went over and scribbled a message to Dee, letting her know where I was going and that a young man named Hunter was in the Camper.

“So, where the fuck are we going, Josh?” I asked.

“Just down the street, to see a fella named Scott.”

“Okie dokie, let’s press on. I believe our escort job will be sooner than next week.”

Josh, Matt, and I headed down the road to see a man by the name of Scott Demidova, while Jamie, Mike and Ryan all went to their homes. Turned out, Scott lived only a block away. I had taken notice of the large, barn style garage behind the house. Josh walked up and knocked on the door to the big old house. No answer, so I suggested we try the garage. After walking along a small path to the big metal building, Josh knocked loudly and a voice immediately called out. “One second!”

“Scott? It’s me Josh. I brought some people to talk to you. We could use your help.”

There was a clanging sound, and then the door slid open. Standing in the opening was an older gentleman with black hair and a dark pair of coveralls, smeared with grease and oil.

“Scott, this is Henry. He lives up the road. And this is Henry’s friend Matt.”

The quirky man stuck out his hand. “How do you do? Name’s Scott.”

Matt and I both shook his hand. He had a surprising grip. Clearly, he spent a lot of time spinning wrenches to build that kinda grip.

“Well, any friends of Josh’s must be good people! You fellas, come on in. It’s getting cold out there.” Josh, Matt, and I stepped into the large barn,

that was apparently heated.

“So, what can I do for ya fellas?”

I looked around the barn/garage and saw half a dozen older Maseratis in various states of disassembly. “Whole lot of nice cars ya got here, Scott.”

“Oh these? Yeah, I suppose. I have been horse-trading and repairing Maseratis for years. It’s a bit of an obsession really.”

I liked Scott. He had a bit of an odd way to him, but he seemed kind. “Scott, we need something kinda unique installed on my SUV, and it absolutely has to work. Our lives will depend on it working. So, I’m not trying to be a dick here, but are you some sort of mechanic?” I asked hopefully.

“Oh no, this is just a hobby! No, I’m no *real* mechanic. But I was a nuclear engineer... And I suppose I was bit a mad scientist really. I worked out in California at JPL, then transferred to Oak Ridge. After a few years, I retired and now I just play with my cars.”

“Hmmm, you may be exactly the right guy, Scott.” I said, impressed.

We sat down at the small table Scott had in his garage. I told him everything that was going on, my plan and what I needed from him. He was a bright guy and another set of eyes on a problem hurt nothing. An hour later we had an understanding. Matt, Josh, and I would go get one of my Expeditions, drop Josh off, and then Matt and I would leave the vehicle with Scott for the needed modifications.

Chapter 7

After dropping off the SUV with Scott, Matt and I began the short walk home.

“Henry?” Matt asked.

“Yeah?” I said.

“What the fuck? How we going to do this, man?”

I was surprised at this. I thought Matt was on board. “I think the plan is solid, Bro. As long we can get the right place, we can do this.”

“No, not that thing... Not the kidnapping and... and the killing. That’s the simple part. How do we live with it, with this world? With every day some new bullshit coming up?” Matt asked me.

“I don’t know, brother. I wish I did. Right now, my biggest fear is hurting one of my kids or Dee, all because I’m having bad dreams. So, I don’t know... but I wish I did.”

“You are shit at pep talks.” Matt said.

I laughed at that, “Yeah, well, you’re not wrong... In truth, though?” Matt nodded at my question. “We suck it up and keep moving forward. What other option is there?”

“Fuck, that is depressing... You know what?” Matt asked.

“No, what?”

“I’m not looking to you for any more emotional support. Fuck man, I’m more depressed now than I was before.”

I laughed again, “Oh yeah? Plug it up Petunia. Nobody needs a crybaby-bitch right now. So, put on your big boy pants and try to pretend to be a man. Fake it till you make it.”

Matt turned and smiled at me. With a flutter of his eyes he said, “You old sweet talker, you! You always say the sweetest things to me.”

I laughed again, “Keep it up, I’ll make you room with Bill over at my sister’s house.”

“Fuck that asshole!” Matt exclaimed.

“Yeah Matt, that’s what I was alluding to.” Matt gave me the middle finger, and I laughed, then stopped. I stopped walking as well. “Shit, my mom... I forgot all about... With the Sherriff and everything, damn, I need to go down there.”

“No, you don’t. I have handled it. Josh said some nice things. Katy was there.”

Slightly pissed, I asked, “No one told me?”

“We knew you had shit going, man. When you’re ready, I’ll take you to where she is resting.”

“She isn’t in the big grave at the football field?” I asked.

“No Henry, we wouldn’t do that to you.”

I wanted to make an argument about not receiving special treatment, but I was grateful. “Thank you.”

I started back towards my home. Matt and I walked the rest of the way in silence.

As Matt and I reached the house, we nodded and parted ways. He went to the camper, and I went into my house. As I opened the back door, the chime from the security system sounded, and I heard laughter from the living room. “Dee?”

“In here, Henry. I’m just chatting with Hunter.”

I walked into the living room and found Hunter on the floor, with piles of clothing next to him. “Well, Hunter, it would seem you met my wife. It would also seem she made sure you were clothed.” I said with a bit of a chuckle.

“Yes sir. I was in Mr. Fairbank’s camper and got a little bored. To be honest, I got slightly weirded out by all the Patrick Swayze movies on his computer.”

“Ah yeah, it’s a bit strange. But he is harmless. He just has poor taste in movies.”

“Yeah, that’s what Dee said. She also said I should ask him if he has any Keanu Reeves movies.”

I laughed at that. “You absolutely should! I know he will appreciate it... So, Hunter, do we need to go to your place and grab any of your stuff?”

“No sir, I don’t really have anything to grab. That’s what I told your wife. She said not to worry about it and asked for my sizes. Then she brought all this stuff downstairs! It’s like Christmas. I don’t know what to say!”

“Yeah, she is like that. Well, how about I help you carry all this stuff out to the camper? Matt is out there, probably wondering if you took off.”

Dee chimed in, “I left a note in the camper for Matt to come inside when he arrived. I didn’t want Hunter just sitting out there alone. Things are strange enough without having to be in a camper with nothing but a bunch of old Patrick Swayze movies for entertainment. Besides, Hunter was a

great help with the kids after we came back from the park. He even ran off some dogs.”

That last part caught my attention. “Dogs? What dogs?”

“I had the kids in the back yard playing. All the other kids had already been picked up or dropped off. The idiots were making a lot of noise. That’s when Hunter came out of the camper and introduced himself. He told me what had happened earlier in the day and about Matt’s offer to help him. While we were chatting on the porch and the idiots were on the trampoline, two medium size dogs came into the yard with tails down and acting a little skittish. Hunter abruptly jumped up and chased them off.”

“Sorry if I scared you when I did that, Ma’am.” Hunter said.

“Why did you think she was scared?” I asked.

“Because I drew my pistol, dear husband,” Dee responded.

Hunter looked a little sheepish. “Yeah, I see now that was a dangerous move, considering we had just met and all, but I have had some run-ins with dog packs in the area. They are getting more aggressive. I stopped going down to the river because of them.”

I pondered about that for a few moments. The implications were disturbing. “That’s not good news. I need to tell Josh about that, so he can warn the neighborhood. Last thing we need is someone’s kid to get mauled, or worse.”

Dee chimed in, “That was my thinking.”

“Great, one more thing.” I said right as the back door chimed with Matt’s arrival.

“Henry, Dee?” Matt called out cautiously.

“Yeah bud. We’re in the living room. Dee was getting Hunter some clothes, and food too I would guess. He also has some interesting news about dog packs forming in the neighborhood.”

“Wait, what dog packs? We haven’t seen any dog packs.” Matt said.

“We haven’t seen any yet. I’m not really surprised. I just figured people would be shooting and eating them by now... I suppose they are not that hungry, yet at least.”

Matt nodded, but Dee and Hunter looked a bit green at the thought. “Well, after this last food hand out, the dog pack problem may be taken care of by the hungry people.”

Dee’s face went white. “What do you mean, after this last food handout? Last food hand out, as in, there won’t be any more, no more... ever?”

I looked at Dee. “That is correct.”

Dee was still, “Henry, this is not good. People are barely holding on as is. This will crush a lot of people.”

“Yeah, I know. But, like the Sheriff said, the government can’t feed them forever... And honestly right now, that is at the very bottom of the list of fucked-sideways shit going on now.”

Dee cocked her head to the side. “What is at the top of this *list*, exactly?”

“And with that, young Hunter and I shall retire to the camper.” Matt stood and picked up a couple piles of clothing Dee had brought down for Hunter. “Come on lad. You grab the rest, and we will get you settled.”

Hunter stood, grabbed the rest of the clothing and with a nod, “Thank you Ma’am... and Sir,” he followed Matt out the Back door.

I was alone with my pregnant and angry wife. I looked at Dee, then back in the direction of Matt and Hunter. Under my breath I muttered, “traitors.”

“What was that?” Dee asked, getting angrier.

I took a deep breath. “How were the kids today? How was your new helper? She looked friendly.”

“Kids had a good day. They are upstairs sleeping. I gave them each a 5mg melatonin gummy so they could get some deep sleep. I thought maybe, just maybe, we could have some good husband/wife time. But right now, my prego-hormones are going from horny to I think I should strangle you for getting into something dangerous... I’m just waiting to find out what that *something* is... So, want to tell me what’s at the top of your *world falling apart* list?”

As I sat there for a long moment, trying to find the best way to explain my day and my plan without Dee losing it, I realized I couldn’t. So I tried a different tactic, placing my hand on her thigh. “How about we release a little tension first?” I leaned in and kissed her neck, hoping her pregger-hormones would take over.

“Hmmm, I like that... wait. Wait! No.” She shook her head clear of the hormone-fog. “What’s at the top of your list? What’s going on Henry?”

I relented and told her everything. I told her about my mom’s earlier, the Government guys, Sherriff Jack and our deal, my plan... everything.

Dee was silent and still while I told her everything. When I came to my plan on how to deal with and hopefully capture a couple of the government guys, she put her hand on her belly and cried. I didn’t know what to do or

say, so I put my arm around her and leaned back on to the couch. She continued to cry.

After a few minutes had passed, I asked her, “So, where were we on that sexing?”

Dee began to laugh. “The funny thing is, I am still eager, but that’s just the pregger-hormones... I am worried Henry.”

“I know, wife, I know... we will be fine. My plan will work. I know it.”

Dee laughed, “Henry... I love you. You can do anything, especially if you are protecting us. I know that... It’s just... your mom, your nightmares, this morning in the shower... Henry, this is a lot on anyone. I’m just worried about you.”

“I see. You are worried I’m going to crack-up?” As I asked this, Dee just squeezed me harder. “That doesn’t matter, boss, it really doesn’t. We must make it until things can get back on track. That’s all. A year at most... I can do that.”

“Stay with me Henry. I cannot make it without you – none of us can.” With that said, she turned into my arms and kissed me passionately. She clawed at my shirt and pulled at my belt with hunger.

...

Afterward, Dee put her clothes on, gave me another kiss and went upstairs to our bedroom. I put my pants back on and settled into the couch, even though, at this moment, I was totally relaxed. I knew I would miss my perfect bed and amazing wife in the morning. I closed my eyes and let the afterglow of the previous ecstasy carry me off to sleep.

I woke to the sound of small feet stomping on the upstairs hardwood floors as my heathens ran around. I could also hear them giggling and another sound, like a board being rattled against a wall. Then I realized that Dee must have closed the baby gate at the top of the steps. I got up and stretched, then picked up my shirt and belt from where my wild woman had tossed them. When I reached the top of the stairs, I open the gate and locked it once again behind me. I heard some noise coming from Paul’s room, so I peaked in and saw the small children all playing Legos. They were giggling and rolling around on the floor. I recognized that behavior. Dee must have asked them to keep quiet. This is their idea of *quiet*. I just watched them talk, cover their mouths, and giggle uncontrollably. No matter what the next few days were going to bring, I would try to remember this moment. Sneaking away, as to not disturb my little idiots’ fun. I silently entered my

bedroom and heard the shower running. Disrobing as I moved to the shower, I saw my beautiful wife in all her glory.

I gave a small fake cough. “Ahem.”

Dee jumped and turned. “HENRY, you scared the pee out of me!”

“HAHAHA, sorry boss.” I said with a smirk as I eyed her.

“See anything you like... big fella?”

“Yes, indeed I do... but I have things to do today.”

“Ooo... Am I one of those things?” she asked with a wicked smile.

“Horny preppers...” I said with a grin, “Down girl – we have a lot to do today.”

Dee let out a huff, “Fine...” she exited the shower. As she did, she reached out and gave me squeeze then leaned in and bit my nipple.

“Ouch! What the hell, woman? That hurt!” I said as I moved back.

A naked Dee just laughed, “But did it hurt... *good?*” she asked with an evil smile.

I tried to respond, then just closed my mouth and stepped into the shower, shaking my head. Dee called out as she wrapped herself with a towel, “Don’t tease pregnant women – that’s just mean!” Then she laughed and went to get dressed.

I turned on the cold water to help me focus on the tasks at hand get my mind out of the gutter. Afterwards I got ready and headed downstairs. The kids were running around, Matt and Hunter were at the table eating breakfast.

Chapter 8

“Hey there fellas! What’s shaking?” I asked as I sat down. Dee was getting breakfast ready as our little monkeys ran around downstairs.

“Sup, Henry?” Matt asked as a way of greeting.

“Good morning, Sir.” Hunter was polite, as always. It was driving me a little crazy.

“Hunter, call me Henry. Everybody does.” I said.

Dee cut in, “I call him big boy.” With that, I turned red, Matt laughed, and poor Hunter looked visibly uncomfortable.

“Sorry Hunter, she’s ah... she’s pregnant.” I half raised my hands in an *is what it is* motion. Matt continued to laugh. “So, Hunter, how did you settle in?”

“Uh, fine sir.”

Matt cut in, “Kid isn’t a fan of the greatest actor of our time.”

I looked at Hunter, “You don’t like Keanu Reeves?”

Hunter laughed, “I am a big John Wick fan.”

Matt was turning red, “You know I think he is an excellent actor, but he has no range, no depth!... not like Pat...”

“Don’t say it! Your fixation with that man is unhealthy and kinda bizarre. Poor Hunter was a little worried yesterday.” I couldn’t hide my smile.

“What?” Matt turned to Hunter with a look of pain.

Hunter just shrugged, “Roadhouse is cool, so is Red Dawn... but the rest seems kind of... uh... like it’s for girls.”

Dee and I both burst out in laughter, while poor Matt looked like someone just ran over his dog. My sweet wife walked over with a large tray of food and set it down, “Hunter, you should know that these two are both wrong... the greatest actor of all time is easily Sean Connery... Now that was a man.” Dee let out a little breath when she said that.

“Woman, what has this baby done to your brain?” That was an unwise statement on my part. Dee gave me look so serious that I was surprised I didn’t explode or catch fire.

“Tell you what fellas, you can either admit that Sean Connery was the finest actor ever on screen or...” She picked up the tray of food, “you’re welcome to go downstairs and grab a couple MRE’s for breakfast. How about it?” She just glared at Matt and me.

I looked at Matt, and he nodded. We admitted defeat in unison. “Sean Connery is the best,” we said in sync. Dee sat down the tray with eggs, bacon, biscuits and baked beans, and with a wide smile, she continued “and don’t you forget it.”

I thought about asking why she had made baked beans but decided I had poked at the mama bear enough for one day. As we filled our plates, I noticed Hunter was really piling food onto his. I looked at Matt and smiled. He nodded, and we began eating. It must have been a while since this poor kid had a home cooked meal. I leaned back and stretched out my back and now full belly. “Thank you, Boss. It was very good.” I looked over at Matt and saw him finishing the baked beans.

He looked up at me. “What?”

“Really, all those beans for breakfast?”

“I have a cast iron stomach.” He patted his stomach.

I just shook my head. “Anyway...” I turned to Dee. “Hey boss. What’s your plan for today?”

“I thought I would get Hunter settled in and run over some basic firearm safety.” Dee tilted her head in Hunter’s direction and gave me the *say something* look.

I took Dee’s hint. “Hunter, you ever fired a gun before?”

“No sir.”

I pursed my lips. “Okay... Boss, maybe while Matt and I are out, you could run Hunter through some basic firearm training – like safety, weapon manipulation, assembly, disassembly, cleaning...and anything else you can think of... Every man should carry a gun. He’s at that age... Don’t worry Hunter– Dee will get you sorted out.” Hunter smiled at that. I looked at Matt, “I think the Rorschach brothers are going directly to Ryan’s and then to the Longdykes’ place up on the mountain.”

“What do you think they will want in exchange for their help?” Matt asked with concern.

“It doesn’t matter. Whatever it is, we will have to give it to them. We need their help – without it, we can’t make this happen. Let’s just hope it’s something we can live with. I’m not real keen on giving them, say, a thousand ounces of silver or gold, ya know.”

Matt nodded in agreement. “I guess we’ll know soon enough.”

I stood up from the table and continued my stretching. “Well, we should walk down to the mad-scientist’s house and see how long he thinks it will

take to make the modifications.”

Matt and I headed down the street to Scott’s house. We had put our full kit on, just in-case. Thankfully, the neighborhood had gotten used to seeing people walk around armed. It was surreal to see how quickly and easily people had adjusted. It was harder for some than others, but overall, in our area, things were moving along. For the first month, most people had nothing to do and just sat inside, doing nothing. Thankfully, Josh had gone door to door talking to everyone who would talk. He was able to get volunteers to help with security, body removal, trash pickup, and grave digging. Most importantly, he was able to get people to volunteer to help the local utility company with their everyday needs. Even though credit cards and the banks were closed, along with just about everything else; the water, sewer, gas, and electric utilities still had to function. The local utility company was having issues without their SCADA systems to monitor the many water tanks, pump stations, and electric substations. The only way to help overcome the lack of technology was to recruit more utility workers. It was amazing how many of our neighbors answered that call. Probably the greatest thing that had happened was that neighbors were talking to each other, helping each other. Our neighborhood was not unique in this.

For the most part, other neighborhoods in Baldman and the surrounding area were doing okay also. Josh kept up with the leaders in the other areas. Our neighborhood was the biggest and most populated by a wide margin, in the Baldman community, at least. There were reports of problems in Kingston and Rockwood, but mostly, the issues had been minor. People had taken an active role in their safety, and it had made all the difference. I knew that would change once the food handouts stopped. It would take too long for people in our area to grow enough food to sustain themselves and be able to put away provisions for next winter. Our modern way of living wasn’t designed for that. If supply lines or commerce couldn’t be reestablished quickly, people would turn on each other. We knew there were horrible things happening in the countryside, the more rural areas. These are the places many thought they would be safe from the legendary *Golden Hord*. The thing is, that Horde, never came. The lights and power stayed on, at least in our area – thank God for TVA! But we heard stories on Infowars about some of the things happening in major cities on the coasts and up north. I hoped they were exaggerated stories, but I knew in my soul they were probably downplaying how bad it actually was, trying not to scare

people for fear they might lose hope. I was happy about the lies, or at least the toned-down truth. The last two months had been ridiculously difficult, but the future looked worse. We still hadn't hit bottom yet. I was terrified of how much further we had to fall.

Matt interrupted my introspection. "When do you think we will hear from Ryan and the brothers?"

"I don't know, bro, but hopefully today. I imagine we will get traveling instructions soon. They said a week or two, but I would say the same thing, then only give someone a day or two notice."

Matt huffed, "Yeah, so would I. They probably figure we wouldn't have enough time to set an ambush."

"That's my hope. We need them confident. We need them to let us go the right way, so we end up in our ambush. We need them to pick the right seats in the SUV, so we can subdue them. Most importantly, we need them to believe they are the ones making the decisions and not us. That they are in control. We need them to feel safe in their superiority."

"Wow, and I was worried this was going to be hard."

I laughed, "Don't worry, we got this." Thankfully, we had reached Scott's house. We walked around to the garage and knocked on the large barn door. I heard Scott call out from inside, "Just a sec."

The door slid open and there was the mad-scientist, wild hair going in every direction. "Hey Henry. Hey Matt. How you fellas doing?"

"Great..." I looked at Matt and he smiled back at me with a toothy grin.

Matt let out a snicker. "So, what's the prognosis there, *Doc Brown*?"

Scott barked out an odd laugh, "Uh-huh, 2.21 gigawatts... Come on in fellas. I finished it this morning."

...

Several hours later, on our way back to my house, Matt looked pensive.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? It works, you should be happy," I insisted.

"I don't know Henry. This shit seems very Roadrunner-ish to me."

"Call me a super-genius then!" I proclaimed.

"Huh? Well, now I feel worse." Matt said.

"What the fuck, Debbie-downer? You saw it work – what's the deal?"

"Two things," Matt went on. "One – you just made us the coyote... Shit doesn't end well for him. Two – how big is the government guy's security

dude?”

“About my size, well a couple inches taller and bigger all around actually.” I answered.

“Yeah, I thought that’s what you’d said earlier... Henry, we need a back-up... If he doesn’t get knocked out cold, I am gonna have a hell of a time in the backseat with someone your size. That’s just facts.”

“Hmmm, I didn’t think about it that way... Fuck, I *did* make us the coyote. That’s a bad omen... And yeah, I’m not sure it would knock me out cold either. Okay, we will make some chloroform. That shit will slow him down at the very least. We will hide a black bag, soaked with chloroform in the back. That way, when we stun him, you can use it to slow him down and restrain him. I will be immediately engaged in a firefight, so you’re gonna be on your own... That is a lot of work on you, Killer.” I said.

Matt was staring off into space. He took a few moments before saying anything. “Yep, but you’re right. There is no other way. Fuck.”

I nodded in agreement as we walked the steps to my front porch. “Fuck, indeed.” I slapped him on the back. “There is good news in this.”

“Yeah?”

I shrugged, “Yeah... If we are wrong, we won’t be alive for very long. So, there’s that.”

“Oh joy. You have eased my concerns.” Matt said flatly.

I smiled at him, “You’re welcome, Sugar Bear.”

“Stop talking to me.” Matt went into the house.

Chapter 9

I grabbed a gallon of bleach and several bottles of rubbing alcohol. As I walked out of the laundry room, Dee gave me a knowing scowl and went to make some space in one of our large, deep freezers. I found our large, glass one-gallon, milk jars. It's like she had kept them around for just this occasion.

Dee was stomping around the kitchen. I could hear the idiots upstairs laughing. "I do not like this, Henry. Why are you making chloroform?"

Luckily, Matt and Hunter came in and saved me from the barrage of questions I sensed building in Dee.

"Boss, how did Hunter do with his firearms safety course today?" I asked Dee, hoping to change the topic, for a little while at least.

"He did very well. We will go over weapon familiarity tomorrow, with some of the more common long guns we have around here." Dee was still staring daggers at me.

Hunter saved me. "Sir, is there anything I can do to help?"

"That depends, Hunter... Have you ever made chloroform before?" I asked the young man, doing my best to avoid looking at my wife.

Dee erupted, "Henry, really? You gonna hand the boy an Anarchist's Cookbook while you're at it?" She promptly went upstairs and started putting the kids to bed. We could all hear the small woman stomping around.

"Ahem... Did we come at a bad time?" Matt asked puzzled.

"Nah, you two probably saved me... With any luck, her hormones will swing back the other way in a bit... I hope." I scratched at my now very full beard, "Oh well, she will live regardless." I shrugged, putting the bleach and alcohol in the deep freeze.

"Huh, she knows this isn't as dangerous to make as most of the other stuff is... I wonder what's really getting to her?" Matt asked.

"I don't know Matt, but I wish I did... She knows this is still dangerous, and she also knows what we would use it for... Hell, I know she has already contemplated what we or I will probably do after we use it. She is a good woman... She knows what it took out of me last time." I stopped talking and busied myself by looking for some dark spray paint for the one-gallon glass milk jug. I found a half full black spray paint can and went outside to spray the outside of the jar. When I came back in, Dee was back

downstairs. Thankfully, she had cooled off some and was explaining the recipe for making the chloroform to Hunter.

“... and that’s why we put those bottles in the freezer. They need to be as cold as possible first.”

“Ah, I get it, it’s an exothermic reaction.”

I cut in as I shut the door. “High school chemistry?” I asked.

“Yes, sir.” Hunter answered sheepishly, then looked to Matt and Dee, and then to the ground.

“Okay, what’s going on?” I asked the room.

“Hunter, why don’t you accompany me down to Scott’s to pick up the Expedition?” Matt opened the backdoor, Hunter nodded to me and gave Dee a funny little bow. Then quick as a bunny, he was out the door followed by Matt.

I had to admire their survival instincts, and I envied their ability to escape this situation. I was trying to figure out how to defuse this bomb, but I had no idea what triggered it in the first place. Then Dee put her hands on her face and began crying. Pregnancy was a hell of a thing. I couldn’t be happier to never know the burden. I walked around the table and put my arms around her, “Hey wife, what’s this all about?” Dee buried her head in my chest and really let loose. She was full on sobbing now, so I didn’t know what to do. Then I felt it. She was going for my belt buckle. “Upstairs, Boss. We might get caught down here.”

She leaned up and kissed me passionately, then grabbed me by the back of the hair and pulled my head back. She put her mouth to my ear and whispered, “hurry, I need this.” Then she bit my ear lobe with enough force to make me wince. With that, she let out a giggle and hurried upstairs.

I just shook my head and mumbled, “*Crazy-ass, horny pregnant women.*”

After making sure I locked up the house and the kids were all asleep, I was able to bring some comfort to my wife. Afterwards, as we laid entangled, Dee whispered, “I’m nervous, Henry.”

“About what?” I asked.

“The ending of food distribution,” she replied.

I finally understood. “You have been doing more than just giving the local kids snacks?”

“Well, let’s just say I have been helping to supplement the kids’ lunches, and so have the Connors.”

“The Connors are the ones you’ve been splitting babysitting with, right?”

Dee just nodded into my chest.

“So, you are worried about people coming after us?” I asked.

Dee surprised me and almost barked out a laugh, “No Henry. I am not worried about us... I am worried about others – the Connors who have been a real help to others and some of the other families in the neighborhood who obviously had more than others that have been helping people... I am worried people will really start... I’m just worried things will get worse.”

“Well, I wish I could say they won’t Boss, but we both know I would be lying.” I felt her nod on my chest. “But I will do everything I can to keep us safe... Wait, why aren’t you worried about people coming after us? I am.”

Dee laughed again, “Oh sweet Henry, if people only knew the truth... Henry, forgive me for this, but you terrify people.”

I frowned, “What?”

“Husband, you are as big as a moose and most people in the neighborhood know what your hobbies and side jobs are. You have always made people uncomfortable.” Dee just rested her head on my chest and gave me a *you poor thing* kind of look.

“Since when?” I asked?

“Since always Henry. Everyone at my office, all the neighbors. I mean, seriously honey, why do you think everyone comes and speaks with me to speak to you?”

“I don’t know what to say...” I was in a bit of shock. “I thought people liked me.”

“Oh, Henry.” Dee said my name as though I were especially slow in the head. “They do like you once they get to know you... It just takes a minute.”

“But I have friends!” I countered. “Mike, Jamie, Magnus, Matt, Josh and Max... Hell, Big Mike!”

“Henry, people feel the same way about most of them as they do about you.”

“This makes no sense.” I had lost my afterglow of awesomeness at this point, and Dee’s laughter wasn’t helping the situation.

“Honey, don’t get mad. It is what it is. You need to know this, now more than ever. That’s why I’m not worried about us. People know if they come here, you will carve out their hearts and put them on a spike.”

“Fuckin’-A, right I will.” I could feel my skin heat at the thought of someone coming to take from my family. “They would be lucky to die so easily.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about, Henry. That is not a normal reaction. Most men would call the cops or authorities or whatever... That is not, nor has it ever been, *you*. For such a smart man, you are blissfully unaware of how you affect people, my love.”

I was at a loss, so took the high ground. “Oh yeah, well, you’re married to me... what does that say about you?”

“I know what it says,” she said as she slipped a hand on my thigh and started working her way up. “I say I am attracted to dangerous men.”

“Down girl, I have to get started on the chloroform in a bit, and then hopefully we’ll hear from Ryan and the brothers tonight.” Watching her pout, I continued, “I would love to go another couple rounds Boss, but I really have to get things done.” I couldn’t hide my smile.

“Fine.” Dee said with a huff, then she clawed the inside of my thigh and bit my nipple at the same time.

“Yeeoww!” I jumped out of bed. “What the hell, woman? That hurt!”

Dee was laughing like a crazy person, “that’s what you get for teasing a pregnant lady!” She then made mocking lunge, with her mouth open and teeth bared, for my vulnerable bits.

I jumped back and hustled into the shower, turning on the cold water and hoping to deter Dee from further sexual harassment. As I glanced back at her, I turned and saw her predator’s gaze. “You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you?”

As she stepped into the shower, I grabbed the handheld shower head and sprayed the front of her naked body. She sucked in a breath and froze. “Henry... what is wrong with you?”

“I said it once and I’ll say it again... Down girl!”

“Not funny!” Dee replied.

“Meh, I don’t know. It’s pretty funny.” I couldn’t hide the playful tone in my voice. I quickly fished my shower and got out. Dee was flossing her teeth. After drying off, I hugged her from behind. “You better now?”

“Yeah, she said with a smile.” Then turned into me and bit my other nipple quite hard...

“Yipe!” I jumped and hit the wall.

Dee looked at me with a grin, “*don’t tease pregnant women!*” Then she winked and flicked a sensitive part of my downstairs as she walked into the shower.

I just shook my head and got dressed. There was still a lot to do.

Outside the air was cool and crisp. I checked to make sure the spray paint was dry on the jug. Thankfully, it was. As I positioned the items I needed to make my boot-leg chloroform, I heard an engine and saw a glow of headlights coming from the far side of my back ally. I drew my pistol and regretted not having a rifle out here with me.

It was Ryan and the Rorschach brothers. I re-holstered my Glock and let out a sigh. I walked over to where they had pulled into the driveway. “Hey, hey, hey!” I called out.

Ryan stepped out and waved, then let the brothers out of the back. They all had strange looks on their faces.

“Did it not go well?” I asked, worried.

Ryan made an odd facial expression. “No, we are good. We found them and told them what was going on. They will help. But they *do* have a price, and it’s... unique.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “What? Gold, ammo, guns, silver...?”

Mike spoke up, “Two Little Debbie’s Devil Squares. Absolutely nothing else will do.”

Jamie just shook his head. “That’s my fault. I told them anything they wanted... I didn’t know they would take that so literally.”

Ryan took a breath. “Normally, that wouldn’t be such a big deal, but I don’t know how the hell we will get two of those now... with the world the way it is. I wish they would’ve asked for almost anything else.”

I asked for clarification, “So, do they want two cases, two boxes...? Two of what, exactly?”

Jamie spoke up this time, “No, not cases or boxes... just two individual snack cakes. But they may as well be asking for a billion bars of gold. How the fuck are we supposed to find those things?”

Mike chimed in, “We have spent the last 5 hours trying to get them to ask for something different... Henry, there is a *lot* wrong with those two.”

I popped my neck, “Yea, I’ve heard that... Do they know where we could pull this off?”

They all nodded. Ryan spoke first. “They know the perfect place – up the mountain, by the old gas station next to the bridge. They showed us

where we could put the guys and the gear... It will work, but I have no idea how to get them up on those ledges without the Longdykes. We also don't need a problem with those two – something is wrong with their heads.”

I let out a breath, “Okay, let's get you two up there tonight. Please load the rifles and ammo into Ryan's Explorer. I will grab some extreme cold weather sleeping bags and the payment.” I turned to head to my basement.

Ryan trailed after me. “You have those cake things?”

I stopped and turned to Ryan. “I have a pregnant wife and three small kids... I have more snacks than a supply house for a movie theater chain. So, yes, I have Little Debbie Devil Squares... But don't tell Dee I gave any away – she won't be happy.”

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Chapter 10

After retrieving two boxes of the snack cakes, I helped the brothers finish breaking down a couple of cases of MREs. I did not know how long they might be out there and had no way to contact them. I hoped that they could receive a radio signal out that far. Since they would be near the top of the mountain, the odds were in our favor that they could, at the very least, monitor the local radio communications on both the HAM and police radios. I even made sure they had a couple CBs, just in case the nothingness wore on them. They both had their own Goal Zero portable solar charger. They had a bunch of shit. The rifles and ammo would be a beast to get up that mountain.

“How do you guys plan on getting all this up that mountain? This will take a few trips.”

Mike reached down to touch his toes and stretch a bit. “Yeah, it will suck. But, without knowing how long it will be until ya’ll come along, it is what it is. The hillbillies said they would help us ruck in our kit. They don’t look too impressive, physically I mean. I don’t know how well they will do hiking and carrying our shit, but we will see. Worst-case scenario, we make multiple trips.”

Jamie sighed, “That would definitely be the fucking worst case. That mountain is fucking steep.”

I shrugged, “I would worry far more about those two finding your mouths particularly... pretty.”

Ryan shivered. “I am so happy I do not have to spend countless hours with those two... Or sleep in the same woods as them.”

Jamie looked at me, almost pleading. “You are positive, there is no other way?”

I tried to hide my smile. “Sorry Killer... If I could think of anything else, I would tell you. Fact is, we need a solid bottleneck. We need the high ground, and we need to take away their maneuverability. I do not know how many men and vehicles will be going along with us, so let’s pray for only one Humvee and five guys. Well, plus the two, I’m sure, will ride with us.”

Mike closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the night air. “This is all so fucked.”

Out of the twilight, “Henry?”

I drew my weapon, as did Ryan, Jamie, and Mike. The brothers immediately moved to flanking positions behind cover. Ryan just stood there clueless. I knew when this was over, we needed to do some training. *Freezing when startled* needed to be trained out of her startle response. It would get her killed if not addressed. I called back into the night, "Yeah."

"It's Josh. I didn't radio because of well... you know."

I sighed and relaxed a little. "Mulan."

"Oh, I know this one! Is not a princess!"

I looked to Jamie and Mike at my sides. "It's clear." They stepped out of the darkness and holstered their weapons. "What's up Josh? What did you not want out on the radio?"

"Infowars is down, as is the Mormon broadcast."

Jamie stepped up. "What do you mean, down?"

"I mean it's down. The news show started, and they said they had serious news to share... But then, nothing. They are off the air. I checked some of the other stations – still nothing. Not local area broadcasts, just nothing."

I popped my neck, "Well fuck! You fellas need to be up there right now."

Mike and Jamie nodded back, then got into the Explorer. Ryan followed closely behind them and got into the driver's side. Soon they were pulling out and, on their way, to meet up with the Longdykes.

"Well fuck, Josh. We need to go down to Scott's and make sure he will have my SUV ready by tomorrow. I suspect we will get a radio call in the morning. Let me go tell Dee what I am doing."

When I came back out, I tossed a bag to Josh. "Here, catch."

Josh complied and caught the bag. When opening it he asked, "What are these for?"

"For seeing in the dark. I thought that would be obvious since it's a PVS 7."

"Hardy har har, I know what it is. I'm asking, why?" Josh went on.

"We have been far too relaxed lately. We need to get back into the mindset of high situational awareness. Once the food handouts stop, people will get ugly."

As we walked towards Scott's garage, I press checked my rifle.

Josh press checked his pistol, "You're right Henry. We have gotten complacent. Reba and I were talking about the stoppage to the food

handouts. She is worried people will target us.”

“Yeah, I had a similar conversation with Dee.”

Josh looked at me sideways. “You did?”

I inhaled, “Well, kinda... She is worried about everyone else that obviously has a little extra. She said she isn’t worried about us, though. I disagree with her thought process, but I don’t want her upset either... so I let it go.”

“What is her thought process?” Josh asked.

“Meh, I rather not say. It’s awkward.”

Josh smiled and laughed, “Let me guess, she told you that most of the neighborhood is frightened of you?”

“What? How did you know?” I asked?

“Henry, I went to Law School. I’m a pretty clever guy. My entire career is based on reading people, reading a jury... You never have been very aware of your image, or just how the world sees you. That’s not a bad thing, but it is a blind spot... Honestly, it kind of made me feel a little easier around you, especially when we were first getting to know each other.”

“That’s ridiculous. We had you and Reba over a dozen times the first year we moved into the neighborhood.”

“Exactly my point. We didn’t want to say no. We didn’t want to start a problem inadvertently with a local hard case. Then we got to know you two and realized you and Dee are amazing people. It’s not an insult, Bro.”

I was getting angry, and I didn’t know why. “I am not happy to hear this.”

“HAHA, I’m not surprised. Remember those classes you were teaching out at Magnus’s range? Almost no one took them.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not that they didn’t want to learn, Henry. It’s more like they were uneasy, kind of.” Josh said.

“What do you mean, kind of? Dee didn’t really do a good job of explain her reasoning, and you’re doing a worse job.” I stopped walking. “To be honest, this is kinda hurting my feelings.”

Josh just chuckled. “I’m not laughing at you, Henry. I’m laughing at the situation. I know you don’t get it, but... When was the last time you went to the Zoo?”

“Now I’m an animal, Josh. This is not going in a direction that makes me feel good.” I said.

“Just go with me here,” he pleaded.

“Okay, I went last summer.”

“Did you go to the new tiger exhibit they just put in?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s why we went. Is this going somewhere?” I was getting irritated.

Josh smiled. “Did you get to see the tiger?”

I let out a loud exhale, like I was a petulant teen. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“How close did you get?”

“We took the kids down to the ground level, where you can look at the tigers at eye level.”

“What did it feel like to be that close to something like that?” Josh continued his questioning.

I shook my head. “It was amazing. They are beautiful creatures... I’m missing the point here, Counselor.”

Josh had a sour look on his face. “Yeah, you are, and I am failing to explain it. Henry, when most people get that close to a predator like that, their fight-or-flight instincts kick in. They feel uneasy. Even though they are totally safe from the creature, a part of their hind brains is telling them to flee.”

I started walking back towards Scott’s. “You’re saying I make people feel like they are at the zoo, looking at a tiger?”

“I’m saying you used to make people feel that way. Before all this, before the... the incident at Jacob and Helen’s house. Now people feel like the glass has been taken away. People don’t know what you will do, but they know what you have done... and you have done terrifying things. So, what I’m saying is, people know you are capable of terrifying things.”

“I am not proud of what happened there, but I am not ashamed. Those two deserved much worse. I don’t need to defend my actions to anyone, least of all you, Bro.” My heart was beating faster.

Josh nodded his head as we walked. “I agree.”

I forgot all about those two kids... No, that wasn’t true. I actively didn’t think about them. Thinking about them only made me relive what I had done. “How are the kids?”

Josh was silent for a moment. “Better... every day is a little-bit better.”

“Good, that’s good to hear, man. You know, I hate I am perceived like a dangerous animal. It kinda pisses me off. I am killing my soul for this neighborhood.”

“I know Henry, that’s why none of your friends or neighbors bring it up. We know who you are... you are a loyal friend, a man of will, and a noble father.”

I stopped walking again and looked at Josh. “But not a *good* man?”

Josh pursed his lips to say something, then stopped. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “No Henry, you are not a good man... and I thank God for that. Because you are who He made you. Our little neighborhood has some semblance of order. You have heard what’s going on in other areas... Rape, theft, murder... so far, we don’t have any of that. I credit you. We don’t need good men; we need men of will... We need dangerous men.”

“How does that have anything to do with me?” Although puzzled, I felt better somehow.

Josh gave me a huge, cat-ate-the-canary type of grin. “That’s easy. Every time I have petty issues come up and people are spinning out, I tell them, they can either work out the problem like adults or I will send you over to figure it out for them... It’s amazing how quickly the apologies get tossed around after that.”

“You motherfucker! You are the reason for this.” It finally dawned on me.

Josh put his hands up. “No. God is. Nature is. Your shit childhood and bizarre hobbies are... I... just took advantage of the effect you have on people... I also may have embellished some of what you did that night and told the neighborhood gossips.” Josh turned, walked fast to the garage door, and started knocking.

“You fucker, that’s why those ass-hats brought that kid to my house and demanded I kill him.” I was stunned.

Josh stopped knocking and turned to me, “Yes, well, probably... that Jared guy has been a problem for a week now... but, because of your reputation, they brought him to your house, and you saved his life. Without the presence of a... I really don’t have a better term for it than ‘*strongman*’ in the neighborhood, they probably would have just beaten that kid to death... People need something to fear Henry. It helps to keep them in check. I gave the neighborhood *you*.”

With that, Matt opened the garage door. “Sup fellas? Wait ‘til you see what this mad scientist has done.”

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Chapter 11

I was on top of the mountain, looking down on Baldman. Smoke rose from the buildings that were still standing. The sky glowed red, with fluffy black clouds made of smoke and pain floating over the city... I felt something wet and warm around my feet. As I looked down at the ground, I saw flowing liquid rushing over the ground. It was warm and thick. As I bent over to touch the strange fluid, I noticed I was nude. I plunged my hand into the dark flowing substance. When I brought my hand up, I knew. I knew exactly what it was – Blood. There was a fucking tributary of blood pouring over the cliffs, forming a waterfall of horror. That’s when I heard him behind me. I knew it was him. Plaguing my dreams once again. I turned to face my demon. He stood at least nine feet tall now. I couldn’t fathom a guess at his weight. He was fucking huge. He was also less than one of his massive arm’s lengths away. That fact was more than a little disconcerting. If he moved to grab me, I was screwed. His shark teeth had now totally torn away what had once been his lips. He turned his head slowly to the side, like a confused dog. I would not run or fight. Feeling tired of this shit, I asked, “What the fuck do you want to know you giant, ugly, son-of-an-inbred-whore?”

Diablo just drawled his head back to center, then slowly kneeled and placed his enormous hand in the river of moving blood. As he rose back to his full height, he slowly extended his blood covered fist. It was then that I realized Diablo was nude. He was nude and had no dick, no vagina... There was nothing there where something should have been. I was now more uneasy with this situation, but I controlled my fear. I stood still as his fist slowly made its way toward my face. Just a couple of inches from my face, Diablo extended his thumb, then touched my face above my left temple, dragging it across my forehead. I could feel his ice-cold flesh and the heat of the blood he was smearing across my face. Once he was done, his smile widened, and he pointed with the bloody hand past my left shoulder. I turned to see what he was gesturing toward. As I did, I saw a flood of dark liquid wash over Baldman. The smoke stopped rising. Everything seemed to stop. I whipped my head back around to say something to the dem, but when I saw what he was doing, I lost my words. He was on his knees before me with his head down in the nightmare water flowing around us. It’s like he was a holy man, and I was his mecca. He was praying to me,

worshipping me. As he rose, he was drenched in the blood. With his hands reaching toward the burned sky, his shark-toothed smile seemed even wider somehow. I was terrified. I could hear my name, booming from the sky. *HENRY... HENRY... HENRY...*

“HENRY, come in! Henry!” The radio in the charging dock next to my lucky hat thundered to life. “HENRY... Come in, Henry.”

I had been sleeping on the couch fully dressed. I was waiting for this moment. Now that it was here, my stomach was spinning. I cleared my throat and grabbed the small BaoFeng. “Hey Jack, everything okay?”

“It’s Time.”

I waited a second, trying to lay the foundation of my plan on solid ground. “Uh, that was supposed to happen next week sometime. I am currently unavailable.”

The response was immediate, “Henry, I don’t think that’s really a decision we get to make.”

I smiled at the thought of Agent Phillip and his attack dog Peter being informed that I had been caught off guard and was not yet ready. But I need to sell this. “Well, that’s not my problem, Jack. I am not ready, and times are not what they used to be. This requires... effort. Copy?”

Long moments passed as my adrenaline seemed to slow down time. I took several deep breaths and pulled my focus back to the moment.

“Henry, I understand you were told something different. However, the situation has changed. The pack needs to be transported now.”

“All due respect Sherriff, I don’t give a fuck. I need more time. This isn’t like it used to be. This needs time and planning. I am not ready. I can’t guarantee anyone’s safety. I literally do not have my shit ready to go.”

I got up and secured my gun belt and my plate carrier. I double checked my AK mags. As I checked to ensure each one was loaded, I stuck them back into the Fast-Mag pouches I had attached to my plate carrier. The full-auto AK from the range was on the floor next to where I had been sleeping. I picked it up, rocked the mag out, and did a few quick-function tests. I rocked the mag back in and pulled the charging handle. Cycling in a live round, then slapping up the lever safety on the weapon, I set it against the couch. I put on my lucky hat; it was a gray, trucker style with an American flag embroidered on it. It was nothing special really, I just liked it. Dee called it my lucky hat, and as far as I was concern, it was.

The radio jumped back to life. This time, it was Phil. “Henry, the timetable has changed. We need to act now!”

“Sorry about your luck, but this was supposed to be next week. I am not ready; this is a bad time.” I was so close, I needed to get Peter on the radio. I needed them to leverage a threat. I needed them to think they had a lever that could be pulled to force my compliance. I needed them to be secure in that thought. If they believed they could move me against my will, they would not be thinking about me acting against them. I needed them invested into the belief that they had caught me unaware, and that I was afraid they would hurt my family as a punishment for my inaction. Without this total buy-in from them, the plan wouldn’t work. I needed them to question me and to go against my recommendations – to distrust my suggestions. More than anything, I needed them to feel superior.

“You will get here now, or I will visit for dinner. Do you fucking Rodger that?” Ah, that was faster than expected. Sweet Peter had joined the conversation.

Time to sell this thing, “I fully understand, but I am not ready. This isn’t a fucking trip to Walmart. I need a few hours.” I just hoped they would recognize my understated compliance. I knew Peter wouldn’t, but I was betting Phil would.

“That’s fine Henry. You have three hours.” Phil was his ever-confident self.

I gave it a minute. “Copy that.” I tried my best to say it with a tone of “*fuck you and your mother*”.

I grabbed the AK and walked out to the Expedition we were taking. Matt was already standing by the truck, dressed and ready to go, with the other full-auto AK in his hand.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Where is Hunter?” I asked.

“He is at Ryan’s house-sitting.” A smirk touched his mouth.

“So, that would mean...” I turned around and saw Officer Ryan sitting on my porch, next to the camper. She was wearing one of Matt’s shirts and apparently nothing else. Her brown hair seemed to flow all around her, not in a mess, but more like a halo. She was watching us. No smile, no expression... She just sat there with her elbows on her knees, watching us. Then Dee came out the back door and sat next to her. Dee draped half the blanket she had been wrapped in around Ryan. Then Ryan turned her head

to Dee and cried. I looked at Dee and mouthed, "I love you." She just smiled back at me and mouthed, "I know."

I gave a slight, sad laugh. "Huh." I turned to Matt, "Ready?" He nodded he was. We climbed into the SUV, putting our rifles in the awesome rifle mounts Scott had made for us out of stuff just lying around his shop. The guy really was a mad scientist.

"You good, brother?" I was concerned where Matt head's was after Ryan's response. Matt just stared out the window for a moment.

"She loves me." Matt was still staring out the window.

"That's awesome brother."

"Yeah... I love her too." Matt was still staring out the window.

"That's even better, man... Congratulations." I needed to figure out where his head was at. It was game time, and he was somewhere else.

"When we heard Jack on the radio, she started crying immediately. The last two days of just waiting had been hard on her. There is only so much sex I can have before I'm totally exhausted... That's when she blindsided me by *talking*." Matt was speaking more to the air than to me. "I love her, and I was waiting to go do something that could kill me. She wasn't comfortable with that... ya know?"

I nodded.

"How do you and Dee do it? I mean, how is she so..."

I cut in with laughter, "She isn't... that's how."

"What?" Matt asked.

"We don't talk about it, bro. It's not who we are. I didn't say 'goodbye', and she didn't say 'goodbye'. There is no point. It's a distraction. Right now, I need to be focused. We cannot afford to be distracted... She knows she is my everything. The fact that I am going to do this... She knows what she means, what the kids mean to me."

Matt nodded at that. "Henry, I have a question."

"Shoot killer."

"It's serious. I don't know how to say it without..."

"Just fucking ask, bro. I have no secrets." I said.

Matt gave a little laugh, "Ah, you know, that's exactly what someone with secrets would say?"

I smiled. I couldn't help myself. "I suppose. So, what is the question?"

"What does it feel like to take a life?"

I could sense Matt's eyes on me. My smile vanished. I let out a deep breath. "It's a rush." I let that hang in the air for a moment. I glanced over at Matt; he was just waiting for the rest. "It's like nothing else – fear, hate, compassion. It's all jumbled together in the moment. Your heart is racing. You will feel lightheaded the first time. It's like somehow none of this is real, but at the same time, it's like the only real thing in you have ever done. But that passes, and then you will want to vomit. It's normal. It's just the adrenaline. You will be dizzy and feel numb. You will feel panic. You will need to recognize that and focus past it. Keep your head about you, but while you're in the shit, it's incredible, addictive even... But later, usually at night before sleep, you will see their faces. You will carry them with you, and your soul will bear the scars of what you did to another human. It will change you if you let it. Understand that this is something that needs to be done. We are the right people, at the right time, in the right place... The universe has placed us on a path... It is what it fucking is." I was breathing hard; I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I took several deep breaths.

"Most importantly, do not hesitate. You kill those sons of whores however you fucking can. Us versus them! Fuck them! Fuck their families and their gods! Hold onto that hate. It will get you through this."

Matt nodded and looked back out the window. "Thanks," he replied.

I said nothing for a few minutes. I just embraced the silence. As we came to the bridge to Kingston, I knew we were only a few minutes out from the sheriff's department. "You ready for this?"

Matt looked over at me. "Fuck no, I just hope we mixed the chloroform right."

"We will see soon enough." As I pulled into the sheriff's department parking lot, I saw Nate. I slowed down to pull up next to him.

"Nate, what's going on?" I asked.

"Hey Henry, it's not good. There is a convoy around back. You will be the lead vehicle. They want you to pull around back and pick up dumb and dumber."

I was nervous. "Define convoy."

"Two Humvees and a semi-truck with a trailer."

Matt chimed in, "Are the Humvees up-armored? How many men?"

"No to the armor, but it looks to be around fifteen including *Fuck Stick* and his boyfriend."

Now I had another question: “How many will be left behind?”

“Twenty,” he responded.

I looked at Nate, “Twenty? That’s a joke, right? Can you guys deal with this? You must, you know. Otherwise, we are all fucked.”

“We got this, but we need you to succeed as much as you need us to.” Nate had a very sober look as he said that.

I slowly shook my head. “What kinda guns on the Humvees?”

Nate grimaced, “M249 and a Ma-Duce.”

Matt barked out a laugh, “Well fuck! That’s not good news.”

Nate looked at me, “I don’t think Peter likes you.”

I smiled, “He shouldn’t, how about Phil?”

“That guy—fuck that guy.” Nate spit.

I nodded, “Welp, be safe Nate.”

Nate nodded back, “You too Henry, good luck.”

I pulled around back and sure enough, two Humvees with guns, five men to a Humvee, and giant semi-truck pulling two trailers. Then there was Peter with full battle rattle on. He had clearly done this before, but not Phil. Phil was in his fancy suit and had matching fucking luggage. Un-fucking-believable.

Chapter 12

I pulled to a stop in front of Phil and Peter. Peter had a scowl on his face as Matt and I got out of my Expedition. “Hey Phil!” I smiled as I called out. Then I looked at Peter, and my smile got wider. “Hey fuck-face, what’s shaking?”

Phil’s expression was unreadable. Peter’s expression was, in fact, very readable. He lumbered towards me. “The fuck you just say?”

I noticed three things right away. The first was that Peter *is*, about my size. He may be an inch or so taller but has a very similar physical build. The second as that Peter did in fact have an extremely short temper. This wasn’t an act. He was genuinely enraged. That sealed it for me; he had to be a former cop. The third thing was that Peter was on a short leash with Phil.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Phil slightly grin and shake his head. “Peter, this is not how we make friends.” Phil gave me a knowing look. “Henry, do you have any other childish provocations you would like to get out of the way now? Because no matter how angry you try to get Peter, he will not storm off to ride with the others. He will ride with me in your vehicle.”

I saw a flash of realization on Peter’s face. He’d be a shitty poker player. Phil had taken the time to say all that for Peter’s sake, not mine or Matt’s. This was the best piece of info yet.

Peter turned to walk away, and I figured I would take one last shot at him. “Peter, if you would be so kind to take your master’s luggage and store it in one of the other vehicles... We don’t have the room for it.” Peter froze in place. He turned his head to eye me. I could see the hate he had for me and his desire to draw his gun and put a bullet in my head. Good, I thought.

Several moments passed before Phil broke the silence. “Why can’t I put my belongings in your SUV, Henry?”

I relaxed my posture, Peter did not. “Because I need everything in my vehicle. I need to access to each item I brought. Well, I mean if you are cool with me putting the chain saws and fuel mix on top of your bag, then sure we have room.”

Phil let out a slow breath, “Please open the back of the Expedition, Henry.”

I nodded to Matt and then he walked over and opened the back of the SUV. I had been expecting this.

Phil walked over and looked inside. “What in the world do you need all this for?”

I winked at Peter before turning my back on him to walk over to Phil. “Phil, it’s a long drive at the best of times. As I understand things, Matt and I are on our own when we come back. We need all of this and probably a bunch of stuff I haven’t even thought of.”

Phil nodded in understanding. “Peter, please have my things placed with the gentlemen in the semi. They have room.”

Peter picked up the luggage started walking towards the semi. “Good boy.” I shouted. Peter turned to give me the ole evil eye, then turned and continued to complete his task.

“Henry, it isn’t wise to continue to provoke him. He is dangerous.” Phil sounded like a snobby community college professor.

I looked to Phil, “These day’s, Phil... Who isn’t?” I asked before shutting the back of my Expedition. I tossed the keys to Matt. “Okay, who all is coming?”

Phil just smirked, “Myself and Peter, of course, and those two Humvees and the semi.”

I pursed my lips. “We should leave the semi. If we have to back-up or maneuver, that beast will hold us up. I mean, look at that fucking thing. I have never seen anything like it. It’s gigantic. I mean, this trip is going to be difficult enough without drawing that kind of attention.”

“Yes, it is quite large, but it contains the supplies we have been waiting on... It’s going. We have fifteen men plus your expert knowledge of the area... I’m sure we will be fine.”

Matt laughed, “As long as *you’re* sure... I feel so much better about this.”

I grinned as Matt walked around and got in the driver’s seat. I followed his lead and got in the passenger side and waited for the inevitable.

I didn’t have to wait long before Peter barked, “Fuck that cunt-shit.” He pointed to Matt, “You, ass-mouth, in the back!” He pointed to me, “You ass-fuck, drive!” Peter lumbered over to my side. “Now dip-shit.”

I happily looked back at him. “Or what?” the question just hung in the air. I could see Peter’s blood practically boil. His gun hand twitched. It was subtle, but it twitched. I knew at that moment that we weren’t supposed to come back from this little adventure. Right then, I felt my conscience clear of what was coming next.

Phil broke the staring contest, “Gentlemen, if this is going to happen every time we have to do or decide something, we will never reach our destination. Understand?”

I grinned, “Absolutely, Phil. How about you, Peter?”

Peter said nothing. He just scowled at me. In fact, I was quite confident that he lightly growled at me. “Well, if I’m driving, then how bout you ride shotgun, Big Sexy? This way we can bury the ole hatchet and maybe sing ‘Kumbaya’. What do ya say?”

Phil spoke up, “I will ride up front, Henry.”

“Suit yourself Phil. Matt, behind Phil.” Matt got out and walked around, only to be met by Peter.

“What?” Matt looked up at the large man.

“Other side, piss-ant.”

“Man, what’s your deal? Daddy fuck you a little too hard or not hard enough?” Matt asked.

Peter was enraged, but before he could move, I started the SUV. “Phil, best pull the leash on your dog.”

“Peter, enough! Get in the car. Time is wasting.” Then Phil got in and closed the door.

“Let’s go Matt. Stop picking on the retard. It gives us a bad image.” I laughed.

“Fuck you!” Peter replied before hopping in the back seat, directly behind Phil.

Matt got in the Expedition and didn’t say a word.

“Wow, you can cut the love in here with a knife... So, Phil... Tell me about your favorite sexual position, are you into butt stuff?” I asked as I pulled out of the parking lot. Our little caravan was officially in tow.

Phil nor Peter wanted to disclose their preferred sexual positions or even sexual orientations. Made for a bit of dull ride. That was until we got to Hwy 27 split from Downtown Baldman. Suddenly, the discussion got lively.

“Where the fuck you think you’re going cunt?” Peter asked.

“Wow, that was almost poetic. Do you write these little terms of endearment down, or are they just memorized?” I looked at Peter in the rearview mirror. He was red with rage. I assumed this guy must have beaten a whole lot of confessions out of people. He seemed to have no way to function, aside from violence, when someone didn’t do exactly what he said.

Phil interjected himself before Peter could explode. “My associate’s question is valid. Why are you going this way?”

I came to a full stop. I could sense Peter was about to lose his shit in the back. “Easy Peter, we are safe here. This is my town.” I turned to face Phil, “You asked me to drive you to the Morgan County Sheriff’s department. This is the fastest way. It’s a large 4-lane highway. It will be easier to maneuver that enormous semi around obstacles. If we didn’t have that fucking thing, we would go the old route. Almost no one lives on it, and it has a sheer cliff to one side and sheer drop off on the other. The opposite mountainside is a few thousand yards away. It could be safe and easy, but that semi could get us in a pickle, or perhaps killed. We need to go the main way. It will allow us to maneuver.”

From the back seat I heard, “Nope, fuck that shit, cunt-ass. Go the old road.”

I looked in the rearview mirror. “Or what?” I stared back coldly at the large man.

Once again, Phil came to Peter’s rescue. “Or we will have our fifteen, armed friends behind us open up on your town. They are under orders. Should anything happen to us, they will kill your family and burn your house to the ground. A new world is coming Henry, whether you are with us or against us. That is your choice, so make it now.” Phil turned his head to look at me, to study my response.

I kept my eyes fixed on the road in front of us, took several deep slow breaths. I believed every word Phil just said. They were probably the first true things I had heard out of his mouth. So, I pointed the Expedition towards the Old Road and turned my 4x4 selector to AWD. I had to reinforce the belief that I did not know what was ahead of us on this road.

I continued up the Old Road, slowly. It seemed Peter was not a fan of cautious driving.

“What the fuck, fag? Hit the fucking gas!”

I took a deep breath and counted to 10. I recalled an old quote from the *Odyssey*. *To be angry is easy. To be angry at the right time, for the right reason is hard*”, or something like that.

“I do not know what’s this way. We are finding out together. So, I need to take my time, make sure I don’t hit a fallen rock or random tree branch. So, sit back and shut your cocksucker.” I caught a glimpse of Peter

grinning. He liked me angry. That's good, because he was about to fall in love with me.

As we came to the abandoned gas station where the old road split into Airport Rd. "Alright, here is the first problem – a downed tree." I pulled into the old gas station. I was immediately met with a *what-the-fuck-do-you-think-you're-doing* look from Peter.

"Matt and I are going to chop up the downed tree, since the road is so fucking small. This probably wouldn't have been a thing if we'd used Hwy 27, like I wanted. Do you want to sit there and be useless or get out and help?" With that, Peter leaned back and looked out the window. The two Humvees had taken up positions by the bridge that spanned the little gulch between the mountains. At this point in the pass, the side of the other mountain is closest to the road – no more than 800 yards. It's a long shot, but not for a Barrett M82 in .50cal.

I heard the sound of a 550 grain bullet going supersonic, followed by the blast from a powerful rifle, even from this distance. As I saw the fist-sized hole appear in the turret gunner's chest, I hit the little red triangle button on my dashboard for the emergency blinker. Thanks to Scott, two car air bags fired simultaneously. One was the main airbag in-front of Phil, and the second was mounted in Phil's head rest facing Peter. It hit Peter as he had started to move from hearing the first shots fired. The airbag pushed him against his seat with tremendous force. I immediately opened my center console and pulled out the extra-large, zip tie handcuffs and black hood in a Ziplock bag. I handcuffed the unconscious Phil, then zip-tied the chain of the handcuffs to the steering wheel and placed the chloroform hood over his head. He only needed to be restrained long enough for the homemade chloroform to do its job. I looked to the back seat and Matt was placing his black chloroform hood on Peter, who had his hands cuffed behind his back and his feet zip tied together with the same stainless steel zip ties we had used on Jacob and his wife. "Matt, you ready?"

He looked at me. "Not really."

We grabbed our rifles and bailed out of the SUV, hauling ass as fast as we could towards the gas station for cover.

Chapter 13

The boom-boom from the two large Barrett rifles seemed to form a strange rhythm. As Matt and I made it to the side of the gas station, I heard one of the two big rifles stop firing. Few seconds later, the other stopped. Mike and Jamie were reloading, in short order. Whoever remained in the vehicles returned fire. The small valley filled with the sound of small arms fire. “Brother, we cannot let them get those big guns up and going. Mike and Jamie will be fucked. You start at the right, I will run to the semi... Remember, no one gets away!” Matt’s eyes were wide, pupils dilated. His adrenaline was pumping hard. Then, with a deep breath, Matt nodded. We charged off to complete our task.

I ran from the gas station to behind the two Humvees, and making a B-Line for the semi-truck. The men in the Humvees tried to take cover next to the concrete sides of the bridge. I was heading towards the semi and the men in that truck. As I got closer, I could see four of the men in a line spread about 6 feet apart from one another. All firing on the opposite hillside. As I approached the line of men, the one closest to me turned and swung his rifle to aim at me. I was faster. I squeezed the trigger and slowed my run to a fast walk. My quick pull of the trigger let three to five rounds loose. I wasn’t sure how many connected, but it was enough to drop him face first onto the asphalt. Now that the cat was out of the bag, I swung my rifle to the next man in line. It was rinse and repeat for the other men in line. After the fourth man went down, I pulled one of my mags and executed an emergency reload. I didn’t have time to save the used mag or whatever rounds remained in it. After pulling my fresh mag from my chest rig, I cleared the old mag out of the way in one motion to immediately rock in the fresh magazine. When I heard the audible click, from the mag seating properly, I put my left hand back on the foregrip and went back to hunting the fifth man. He wasn’t hard to find. He was in the driver’s seat of the semi-truck, trying to back it down the hill. I aimed my fresh mag at the driver’s window. The young man raised his hands. I gave the trigger on my rifle a short squeeze and watched the window spider-web as the bullets made impact. The man’s limp body slumped forward, and the truck engine stalled.

I still heard gunfire behind me. It was coming from mostly small arms, mixed with the occasional boom from a .50cal. I turned around to see what

was happening and heard the distinctive sound of the belt fed M243. I could feel my stomach sink as I heard the Barrett's thundering stop. All small arms fire stopped except for the M243 cutting through the air. Finally, as suddenly as it started, it stopped. I had my rifle at the ready as I rounded the bend to get a clear line-of-sight on the Humvee. I lowered my rifle and felt my jaw drop. A hillbilly with no front teeth was in the turret, smiling and waving at me. It was Bobby Longdyke. I looked over and saw Matt emerge from behind a boulder next to the gas station. With his rifle lowered, he walked toward me. To his side was Cliff Longdyke. Cliff had a giant revolver in one hand and the biggest fucking bowie knife I had ever seen in his other hand.

It was over. As quickly as it started, it ended. I knew I should be happy; this was the perfect outcome for any ambush. This was swift and a total surprise to the men in the vehicles. I could see that only half the men had actually made it out of the Humvees. That was my hope. Vehicles make the perfect death traps in an ambush. Somehow, I didn't feel happy about my perfect plan. Then I heard a sound behind me. One man I had shot wasn't dead, just wounded. I turned back to the grizzly scene that was totally my doing. I shot each man in the head. Just to be sure.

I could feel my stomach churning, so I leaned my head back and took several slow, deep breaths. It worked at least for the moment. I returned to the massacre to find Bobby and Cliff scalping the dead men. Matt was sitting on a large rock on the side of the road, just staring into space. I walked over to Matt. As I looked around, I saw red chunks of human remains all over the back of the Humvees. That .50cal round does an incredible amount of damage. There were bits of people and red fluid everywhere.

“Hey killer. You okay?”

Matt looked up at me. “Please don't call me that anymore.”

I nodded in understanding, “This will pass brother. Could you do me a favor and check on the fellas in the SUV? Make sure they are unarmed and still alive.”

Matt bowed his head, then stood. “Sure man.” He walked over to the Expedition, opened the door and patted down the bound men inside the vehicle.

I walked over to the Longdyke brothers, who were now busying themselves by removing scalps and what appeared to be ears and noses.

“Hey fellas.” The brothers stopped to look at me. “Thank you. I don’t know where you two came from. But thank you for your help.”

Bobby, the shorter of the two, gave me a big toothless grin. Then he stood up straight and stuck out his blood-covered hand. “No worries, Boss. Meh pleasure.”

I took his hand and shook it. The slick but sticky, slightly warm blood was now covering my hand. Cliff was standing just behind Bobby. He apparently had his own gigantic bowie knife as well. I extended my hand to him. He just looked puzzled for a moment, then let out a howl. “Yeeee... aahhh!” He shoved his bloodied carving tool in his belt next to his revolver and shook my hand with a fierce grip. “You alright there, white-bread!”

“Trophies?” It was an obvious question, but I wasn’t sure how to keep the conversation going.

Cliff smiled and returned to his gruesome task, but Bobby kept smiling. “Yea Boss. Our Daddy got him some trophies back in the Vietnam. This be our time to get our own.”

I was at a loss. I just smiled and nodded. “Copy that. Hey Bobby, can I ask you a favor?”

“Nah, don’t do no favors, Boss Man. But we could do some trading, yea?” I couldn’t tell if Bobby was grinning or just breathing with his mouth open.

“Alright, what do you want?” This whole spectacle was starting to mix in my mind with what I had just done. I was forcing myself to hold back the vomit that was struggling to free itself.

“Don’t work like that, Boss Man. Whatcha need?” Bobby was breathing with his mouth open.

“I need Mike and Jamie, plus their gear, down here as fast as possible. Can you do that? And what do you want for it?” I stared into the man’s cold eyes. They were smiling back at me.

“Sure, Boss Man, we can do that. No problem. But I want your trophies, and I wanna know sumptin.”

I raised my eyebrows at the words, “your trophies”. Then it hit me. The men I killed, the five men... He wanted to mutilate their bodies as well. “Done. Those men back there are yours. What’s your question?”

Bobby’s smile grew wider. I could see he still had blackened molars, with what looked like greening yellow plaster caked around them. “Why you want us to help you do this? Why’d you do this?”

“That’s two questions... not one.”

“HAAA sheet, you right Boss Man. But we blood kin now, so you can tell Bobby. I ain’t gonna tell no one... Meh, maybe Cliff, but that boy’s head is all wrong.”

I smiled at that. “Okay.” Bobby went still, like a statue. He simply focused on my words. “They threatened my family.”

Something in Bobby’s eyes hardened for a moment. He looked around at the carnage surrounding us, up to where the two men with rifles still watched us and behind me to the five dead men I had personally killed just moments before. He looked to my Expedition where Matt was checking the breathing of the two bound men who now laid out unconscious on the pavement.

“What-cha gone do with those?” Bobby asked as he nodded his head toward the bound, and now gagged, men.

I looked Bobby dead in the eye. “I am going to kill them slowly and painfully.”

Bobby’s eyes twinkled back at me. “Those men threaten your woman, your littlins... you do all this?” Bobby’s whole face lit up. “I like you white-bread... you good people. Cliff and me, we can go help those other boys down.” Bobby pulled a giant revolver and massive bowie knife from his belt and set them on the ground. He then called out for his brother, who did the same. The pair took off across the bridge, to the sheer 20 foot walls of stone on either side of the road. Then, like some kind of supernatural goat-creature, they each scaled the face of their respective rock walls. In what felt like moments, they were on the ridiculously steep mountain side. Both moving like animals or those shiny vampires from those crappy books turned crappy movies. It was unbelievable. In just a few minutes, they had both reached their intended points. It only took them a few minutes to traverse the steep mountainside and return with backpacks. And then they went right back up. The second time they came down, they were each carrying a 30lb, .50cal Barrett rifle. The third trip up and back, they had enormous backpacks on. Then I could see Jamie and Mike on their respective Mountain sides, trying to just come down the steep terrain. They were slipping and cursing, holding on to trees as they went. It took the Rorschach brothers longer to just come down once then it did for the Longdykes to go up and back 3 times.

Bobby and Cliff stuck around at the base of the rock wall, guiding Mike and Jamie on what to do to get down safely. Matt came up beside me and whispered. "Are they some kind of mutants?"

I shook my head and whispered back. "No brother, they are native Appalachians."

Matt exhaled a long, "Fuuuuccckkk... Appalachian indeed."

"Yup... Hey, I am gonna check on the semi. Do me a favor and get the brothers to help you round up all firearms, unless the Longdykes want some as well, then that's cool. But do not let them have any explosives or the belt feds. These hillbillies are dangerous enough without that kinda stuff."

Matt nodded his silent agreement and went over to the two sets of brothers while I went to check out the semi-truck. The driver was dead, his head blown all over the inside of the cab. I grabbed his body and, with an absent regard for the dead, tossed the corpse to the ground. I looked around the cab and my heart sank. I had hoped I would be able to figure out how to drive the beast, but I wasn't even sure how to start it. I closed the door and climbed down from the rig. We needed to move this thing somehow. We had to get down the mountain swiftly. Those gunshots wouldn't go unnoticed. It would be nice to bring this big rig and all the supplies that were inside, but at this moment I would settle for just moving it. I walked back over to the guys, who were rounding up the last of the rifles, ammo, and miscellaneous kit from the dead men.

"We should grab their boots as well." My ears were ringing from the shooting and my voice sounded small. I could tell by the look on the faces of the guys, their ears were also ringing. I pointed to one of the dead man's feet, then knelt and proceeded to remove his boots. They all understood and began removing the dead men's boots.

Once we had finished the task at hand, we regrouped by my Expedition.

"What now?" Jamie asked.

"We need to figure out how to move the semi-truck." I nodded in the direction of the truck. "I had hoped I could figure out how to move the fucking thing but no joy."

Mike spoke up, "I can drive a semi-truck."

I was shocked, as were the rest of the guys, judging by their expressions. Jamie asked, "When did you learn how to do that?"

Mike laughed, "Remember Carol? Yeah, she taught me."

I just shook my head. “I feel like there is an entertaining story there, but we don’t have the time. Mike, do you think you can get this beast down the mountain and to the High School?”

“No problem Bro.” Mike and Jamie headed toward the semi, and a few moments later, I heard the truck roar to life.

“Any of the Humvees salvageable?” I looked at Matt.

“Nope, they are proper fucked. On the Brightside, we have a shitload more guns, ammo, and explosives... So there is that.”

I nodded. “That is good news. Where are the Longdykes?” I asked as I looked around.

“No clue bro. They wandered off and kinda vanished. It’s a little spooky.” Matt said.

“I agree. Let’s get the fuck out of here.” We folded down the back seats of the vehicle and secured our passengers.

Matt asked, “Should we take the hoods off now? Don’t we need them alive?”

“Meh, they will be alright, it takes several minutes to really take hold. When we get to town we will pull off the hoods.” At that, Mike pulled the Semi into the gas station parking lot to circle around and head back down the mountain. I pulled out of the parking lot, doing my best not to look at the bodies and smoking vehicles. Mike followed me down to the high school parking lot. When we pulled in, a couple of the neighborhood volunteers greeted us. They were guarding the food depot.

I exited my vehicle, and they visibly relaxed. “Hey fellas, I need you to do me a favor and find Josh and Ryan. I need them here ASAP, but no radios.”

They had a puzzled look but nodded and jogged off toward Josh’s house. Mike parked the truck next to the loading docks. Then he and Jamie jumped out and came over to Matt and I.

Jamie stretched his back and said, “So, all done?”

I chuckled, “Not even close. We need to make sure Jack and his deputies were able to handle the guys that were left at the station... And we need to secure these fuckers somewhere.”

Jamie just took a deep breath and nodded. “Well, shit.”

Mike chimed in, “What’s the plan?”

I cracked my neck, “Same plan... you and Jamie with the Barretts, from distance... Matt and I close in.”

Jamie shrugged. "If it works, why fuck with it?"

I smiled, "Exactly... When Josh and Ryan get here, I am gonna have them take these fuck-wads and put them somewhere secure. When I get back, I plan on having a more in-depth conversation with them."

Matt spoke up, "Excuse me." He walked to the back of the SUV and vomited.

Jamie said, "I already did that in the woods."

Mike responded, "Me too."

"It's kinda universal... Strange thing, but this will be the last time it happens like this... trust me. You guys were amazing, all of you." I said with as much conviction as I could muster.

"The Longdykes... what the fuck was that?" Matt asked as he pulled himself together at the back of the SUV.

I pursed my lips in thought before answering. I noticed Mike and Jamie waiting for my answer. Apparently, they were also unsettled by what they saw. "They were necessary. Do yourselves a favor and don't think about it, or at least, try not to. I know what you guys are thinking and you are right, they are a problem. But they are our problem, and I have no doubt they will fuck up anyone trying to come at us from that direction. We have an understanding." I hoped.

Jamie was shaking his head. "You have an understanding with them. I believe that. They do not have one with us. I saw the way they looked at us. Those boys are unnatural. Something is broken or way too inbred going on there. I don't know what it is, and I don't want to. I watched them through my scope. I saw what they did to those guys."

I looked at Jamie. "So, you believe those guys were, now let me get this right, '*way too inbred*'? That leaves me with a serious question." Jamie just cocked his eyebrow and starred at me. I smiled wide right back at him and asked, "What is the right amount of inbred? Can someone not be inbred enough?"

Everyone burst out laughing. Jamie flipped me the bird and said, "Go fuck yourself Henry."

When the moment had passed and the laughing had subsided, Jamie said, "All joking aside... you know I'm right."

I nodded, "I figured, but they saved Matt and Me. Understand this bro, we were very lucky. We miracled that shit. A large part of that miracle was due to the Longdykes. Yes, they are dangerous. Yes, you probably should

have shot them when you had the chance. But that was then, and this is now. That moment is gone, so we need to cut it loose... Alright?"

Everyone agreed, and we stood in the sun's warmth with the semi-truck blocking the cold winter wind in silence, waiting on Josh and Ryan. We waited another 20 minutes before they showed up and we could hand off our prisoners. I made Josh agree no one would open the semi until we returned. With that set-in motion, we all climbed into my Expedition and headed toward Kingston. With any luck, the Sheriff's task went down without an issue.

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Chapter 14

Heading down the road with the windows down and the heater going full blast, Matt spoke first. “So, what’s the plan on this Kemosabe?” Mike and Jamie leaned forward to better hear the conversation.

I looked at the guys, then back to the road. “Simple, we let Mike and Jamie out on the other side of the bridge. We will slow to a crawl and try to reach the Sherriff by radio. If we can’t, we will drive in and pray that Mike and Jamie are in a good shooting position. Maybe our luck will hold, and we won’t die.”

Mike spoke up. “You call that a plan?”

I shrugged. “At the very least, it’s a solid outline.” I heard Matt chuckle over the sound of the heater and the wind as we drove.

Jamie said, “Well, it’s a hell of a lot better than that Roadrunner-Wiley-coyote-shit plan we just executed.”

I looked at Jamie in my rearview mirror. “Hey, it wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t great, but it wasn’t that bad.”

Matt looked over at me, “You said it yourself bro, we miracled that shit.”

I opened my mouth to respond, then promptly shut it. They were right, this was a shit plan. I shook my head. “We have no choice. We have to move first, in case the sheriff failed. We cannot give them an opportunity to regroup and react. We will get fucked good and hard ... no lube involved.”

The guys just settled back and pointed their weapons out the windows. We were driving into another shit storm and it wasn’t even noon. This was going to be a long day.

As we came to the Kingston bridge, I slowed to a crawl and let out the Rorschach brothers. They swiftly exited and hustled to the tree line, all while carrying their thirty-pound Barret fifty caliber rifles and ridiculously heavy backpacks that contained loaded magazines for the rifles. Once they hit the tree line, they vanished into the thicket.

I grabbed the small BoaFeng Radio and keyed the frequency we had been using to communicate with the sheriff’s department. “Henry calling for the Sheriff... you there, Sherriff?”

Matt was staring at me, “Why are you using your name?”

“Matt, they knew about my wife and kids... they know who we are. If this thing goes sideways, the element of surprise will probably be a moot point. If the Sheriff couldn’t do his part, they will already know it was us

that hit their convoy and killed their men. Everything is on the line right now.”

Matt slowly shook his head. “Fuck. I didn’t think of it that way.”

I took in a deep breath. “Yeah bro, it’s all fucked.”

We continued creeping toward the Sheriff’s department. We could only pray Mike and Jamie were able to hustle the 10th of a mile through the woods to get a decent shooting position before we slowly rolled into the Sheriff’s parking lot.

We crept around the last turn in the road. In moments, we would be back at the Sheriff’s department. I could only hope the Rorschachs were in place and ready. In the twenty minutes it took us to roll here, we made six attempts to contact the Sheriff’s department. All attempts failed. I was nervous. I pressed the door-unlock button and opened the SUV’s door just a crack. If we were to take fire, I needed to be able to move as swiftly as possible to a better firing position. The best option was the wood line.

Moments later, we rolled into what was essentially downtown, with the massive courthouse on the right and the Sheriff’s department and jail on the left.

Both buildings had smoke trailing out from various windows. There were three firetrucks and two ambulances that I could see.

“Looks like something happened.” Matt commented on the situation before us.

I responded solemnly, “Yep... I wonder who won?”

Matt shook his head like a dog trying to shed water from its coat. Then he took a couple of deep breaths and slowly exhaled. “Okie dokie... let’s do this.”

I slowly nodded my head and hit the gas. We sped in and stopped just to the right of one of the ambulances. I put the vehicle in park, and we jumped out with rifles at low ready. I didn’t know what was going on yet, and I sure as hell didn’t want to find out the hard way. Sadly, this situation was beyond our ability to be cautious. As we approached the rear of the ambulance, I fell into my training. I compressed myself and brought my rifle up to a high ready and paused before rounding the corner of the large vehicle. I was two feet away from the side of the ambulance when I felt a squeeze to the back of my thigh. I exploded forward and around the ambulance, I button hooked left, trusting Matt to continue right. I moved ahead called out, “BLUE, BLUE, BLUE,BLUE...” continuously. I had run some training for the

Sheriff's department deputies and their ragtag S.W.A.T. team. The safety word was blue, always to be called out upon exiting or entering any live situation. The idea is to give the Deputies an audible warning that a friendly party is coming in or out. Hopefully they kept that practice up. If not, this could result in a friendly fire situation.

I could hear Matt calling out "blue" as I continued to move forward, AK still in the high ready position. I saw movement at the front door to the Sheriff's department. "HEY.. BLUE, BLUE, BLUE... HEY THERE AT THE DOOR ... BLUE, BLUE, BLUE." As I got closer, I recognized who it was at the doorway, and I slowed my approach. I also noticed the Matt had stopped calling out. I knew this meant he would flank my position and periodically checking behind us so no one could sneak up and surprise us, as I stayed on point and moved towards the door. I called out to the young man, "NATE, IS THAT YOU? BLUE, BLUE, BLUE... NATE, YOU OKAY? BLUE, BLUE, BLUE... NATE IT'S HENRY."

The door swung open, and I saw Nate. His face was smudged with something black, and his nose and ears were bleeding. I slowed my forward motion and took in his appearance. He was holding an AR at low ready and looked dazed. I got closer and continued to shout, "NATE, YOU GOOD?"

Nate finally seemed to come out of it to let out a deep breath, and his shoulders slumped. "Hey, Henry."

I was now within a few feet of him. "You look like shit. What the fuck happened here?"

Nate gave a hard laugh and smiled. "It went to hell. Right after you left, we surprised the rest of the men left here, disarmed them, and put them in the general population holding. We figured that would be easy. Fuck, we were wrong."

I didn't understand, "If you had them in holding... what went wrong?"

Matt had taken up a position to my right and was trying to look in all directions at once.

Nate coughed up a wad of spit and blood. "We didn't think one of our own would turn on us. That piece of shit Swindle, fucking turn coat. Let them and the rest of the fuckers in holding, out. Then gave them their guns back. We have been outnumbered and trying to contain them for the last hour."

I was stunned, "Fuck... fuck!"

Nate nodded, “Fuck.”

I shook off the awe of the situation. “Okay, that explains why the Sheriff’s department and jail are burning. What’s up with the courthouse? Actually, I have a few more questions. Where is Jack? Where are the firefighters and EMTs?”

Nate rolled his neck and let his rifle hang by its sling. “Jack was shot by that piece-of-herpes-shit-fuck-face, former deputy Swindle. Thankfully, he was wearing his vest. So, other than some bruised ribs and sore muscles in his back, he will be fine. The firefighters put out the courthouse fire that Swindle started, and the EMTs helped Jack and a couple of other guys that were hurt. Then we gave them all guns and deputized them. They are still fighting in the jail.”

I was stunned. “Holy shit, I knew that guy was an asshole, but fucking hell... He shot Jack in the back?” Nate nodded in the affirmative. “And he armed the prisoners?” Nate again nodded in the affirmative. “Okay, so everyone is still fighting... then why are you out here?”

Nate turned side to side, stretching his back. “Those fuckers got a hold of some flash bangs, duck taped them to some kind of cleaning chemical can. I don’t know what it was, but it made one hell of a boom and the biggest fireball I have ever witnessed. I was just at the edge of the blast... fucked me up. Jack sent me out here to watch for you or the rest of the feds you left with this morning... I don’t see them, so that means...”

I answered his question. “It means they’re nothing to worry about anymore... So where are the rest of these fuckers held up?”

Nate motioned with his head to the building. “We pushed them back into general housing, but the glass is bulletproof and there is only one way in and out. Luckily, it’s open housing, so no individual cells. But we are out of flash bangs and O.C. spray and tear gas... We can’t go in because they only have to watch the one door. It’s a shit show.”

I took in all the information, then I had an idea. “Nate, do you have any old metal gas cans around back?”

Nate nodded in the affirmative.

I smiled. “Good, I need you to fill up a couple and bring them here.” I turned to Matt. “Matt, do me a favor and go grab my breaching kit.”

Matt looked at me questioningly, then nodded and jogged off to the SUV. Nate did likewise to retrieve the gas can. Twenty minutes later, I had my barricade problem solver ready to go. Matt and Nate had almost giddy

expressions on their faces. “Nate, if you would, please show me to Jack and the barricaded men?”

Nate smiled and walked through the front doors into the building. Matt and I followed. A few minutes later, we were at the back of the jail where firefighters, EMTs, and regular people were all armed, watching a bunch of feds and prisoners with rifles on the other side of a wall of bulletproof glass. There was only one door in the middle of that wall of glass. Everyone looked drained and exhausted on my side. On the other, the feds and pedophiles were exuberant. The only prisoners Jack continued to hold were those with serious crimes, like rape, murder, pedophilia, and the like.

I saw Jack standing with a group of deputies. “Sheriff, need some help?”

Jack turned to look and smiled when he saw me, “It’s about time you came to help. We have been having all this fun, figured it wasn’t fair. So, we decided to wait on you.”

I laughed, “Is that so?”

Jack winced as he turned to face me, then quickly hid his discomfort. “As far as you know...”

I laughed again. “Funny it doesn’t look like that to me.”

Jack confidently walked past the ragged-out men and women and shook my hand. I could see the pain and pleading in his eyes. “To be honest, Henry, we are in a bit of a pickle... Any ideas?” he asked as he eyed the two gas cans in my hands.

I smiled, “You could say that... But first, is there anyone in there you need alive?”

Jack’s face went hard, then he closed his eyes and shook his head “no”.

I nodded, “Good. I need you to shut the water off to that room. Then we need to lock that door. Can we do that?”

Jack nodded and said to the two men he was talking to before we walked up, “Y’all go kill the water.” They nodded and hurried off.

I looked at Jack. “Do you have any cold packs, the medical kind? Also, do you have any more of that flour left, say a fifty-pound bag? Oh, and detergent.. laundry detergent, the powdered kind?”

Jack looked at me confused. “Yes, we have cold packs here, and I’m sure there are some in the ambulances outside. We also have a fifty-pound bag of flour we can spare. We have industrial detergent in the prisoners’ laundry. May I ask why?”

I nodded. “Sure, I am going to make a bomb and kill everyone in that room.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “But, ...” Jack just shook his head, closed his eyes, and then nodded. “I get it. How big will it be?”

I shrugged, “Fuck if I know. At the very least, the blast will give us the upper hand by stunning them and we can go in... At worst, building caves in on them... Before you argue, there is no other way. No one is coming to help.” I got closer to Jack and whispered, “If you would have just shot these fuckers, this wouldn’t have happened.”

The Sheriff’s eyes went hard, then he relaxed and looked away. With a whisper he said, “You’re right. Jesus save my soul, but you’re right.”

Ten minutes later, I had all my components – gallons of gasoline, a shitload of industrial powdered detergent, fifty pounds of flour, and 20 instant cold packs. I then removed the key to make it work – a Firepen, a thermite rod with a special match to ignite the thermite stick. When lit, the stick can burn through almost any chain or steel lock in seconds. It will have no trouble with the thin, sheet metal of the gas can. It took me another fifteen minutes to assemble the bomb. “Alright, this is heavier than I was expecting. I need something with four wheels, like a skateboard or furniture dolly.”

Everyone just looked at each other. Then Nate walked over to the large trash can in the hallway, picking it up and revealing a strange little 4 wheeled trash can holder.

“Prefect Nate, good work! Now when we wheel this out into the hallway, they will know something is up. This is the part of the show that suggests everyone who doesn’t really need to be here should leave. Things are about to get complicated and you will have to learn to carry what is about to happen, on your conscience. There is no shame in leaving. Y’all put up a hell of a fight, but this is different.”

Jack stood up and said, “Henry is right. This about to get ugly. This is a burden you don’t need to carry.”

One of the firefighters I didn’t know spoke up, “Hell, Jack, we came this far. We fought beside you. We ain’t leaving till these sum’bitches are dead.” There was a round of nods and “hell-yeah”s.

I placed my makeshift bomb on the little trash can roller, then grabbed the other five-gallon gas can I left out to the side. I walked over to the steel door with the gas can. As I did, one of the fuckers shot at me. The glass

stopped it, but it made me duck. When I looked to see who shot at me, I saw a gangly ass-wipe in prison clothes laughing his ass off, as were a few others. I stood back up with my can and continued to walk to the door. But now I hoisted the forty-pound gas can and started banging it on the glass as I went. I could catch glimpses of the men on the other side, some were yelling, others had a look of realization. When I got to the steel door, I could hear the pinging of bullets hitting the other side of the door. The large steel door had a small port that could be slid to the side, allowing guards and prisoners to talk. Other than that opening, the door was air tight. I partially slid the door open, and gunshots immediately rang out, with sounds of the banging bullets on the door. I couldn't imagine how loud the shots must have been in the confined space on the other side.

I lifted the gas can, stuck the nozzle through the crack, and emptied the five gallons of gas into the room. I heard someone shout, "Stop shooting! You want to burn us alive?" A moment later, the can was empty. I closed the sliding view port and set the can down to retrieve my bomb. As I walked, there was a calm in the building. I could feel everyone on both sides watching me.

I retrieved my humble creation and wheeled the one hundred plus pound creation to the steel door. This time, no one took potshots at me. As I got to the steel door, I left my device just to the right of the door. Since it swung out and to the left, I would need someone to open it while I rolled it in. Then they would have to shut the door and haul ass.

"Alright, I do not know how big this blast will be. We need to move down the hall or into these side rooms. FYI... my plan is to run to that room directly adjacent from here and hide behind that cinderblock wall. So please, no one get in my way. I need two volunteers, one man to open the door and one to shoot into the room, while I push it in. We close the door and run for cover. Who is willing to help?"

Nate and Matt stepped forward. "Okay then, Sheriff, I need you and the rest of these men ready to run in once it goes off. Worst-case scenario, the men inside are only briefly stunned."

Jack nodded, "Yall hear that? Once that goes off, we need to rush the room and put a round into anyone alive. This is not an arrest or rescue. If anyone has a problem with that, it's okay. Just stay back and if someone gets hurt, help them... Does everyone know what they are doing?"

The group of what appeared to be about sixteen men nodded in unison. To everyone's credit or stupidity, no one left the detention facility. Everyone found cover and hunkered down no more than 50ft from the steel access door. As Nate, Matt, and I got ready, the men on the other side of the glass went berserk.

I looked at Matt and Nate, "Nate, I want you on the door. Matt, you're the shooter. It's going to take me a second to get this thing lit." They both nodded.

Nate got into his position by the door. Matt was a few feet back with his rifle at high ready. I double checked my device. Everything looked ready, everything except the Firepen. I had it taped to the top of the gas can, with just a mm or two sticking out. To get the pen to ignite, I needed to hold the special match that burned at over 1400-degrees Fahrenheit, to the solid state thermite for a second or two. Problem was, too much could happen in those seconds. Then it hit me, the solution to this problem. I would tape the match to the top of the Firepen. I just had to ignite the match, then that would give me at least a two maybe three second delay before igniting the Firepen.

I made my adjustments to my igniter, "Y'all ready?"

Matt nodded, but Nate asked, "What's the deal with the flour?"

"Seriously?" I asked.

Nate tilted his head, "Just curious."

I laughed, "When the gas mixture ignites, it should burst into a fireball. That will disperse the flour into the air, then it will ignite and burn the air. Happy now?"

Nate had a surprised look, "Really?"

I let out a breath, but before I could say anything, Matt chimed in. "Hey there Nate, how about we have this discussion later or you can go to the library and look up grain silo fires and explosions. In the meantime, I would appreciate it if we could get this sketchy shit over with."

Nate had a sheepish look. "Yeah, sorry, I'm ready."

I nodded. "Good. On three... Nate, you open the door. Matt, you start firing and please don't shoot me."

Matt and Nate nodded. I looked through the glass. They knew something was coming and were reading their positions.

"One..." Nate unlocked the door and Matt shouldered his rifle. "Two..." I took the strike pad and placed it against the match head. "Three..." I ignited the special match and it glowed white, Nate jerked open the door

and Matt opened fire into the room full of feds and criminals. I shoved the IED as hard as I could hoping it would make to the back wall before detonating. Nate swiftly closed the door as the men inside opened fire and no longer cared about the potential of igniting the gas on the floor.

We ran as fast as our feet would carry us to the janitor's closet directly adjacent to the large steel door that we had just sent a bomb through. The seconds ticked by like hours, I couldn't help but wonder if I had been overconfident and done something wrong or that somehow the men inside had disabled it.

I needn't have worried. The I.E.D. went off with a woop, followed by a loud BOOM! The building shook, and the lights went out. I could smell burning chemicals and flesh. The air smelled like I had gone to a pork BBQ at a chemical plant.

Matt said, "It worked."

"Fuck yeah it did." Nate Agreed.

My face was wet. I put a hand to my mouth and nose. "My nose is bleeding. Twenty, one-pound packs of ammonium nitrate may have been... a bit much." I laughed.

"Where did you get that?" Nate asked.

"You know those instant icepacks? Well, the key ingredient is ammonium nitrate." I said as I sat up and located my rifle.

Nate just shook his head. "How many Federal Watch lists were you on?" he joked.

I smiled back at him, "All of them... Now grab your rifle, we have shit to do."

Chapter 15

Nate, Matt, and I got up off the floor, exited the closet, and surveyed the damage.

“I may have gotten carried away.” I said as I looked at the large sheets of bulletproof glass that had been blown out of their frames. The heavy steel door that controlled access to the large room was gone. I looked around but couldn’t locate it. “Where the fuck is the door?”

“I bet it somewhere through that hole.” Matt said while motioning with his head to a gigantic hole in the wall, right next to the small closet we had ducked into.

I let out a long breath. “We got really lucky. That door turned into some kind of E.F.P. That was close.”

Matt slowly nodded his agreement. “I think I shit my pants.”

“Me too brother,” I said as I tried to shake the ringing from my ears and the fog from my mind. That’s when I finally noticed the crying and moaning coming from the blown-out room. “Rifles up boys... There is hard shit still to do.”

Matt and Nate formed up behind me and we entered the burning room through the hole that only kinda sorta resembled what was once a doorway. Everything that could burn was burning, including people. The smell of burned pork BBQ was stronger in here. I saw a man that looked like one of the Feds. He was unburnt and dazed. I did not know how he survived that blast, and I really didn’t care. I raised my rifle and put two rounds in his chest. He collapsed where he stood.

“Put two in everyone, even if they’re burned to a crisp. We’re not taking any more chances.” I stalked forward. I knew Matt and Nate were with me when I heard their rifles bark. I stayed focused on my area, trusting them to handle theirs. We made quick work of the 4 survivors we found. We put two rounds in every person, dead or alive, whether they were burnt, bleeding, breathing, or missing limbs. We didn’t discriminate. After Nate put two rounds in the last body we found, we headed back to the blown-out doorway. I saw the Sheriff and two firefighters with rifles just standing in the doorway.

“If y’all don’t mind, I would like to go outside and vomit... smells like charred pork and burning chemicals.” I said as we approached the men. They all just stepped aside as we walked past and in moments, we were

breathing cold, fresh air outside. It had gotten colder, at least I think it did. My hands and face were numb. I turned to see Nate vomit in the road as he held himself up against the ambulance.

He had one hand on the vehicle, the other rubbing his face and buzz cut hair like it was burning.

“You okay Nate?” I asked.

“Yeah, Henry... I... I just need a couple minutes.” He was still rubbing his face and hair.

Matt said, “No worries, man. I would be right there with you if I hadn’t already puked my guts out earlier. No shame in this man. It’s a normal reaction. It will pass.” Nate nodded at that.

Matt motioned with his head over to the side. I followed his lead.

“What the fuck?” Matt whispered.

I nodded in understanding. “I only ever read about making those things... It seemed to have a little more *punch* than I expected. We got lucky. If that door had hit the room we were hiding in, we would be as dead as those fuckers.”

Matt exhaled a long breath. “Better to be lucky than good any day.”

I took a sip from my camelback to wash the taste of chemicals and brunt flesh that had somehow permeated my mouth. I swished it around and spit it out; it helped, but not much.

Matt looked at me, “Good thinking.” He took a sip and spit it out to try and rid himself of the foul taste the air in that room left in our mouths.

“I didn’t know you threw up this morning,” I said.

Matt went still, “Yeah, well... It has been a hell of a day. I didn’t think it was necessary to bring up.”

I nodded. “It doesn’t get any better, but you will learn to carry it. I promise.”

Matt nodded in response.

“Henry, what the fuck was that? Everyone is dead.” The sheriff shouted from the front of the building.

Matt and Nate stood and readied themselves immediately. “Easy boys, he is finally understanding... things are different and guilt is heavy.”

I didn’t respond to the Sheriff immediately. Instead, I made a stupid face that I hoped expressed, “what?” Then I cocked my head to the side. I had an idea of what was going on, but I needed him to come out from behind the

vehicles. I needed a clear line-of-sight for the Rorschachs in the wood line. Thankfully, the Sheriff obliged.

“Listen here you son-of-a-bitch, there is a room full of dead men in there. The whole jail is filled with smoke, and anything that could burn is burning, including bodies!” He was red faced as he said this.

I nodded, “Well, good thing you have a couple firefighters here then.” I gave him a thumbs up and turned to walk to my SUV.

“Wait one God damned minute... You are gonna have to answer for this.” He was foaming a little at the corners of his mouth. He didn’t like me turning my back on him. He didn’t like it so much that he walked out beyond his men. This put him between Nate, Matt, and me. Nate and Matt were between the men and the Sheriff. Jack was now all alone.

Now that he was separated from his support, I closed in on him. I caught him off guard, and before he could back away, I was in his face. “Answer to who, motherfucker? You?” I stalked around him like a wolf circling a lamb. “You and what army? You best think this shit through, Jack. I have been responsible for the deaths of at least twenty-eight men. That’s just today. So, who in the fuck do you think you are talking to?” I continued to circle him. I could see the realization of this situation crossing his face. “Here’s a better question. Why in the fuck are you holding prisoners? For what fucking purpose? To what end?” I stopped in front him, making sure to stare him directly in the eye.

He fumbled for a minute, “I was waiting till things normalized... then I would..”

I cut him off, “You would do fucking what? Have the D.A. press charges? What world do you think we are living in right now?” I began circling him again, trying to keep my rage in control. “You asked me to set up an ambush and murder seventeen men. I did it. I upheld my end of the bargain. Your end was to put a fucking bullet in the Swindles and kill those fed boys. Right? I didn’t misunderstand our little deal, did I? Oh, and by *deal*, I mean you were leveraging threat of force against me and mine. That about sum it up, Jack?” I stopped in front of him again.

He was visibly uncomfortable. “I... I am a man of the law. I couldn’t just...”

I cut him off again, “You couldn’t what? You couldn’t get your hands dirty? You clearly had no issue coercing me to do it, but what now? The law... you’re a man of the law, you say? I told you exactly what I was

going to do in there. I warned all your men, I gave everyone a chance to leave to get out.. to not have to see. You ... yourself told them what was coming,, but now the reality of it a little too much?" I started pacing again. I was struggling to hold myself back. "I say you are too soft for the times, Jack. I say when push came to shove, you blinked. It is easy to tell people to do things to someone far away. Having other men do hard shit you never have to see and never have to deal with personally has made it a little too easy for you Jack. It's time to get dirty or step the fuck aside." I stopped in front of him and stared him in the eye, "Men like you, are not made for times like these. You are indeed a sheepdog Jack... and that's the problem. You need a shepherd... I told you exactly WHAT I WAS GOING TO DO IN THERE... you were fine then... what changed?"

Jack's eyes grew with fire, "Damn straight! Who else will keep the wolves at bay?"

I couldn't help but smile, "Jack, men like you don't even know what the wolves look like. Look at me, Jack. I am the wolf." Jack's fire was gone and now replaced with confusion. "You know, I always hated those animal analogies." I let the anger slip from my voice. I knew exactly how to handle this. "I am the wolf, Jack. I am independent of the shepherd, flock, any of that. I am loyal, territorial, self-reliant and very, very dangerous. I don't need protection. I don't need help. I need my pack and fuck everyone else. The sheepdogs are just as weak as the sheep. Hell, what's the difference if they both need the shepherd."

Jack just stood there silently, staring.

"Now you came out here with a bit of bluster... maybe thinking you would intimidate me to somehow gain the upper hand. Possibly even try to arrest me... I get it, I do... guilt is a hell of a thing. Let be clear with you. That will not be happening. The devil himself couldn't keep me from my family, let alone you. Now I need you to answer a serious question, Jack." I stared at the Sheriff for a long minute. "Deputy Swindle got away along with his uncle and grandfather, and you have no idea where those fuckers are, do you?"

Jack took a second before answering. "That's right... I fucked up. I fucked this whole-thing up."

I briefly turned my back to the Sheriff. As I rubbed my eyes, I tried my best to push the thought of stabbing him in the throat and watching him bleed out slowly from my mind. A few seconds later, I turned back around

to face him. This time I didn't bother to look him in the face. Instead, I looked behind him to the rag tag group he was able to assemble. It was impressive.

"Jack, I want you to come to the high school tonight about 7pm, the back parking lot. If you still want my help and support... I am going to give you a chance to earn it."

"If I don't?" Jack asked, not confrontational, but like he wanted to know all his options.

"Then you will turn over control to young Nate back there. Understand, this is not a request. I have the manpower and firepower to back this up." I said coldly.

"I have a bunch of armed men here, you think..."

Before the Sheriff could finish, I raised my hand in the air then made a fist. A loud metal on metal ping followed by a thunders boom filled the air and Jack stopped talking. "7pm Jack. I promise this isn't an ambush. You will be safe. You have my word." With one last look to see Jack's response, he nodded, and I walked away to my SUV.

I called out, "Come on Nate... You're with me. Nate didn't hesitate and followed Matt to the Expedition. We all got in and started down the road to the pickup location to grab the Rorschach brothers. Once they were in, I debriefed them to what happened and to what my plan was. I needed them for another day. Thankfully they consented.

Thirty minutes later, we were at my house. The guys were on the third-floor re-loading mags and kit. Matt carried my gear up to reload and double check. I sat on the living room floor with my wild monkeys climbing all over me. They were laughing, telling poop stories, and trying to tell fart jokes. Occasionally, I would close my eyes and lay back, forcing myself to hold back the tears.

"Daddy? Are you okay? Do you have a booboo?" My sweet Lily asked me.

I noticed the other two were now watching me. I couldn't stop the flow of water from my eyes, "Daddy is just really happy to see you little monkeys, and your fart jokes are so funny!"

So, they are happy tears?" Paul asked.

"Yes son. They are happy tears. Daddy is so very happy." With that Paul and Lily both hugged my neck hard. I looked for Evie, but she was off to the side with a pouty face. "And what's the matter with you?"

“I’m bumblebee, not a monkey.” I reached out and brought her into the group hug.

“Okay, Bumblebee. Paul and Lily are the stinky monkeys! You are my Bumblebee.” Her face lit up with joy and the other two just started giggling and making monkey sounds. My soul felt so much better.

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Chapter 16

It was 7:10pm and Matt, Nate, and I were in the high school parking lot. Jack was late.

“What do we do if he doesn’t show?” Nate asked.

I shook my head from side to side, “He’ll show.” That’s when we heard the distinctive sound of a Humvee a few blocks away.

As it pulled into the parking lot, I noticed it had been shot up a bit. It came to a stop and Jack hopped out of the passenger side door. I waved and walked over to him. I extended my hand, and he took it with a firm grip. We shook. “Jack, glad you made it. Y’all follow us.”

He nodded and turned to get back in his newly appropriated Humvee. I got in my Expedition and Matt already had the beast started. Nate was in the back. We headed down the street to talk to our prisoners. A moment later, our vehicles stopped by a little white house on the corner of two silent streets. Our doors slamming closed, echoed in the night.

Jack got out with three of his men. All three had rifles. I couldn’t help but laugh inside a bit. The dark humor felt good. It had been a terrible day that would soon get worse. I needed a chuckle, even if it was only to myself.

“Jack, I need you and your men to lay down your weapons.” I said as calmly as I could.

One of the men cocked his head to the side and spit on the ground. Beyond that, no one moved. I shook my head slowly from side to side and raised my hand in the air.

“It’s been a long fucking day, fellas. I will not repeat myself. But you have until I get to three. Then you will all die... One...”

The man who spit spoke up, “Bullshit, you wouldn’t dare...”

I cut him off, “This will be the third time today I have used this set up. My men, who are hidden and have suppressed AR 10s, are about to pop your grapes. Two...”

Jack spoke up, “Fine. Henry. Fine! We will comply, but this is no way to treat friends. We came here to get information and work together.”

I laughed out loud. “You came here because I told you to. That’s also why you brought men who were not at the sheriff’s department earlier. You also know that I’m not bluffing. On three, any man holding a weapon will be dead.”

The Sheriff tossed his handgun on the ground. The three men he brought with him laid down their rifles. I took a mental note that none of them had sidearms. That was a very interesting piece of information, and it spoke volumes about what was going on at the county level.

“Excellent decision fellas.” I said as I lowered my hand. “The sheriff, these two gentlemen, and I will go inside. Should you get curios and come inside, you will be shot. If you attempt to pick up your weapons, you will be shot. If you attempt to get in the Humvee, you will be shot... Do you three understand?” They didn’t answer. “I will take that as a ‘yes’.” I turned and walked into the familiar home. It seemed like a lifetime ago since we had rescued those kids from this hell. Somehow, everyday felt like a year. Time seemed to be slowing down. Logically, I knew that wasn’t true. That it was just my perception of time and events, but it didn’t help how I felt.

As I seamlessly navigated my way through the house to the basement door, the men who followed me were silent. I understood why. It was something about this house, maybe the knowledge of what happened here or what I did to the people who lived here. I don’t know, maybe there was a trace smell that our ole factory senses could detect – the smell of old blood and death, warning our subconscious of potential danger. I didn’t know, and I didn’t actually want to know. I could feel the burden of what I had to do, of what was in front of me yet again. I couldn’t help but wonder how much more of myself I would destroy tonight. I took several breaths and opened the basement door.

The smell of death and old blood assaulted me, but I walked down the stairs and the others followed silently.

I was happy that the lights were already on. Unfortunately, the lights showed the bloodstains from the previous tenants. Two men were bound with stainless steel zip ties. They were both stripped naked, their clothing most likely cut away. I was happy to see Josh had followed through with my request.

“Why in the hell are they naked?” Jack asked with genuine concern in his voice.

“Josh and some of the local volunteers cut their clothing off,” Matt said.

All four of us were now in the basement. “Nate, do me a favor and head back outside. Maybe try to calm down the three amigos. We don’t need them doing anything stupid. Matt, you should accompany him. It will keep

the Rorschachs from getting twitchy trigger fingers. They have had a hell-of-a day like the rest of us.”

Matt nodded and patted Nate on the arm, “Come on champ, let’s let the grownups talk.”

“But...” Nate protested.

Matt shut him down. “Nate, you don’t want this on you, man. Trust me. Just let Henry do this.”

Nate closed his mouth and walked back up the stairs with Matt. Jack and I were left alone in the basement with two bound, naked, shivering men.

“Jack, I think you’re a good man. I always have.” I looked the Sheriff in the eye, hoping he could tell I was sincere. He gave me a nod of thanks. “That said, Jack, you are not the right man for the job... at least not right now anyway.”

I could see Jack take in a deep breath. “Who exactly made you judge of anything? I don’t remember the election that appointed you God King Savior of the county.”

I smiled back at him, “You made me Judge. You made me Executioner. There really isn’t anything more godlike than the power over life and death, so you made me the God King Savior.” I said with a grin.

“Bullshit and fuck you very much! Who do you think you’re talking to, Henry?” Jack was furious.

“I am talking to someone I respect. Believe it or not, Jack, I meant what I said. I think you are a good man. Sadly, that is the problem. There is no more room in this world for good men. You are weak. You are making decisions based on a value system that doesn’t translate to what we are going through right now. This isn’t an insult, Jack, it a compliment.”

Jack ran his hand through his graying hair and paced the room for a minute, clearly trying to let his anger at my words dissipate.

“Henry, I disagree with what you are saying. I am angry, so maybe we should take a few days, then meet back up to talk again.” Jack turned to the stairs.

“If you walk outside, you and your men are dead. Whoever is left at the station, dead. We deal with this tonight, Jack. You need a dose of the new reality to break you out of your normalcy bias. I need you functional and in an advisory role to the new sheriff.”

Jack laughed, “You threaten me then expect me to help you? FUCK YOU!”

“I don’t expect you to help me, Jack. I hope you will help Nate. Nate is the right guy. He didn’t flinch or turn away when we went into the jail. He didn’t hesitate for an instant when it was time to do the hard work. Where the fuck were you? Where were the rest of your men, I mean, the ones that aren’t already dead because of how badly you fucked things up?”

Jack lunged at me, wild with rage. I side stepped him and gave him a shove. He hit one of the support pillars that were holding up the house.

He got to his feet quickly for a man his age, but before he could come at me again, I kicked him in the chest. He bounced off the pillar again and was on all fours, trying to catch his breath. I took this opportunity to hit him hard in his liver three times. He was down and trying to pull himself together, gasping for air through the pain.

“Easy Jack, I know that really hurts. Just take a moment and collect yourself. We aren’t in a rush.” I said as I moved over to the steps and sat down.

Twenty minutes must have passed before the Sheriff righted himself and winced as he leaned back up against the steel support pillar. “I didn’t get anyone killed.” He practically spat the words at me.

“Yes, you did. Your weakness killed those men. Your inaction killed those men. Your inability to adapt killed those men.” As I said this, Jack starred daggers at me. “Let it go, Jack. I could beat you to death with my arms cuffed behind my back. Let the anger go and listen to what I’m saying. Your life depends on it. No matter what happens tonight, you are done as Sheriff. I would rather you assist Nate; he could use your help. He has the will to do what is needed. He has the courage, but not the trust of the community. You have that. You back him and so will everyone else.”

“So, explain it to me. How did I fuck up?” Jack asked, “How am I not adapting?”

“Seriously? We already had this conversation,” I said, feeling a little stunned. Jack just sat there, waiting. “Fine, you should have executed those prisoners. You held that many prisoners, for what? A fucking trial at some later date, maybe? People, good people, are starving but you’ve been diverting resources to feed child molesters, rapists, and whoever else you deemed too dangerous to just wander free? Think about just that part... too dangerous to be let go, but you are still giving them three hots and a cot?” I shook my head, then made eye contact with Jack. He was listening. The fight in him seemed to have settled down. “Jack, you coerced me into

service under threat of violence after Ryan told you what went down.” Jack sat up to respond, but I raised my hand. “It’s okay, you were right to do it. I should be involved in the community. I get it. I don’t have any hard feelings, Jack. But hear me... You sent me on a mission to kill seventeen men. Why did you ask me to do that?”

“I knew you would. I knew you could probably do it with minimal losses.”

I nodded. “It was the right call, but why didn’t you have your deputies do it?”

Jack sat there silently, then nodded. “I knew they weren’t the right people for something like that.” Jack’s eyes went to the floor.

“I figured. That’s why you fucked up with the feds. You got the drop on them, locked them up instead of putting bullets in their heads.” Jack just nodded at my words.

“You’re right, Henry... You’re right.” Jack leaned his head back against the wall.

“You relied on me to do some hard tasks; all the while, you were unable to do them yourself. That’s a problem Jack, but that’s not the biggest problem.” I said with heat in my tone.

“Swindles... Where are the Swindles?” I asked.

“You are right. I fucked it all up.” Jack nodded, “I will support Nate. We need more action and less of the old way.” Jack stood up and winced again, then offered me his hand. “I’m sorry Henry, things are just so crazy and...” He just shook his head again, then stiffened up, raised his head, and said, “I am sorry.”

I took his hand and gripped it firmly, “So am I, Jack.”

We shook and the air between us seemed to get lighter.

“Now what?” Jack asked and looked to the two men, who were both very much awake and shivering.

“Now we see if you can move past your normalcy bias and do a hard task. We are going to torture these men for information. Then we will kill them. The only hope they have is to die fast, without knowing what it tastes like to choke on their own cock.”

Hearing that, Phil let out a whine and pissed himself on the floor. Peter just took a deep breath through his nose and let it out. I think he may have been praying. That made me smile.

I kneeled down next to Peter, “Hey Pete, I didn’t forget about you... I am sorry you and Phil had to listen to the Sheriff and I work things out. I know that was awkward for you. Sorry.”

I slid over to Phil who seemed to be crying, “Hey Phil, I take it you heard that all the men you were with are dead. All the men that came to take your place are also dead. You are alone. You will die horribly, Phil, unless you answer my questions. Do you understand me?”

Phil just cried. I pulled my expandable baton from my battle belt and snapped it open. I then pressed the tip of the baton into his ass-crack. “I said do you understand me?”

Phil screamed “yes!” through his ball-gag.

I looked over at Peter. He was definitely praying. I slid back over to him, “Pray all you like Pete... God doesn’t even know this place exists. You will see what I mean... I promise.”

I stood up and used the wall to collapse my baton and put it back in its holster attached to my battle belt. “Jack, will you do me a favor and watch these two? I need to grab my breaching bag.”

Jack was puzzled, but nodded.

“Be right back.” I jogged up the stairs and went outside. The men were all standing around talking.

It seemed tensions had eased up. I called out, “Matt, could you bring me the matches from my breaching bag?”

“Sure.”

Moments later, I was back in the basement with the matches. Jack was standing against a pilar, stretching his back out.

“Alright. I don’t need you to help, but I need you to listen and debrief Nate (and whoever else you think needs to know) whatever we find out.”

Jack nodded, “Absolutely.”

I took a second and rolled my neck, calming myself with a few deep breaths. I found that dark bit of myself and held it tight, exhaled and opened my eyes. “Time to give Diablo his tribute.”

I pulled my knife and cut the paracord that bound Peter's hand restraints to his ankle restraints. Then I rolled him from his belly to his back.

“Ready Pete?” I grunted as I rolled him over. Turned out, Pete was indeed ready. He bucked and tried to kick me with his bound ankles. I figured he would, so I was ready. I stepped to the side, raised my right foot,

and brought my heel down on his cock and balls. He let out a muffled scream.

“Impressive Pete! You’ve been down here for a bit with the concrete slowly draining your body heat away. I figured once we got going, your adrenaline would bring you two back around. I’m happy to see there is still *fight* in you.”

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Chapter 17

Pete was moaning through his gag. Phil was still bound, laying on his belly with his hands and legs behind his back.

I reached deep into my hate and focused on it. Then, with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, I said, "So, for those interested parties who may be curious about how things will play out this evening, I will tell you exactly how tonight is going to go." I looked back to the Sheriff; he was visibly uncomfortable. "I am going to ask you questions, then I am going to kill you." Phil cried, and Pete tried to yell at me through his gag. I looked down at him, "I agree Pete. It's a shit sandwich, no doubt about that. Yet, this is your shit sandwich, so you will choke it down." Pete let out a burst of air through his nose and his head fell back. He relaxed a little and slowly shook his head from side to side. I knew he was starting to accept his fate. "The only thing you have control of it how you die. Slow and horribly... or fast and clean. I don't much care either way. But should you choose to test me, I will inflict suffering the devil himself couldn't imagine. You can trust in that. You two are not my first visitors to this little room. Those aren't water stains you have been laying in." That seemed to catch them off guard. Phil looked down and noticed he was indeed, laying on a dark stained area of the floor. "Now, before I take your gags off, I would like to share something with you." I pulled out the starter matches for the thermite sticks and held them out in my hand so both the men could see them. "These aren't normal matches. They are used to start thermite sticks. They burn at Fourteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit. They burn under water. They fucking burn anywhere and everywhere. They burn for thirty seconds each. Should you choose to fuck with me or give me anything less than the absolute truth, I will light these matches and find interesting holes to jam them into. If I burn all your holes closed, I will make new holes in your bodies with this knife. "I waived my knife that I had just used around for them to see. "Fuck with me and I will take days to kill you... Do you fellas understand?" They nodded in the affirmative.

"Okay then... Jack, do me a favor and cut the paracord holding Phil's hands and feet together but leave the zip ties on. Then roll him to his back and take his gag out please?" Jack went over and got to work.

I looked down at Pete. "I am going to remove your gag. Fuck around or start screaming... I will stab you in the stomach. You will not die from this,

not immediately anyway. Understand?” Pete nodded, and I removed his gag.

Pete stretched his mouth and licked his lips. “Water... please?”

I stared down at him. “No. It would be a waste.”

Pete took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I see. What do you want to know?”

“Who sent you?”

Pete barked a dry laugh, “The government.”

“Which Government?”

At that Pete smiled. “I knew we should have burned your house down and shot your fucking family as they ran out.”

I reached up and grabbed Pete’s ear. I began to pull hard. It didn’t take much to get the blood flowing as his ear ripped from the top down.

“OKAY! OKAY! OKAY!” he screamed. I stopped pulling and released his ear. I could hear Phil behind me crying.

“Now you know I am not bluffing. You will die here. The only thing you have power over is how. Like a man? Or like a bloody bitch, I will sodomize you with your own cock and then stuff it down your throat. You will die, suffocating on your own shit covered dick... Don’t test me.” I could see the fear in his eyes. He went pale and closed his eyes as blood flowed from his half-torn ear.

“Now, who sent you? What government, what agency?”

Pete let out a long breath. “Democratic America, Homeland Justice Enforcement.”

“So, you are agents of this H.J.E. then?”

Pete nodded yes.

I sat down on the steps. “When were you recruited?”

Pete let out a breath. “About two years ago.”

I lowered my head into my hands. “Motherfuckers...” I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. Apparently, neither could the Sheriff. He went ballistic.

Jack kicked the crying Phil, “TWO YEARS? HOW? HOW THE FUCK COULD YOU KEEP THIS A SECRET?”

I shouted him down, “CALM DOWN!!! We made a deal... We need to keep our end.”

Jack was clinching his fists and panting, but he was still in mostly in control.

“As you fellas can see, my associate is not taking this news well. How about a subject change? What were you trying to do here and why were you going to Morgan County?”

This time it was Phil who did the talking, “We were to initiate contact with local government remnants, organize compliance from what we found, and secure multiple county seats around the Oak Ridge facilities.”

I nodded, “Y12, or the other Labs?”

Phil said, “All of it, everything. We were to gain trust and control of everything around it. Anderson county was next. Knox was already playing ball with the new government.”

“I gotta be honest Phil, you have definitely piqued my interest here. But first, why the labs here? There are Government labs in a bunch of states? Why here? I can’t believe you would be after the nuclear material there... Oh shit, were you? No, if that was the plan, they would have reinforcements inbound and they would have been better supported,” I spoke to myself out loud, “No, that doesn’t make sense. That place is locked down tight. If you wanted the radioactive materials, you would need an army, not a few truckloads of guys with no training... Fellas, I feel like you are bull-shitting me. Maybe you didn’t believe me when I said I will shove one of these super matches up your dick holes, but you are about to be proven wrong.” I stood up from the steps and approached Pete with match in hand.

“NO, NO, NO... YOU FUCKING PSYCHO!!!” Pete was worming his body away from my approach. “We are here to see why they are jamming our communications!” Pete shouted.

“Bullshit!” I said, “We have been using HAMS with no issues.” I kneeled onto his legs.

“It’s not HAM’s. It’s ULF, ultra-low frequency like the subs and shit use it. Also, the internet is down...” I interrupted Pete by placing the tip of my knife against his belly.

“Pete, I’m not a long-suffering kinda guy. You need to articulate yourself, right the fuck now.”

Phil spoke, “The Government has been in contact with other countries and most of the military via ULF. The Government has also been using the internet to organize and mobilize remnants from what was Canada and Mexico, to strong holds here, like the Last Resort under Denver International Airport. The NSA nerds figured out that the only place that

could jam the ULF signals was in a lab in Oak Ridge. They believe the Internet is being disabled at a facility in Utah.”

I was stunned. “To be clear, part of our government knew this catastrophe was going to happen. They didn’t say anything.” Phil nodded in the affirmative. “In fact, it would seem nefarious people have orchestrated some grand coup. Also, they have had and were using advanced communication techniques to maintain some form of organization, waiting for what exactly? What are they waiting for?”

I was stunned until laughter broke my focus. The laughter was coming from Peter.

“Something you would like to share with the rest of the class?” I asked the bleeding, bound and nude man.

“I was wrong about you... I thought you were smarter than this.” He said as he continued to laugh.

I sat back on the steps and thought about it for a second. It hit me like a wave. I looked up at Jack. “Too many people.”

Jack cocked his head to the side for a fraction of a second, then his eyes widened. “NO... they wouldn’t. That’s fucking insane.”

“Jack, they did... They fucking did! They saw an opportunity, and they ran with it.” I was in awe of the revelation this information presented.

Pete was laughing hard now. “YEP!”

Jack leaned against the wall. “But... why?” He looked like he may slip into shock.

Pete just laughed, “You fuck. You all live out here in the middle of nowhere. You have no clue what it’s like, what the world is really like... This is an opportunity to fix the world! Fucking wake up!”

At that moment, I realized I didn’t know anything about these men. Nothing at all. “Pete what did you do before this? Where did they recruit you from? It wasn’t from the military, but it’s obvious you were in the military. Which branch? How the fuck did you get here?”

Pete just stared at me. “Trying to trick me? Violence, threats, and humiliation... then flip the switch and show me compassion? Not going to work fuck stick. I’m not giving you fuck-all.”

I just looked at Pete for a few minutes. “Pete, I already know everything I need to. I am just trying to figure out how you got so fucked up? You don’t strike me as a coward. You may be a bit of a bully, but I just figured you were a cop somewhere, then burned out.”

Pete glared at me. If looks could kill, his gaze would have nuked the entire city. “Fuck you. You don’t know shit; I’m not playing your head games.”

“I know there is some kind of civil war going on in what’s left of the government. I know there was a coup attempt that failed, and your side isn’t doing so well. I know that reinforcements are not coming to help you. I know the military is staying out of it. I know your side is doomed if those fuckers you brought out here were the best that could be spared to get communications going again. I know one more thing. You are not going to leave this place alive.” I gave a little half smile to Pete. His complexion went white. “I also know, this is a giant shit show and you both are guilty of mass genocide.”

Phil spoke, “I haven’t killed anyone! Fuck you and your judgement!”

Jack leaned down to look at Phil, “You took part. You knew something was coming – something that would result directly or indirectly in millions of Americans dying... billions worldwide. You’re absolutely guilty. You fuckers make Mao look like an amateur... Fuck you people.” Jack spit in Phil’s face and walked over to stand behind me.

“Fuck you, Jack. We are trying to make the world a better place. What do you know? You haven’t seen what we have. When was the last time you saw a mother sell her children for drugs? Or murders and thieves get off with a slap on the hand and a fat paycheck from the city... Fuck you weak people. I hope you die along with the rest of them.” Pete just shook his head, “Fuck you, kill me now, I’m...”

Pete didn’t finish his thought, I put a forty Smith and Wesson, one hundred and eighty grain hollow point in his head. Phil began to scream, and Jack just stood there in shock. I walked over to Phil. “I was thinking about asking more questions, getting more information, bla, bla, bla... But it has been a very long day. I have killed so many people today, my soul hurts. I’m sure you have a story as to why you ended up here... but I don’t care, Phil. Enjoy your trip to hell.” My Glock barked once more, and the contents of Phil’s head hit the floor and wall behind him. I looked over to Jack, who was staring at me. I nodded. He nodded back and turned to go upstairs. I followed him in silence.

As we exited the house, the cold winter air washed over me. It felt amazing. Jack and I shook hands, and he left with Nate and the deputies. Matt and I got into my SUV and headed back to my house. Two minutes

later, we were there. I got out and stood there for a moment, staring at the house and then back to the guns in the SUV. I let out a deep breath and said to no one in particular, “that’s tomorrow’s problem.” I hit the door lock button twice, and the truck flashed its lights and beeped.

I walked over, sat by the greenhouse, and just breathed in the frosty night air. Matt sat beside me, “You okay brother?”

“No, not at this moment. I feel like something inside me is thin. I don’t know, man.”

Matt nodded. “You could stand to lose a couple of pounds.”

I looked over at him. He was looking off into the darkness. I could tell he was smiling. “Fuck you, shorty.”

“Hey man, no need to get mean,” he smiled.

Out of the darkness, I heard, “Red.”

I grinned and answered, “Robin.”

Out of the night came, “Yum.”

I gave a chuckle, “Hey guys... how was the walk?”

Mike looked at me with his thermal watch-cap on, “It’s fucking cold.”

Jamie said, “Fuck yeah... Let’s go inside. We will head home tomorrow after the debrief.”

I nodded, “Copy that, let’s go in.”

I got up and walked to the house and Matt said “We’re gonna crash in the camper... give you and the family some space.”

“Thanks guys, I’ll see you in the morning.” We parted ways and I went into the warmth of my home hearing the familiar the ding of my alarm system alerting that the door had been opened.

Chapter 19

Dee had apparently been waiting up for me. She was sitting at the kitchen table when I entered the backdoor. “Hey Boss, everything okay?”

She smiled back at me, “Absolutely, how did it go?”

“It went. I don’t really want to talk about it... I kinda just need to sleep right now.”

She got up out of the chair and waddled over to hug me. As she squeezed me, I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her head. She took several deep breaths and stepped back from our embrace and wiped at her eyes. She let out a long exhale and patted my chest rig. “Bacon in the morning?”

I smiled at this tiny, pregnant woman in front of me. “Yeah Boss, that would be great. The guys will be over so, if we can, maybe do it up big? ... it’s been a long, hard day.”

The tears were back in her eyes. “I can see that... and that shouldn’t be an issue. Go get some rest. We set up a bed on the third floor, so you can stay to yourself while you sleep until you are ready to come back to *our* bed.”

“It’s not like that... I just couldn’t live with myself if I...” she cut me off.

“I know Henry, I know. *This too will pass*. I love you, and you’re home. That’s enough of a win for me tonight.” She leaned back in for another hug, then quickly released me and went to the freezer to lay out bacon.

I walked the steps to the third floor and locked the door so the little idiots wouldn’t be tempted to wake daddy. Most importantly, I locked myself away from accidentally hurting one of them if they were to startle me awake. I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt one of them, for any reason, and Dee knew it. I saw the inflatable mattress, pillows, and blankets that Dee put out for me. God, I love that woman. I stripped of my gear and was asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

...

Morning came fast. Even on the third floor I could hear my heathens running around, screaming and laughing as they played. It made me smile, and for a moment, I felt human again. It was like a spiritual baptism. Their silly sounds breathed new life into my soul. I also noticed that I was on the floor. The inflatable mattress must have had a hole somewhere. As I sat up,

I took a long look at all the hardware and ammo we had accumulated up here. I would have given my eyeteeth to have this stuff several months ago. Now, I would trade everything for the world to be as it was.

I strapped on my gun belt, grabbed my AK and vest, and walked downstairs to breakfast. It must have been later than I thought. Rose, the girl who had been helping Dee, was in the girls' room with my kids and what appeared to be a few others I didn't recognize. When I reached the kitchen, the guys were all eating and laughing. It seemed almost normal.

"What did I miss?" I asked.

"Hey man," Matt was the first to answer.

I walked over to Dee, who was busy making more pancakes, bacon, and eggs. Holy shit! We had eggs – real honest to God eggs!

"Dee, where did you get eggs? Real eggs?" I was in awe. Now I knew why everyone was in such a good mood.

Dee smiled, "The mother of two kids Rose and I have been watching gave them to us as a thank-you gift, or payment, I guess for watching her kids. Those over there on the counter are for Rose and her family."

I couldn't help my goofy smile. "Eggs! I am so happy right now."

The guys started laughing. Matt chimed in, "So are we."

I stacked my plate high with eggs – scrambled eggs, eggs over medium, and eggs in a basket, with a very unhealthy amount of bacon on the side. For the first time in months, things felt normal.

Once we had eaten our fill and the self-induced egg coma had passed, we shifted our focus to what should happen next.

"We need to fill Josh in, and then have him and Ryan coordinate with the Sherriff. We have done enough." Jamie said.

"I agree. This isn't our problem and thank Christ for that. These things are way beyond us. I want to get through this. I want my family to get through this, and I want you guys to get through this. Fucking around with the government or factions of what is left of the government... that is how we get D.E.A.D.." I stood up, collected the plates, and took them to the sink. Dee was there cleaning up.

"It's not our problem." Matt concurred from behind me.

Mike chimed in with, "Fuck the big G. this is our home. If it comes here, that's different. But as it stands... it's just a bunch of people who think they are important, trying to get other people to do horrible shit. Personally, I have had my fill."

I turned back to the guys. “Then we agree. This shit isn’t our problem.”

They all nodded back. “Okay, Matt and I will de-brief Josh and hopefully... God willing, things will stay calm around here. Mike, you and Jamie have everything you need? Food, Meds, Ammo, Guns?”

Jamie answered, “Yeah brother, we are good, but we could use one of the fifty cal's with mags and some ammo.”

“What’s mine is yours. Let’s go grab it.” I said as I headed to the stairs with the fellas in tow. Twenty minutes later, we had the Brothers loaded up and on their way.

Matt and I kitted-up and walked down to Josh’s house. It was very cold outside. If it wasn’t below freezing, it would certainly be by tonight. Our gear was heavy, which was a good and bad thing. It was good because the weight forced our bodies to work harder, which kept us a little warmer. It was bad because it was heavy, and I was fucking exhausted. Whatever energy bump I had received from either the eggs or my joy at getting to have eggs again had definitely worn off. Thankfully, Josh was only a couple streets down. We were there in no time. I stepped up on the porch and gave a couple of loud knocks.

Hunter opened the door and smiled. “Hey guys, do you need Josh?”

“Why aren’t you at Ryan’s?” Matt asked.

“Mrs. Reba needed some help with the kids. Josh thought I could help.”

I just cocked my head and looked at the black teen. Then it hit me, “I see... That’s good. How is it going?”

Matt was lost. “What am I missing?”

I looked at Matt, “Shhh, grown-ups are talking. I’ll explain later.” Matt just shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

Hunter gave a big smile and laughed, “They are doing okay. They still don’t need to be around any other kids for a while, definitely not around any younger ones for a long time.” Hunter’s voice had a knowing sadness to it.

I just nodded, “So, where is Josh?”

“He is down at the Church. There is some problem with the pastor. I don’t know more than that.” Hunter said.

A call came from behind Hunter, “Hey fellas!” Reba came up and put her hand on Hunter’s shoulder. “Hunter, will you do me a favor and finish putting away the dried dishes?”

Hunter turned his head and replied, “Yes Mam... Sirs, if you will excuse me?”

I smiled and nodded, “Sure, we will talk to you later Hunter.”

“Don’t let her bully you, Hunter.” Matt said in his usual flat delivery.

“As if!” Reba shot back at Matt with a grin. Once Hunter left, Reba stepped outside onto the porch with us and closed the door behind her. “That boy is heaven sent. Y’all have no idea.”

“What’s going on Reba?” I asked.

“You always were sharp, Henry. Josh has been having some trouble with one of the local pastors. The churches in the neighborhood have formed a council and were helping Josh, mostly. But lately, things have become difficult. One man in particular..”

I nodded, “Let me guess, trouble started when Josh went to them for help in keeping people calm after everyone found out that no more food was coming?”

Reba smiled. “You are definitely sharp as a tack.”

Matt said, “This doesn’t sound fun.”

Reba tilted her head a bit. “It won’t be... The guy is kind of a nut. Josh thinks he has run out of his meds.”

“Yeah, we have already seen an example of that. Don’t worry Reba, we will go down there and give Josh some moral support. But I have a question... Should we just have Hunter move his things here? And how many more *broken things* will you be taking in?”

“Ah, I see now... You are a good person, Reba.” Matt said.

“He is a tremendous help with Caleb and Mary. He has been around kids that have suffered abuse before, when he was in foster care.”

I nodded, “He definitely knows a thing or two about it, I’m sure. Let us know if y’all need anything.” I turned and started down the stairs, then stopped and looked back. “Which church are they at?”

Reba answered, “Which one do you think?” With that, she smiled and went back into the warmth of her home and out of the now bitter cold.

Matt and I went to the street, “so, more bullshit?”

“Yeah Bro, more bullshit.” I started walking to the big old church at the other end of the neighborhood. It had been almost every denomination at one time or another... Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, and nearly every flavor of Baptist. If I didn’t know better, I would say the place was cursed. No church denomination stayed there for more than a year or two. I think

now it was some kind of independent, full gospel church. I had never been there personally. I supposed now was as good a time as any for a visit.

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Chapter 20

Matt and I made the long walk to the old church on the boundary of the neighborhood, by the riverfront park.

“So, what do you think is going on?” Matt tried for casual talk but failed.

“I think self-important hypocrites are worried about their own skin, instead of their flock.”

“Well, don’t hold back. Tell me what you really think.” Matt said, still laughing.

“I don’t mean to be negative. But...”

Matt cut in, “Yes, you do. It’s cool man, I get it. I do.” He continued to smile widely as we walked.

“Yeah, I supposed I am a little short-tempered with the holy types. I’m not perfect, but I have actually read the Book. I haven’t found too many so-call “shepherds” that have done the same. In fact, I would say the fact that we, and a few others, have been the ones running around trying to hold things together, and not those ass-hats, as evidence they could give a flying fuck about anyone other than themselves.” I was breathing hard now.

“This is going to go great... I can tell.” Matt said with his ever-flat delivery.

“I somehow doubt this will go well, but I hope it ends well. I am also less than excited about walking back up this big ass hill to get home. I’m still sore from yesterday’s bullshit. Not to mention, I still haven’t really processed everything yet.”

Matt popped his neck. “I am trying not to think about it.”

“How’s that working out?” I asked.

“Not as well as I would have liked, but I didn’t wake up crying or screaming. I count that as a win.” Matt said somberly.

“It will get better. It just takes time.” I tried to reassure him.

“I hope so, man. I do... Anyway, how about that Hunter?”

I couldn’t help but laugh, “Yeah... It makes sense. If I had found all those Patrick Swayze movies on your laptop and didn’t know you, I definitely would have found somewhere else to stay.”

“Fuck you.” Matt shot back.

“Matt, we have had this discussion. I could do way better than you.”

Matt glowered and shook his head. “You know what I mean, ass-fuck.”

“Sorry bro. I couldn’t resist. Yeah man, he is a good egg. Reba and Josh could definitely use some help with the kids, given what they have been through. Hunter has been through some shit of his own. I hope he can help.”

“Yeah, me too.” Matt agreed.

Fifteen minutes later we were in the church parking lot where one of the volunteer security patrols was outside. Two men were armed with lever action thirty-thirties and revolvers of some kind. They waived as we approached. They also looked relieved.

“What’s shaking fellas?” I asked. The men seemed entirely too excited to see us.

The names of the two men escaped me, but the taller of the two spoke first. “Thank God!... Henry, we don’t know what to do.”

I looked at Matt, and he shrugged. “When it rains, it pours.”

I nodded at his wisdom. “Okay, what exactly is going on?”

The short guy answered. As he did, I noticed his clothing was a bit too big for him. He must have lost a few pounds now that all the fast food is gone. “Pastor Harvey, Father Eli, Pastor Karen, and Reverend Jim are all inside with Josh. He said if we could hear shouting to go find you.”

“Okay, I take it they just started shouting?”

The tall guy shook his head no. “No, we didn’t know if both of us should go find you or if one should go while the other stayed here. And we weren’t sure who should go...”

I interrupted him, putting my hands up to calm the excited man. “I think I get the picture. We will go in and see what the fuss is all about. Why don’t you two just wait here? If we need you, it will probably be obvious. That sound like a plan?” They nodded in unison.

Matt opened the door to the old church, and we walked in. As we walked into the little transitional space that held the doors to the main sanctuary, we could hear shouting and someone screaming. We rushed in through the sanctuary door, rifles ready. We entered swiftly, rifles up first checking our corners and then driving our sights to the center of the room. An above average height, morbidly obese man with thinning blonde hair was screaming at the top of his lungs like a maniac. Two other men and a woman were all bracing themselves to shout once an opportunity presented itself. Poor Josh was sitting in the front pew with his arms folded, clearly trying to keep his cool. The fat man stopped screaming when he saw Matt and I pointing our rifles at his face. His face drained of color and his mouth

was wide open. Matt and I lowered our rifles. About that time, the rest of the participants of this little shouting match took notice of the fat man's slack jawed silence and followed his gaze to the back of the sanctuary, where we were holding our rifles at low ready. The three people sitting on the stage all grew visibly uncomfortable. Josh turned and saw us as well, though he seemed relieved.

"Is this a bad time? We can come back." The only sound was that of Matt and Josh simultaneously letting out small chuckles under their breaths. The acoustics of the room carried the sounds like echoes in a cave. "No one speaks English? I only know English. Well, that's not true... My hillbilly is pretty good." That seemed to snap them out of it.

"Ah, excuse me sir. This is the Lord's house. We do not permit weapons in here," said one of the middle-aged-looking men sitting on the stage. He had a familiar face. I knew this man from somewhere.

"Where do I know you from? I don't recognize any of you other people." I spat the words. "But I know you... Where are you from?"

Matt spoke, "He was one of the men with that crazy Jared guy. He was the man who wanted you to execute Hunter."

"That's right. That's where I know you from. You were one of those weak men who wanted me to shoot a teenage boy. Huh, this kind of makes sense now." I made an obvious look around the big church.

He cleared his throat. Maybe he was about to say something to defend his actions. I will never know. In interjection, "Don't bother, I don't give a fuck. It would probably be best for you not to speak at all." With that, he just sat back in his chair and stared daggers at me.

"The minister of this Holy Place told you..." the woman began to say as I cut her off.

"What's your name, lady?" I asked, already knowing the answer, but I couldn't miss this opportunity.

She clearly bristled at my rudeness, "I am pastor Karen Sch..."

I cut her off again. "Karen? Yep. That fits." I was doing my best not to laugh. It didn't help when I heard Matt behind me snort and stifle a giggle. "Look, it's obvious we are not all going to be friends, but I need to speak with Josh. So, if you all don't mind?" I looked at the group and tilted my head at Josh, in a "Let's go" motion.

As Josh rose, the fat man decided to assert his dominance. "Who said you could leave? You were not dismissed. Who are you to come into God's

house and behave like a heathen?”

The man’s smugness took me aback. Something was off here. “Who the fuck are you to be allowing anyone to do or not do anything? Now that I look at you, how the fuck are you so fat?” Even Karen stifled a laugh at that. “Seriously, how are you so fat? Your clothing even looks too small. Everyone is making do with less, but here you are putting on weight. How?”

He turned bright red and mumbled. Josh came up to me and patted my shoulder. “He isn’t worth it, Henry. Let’s go.”

I took a deep breath and started towards the door with Josh. We got halfway to the door before the pig of a human decided he couldn’t let it go.

“I’m sure that whore of a wife you have isn’t going without.” The pig man named Harvey said.

I stopped walking. I didn’t bother to turn around as I replied, “What did you just say?”

“Your whore isn’t going without. I’m sure those little bastards of yours, if they are yours at all, have plenty... what about all of those ... all of us in need?”

I turned around and eyed the fat fuck, “Congratulations, you now have my undivided attention... Probably best we get all this out in the air now. I despise you fucking leaches. You blood suckers, you make lawyers look like decent human beings. So, I suggest anyone who has a grievance with me speak now.” I started back down the center aisle towards the stage. Josh tried to get in my way. “Move Josh, I won’t say it again.”

“Henry, let’s just talk outside...” Before he could finish, Matt grabbed Josh and pulled him out of my way.

I heard Matt say, “Stay out of this Josh, trust me. This is already done.”

I stood in front of the stage looking up at the four people who should have been trying to help the community and not in here arguing about nothing.

“Alright fat fuck, you go last. Karen, you’re up. Speak your peace. Make your complaint... Say to me whatever you feel you need to. Just for the record, I know that the food distributions are going to stop. I know Josh is here to get you shit bags to help with the people, to keep them calm and help them understand the situation. So, please file your complaints about the situation with me. Also, if you have issues with my actions so far, by all means, let me know.” I stood there smiling. As I looked over my left

shoulder, I could see Josh sitting down with his head resting on his hands. As I glanced to my right, Matt was taking up a firing position. “Well? Cat got your tongue?”

Karen cleared her throat. “I believe I can speak for everyone here when I say that this is unacceptable. People are hurting, and we cannot allow them to be abandoned now in their time of greatest need.”

I raised my hand, “Save your sermon Karen. I’m interested in the short version, the one with facts.” I stared her down.

“Well, I think your disrespect for the clergy here is reprehensible. Your disrespect for God’s house and your language is just plain ugly.” She puffed out her chest a bit at that last bit.

“So, to be sure I understand correctly, you do not want the food handouts to stop? Is that correct?”

Karen, Jim and Harvey nodded. The only one who didn’t was an older fella on the end. I took him for Father Eli. “Also, my language and choice to have my weapon with me in this large, empty room offends you?”

Karen couldn’t help herself, “It offends God!”

I pursed my lips. “I offend God... you are probably right. Righter than you could possibly know... I don’t know if my having a rifle in here offends God. I don’t know if my language bothers Him... I have no fucking clue how much value He has placed on this... empty building. I don’t assume to know His will or speak for Him. I know that I have a pretty long list of complaints for Him though. But that is between Him and I.” I gave Karen a friendly smile, or at least I tried to. Judging by her reaction, I don’t think I succeeded.

“Anyone else?” I asked. Jim cleared his throat. “Not you fuck face. You helped drag a boy to be executed. I have no use for anything you have to say, or you, fat man.”

“I guess that leaves me,” the old man said. His clothing was loose, maybe too loose. “I’m Father Eli. I hate coming to these stupid meetings. I hate the situation the world is in right now. I want a beer.”

I nodded at the old man. “Amen.” His smile was warm and big. “Now that we have cleared the air, please allow me to respond to your primary concern – food...” Karen, Jim and the pig man gazed at me. “Tough shit!” I said with a bit too much joy.

Karen’s mouth was open. “What?”

“You heard me, tough shit. There is nothing anyone can do about that. There is no more food coming. We will have to figure something out until the supply lines can be reestablished. Now I have important information. I am going to give it to Josh, so he can tell everyone at the next neighborhood meeting.” I looked over at Josh, who was now sitting up and wide eyed. “When is the next general meeting, Josh?”

“Uh, tomorrow.”

“See, you all will find out the big news tomorrow, or hell maybe sooner if you’re listening to Alex Jones or the Mormon broadcast.”

The pig man weighed in, “You need to tell us now. It is our business to deliver information and guide our flocks.”

I cocked my head. “Is that how you are keeping their support? Threats of hell fire and giving out bits of information as you see fit. Feeding their fear?”

The fat man was turning red. “Who the FUCK do you think you are? I am a FUCKING man of God!”

Karen jumped in, “That’s right Harvey, he doesn’t know what burdens we bear! What it’s like for us! You tell him!”

I noticed Eli and even Jim gave her an odd look. “Karen, keep it up and I will knock your teeth out with a brick. Keep your mouth shut. I will not tell you again.” Karen gave me a look so loaded with hate, that if hate were edible, she could feed the world for a year.

I returned my attention to Harvey. “Man of God? Hmm, which god? The god of heart disease or diabetes?”

The fat man was foaming at the mouth now. “You will fucking pay for that, you sum-a-ma-bitch. I will see to it.”

I slid the safety off on my rifle. “Now works for me. What do ya say? Feel froggy?”

“HAHAHA” The obese man cackled, and spittle flew through the air.

“I suspect you are off your meds, Harvey. I think you are losing it.” I said as I moved slightly to my left making sure I wouldn’t hit anyone behind the tub of lard. His forehead was glistening with sweat, veins bulged in his forehead. He was working himself in to a rage. “I suspect you are extorting food and God knows what else from your *flock*. I think you’re probably doing it in the name of God or holiness or whatever con people like you use to get money out of good folks. Now you’re just doing it for food instead of money. Look at you, fat as hell. Now look at Eli. Eli hasn’t

eaten in a while. I think that's obvious, but you Lard Ass, are plight on the world. For that reason alone, I should fuck you up."

"If you touch me, I will have your home burned to the ground! I will have your whore wife and bastard children hung from the highest tree. I will cut your abortion from that cunt's womb..."

"BOOOOMMM!" The bullet going supersonic sounded like a thunderclap, thanks to the acoustics of the room. The unbelievable boom sounded like the Almighty Himself had struck down the fat man.

Harvey screamed, ranted, and raved at me. My round went into his pelvic girdle, he collapsed where he was. I calmly climbed steps to the top of the stage where the ministers were seated. Jim was just staring at Harvey on the ground. Eli had pulled out his rosary and made the sign of the cross in Harvey's direction. Karen was weeping. Josh was still sitting on the pew, his hands over his mouth and his eyes wide. The doors to the sanctuary flew open and Stupid along with his buddy Stupider burst in. "What's going on?" They shouted.

Matt walked over to them, motioning for them to lower their weapons. As I walked up to Harvey, who was practically speaking gibberish now, "Harvey, I am going to put a bullet in your head in ninety seconds. Curse me, repent, make peace, or whatever. You have ninety seconds." I pointed my AK at his head.

"*This is fucking crazy!*" Karen shouted.

"No, Karen. This is what the world is now. Unfortunately, it's my duty to introduce you all to this new world. I suggest you pass on what you learn here to your congregations."

There was a commotion at the back of the room. When I looked back, the tall guy had his hands in the air and the other was on the ground, holding his crotch.

Harvey had a last moment of clarity. "You will burn for this!" His hatred seethed through his words.

"Not for this Harvey, I will burn... but for many other reasons. Times up." I squeezed the trigger. Thunder sounded through the room once again and Harvey went limp. I walked off the stage and headed towards Matt at the back of the room. Josh followed me.

Karen called out from behind, "What do we do now?" She was in shock, but I didn't really care.

Matt turned to the ministers, pastors, and trustees of the word of their gods and said, "I suggest you clean it up. It would be good for you to see what it's like to do some actual work." With that parting comment, we exited the church.

As I exited the building, the bitter cold air felt good on my face. I took several deep breaths. Matt and Josh were behind me. I turned to face them. "Well, I probably could have handled that better."

Matt laughed and spit on the ground. "Yeah, probably."

Clearly agitated, Josh said, "Henry, I... I don't know what to say. This isn't good."

I let out a long exhale. "Yeah, I can do the political math. But, it is probably for the best."

Josh's heavy eyebrows raised. "Oh, how do you figure that?"

I smiled. "Your attack dog has drawn blood publicly. Should work out well for you. Now, the threat is real and not imaginary. Now when you threaten people with getting me involved, they will know there is a real possibility of getting dead... It is not a rumor anymore. That is a big hammer to wield."

Josh just shook his head, "Henry, that's not what I... no, no, you're right. That is what I have been doing. Shit. I set this in motion."

Matt grabbed Josh's shoulder. "No, you didn't. That fat fuck did. Times are different and words carry weight. You say some fucked up shit, and you will get dealt with. That fat bastard crossed some serious lines. It cost him his life. Best thing from this would be for everyone who hears about it to take that shit to heart. It could save their life."

Josh nodded, "You're right, but his congregation may take this poorly."

"I think that depends on how they find out about it, Josh. You need to get ahead of those other bastards in there. People like that could help to keep everything together or tear it apart. We need them, for the moment. But if they give you shit, let me know. I have so much blood on my hands, what's a few more ghosts following me around at this point?"

"For fuck's sake Henry, are you okay?" Josh was visibly concerned by my words.

Matt and I debriefed him on what we had found out, what was going on with the sheriff's office, and how the shoot out on the mountain went... all of it. Josh took it all in like a champ. "Well shit. This is going to go over like a lead balloon tomorrow. Bright side is with all this news. No one will

give a shit about a dead pastor who had been off his meds for a couple of weeks. So, that's something, I suppose." Josh bit his lip. "Y'all get some rest, I will get these dumb-shits on our side and go make some key visits to the local gossips... I need both of you there tomorrow, full kit. People will not take this well."

Matt and I nodded to Josh, then turned to walk home. We walked in silence, just the bitter cold and the sound of our own breath as conversation.

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Chapter 21

Dee had the third floor ready for me. I locked the door, so the little idiots couldn't try to surprise me and something bad happen. I stripped my gear and clothing and laid down to rest.

...

I was in my kitchen, the air smelt of burnt meat. I was in my full kit and I could hear a slapping sound that was followed instantly by a thud. I have never heard anything like it. I press checked my rifle and move toward the sound. It was coming from my back yard. I slipped out the side door and rounded the corner. It was Diablo. He was standing by the old maple tree stump by the fire pit. Harvey was lying on his back, as though he was on some kind of altar. Diablo had the biggest machete I had ever seen in his hand. He was chopping off slices of Harvey and tossing them into the fire. I wanted to vomit, when Diablo suddenly opened his mouth. "Shots fired, shots fired, corner of Hemlock and Tennessee..."

I was awake, my radio next to my bed was sounding off. "Shots fired... Man down... House on fire."

I slipped on my dirty clothing and gear as fast as I could and zipped up my "emergency" boots. In less than a minute, I was hurdling down the stairs to the second floor. I opened the door and Dee was in the hallway. I almost shit my pants. "Holy shit, woman. I almost crapped my pants."

"Sorry, I heard the radio and figured you would be going. I am going to stay here in case ..." she didn't finish.

I nodded, "In case it's a trap. Good thinking Boss. I will be back in a few." I did my best to give a confident smile. I hoped I was successful. I continued my dash down to the ground floor and decided to exit my kitchen side door. Thank God for Victorian homes ridiculous number of doors. The house was five blocks away diagonally from me. I started sprinting as hard as I could. I didn't see any ambient light in the sky from the house fire. I could hear the local fire truck sound its horn. That was an especially good thing. These old homes are very susceptible to fire. Thankfully the city decided to put one of the fire and EMS station at the boundary of the neighborhood. This was the first structural fire we have had since the event. Since the utilities were still on but no one was getting any bills, no one was fiddling with their fireplaces. I suspected that's why we had been spared any house fires to this point.

I was on the scene in minutes. There was a dead man in the street who looked vaguely familiar. There were three men with guns trying to corner one with an AR 15. Behind the man with the AR were two women struggling to put out a fire that was climbing the side of a house. I recognized one of the women. It was Rose, the teen that had been helping Dee with the small neighborhood kids.

I clicked my weapon light on and showered the area in one thousand lumens of glory. The three men with guns flinched and covered their eyes. “Lower your weapons and tell me what the fuck is going on here.” I said in my command voice.

One of the men stepped forward. He was holding a hunting rifle and was shielding his eyes from my light with his right hand. “He murdered Jared!”

“Jim? What are the odds we would see each other again so soon? Okay, so Jared is dead. Yet, you are still breathing, so this clearly isn’t a rampage. What happened?” I asked.

From behind me I heard, “SEVEN AND BLUE.” It was Matt arriving with Ryan, giving me a head’s up as to not cause any incident.

“Seven and Blue up!” I called back. Matt and Ryan walked over to me.

What in the tea-total fuck is going on?” Ryan asked.

“Excellent question Deputy. Jim here was about to give us his story. Continue Jim, but do me a favor and set that rifle down. In fact, set all of your weapons down.” I looked at the man with AR, “Go help your family. The fire truck will be here in seconds.”

“Thank you.” He ran to grab a shovel and was throwing dirt at the wall as the fire was crawling up. Luckily, the volunteer fire department showed up within seconds. Matt ran over to drag Jared’s body out of the fire truck’s way. Ryan and I took the three men aside.

“Alright, first question. Who actually saw this thing go down?” I asked.

“I did.” Jim said.

I looked at the two other men, “You two didn’t actually see anything?”

They shook their heads no. Then one of them spoke up. “We are the night watch. We heard the shooting, ran down here, saw a man in the road dead, and then saw this man.” He pointed at Jim, “shouting at the other man.”

Matt had rejoined us now, mumbling something about how Patrick Swayze never had to do shit like this. I made a mental note to fuck with him about that later.

“Okay, you two came on scene and backed up Jim... Why?” I asked.

The shorter of the two cocked his head and looked at me blankly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, why did you choose sides? Why did you decide to help Jim detain that man?” They looked at me as though I had grown a dick on my forehead.

The taller of the two answered, “We have known Jim and Jared for years. I played ball with Jim when we were boys.”

Ryan couldn't hold back her sarcasm. “Well shit, y'all played ball together thirty years ago? He must be in the right.”

I took a deep breath. “Next time, maybe find out what's going on first. Good job getting here so fast and calling out for help. Seriously, good work guys. We will take it from here. Please gather your weapons and continue your patrols or help the fire fighters. But it looks like they mostly have it under control.” I just left that to hang in the air for a second. Both of the men looked at each other, then realized they were being dismissed and retrieved their weapons. I took a mental note that they had what appeared to be a break action single-shot shotgun and a revolver of some type. That was not inspiring.

I turned my attention back to Jim. “Okay, what did you see?”

Jim cleared his throat. “I heard yelling and came outside. That's when I saw that son of a bitch gun down Jared.”

I looked over at the tall man who was holding his crying wife and daughter. They were just staring at their home. The fire damage didn't look too serious from here, but I wouldn't actually know until I walked over there. The closest security light was twenty yards away and didn't illuminate shit.

“Okay, was the house already on fire?”

Jim just looked at me for a second. Then I swear I could actually see the gears in his head turn. “Yeah. Yeah, it was.”

“Jim, do me a favor and hang out here with Matt. Deputy, would you accompany me to talk to this gentleman?”

Ryan pursed her lips and nodded. We walked over to the weeping family.

Ryan took lead, “Sir, may I have a word with you?”

The man turned to see us and nodded, “Sure.” He let go of his wife and daughter and came over to us.

“Sir, what happened?” Ryan asked.

“I have been having problems with Jared for a couple of weeks now. Nothing major, just odd comments and behavior. We moved here about a year ago. He was a supper nice guy then, but about two months after the Event, he began acting strange. Lately he had been aggressive. I didn’t think anything of it. People handle pressure in many ways, so I figured this was his way. Except, the last few days, he had been making comments to my daughter.” Don looked over his shoulder at his wife and daughter.

“Your daughter Rose?” I asked.

He nodded.

“She seems like a good kid. She has been helping my wife with the little kids in the neighborhood.” I said.

“Yeah, she loves kids and your wife... She didn’t know what to make of Jared. When she told me what he had said,” Don took a deep breath, “I confronted him. Told him if he spoke to her again,” Don cleared his throat, “I, uh, told him there would be trouble.”

“What did he say to that?” Ryan asked.

“Nothing, which was strange, because I was pretty angry when I said it. He just looked at me with a blank expression, like he was a million miles away, then started laughing. It was creepy.” Don was shaking his head. “I should have known the crazy S.O.B. was going to do something.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. Shit is unpredictable these days. So how did it end like this?” I asked.

“I was in the kitchen, luckily. I heard something hit the outside of the house and saw a glow outside the window. I grabbed my rifle and went outside. The house was on fire. I reached inside and hit the alarm on the security panel. Liz and Rose came running downstairs. Then I heard Jared laughing in the street. Liz and Rose came out and grabbed the hose and started trying to put out the fire. I went to Jared. He was laughing hysterically. He was weeping, he was laughing so hard. So... I shot him. I don’t know, five or six times, I’m not sure. Then fucking Jim ran out and tried to save the day or something. I don’t know. I... I don’t know.” Don ran his hand through his hair. “So, what now? Am I under arrest?”

I looked at Ryan, and she shrugged and walked back to Matt. I looked at Don. “Arrest, for what?”

Don blinked. “I shot a man in the middle of the street. In cold blood.”

I nodded, “Yep, so have I. Shit's bizarre, but this is the world we live in.” I slapped his shoulder, “Let's see how bad the damage is.”

As Don and I walked to his wife and daughter, I could see the side of the house that burned was where the electrical meter was. Most likely on the other side was the breaker box. “That doesn't look good, Don.”

Don let out a deep breath, “No it doesn't... Damn.”

I stopped him short of his wife and daughter. “If it's cooked, I know of an empty house. The lady that owns it is in Thailand and she is elderly. Odds are she isn't coming back.”

Don looked at his family and back to me. “Where is it?”

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Chapter 22

I was sitting at the table in a bit of a trance. I hadn't had a full night's sleep in a few days and my skin was tingling. I had a ringing in my ears, maybe from the gunfire. Dee was busy cooking and chasing kids. Occasionally, one of my idiots would come in for a hug or tickle. I happily obliged them, but I felt distant. I was staring at the breakfast in front of me, eggs and bacon.

"... so when do you think you will get that built?" I suddenly noticed Dee was talking to me.

I blinked my eyes as hard as could and responded, "Sorry Boss, I think I phased out for a moment. What were you saying?"

Dee had a look I have rarely seen on her face, concern.

"What?" I asked.

"Henry, maybe you should try to get some rest? You don't look well. You haven't touched your breakfast, and apparently you are spacing out. I don't think anyone wants you having blackout episodes."

"What are you talking about?" I asked defensively. "I'm just a little tired. That's all."

Dee called out, "Idiots, go play upstairs. That includes you Itty-Bitty."

My youngest daughter was sitting in my lap and for the life of me, I couldn't remember picking her up. That was probably a bad sign. "Huh, you may be right Boss." I started to eat.

"Henry, you have been talking with me most of the morning. Can you remember what we were talking about?" Dee looked anxious.

I chewed my food slowly, trying to buy some time before I answered. I took a couple of deep breaths through my nose. "Ah, chickens... you are trading for some chickens, and I was telling you about Moving Don and his family into the house next door."

Dee just stared at me for a few long, silent moments. She smiled that bright, perfect smile and walked over to me. She wrapped her arms around my head, hugging my face into her boobs and kissing the top of my head. It felt amazing. I set down my fork and wrapped my arms around her pregnant belly. I trembled. The weight of the past week was crashing against me, like a dam in my head was crumbling. Dee just held me tighter.

I had a thought, "Honey, do you think I am going to Hell?"

Dee just held me tighter. If she wasn't careful, she would smother me to death with her prego boobs. "NO. No Henry I do not."

I took a deep breath. "I shot a preacher in a pulpit yesterday. He wasn't armed. He was just crazy, probably off his meds, saying crazy shit. I could have ... I don't know. I don't know anything anymore."

Dee went still. Her breathing slowed and heart rate speed up. I could hear it.

"What the fuck is wrong with me, Dee?" I asked in a voice I didn't recognize as my own. It sounded like a child's voice.

After a few more silent moments, Dee took in a large breath and squeezed my face into her breasts one more time before releasing my head and looking me in the eye.

"Henry, did this crazy man threaten you or us?" She was calm and focused on my eyes.

I nodded, "Yeah. He ..." Dee didn't give me the opportunity to finish.

"I don't want to know what he said. You said he threatened us. You removed that threat. It's what you do. It's who God made you. These are not normal times Henry, things are dangerous... You do whatever you have to, just get us through this."

I laughed, "That's not very feminist-like of you."

She scowled at me. "Don't start." Dee looked away for a moment. When she turned back to me, she had a resigned look on her face. "I don't think you're going to Hell, Henry, for the same reason you're not going to heaven."

I blinked several times. "What?"

"Henry, I love you. The kids adore you... but you scare the total shit out of everyone else."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing. "What kind of understanding pep talk is this?"

My sweet wife grabbed my face and kissed my forehead, "You are an asshole, my dear husband... some would say, an unbelievable asshole." Dee lost a bit of her playfulness. "You are a dangerous person, Henry. You always have been, there has always been a... well, an edge to you. A hardness." Then with a bit of a grin she leaned in and bit my ear. "It's a big part of what turns me on about you."

I pulled my head away, "Calm down preppers."

She just giggled, “Henry... the Devil won’t let you into hell for the same reason God won’t let you into Heaven... They don’t want you to start bossing them around like you do everyone else. They would probably be too scared to say anything to your face about it. I don’t blame them. Who wants that kind of trouble?” Dee shrugged her shoulders, “Other than me?” With that last statement grabbed my head and shoved it into her boobs.

I laughed hard, “Ok, ok, ok, I get your point.” I stood up and felt as though a very heavy weight had been lifted from shoulders. “Thank you, wife. I needed that.” She just grinned and leaned in for a hug. Then out of nowhere she pinched my ass so hard I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Damn it woman, that hurt.” I said as I escaped her clutches.

“I’m not sorry, I only have so much consoling I can do, and if you don’t want to be treated like a piece of meat, you shouldn’t be dressed all sexy like that. It’s misleading.” She harrumphed.

“I am wearing my dirty clothes from yesterday. I smell like onions and a campfire.” I said flatly.

“Exactly, you tease. Now get out of here... I can only control myself for so long.” She winked and chased me around the kitchen table.

“Fine Boss, just keep your hands to yourself. I have enough running through my head right now.” I said with a bit of a laugh, “I don’t need one more thing added to the list.”

Dee smiled and relented, “Fine, you big tease. Be that way.” She wore a smirk on her face as she returned to the kitchen.

I quickly wolfed down the rest of my food. I felt much better now, more focused and relaxed. I went to the back door and strapped on the kit that I had placed there. Right before I opened the door, Dee spoke, “Come home, Henry.”

I half grinned at the small woman. “Always.” I walked out and locked the door behind me.

As I walked out back I saw Don unloading his truck. “Hey new neighbor, everything under control?”

“Uh, no... Not really, but we will manage.” He was visibly exhausted.

“I would offer to help, but my presence is requested at the park for the neighborhood meeting.” I apologized.

“Hey, no problem. Thank you for everything, but Liz and I can manage.”

“Copy that. Just give us shout if you need anything.” We shook hands, and I walked down the alley to the park for the neighborhood meeting.

Halfway down the alley I could hear the mummer of voices coming from the park. I could make out Matt and Ryan at the end of the alley surrounded by at least a dozen armed men. I swiped the safety off my AK and prepared for a gunfight. I picked up speed, moving to a jog. Surprise needed to be on my side.

Matt, turned in time to see me coming. Wide eyed, he shouted “NO!!! BLUE, BLUE, BLUE!!!”

I stopped in my tracks; my heart was racing. “Maybe... next time you give me a little heads up before you amass an armed posse at the end of my alley?”

Matt closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. “Yeah... I see that would have probably been a smart move.” Matt’s demeanor had finally raised the attention of the dozen armed men and Ryan.

“I think we need to work on situational awareness in the future... right after communication.” I swiped up the safety level on my AK. Ryan saw this, and a flash of realization crossed her face.

“Oh, yeah... We were waiting for you. Um, damn. This could have gone better.” Ryan bit the side of her lower lip. The rest of the group seemed to realize what had almost happened.

I shook my head, “We need to get volunteers recognizable jackets or hats... something.” I adjusted my rifle sling, “Okay, I take it everyone here is a new volunteer for neighborhood security?” The men all nodded back. “Excellent, we need more solid people involved. I’m sorry I haven’t met any of you yet. My name is Henry. I stuck out my hand to shake the volunteers’ hands. “Thank you for helping. We need you fellas more than ever. Did anyone tell you what is going on today?” They all had a grim look on their faces. “I will take those sour expressions as a yes. Things could go... a bit sideways. We need to be on top of it.”

“Matt, Ryan... what’s it looking like over there?”

Ryan and Matt looked at each other. Matt shrugged. Ryan cleared her throat. “Everyone is here, I mean everyone. I have never seen so many people in that park. If they get wild, we don’t have enough bullets.”

I cocked my head to the side puzzled, “How? We just found out about this. It doesn’t make sense.”

Matt rubbed his face, “Alex Jones and the Mormons, they broadcast a big thing about it last night. Turns out the new government was doing sneaky shit everywhere. At military bases, national labs, nuclear power

plants and hydroelectric dams. Straight up coup. Shit, it's like a bad movie Bro."

"That, is not good." I cracked my neck, "Now everyone knows everything?" I asked.

Matt and Ryan gave solemn nods. I closed my eyes and tried to get my heart rate to slow. "Okay, then this is disaster containment now." I nodded my head. "Okay everyone, I know you're new. Unfortunately, shit is going to get weird. I don't know anything about any of you. So, we will break into two groups, half with Deputy Ryan and the other half with Patrick Swayze's number one fan... also known as Matt."

I could hear Matt to my left mumble, "You are such an asshole."

I did my best to hide my grin. "Do not shoot unless told to. Pass through is a serious concern in a crowd this big. You all are the goons. Shit kicks up and you will come in and disperse it, together. I will be with Josh in the center. That is another reason not to shoot unless absolutely necessary. These people are our neighbors, and they are scared. That doesn't make them evil, but if it gets squirrely and you have to decide you or them... fuck them. Fuck them every day of the week." The men all nodded back.

I looked at Ryan, "Where are the other volunteers, the ones that have been helping with security for the last couple months?"

"They are with Josh. We had eight show up."

I whistled, "So we have twenty-three people... How big is the crowd?"

Ryan swallowed hard. "Maybe five hundred. Probably more."

My heart rate shot to the moon as my blood ran cold. "I take it there are people here from other neighborhoods?"

Ryan nodded, "Yeah."

"Fuckity fuck. This may get out of hand. Wait, is Josh already in there?" I asked.

Matt said, "Yep, he has been pushing for time to allow everyone to arrive. I think he is waiting for you."

"So, they are waiting... Okay, this is a horse of a different color. Still a shit sandwich, but it's not as soggy as I had feared." I turned to the group. "If I shoot, y'all start forcibly escorting people out of the park. Don't shoot anyone if you don't have to." I got nods of understanding from the group.

"Matt you and your Swayze fanatics take up at the top park. Ryan, you and your men stay on this side. If we are forced to shoot, at least our lanes

of fire are mostly free of friendlies. If we must disperse the crowd, we are pushing them down hill.”

“All right, game time.” I started walking to the stairs that led to the gazebo path. There were so many people. So many fucking people. Five hundred my ass. There was at least a thousand. We are in serious fucked territory.

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Chapter 23

I found Josh on a makeshift stage in the middle of a sea of humans. I made my way to him, saying “Excuse me” and “Move motherfucker” at least a dozen times before I reached him.

“Where the fuck did all these people come from Josh?” I asked.

Josh let out a long exhale and looked down. I could see his breath in frosty air. “I think some of the other neighborhoods sent people. Heck, I am pretty sure some of these people are from other cities. I know for a fact a couple of them are from Rockwood.”

I gave a snort. I must have looked like a bull the way my breath made little clouds of fog. “This is not good. If things go sideways, there is nothing we can do without innocents being hurt.”

“Yeah, that had occurred to me. As I understand it, the broadcasts last night got everyone a little worked up. The local radio chatter is that we have firsthand knowledge of what’s going on.”

I nodded, “And that’s why everyone came or sent someone here.”

“It would seem so,” Josh agreed.

“Okay, nothing can be done about that now... Where is your kit and rifle?” I asked sternly.

“Didn’t think it would be such a good idea. I didn’t want to trigger people.” Josh said with a twinge.

“I see... You didn’t want to trigger people... Got ya. Well, if or when the shooting starts, let me know if you feel triggered without a fucking bulletproof vest on and at least a fucking sidearm.”

“Henry, I get it. I messed up. I didn’t think there would be so many here. I figured on three hundred tops.” I could hear fear in his voice.

I took off my AK. “Here, Josh.” I handed him the rifle. “Sling this across your front. You need to look formidable. Maybe, just maybe, they will mistake you not wearing your *fucking body armor* for having giant balls instead of a tiny brain.”

Josh shook his head, “No, you need to...”

I stopped his protest. “I will be fine. If we do this right, hopefully we won’t need any rifles. Just know that at the first sound of gunfire, Matt and Ryan will bring in the reserve volunteers and start cracking skulls.” I looked at the rest of the regular volunteers and addressed them. “Fellas, this shit

could get hairy. Listen to Josh and follow *my* lead. We will get through this.” They nodded back.

I turned my focus back to Josh. “If someone challenges you or gets uppity, I will have to set an example. There are too many people here for us to look weak.” I looked Josh in the eye. “And the rest of you keep them away from Josh. He is our symbol of authority. Keep his head above the water.” The men all nodded back.

Josh slowly blinked and nodded.

“Good then. Let’s get this over with.” I checked my knife on my belt that was mounted for a cross draw. Pulling it out and snapping it back, it was good to go. Next, I checked my holstered Glock. It was secure. I gave one last nod to Josh and then turned to face the crowd as he looked up from the rifle I had handed him.

It was game time.

“HELLO!” Josh shouted over the rumbling chatter of the crowd. “IF EVERYONE COULD BE SILENT.” The rumble of the crowd slowly fell quiet. “Thank you. There seem to be a few more people here than normal.” The crowd laughed, and it sounded like the crashing of giant waves on the shoreline. But as swiftly as the laughter came, it evaporated. “I understand word has gotten out. So let me address that white elephant right now. YES. Yes, we have firsthand information on the Event, as everyone is now calling it. Also, we have information on at least *OUR* government's involvement. Please understand our information is very limited, but I will be happy to share it with everyone. In fact, I will cover that subject first. This way, those of you from other areas can be on your way as swiftly as possible. It will also make it easier for us to get along with our neighborhood business, without so many here to speak over.” Josh took a sip of water then continued. “I am sure everyone will have questions after. I will do my best to answer them after I am done relaying the story and subsequent information. So, please hold your questions until the end.”

As Josh continued to tell the crowd everything we knew and most of what had happened, I took a moment to scan the crowd. It was a sea of scared faces, which was excellent because it highlighted the ones that didn’t seem scared. I marked three groups of men that stood out. One group was comprised seven black men, all with long guns and kit. I knew one of them. His name was Ben Silas. While they weren’t scared, I could tell they were on high alert. The second group was three men I didn’t recognize. They

couldn't give a shit less about what Josh was saying. Their focus was on me. I made a special note of that. The last group was our neighborhood's liberal coalition. Well, kind of... I couldn't tell exactly how many from the group were there. Several of the faces were familiar, but they seem to be spread over two separate areas, like two separate groups. I did, however, recognize three of them. They were Jerry, Floyd, and my brother-in-law. Fucking Bill...

As Josh wrapped up his not so *little* debrief, I noticed that Jerry and Floyd seemed to be readying themselves for something. Then it hit me – the Q and A. Fuck, these two were planning to start some trouble.

“So, that’s everything we know so far. OH, wait! There was one last thing. The Sherriff asked me to let everyone know that anyone interested in working for the Sherriff’s department should go to the county courthouse and talk to him. The Sheriff’s department is in dire need of help. I don’t know how they will handle pay or compensation, but I’m sure they will figure it out. Right now, more than ever... We need good people to stand up and help their communities. Alright... that’s everything.”

Josh took a deep breath. “Any questions?”

To my surprise, no one shouted any questions, but a few people did raise their hands. Josh called on them one at a time and answered their questions to the best of his abilities. Then, one of the three men I didn't recognize raised his hand. My stomach turned and I could feel my adrenaline pump through my veins. I could hear my heartbeat thundering in my ears and my breathing quickening. My vision narrowed on the three men, tunnel vision blinding robbing me of my periphery. I took long, slow breaths, forcing my mind to focus and regain control of my senses. I was able to push back my tunnel vision and reclaim my hearing. The adrenaline and cortisol was now streaming throughout my system. My fingertips were tingling, and it wasn't the cold. I clinched my hands into fists repeatedly, trying to get back the fine motor control and push back the natural numbing effects of the fight or flight response. Time had already slowed down. Josh had only now called on him. It was game time. My intuition knew this was going to be bloody.

Josh called on the man in the middle of the three strangers with his hand up. “Yes, sir?” Josh said, pointing to the man.

“YEAH, I WANNA KNOW WHY YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS MURDERED MY PASTOR IN COLD BLOOD?” The man was boiling with hate.

Josh exhaled a cloud of steam from his nose. “That was unfortunate. Harvey was clearly...”

Before Josh could finish, the angry man interrupted, “PASTOR. PASTOR HARVEY. HE WAS A FINE MAN OF GOD AND YOU MURDERED HIM!” The man was billowing clouds of steam out of his nostrils.

I could see he was trying to work himself up for something, and I didn’t want to wait to find out. His two buddies were clearly his support, but they kept looking at the man with puzzled expressions. I had an opportunity.

I stepped in front of Josh. “I shot Harvey.” The murmuring in the crowd stopped.

“I KNOW YOU DID! YOU WILL BURN IN HELL FOR THAT!” The man was now wide-eyed with foamed up spittle at the corners of his mouth.

This had to be done. I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing. “Maybe,” I said as I moved toward the man. The crowd parted as I walked toward the angry man. “Maybe not, but that’s yesterday’s problem. What I am wondering though is why you look half crazy. Yes, I shot your pastor. He was off his meds and saying some crazy shit. I didn’t plan on giving him an opportunity to enact his threats.”

A voice came from the crowd, “JUST WORDS AND NO MEDS... YOU KILLED HIM FOR THAT?”

I stopped my approach and turned in the direction the anonymous voice came from. “YEAH, I DID. TIMES ARE DIFFERENT NOW. IF YOU HAVEN’T FIGURED THAT OUT YET, I CAN’T HELP YOU!”

I turned back to face the angry stranger, who I assumed was a member of Harvey’s church. I continued to speak loudly without yelling, “Times are hard and are going to get harder. People across the world are dying because they don’t have their normal, everyday medications. Worse yet, those who suffer from mental issues don’t have their meds either. Those are the people who are the biggest threats. Friends and family who are no longer themselves, no longer stable or trustworthy. Those poor people... Without their medication, they can be a danger to themselves and others. ALL THREATS SHOULD BE AND WILL BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY.”

I stopped walking and turned in a slow circle, speaking to the crowd. “For the first time in a long time, your word means something. Make a threat, you better be prepared to back it up *at that moment*. Say something

stupid and you may get your jaw broke. Hurt someone's ego... they may try to take your life."

"This world is hard. It's only going to get harder. If we work together, just maybe we can get through this. Or we go after each other and steal from each other, then only the cruel will survive."

I looked around at the crowd, then back to the angry man who was now barring his teeth. I was ten feet from him, and I could see he was no small man. He was as tall as I was and looked heavy. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Jeff."

"Well, Jeff... You don't look like you have been missing any meals. You and Fat Harvey must have been splitting the wealth of the congregation."

Jeff's face was red with rage, and he let out an animalistic howl, "Aaaaahhhhhh" and charged me.

He was fast for a man that heavy. He had some kind of ground combative training, probably BJJ by the way he executed the double leg take-down. It was flawless and his speed caught me off guard. I was going to the ground, surrounded by a sea of people, and I missed my opportunity to sprawl and maybe stop the take-down. A second later my ass hit the ground with Heavy Jeff driving his weight into me. There was no more doubt in my mind. This guy definitely had BJJ training. The way he drove forward and took mount... It was perfect. I had to act fast, or the big man was going to choke me out, or worse. I hipped-up, tossing his weight forward and stopping him from posturing-up and raining punches down on my face. Once his posture was broken, I wrapped my arms around his ribs and shoved my face into his jacket, grabbing fist-fulls of his jacket on his back. I pulled myself up and forward as I pulled him down to me. Once I was able to even up my position, I snaked my left arm out and around his right arm, folding them into our bodies, effectively taking away his ability to splay out. Now I could trap and roll him, allowing us to basically switch positions. I have practiced this thousands of times in training and sparing. Thank God I did. I trapped his right leg with my left foot, then I brought my right foot as close to the crack of my own ass as possible. With all my strength, I hipped up and used my right leg, planted firmly on the ground like a piston. I also reached with my right arm over Heavy Jeff's back, trying to grab some imaginary rope to help pull Jeff and I over. With Jeff's right arm and right leg bound to our bodies, unable to stop the roll, I was

able to swiftly reverse the positions we had landed in. Heavy Jeff had an excellent take-down and fantastic positioning, but he was clearly used to playing a game, and it showed in his technique. I did not train for competition or trophies. I trained to kill a motherfucker should the need arise. Today... the need arose.

As Jeff rolled with my counter, he immediately tried to pull me in and keep me in his guard. I was counting on that. I allowed him to wrap his legs around my waist and pull my head down to his chest. To do this, he had to pull me forward and compress himself. This allowed me to pull my knife on the front of my battle belt. I sliced the back of Heavy Jeff's left hamstring. He cried out in pain and his leg released its hold from around my ribs. Once his left leg released, his hold on my neck and head tightened. All his muscle memory trying to stop me from getting away was going to cost him his life. With Jeff's left leg down and the knife in my right hand, I now had a direct path to Jeff's groin. I plunged the blade deep into Heavy Jeff's crotch. Jeff howled in agony; I drove my blade deeper until the top of my hand slammed into his balls. Wiggling the knife up and down, side to side. Jeff's howl stopped. Looking at Jeff's blank expression, mouth open wide and lips moving silently, Jeff had let go of my head and neck. Standing up on my feet, I turned the blade of my knife to the left. Then, with all the strength I could muster, I drew the blade along the inside of Jeff's right thigh. The razor-sharp blade flayed open his thigh and clothing. I could see the white of his femur in some spots.

Breathing hard, I noticed steam rolling off my body in the fringed air. It was the steam from Jeff's blood. I was drenched in it. Looking down at the dying Jeff, his crotch and left leg opened wide to the world, blood all over me and the ground. It was gruesome, like Heavy Jeff had just birthed me. I looked at the faces of the surrounding crowd. People stood with their mouths open. Some were vomiting, while some others were crying. The entire fight only lasted three-ish seconds, maybe. However, my heart rate and gasping breaths would beg to differ. As far as my body was concerned, it had been hours of full-on combat.

Sheathing my knife, "Anyone else have an issue they would like to talk about? Or... maybe we call it a day. What do you think?"

The two men who came with Jeff had stunned looks on their faces. They both had tears rolling down their cheeks as they kneeled next to their dying friend. I sheathed my blade and put my hand on my Glock. Partly to make

sure it was still there after rolling around on the ground, but mostly, I was ready to draw down. That was closer than I cared for any fight to be. Walking back to Josh, I could see his blank stare. His eyes were shifting from the body to me, back to the body.

With what looked like great effort, Josh closed his eyes then took a deep breath and said, “Alright, y’all know what we know. If anyone wants to help, see one of the volunteers standing around. We desperately need more utility workers and security guards. No previous experience needed. We also desperately need health care workers. If you have any medical skills, please go to the hospital. If you don’t have transportation to go to the hospital or you need help with kids so you can help... SEE A VOLUNTEER.” Josh looked around the crowd, “Y’all be safe. Thank you for coming.” The crowd dispersed as the mass of people resumed their murmuring. Josh stepped down and walked towards me.

I met him halfway.

“Good job, Josh.”

“Are you okay, Henry?” Josh asked.

“Yeah, mostly. I’m sure my back will hurt tomorrow... But that’s tomorrow’s problem.” I rolled my neck.

Josh shook his head. “That’s a lot of blood.”

I looked down, “Yep. That did not go as well as it could have.”

Josh looked at my blood covered vest and pants, “Yeah. It could have gone better. What’s done is done, but we can’t keep...”

I stopped him, “Now is not the time. There are wolves in this crowd. We can talk later, but right now we need to appear strong. Just keep telling yourself everything is fine and under control.”

Josh nodded, “Yeah, you’re right.” Josh took another deep breath and settled himself.

There were several groups calling for his attention. I noticed Bill among them. I needed to go have a chat with him. I needed to find out what was going on with him, apparently leaving Katy and the kids. Then I heard my name.

“HENRY!”

I turned to see who was calling my name. It was Ben. “Well, Mr. Ben Silas. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

We shook hands as old friends. Ben had a large warm smile, but his men did not. They casually set a perimeter around us and used their presence to

keep others back. Ben and I were now in a mostly private circle.

I made a show of looking around and acknowledging his men. “Something you would like to talk about privately, Ben? You could have just come to the house. You know that.”

Ben smiled wide, “Ah, better safe than sorry. Not everyone here is happy to see free black men with guns.”

I let out an exhale, “How about we skip all that discussion. It’s not productive, and shit is crazy enough. What’s up?” I asked trying to avoid a long-standing debate between us.

Ben just chuckled. “And that is why I have always liked you, Henry. No bullshit.”

I nodded back to him, “Thank you for that, but it doesn’t actually tell me anything, Ben.”

Ben just smiled and became uneasy. I stated to regret not having my rifle.

Ben’s smile faded, and he released me from our handshake. “I wanted to volunteer.”

I was stunned. “You want to what?”

Ben's tremendous smile returned. “I want to volunteer my skill and abilities, along with everyone in the community. We are all of like mind on this. Our only stipulation is we deal with you. No one else. And we will not be helping with supplies. What we have is ours... period.”

I rubbed and tugged at my growing beard. “That is fucking outstanding, Ben. But what about Saturday? I thought Hebrew Israelites don’t work on Saturday?”

“Normally, no, we do not. But these are not normal times. As you said, things are different now.”

I nodded slowly. “This is a big deal, but I have a question.”

Ben nodded. “Okay, ask.”

I pursed my lips in thought. “Why help now? I know how you and your people feel about government, big and small. I need to know why.”

“Fair enough. We want the new world to be better than the previous one. We can either hide away and survive; or we can take part, help out, and educate those around us. We have many brothers and sisters with a bunch of skills. We know that no one in the government is coming to help us or our neighbors. How can we claim to Honor our Holy Father, when we won’t help our neighbors?” Ben said with grit and sincerity.

“I can believe that Ben. But why now? Why not earlier? Did it have something to do with those humvees that passed your homestead? I know they had to pass your place to get to Kingston.”

Ben gave me a wide smile. “Maybe, maybe not. Does it matter how we came to our decision?”

I smiled back, “No, it does not Ben. I will be happy to have you and your people on board. How about in two days, Josh, Matt and I come out and chat?”

Ben extended his hand to say, “See you then Henry.”

“Thanks Ben. Things maybe getting much worse very soon. You and your people could help us keep it all together.”

Ben released my hand, “I know.” And with a giant smile, he turned to leave. His men formed a diamond around him. They walked through what was left of the crowd effortlessly.

Matt came up on my left. “Who was that?”

“Ben Silas, pastor of the local Hebrew Israelite community. They have a compound in the southern part of the county. I am a bit surprised they came out this far.”

“I don’t know what that is.” Matt replied.

“You don’t know what a compound is, or you don’t know which way is south?”

Matt let a slow exhale escape. “You are such a dick... Hebrew Israelite... What is a Hebrew Israelite?”

I smiled and turned to Matt, “I guess it makes sense. Patrick Swayze never made any shitty movies that involved them or their beliefs. I’m sure if he was a potter, you would have greater understanding... How many times have you seen Ghost? To answer your question, they are a religious cult, like Baptists, Catholics, etcetera, etcetera... It’s all the same – it’s us versus them. The big difference is, much like some Mormons, the Hebrew Israelites are well-armed, kinda trained, and have stockpiles of food. They also try to be self-sufficient... It’s admirable.”

Matt paused for a moment, “... Then why come out now? Why not continue to wait this out?”

I shook my head, “They are religious. Who the fuck knows? I’d have a better chance understanding your bizarre obsession with Patrick Swayze, and we both know that will never happen... mostly because I’m a man.” I smiled wide as I looked at Matt.

“You are such an asshole, you know that? And you’re covered in some dude’s blood by the way. I have his buddies over to the side. You want to go ask them some questions or just keep running your cock gobbler about the greatest actor who ever lived?” Matt started toward the captive men.

I looked down at myself, “I’m going to take door number one there, Vanna.”

Matt barked a laugh, “I figured... By the way, *Ghost* is a classic movie... love, death, and triumph from beyond the grave... *Classic!*”

I just laughed and shook my head. As we headed over to the two men being detained, people behind us started shouting.

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Chapter 24

Matt and I turned to see where the shouting was coming from. It was Jerry, Floyd, and mother-fucking-Bill.

“Well, I am not surprised... You?” I asked Matt.

“Nope.”

“Well, fuck. Let’s go see what the commotion is. We cannot let this get out get out of hand.” I said as I changed direction.

We need to keep this situation calm. There are way too many people in the park. If people were to panic or get crazy, things would get bloody fast.

“Yeah, but if we kill them, it will make us look bad. One asshole a day... I think that’s about as far as we can push things publicly. Anything more and we will look like the aggressors.” Matt replied.

We picked up our pace. “Agreed, watch my back. I will adjudicate this situation as swiftly as possible.”

“Henry... *be calm.*” Matt said with a touch of worry in his face.

“The fuck you talking about *Willis*? I am the calmest person I know.”

“You are still covered in the blood of the man you literally just cut the cock and balls off of.”

I started to respond, but stopped. I cocked my head to the side and nodded in acceptance of his point. I did just knife a guy to death.

I cleared my throat, “You may be correct on that one. Point taken... Just watch my back.”

“Always Brother.” Matt said as he walked off to my flank.

This would allow us to form an L around the troublemakers and decrease the likely hood of a friendly fire situation.

“What seems to be worth shouting over?” I asked as I approached the two groups of men. Jerry, Floyd, and Bill were on the left side with several other neighbors. Some I recognized, others I didn’t. Josh and his security detail (made up of our first wave of volunteers) were on the right. “I think y’all should try to keep it down. We don’t want to spook the crowd.”

“Go fuck yourself, you bigoted piece of hillbilly trash...fucking asshole!” Floyd snapped.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Is it Thursday already?”

Jerry and Floyd did not appreciate my joke, and by the looks on the faces of their little group, I would say it fell flat.

“Okie dokie, so much for humor. What is the problem? And keep your tone civil.”

Floyd grinned, “Or what?”

I hit Floyd in the throat before he could finish showing off for his friends and put my hand on my Glock. “I asked nice. I will not ask again.” I looked around at the group. They were gearing up to say or do something dumb. I could see in their posturing. “Before any of you do something regrettable, I suggest you take a hard look over at that gentleman on the ground. In case you are confused as to which gentlemen I am referring to, it’s the guy missing his cock and balls with the massive wound down the inside of his right thigh. Now, I’m not sure if you could see clearly see what happened from where y’all were standing... But if you would take one second to look at my clothing and all the blood covering it, I think you may understand what just occurred.” The group did in-fact take a long look at poor Heavy Jeff, then at me. Some took a step back. “Since I already asked politely...” I looked at the coughing and wheezing Floyd. “I will now tell you. Keep your tone civil. Do not yell or shout. People here are on edge. I do not want a panic.”

Jerry was holding his partner and looked at me with murder in his eyes. “And what... You don’t think murdering someone and then assaulting another person would cause panic?”

I cocked my head to the side and made an overly exaggerated gesture looking around, “Clearly not, which is a real sad indicator of the times in which we live... But if you start yelling, people will get excited. There are way too many people here. And I don’t want to see a riot. Since you also live in the neighborhood, I would think you’d feel the same.”

Jerry looked around at the mass of people. I could almost see my words take root and grow in his eyes. “Okay, I acknowledge you may be right. But it doesn’t change the fact you murdered that poor man and just committed a hate crime against my partner.”

“That fucker committed suicide. And as for this hate crime nonsense, you can go fuck yourself with a side of hate crime.”

Josh stepped in, “Enough. This isn’t going anyplace good... so let’s disengage and get back to the main point.”

“I agree, so what’s the main point?” I asked everyone.

Bill spoke up first. “We have not seen Gloria in several days, and several others are also missing.”

“Okay, define *missing*. Missing like, where did she go? Or missing like, we searched her home and found nothing? Or is it that you knocked but no one answered?”

“Gloria and others haven’t answered their doors, and no one has seen them.” Bill said.

“Since when?” I asked.

Floyd found his voice, “Since two or three weeks ago.”

“Okay and what am I supposed to do about that?” I asked.

“Oh my God, really? Investigate or whatever... fucking stupid racists.” Floyd spat.

“Oh, gee golly mister, how could I have been so clueless?” I shook my head, “Gloria was old. I don’t know the others, but if they live around here, they were probably old as well. I have a lot of shit to do. I don’t have time to do welfare checks on every old person. Have you considered they are probably dead? It’s what happens to old people when they can’t get their meds.”

“Like your mother?” Jerry asked.

I nodded back, “Exactly.” I turned to walk back to the two men, still on their knees at the edge of the park.

“Henry, I am really sorry to hear about Dorothy.” I stopped walking and moved my hand back to my pistol. “She was always my favorite. I know you were aware of how close we were. If there is anything I can do... just let me know.”

I turned to Bill. He was standing in front of Jerry and Floyd. His eyes were wide and not blinking. “Yeah Bill. I know she always loved you. Thank you for the offer. I already handled everything, including taking care of my little sister. You know, the job you walked away from?” I eyed Floyd and Jerry carefully now, as well as scanning the group they were with. Several had stepped back, but there were two who stayed close. After a closer look, I could see pistols under their coats. Their hands were shaking.

“I know Henry, I... I just didn’t want to take from the little you were giving them. From the government handouts, ya know. It just wasn’t enough for all of us. The kids need...” Bill choked up.

“Yeah, Bill. Times are hard for everyone... You know what? I will go check on Gloria. Let me handle a few things and I will swing by Floyd and Jerry's place. We can all go look together. How does that sound?”

Bill closed his eyes, "Perfect, that sounds perfect. See you tonight or tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow afternoon." Bill nodded and turned back to the little group of people and assisted Jerry to get Floyd up and moving. Floyd was still rubbing his neck. I turned and continued to the two captives.

Matt walked up beside me, "What the fuck was that? Your mom hated Bill."

"Yep. Something is up. Did you catch that shit about me bringing them food? Katy has a shit load in the basement."

"Yeah, I did. I also noticed those two fuckers behind the dynamically gay duo were entirely too twitchy." Matt said.

I laughed, "Dynamically Gay Duo... Oh shit, awesome reference. But, yeah, we need to talk to Katy and check out Gloria's house tonight." I let out a long exhale. "Do me a favor and see if Josh needs anything. I will chat with these two, then we'll rally at my house."

Matt nodded and walked off to talk to Josh. I continued to the two men, who were both staring at their dead friend. "Okay boys, talk. What the fuck was that about?" They both just stared at me blankly. "Okay, let's try this another way. What are your names?"

"Kyle, Kyle Jennings. This is Daryl Hitchens." Kyle said.

"Okay Kyle, Daryl. What's was Jeff's problem? Why did you two come here with him? You didn't jump in, so what's your deal, fellas?"

Kyle had seemed to shake himself back to reality. "We, ah, we went to church together. Harvey was our pastor. Harvey was also Jeff's uncle."

"Fuck. Harvey was Jeff's uncle? That is... unfortunate. Are there any other congregation members or relatives I should know about?"

Now Daryl came to life. "No. Harvey's wife passed away a couple of years ago. He got custody of Jeff when he was nine. Harvey and his wife raised Jeff."

"Now I understand. I didn't kill an uncle and a nephew. I killed a father and son."

Kyle and Daryl nodded. "Yeah, basically. We came here with him for moral support. He was never... well balanced. Sometimes when he got mad, he would get crazy and go berserk." Kyle said.

"He got better in high school. He started taking pills to help. He said his uncle took something similar."

I got down on my knees to look the men in their eyes. “But lately Harvey and Jeff have been getting angry again, huh?”

The two men nodded in unison. “Fuck, what about Jeff’s biological mother and father?” I asked.

“Jeff never knew his dad, and his mom shot herself. That’s how Harvey got him.” Daryl said.

“Family history of mental illness... Well, that’s sad... Fuck...” I ran my hand through my beard. “Boys, I am truly sorry about your friend and your pastor. I know that...” I took a deep breath to steady myself, “...probably doesn’t sound genuine, but I mean it. I would give almost anything to...” I just couldn’t go there. Not now. I shook my head and stood to my feet. “I’m sorry, you fellas are free to go on your way.” They nodded.

I nodded and said to the guards. “They are free to go.” I looked at the two men in their mid-twenties. I wanted to tell them again how sorry I was. I wanted to say a lot of things, but my words would not change my deeds, and I couldn’t afford to start second guessing myself. I turned and made a B-Line for Josh and Matt. As I got closer to Matt and Josh, I noticed that most of the crowd had dispersed. There were maybe forty people left. They were mostly locals playing in the park with their kids. Thankfully, Bill, Jerry, Floyd, and their crew, had cleared out.

“Find out anything useful?” Josh asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Yeah, I basically murdered a father and son.”

“What?” Josh asked.

“Harvey had taken in and raised his nephew, Jeff.” I gestured over to the body on the ground. “There is also a history of mental illness in the family. Turns out, Harvey and Jeff ran out of their meds a while ago. They have been slowly spinning out...”

“Fuck... that’s depressing.” Matt spit on the ground. “I preferred to think of them as giant assholes.”

“Yep... I couldn’t agree more.” I shook off the sadness trying to creep in. “But they were assholes, it just wasn’t their fault... Any who, what’s new here?”

“Nothing you don’t already know.” Josh said.

“Good... I suppose. Matt and I have some recon to do tonight.”

Matt cleared his throat, “Just us?”

I nodded, “Figured it would be more romantic that way.” Josh let out a laugh and flipped me his middle finger. “Maybe if you’re good we can put

in dirty dancing and cuddle afterwards. But for the moment, it just needs to be us.”

Josh interjected, “I am capable and happy to come off the bench.”

I shook my head, “Nope, sorry Brother. Not this time.”

I could see the argument in Josh’s eyes, “Wait one second... I am more than just a community organizer, I have skills.”

Before I could reply, Matt beat me to it. “Sorry Josh, Henry is right. It’s not that you’re not capable. It’s that you will be missed.”

I jumped in, “Exactly. Josh, how many random visitors do you get in an evening? Now that our illustrious city government has all but vanished to their family farms?”

Josh just slowly nodded, “I know you are right... but it feels like I’m not carrying my load.”

I snorted, “Nothing could be further from the truth. You keep these people together, manage their complaints, and organize the volunteers. You’re the man for the job, because it sure as shit isn’t me.”

Josh began laughing... Hard. “HAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

Josh wiped tears from his eyes, “The thought of you... trying to organize everyone and listen to them gripe.”

Suddenly Matt burst into laughter, “You’re right... HAHAHAHA... that would be hilarious!”

I was starting to get a little angry, “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“Oh, no... you wouldn’t.” Josh pulled himself together and wiped away a few tears from laughing so hard. “We aren’t laughing at you Henry, but the thought of you dealing with pettiness all day, and not shooting absolutely everyone.”

Matt chimed in, “Or burning their houses down...”

Josh burst out laughing again, “Exactly!... Oh man, I needed this. I needed a good laugh. Thank you, Henry.” Josh took a deep breath, “You two are right, I would be missed. Just remember, I’m here if you need me.”

Matt was still laughing, but I was a little pissed. “Hey, just so you know... If you need any help, I am willing to help you deal with whatever... disputes, petty crime, whatever. I’m good with people.”

Matt just upped his laughter, and Josh broke out laughing so hard he resumed crying. Now I was pissed, “Fine, fuck you both. I am going to try and get a nap before tonight. Matt, come over around ten and we will kit up

and head out. Josh..." I flipped him off, "You can't do math..." I looked back to Matt, "Patrick Swayze sucks and *Road House* is way over rated." I turned to walk away, and the jackasses burst out laughing again. Luckily for me, it was a short walk to my house.

As I walked into the driveway, I saw Dee with Don's daughter, Rose. They were watching a horde of children play. As I walked closer, Dee turned and smiled at me, "What's cooking good look.... Henry, what happened?" Her face was serious as she stared at my clothing and gear.

Rose turned to me and gasped as she saw me covered in blood.

I stopped and looked down, "Yeah, I need to change. I had a disagreement with a man at the park."

Dee swallowed, "I can imagine. Do you need help or..."

I smiled, "No Boss, I don't need medical care. I am fine, physically anyway. I need to get some rest. Matt and I are rolling out tonight."

Dee let out a long breath and closed her eyes, "Is it necessary?"

I looked from Dee to Rose, then back to Dee. "Yes, unfortunately. I am going to trash these clothes, but I will put my kit in the laundry room. I'll clean it up tomorrow." I thought for a second, "Dee, do you think I'm a people person?"

Dee cocked her head at me for a second then began laughing. "No, my husband. No, you are many wonderful things, but you have never been a people person."

I was hurt, "What... since when?"

Dee grinned and walked over to me. She could tell I was bothered. "Henry, if you and rabid pit bull applied for a customer service job, they would give the dog a sign-on bonus."

My mouth fell open, "But, I negotiated all those contracts for our firm..."

Dee smiled, "Henry, you negotiated such good deals because you intimidate people. You're not a big friendly bear of a man. You're more..." She gestured to my clothing, "...Well, you're more of a ravenous maneater that people tell horror stories about."

I blinked and shook my head. "Well, this has been an enlightening day." I shook my head and started to walk away.

Dee grabbed my arm and stopped, "Henry, the world has too many soft men... I thank God every day you are what He made you." She placed her hand on my chest. "I know the things you have done are weighing on you. I

am sorry you must carry that. I am, but I know that you can. I know that because that is what we..." Dee gestured toward the kids in the yard and her belly, "...need you to do. Be the man people will tell horror stories about as long as our kids get through this..." Her eyes were wide and clearly holding back tears. "Do or be whatever you must. I will always be here for you... no matter what."

I went to hug her, but she stopped me. "You're covered in blood, not a chance." She smiled, "Go get cleaned up and get some rest."

I smiled and nodded. I felt clean and lite, like my soul had gone on an extreme diet.

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Chapter 25

I awoke to rain hitting my face. It was warm. I sat up and looked around. I was in my front yard, and the air had wispy clouds of red slowly traveling though the gray of the world. The sky was purple with green lightning steaking across the sky. There was no boom of thunder, just the crackle of energy moving across a clear purple sky. A hot wind kicked up, and I felt the warm rain again. As I looked at my hand, I noticed the rain landing on my skin was not water. It was droplets of warm blood. The warm wind carried the smell of burning flesh and sound of creaking tree limbs. My stomach lurched. I knew where the blood was coming from.

I looked up to the trees surrounding my yard. There they hung, dozens of burnt and mutilated bodies. Some I recognized, many I didn't, at least not at initially. They were familiar somehow, but I couldn't put my mental finger on how I knew them. The strangers' bodies were burnt, and many had limbs missing, but all of them had bullet wounds to the head or chest. There it was, plain as day. I knew these men – I blew them up.

The world began to spin, and I doubled over falling to one knee. I was going to vomit. There were so many, the drops of their blood fell upon me like a monsoon.

“Henry,” a soft voice whispered.

I snapped up to look around, but before I could scan for anything, two massive legs were in front of me. They were dirty, naked, and covered in blood. Instinctively I rolled back and away, then popped up ready for whatever was to come. Diablo... He was a fucking giant now. His mouth was still filled with those insane shark teeth ripping through his lips with meat hanging and blood running from what should have been his lips, but now it just looked like a nightmare hole come to life. Still with no eyes, not even the holes where eyes should have been, he now stood at least eleven feet tall. His head was tilted back, with his horrid excuse for a mouth wide open.

A whisper escaped, “Henry, Henry... get up.”

Diablo raised his enormous arm and pointed to the front of the yard, where the rock wall met the sidewalk. There was something there, moving in the shadows of the trees just beyond the rock wall. It was more than one, I could see them move back and forth, still cloaked in shadow.

“Henry, get up. Someone is outside.” The whisper was loader.

I turned to face Diablo, but before I could say a thing, I was awake on the third floor. I heard Dee softly call to me from the stairs.

“Henry, are you awake?”

I shook off the fog of sleep. “Yeah Boss, what’s going on?”

I could hear Dee creeping up the stairs, “Turn on the TV and look at the security cameras.”

I did as she said, sure as shit. There were people moving around in the tree line and the shadows at the edge of the property. Thank God when I installed the sixteen-camera security system I ran the feed to every TV in the house, even the kids’ rooms were set up to access the cameras.

“Looks like at least three people,” I said.

“What do you need me to do?” Dee asked.

“Kids are asleep?” I asked. She nodded that they were. “Okay... this is a problem.” I looked to my watch; it was 10:30 p.m. Matt wouldn’t be here for thirty more minutes.

I took a deep breath and let my fear for my family go. I snatched up my radio and hit scan.

“Do you think we should call for help? What if they have one of our radios that you handed out?” Dee asked.

“Damn it woman, you can be so sexy sometimes.” I smiled up at her. She just shot me a questioning look.

I grinned, “They are all on different sides, they must be communicating somehow. I programmed the Bao Fengs with common GRS And FRS frequencies.” Dee just stared at me like I was speaking Turkish. “Those are the frequencies associated with common sport type radios, ya know the yellow radios everyone uses at the big theme parks? Well, at least they used to.”

I could see the light in her eyes as she put it together. “So, you are going to see if they are using those or ours?”

I nodded, “hopefully it’s one or the other. If not, we have bigger problems.”

Dee’s eyes went wide, “What?”

I put my boots on and stood up, “Let’s worry about that when we have to.”

She nodded, “So I get my twenty gauge and watch the stairs, right?”

“No Boss, I need...”

She cut me off. “Henry, I will fight!”

I put my hands up in mock surrender, “I know Babe, I need you to fight if they get past me.” She visibly calmed at that.

“I just don’t want you to use the shot gun, not pregnant. It will send you into labor.”

I walked over and grabbed the CZ Scorpion Mini EVO3 with a can on it. I also grabbed the pre-loaded mags with the blue duct tape on them. “This is Suppressed. These mags have one hundred and forty-seven grain, subsonic ammo. No big boom, and no recoil.”

Dee nodded. “What are you going to do?”

I slipped on one of the vests that had been preloaded with Scorpion mags and level four ceramic plates, then a Team Wendy helmet with the PVS14 on it and comms. “I am going to see if they need any help...”

The radio cracked to life, “...don’t see any movement. We should do this now!”

My heart stopped. These fuckers were coming for my family.

“Well, do we keep waiting or what?” One of the men asked the others.

“I already told you guys. He will be there tomorrow night.” That was a voice I recognized. That was Bill’s voice.

“He fucking hates you. Everyone knows that. Why would he come? I say we do it now!” That sounded like Floyd.

I looked from the radio to Dee. Her eyes were wide. She whispered, “Bill?”

I nodded and looked away from her tear-filled eyes and back to the security camera feed. All sixteen were up, and then I saw it. A flash from the ally next to the shed behind our house. It was really bright, but the three visitors didn’t react to it.

There it was again. Flash, pause, flash, pause, flash... then it hit me, “It’s an I.R. flashlight.” I said.

It was Matt. He came early.

I grabbed my AR that was leaning against the wall, ran to the back window, in the third-floor bathroom and cracked it open. I stepped back from the window and pointed my rifle in the direction that the flashes came from. I hit the button duct taped to the foregrip of the weapon, triggering the infrared laser and signaling back to Matt. Three flashes with pauses in between then one long hold of the laser. I could only hope he understood me. I quickly shut the window as the radio cracked back to life.

“I don’t know... maybe we should go now. It’s just him, a bunch of brats and his knocked-up bitch.” Jerry said. I could tell the difference in their voices now that I knew who I was listening to.

“Dee will fight. Henry will fight like a wild animal... Hell, his kids might even pick up a rifle. It’s not worth it. We start shooting and the security patrol will come, neighbors will come. We need to wait.” Bill said, almost pleading with the other two.

“What the fuck is wrong with white trash bigots like this? His spawn will fight? Bullshit, I’m not worried about that. I’ll turn them out like bitches... Fuck these hoarders. We will be doing the world a favor... Let’s just burn it down. Fuck them all. Once he is gone, we will take what we need from everyone else.” Floyd said.

“You saw what he did to that guy today and he wasn’t even trying... If you want to take Henry, you will have to surprise him. Even if we could get in there, I’m sure it’s booby-trapped or something. It’s who he is, trust me.” Bill said.

“Fuck that! You’re just a scared little faggot.” Floyd said.

“Yes, I’m scared... and you are stupid if you’re not. He put me in the hospital for weeks. I had to have dental implants. He is a fucking lunatic. You saw him kill that guy today like it was nothing. He has trained people to do this kind of shit. At least he used to... We need to stick to the plan. He said he would be there tomorrow. He will be there tomorrow. Even if he suspected something, he would still come because he said he would.” Bill said.

“I wonder why he would ever think something strange might happen with that bizarre conversation you two had. Nah, I say we go now.” Floyd said.

“We wait.” Jerry said.

“Fuck that! I am going...” Floyd exclaimed but was interrupted.

“Floyd shut your cock-sucker and think. Bill is right. This isn’t some fucking punk we can just intimidate into doing what we want. He cut that guy’s balls off. We have a plan. If he doesn’t show, we go to Bills whore’s house and use her as bait. Simple as that. We will get what we want... Henry will die, then that fucking macho Matt asshole and his cunt cop... we can just burn down that Josh’s house... But we take care of Henry first.” Jerry said.

“FUCK, you are right. I’ll wait... Fucking breeders.” Floyd said.

“Let’s go.” Jerry said.

The radio was silent. I watched the three men meet up in front of my house and silently walk away in the cold night air. I looked over at Dee, tears were flowing down her cheeks. She wasn’t frightened – she was enraged.

“I am going to need both of these.” I grabbed the suppressed Stribogs. “Here, take this and these mags.” I handed Dee a suppressed AR pistol and mags. “Watch the cameras, I don’t think they will be back tonight.”

“What are you going to do?” Dee asked with concern.

“I am going to meet-up with Matt and we are going to make sure they don’t ever come back again.” I grabbed the other set of kit for Matt, then hustled downstairs. I clicked the radio three times and said “Seven”, then stepped out the back door. From the cold night I heard a whispered “Eleven”.

Matt hustled over, “Was that Bill and those dick-faces?”

I nodded, “Well put, now come in and let’s get your gear swapped. We need to go have a serious conversation with those three.”

“Yeah” Matt said coldly.

I looked at him for a second, his face was so red it was almost purple. “Ah, you scanned the radio as well?”

Matt nodded, “Yep, I figured they had to be talking somehow since they were all separated.”

“Yeah, so did I.” I looked at my furious friend, “You need to let it go. Now is not the time to be angry. That will come soon enough.”

Matt looked at me fiercely, “How does one do that, exactly, senpai?”

I smiled at his anger, “I get it. I want to rip their throats out with my teeth, and maybe I will. I don’t know. That’s a decision for later. I do know that if you can’t reign it in, you will get us shot. Calm, professional, detached... save up that hate.”

Matt shook his head, then took a long breath. “You’re right.”

“About a lot of stuff.” I watched Matt as his rage boiled just below the surface of his normally deadpan face. Then, something about this situation hit me as funny. “So, I have a serious question for you?”

“Yeah?” Matt asked.

“Yeah.” I answered.

“Okay, what is it?” Matt had his sour face on.

“What do you think Jerry and Floyd’s favorite Patrick Swayze movie is?” I did my best to keep my face straight.

Matt’s jaw dropped open.

“I mean, they are gay. It’s a known thing. Gay dudes like Patrick Swayze. It makes sense. He is a beautiful man... Well, he was a beautiful man. I mean, I’m not trying to push a stereotype... Well, actually I am if I think about it.” I shrugged my shoulders and cocked my head as I grinned at Matt.

Matt just slowly shook his head. “You are *such* an asshole... How do I not have better friends?”

I shrugged, “I feel like that says more about you... than me.” I smiled, picked up my rifle and headed to the door. I could hear Matt behind me mumbling, “The next time an apocalypse happens, I’m going to get new friends.”

I laughed, “You watch Patrick Swayze movies, who else would have you?” I asked.

Matt shut the door behind us, and my electronic hearing protection let me hear clearly, “Yeah, you’re not wrong.”

I just smiled, “Now let’s go have a serious conversation with these dick-faces.”

Chapter 26

It didn't take long to swap Matt's kit around. Within a few minutes, we were out the door and in the alley. We ghosted along, doing everything we could to be as silent as a fart in church. No talking, no joking. We avoided the roving neighborhood security patrol. Neither of us wanted that complication. We didn't need anyone getting in our way. Tonight's business was personal. I could feel the anger and hate radiating off Matt, as I know he could feel it rolling off me. Weapons up and ready, we ghosted down the alleys to Gloria's house. Her lights were off, and the house was empty. No gloria... Also, there was no food, blankets, valuables or any sign of a struggle. All the doors and windows were intact. We checked them all as we cleared every room.

"Someone cleaned this place out." Matt said.

I nodded, "Yeah, I'm not surprised. She had a valuable coin collection."

Matt looked at me puzzled. "That was common knowledge?"

"Yeah... some people can't help themselves... they have to crow from the highest perch."

Matt looked around the tossed and picked over room, "And this is what happens."

I nodded, then looked out into the backyard toward Gloria's shed. "Shed." I said as I pointed out the window. Matt understood and fell into step behind me. As we approached the shed, I saw the first sign of something wrong. The lock and pad, all still secured together, were on the ground. Someone had clearly installed the pad and latch with short screws, which had obviously made it easy for whoever removed it.

Matt and I got into position. He opened the door, and I swept the small tool shed. I lowered my rifle and Matt came up to my right side.

"Is that Gloria?" he asked.

I looked at the small woman, old and frail. Tossed on the dirty floor like a forgotten toy. Her purple petty coat was open showing her nightgown and blue skin. She had deep purple marks around her neck.

"They strangled her." I shut the shed door.

Matt spit on the ground, "Fuck."

I had no words for the moment. I just nodded. I lifted my rifle up and headed for the gate to the back alley. We were only a few houses away from Floyd and Jerry's place. Matt and I crept slowly down the alley. With

weapons up and night vision down, we continued looking, smelling, and listening. Every so often, we would take up a position and read the night as best we could. Dogs barked; wood smoke mixed with burning trash wafted throughout the friggid night air. I did my best to keep my heart rate slow and even, but I was burning with rage, which made that task harder than usual. I slowed my movements as I pushed the thought of Gloria's strangled and discarded body out of my mind. I pushed that image to the back of my mind along with the knowledge of Jerry, Floyd, and Bill being outside my home earlier plotting to kill me and my entire family. Now was not the time for my rage. Focus... I needed to focus.

I paused my advance, turning my electronic hearing protection all the way up. "Is that music?"

Matt turned his all the way up. "Yeah, I think it is."

"It's coming from down the alley." I moved forward and Matt stayed just behind me. Every few seconds he would do a little shuffle step and take a hard look behind us. Then pivot and fall back into step with me.

We were behind Jerry and Floyd's place. Our night vision devices showed us their security cameras. They shined like bright beacons of warning in our NOD's. The IR lights bathing the area in infrared light. We crept just beyond the IR light cast by the cameras. Unfortunately, we could not see inside the house. The IR light from the security cameras and the regular white light seeping out the windows washed out our NOD's. I flipped up my set and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark. Matt and I could still hear the music pumping from the house. This close, I could tell it was from the second floor. But there was something else. It was intermittent and hard to make out past the thump, thump, thump of the music.

Matt cocked his head. "Is that barking?"

I strained to listen past the music. "I don't know... maybe."

"Well, that's not good." Matt said dryly.

"Nope... if it's anything other than an ankle biter, shoot it."

"I like dogs.... This is going to suck. I want to shoot them, not their dog." Matt lamented.

I nodded. "Well, let it bite you in the ass first. Then you won't feel so bad about shooting it." I said to him with a wide smile.

"You are such an asshole." Matt said.

"It's not my fault you can't get better friends..." I swung my long gun to the side and grabbed my entry kit. "I will pop the lock; you are on point."

Matt nodded to me... “Ya know, maybe if you stopped telling everyone how awesome Patrick Swayze is, more people would talk to you?”

Matt starred at me, then whispered, “You are my friend. What does that say about you?”

I smiled at him, “That I take pity on the mentally defective?” Then I stepped behind him and pulled down my NOD’s. “Front door, they won’t expect it.”

Matt nodded and moved to the side of the house between what we hoped was a gap in the camera's field of view. At the very least, it was a gap in the IR light that was being pumped out by the security cameras. Once to the side of the house, we slowly moved along till we hit the side of the porch. We froze.

“What the fuck is Tara barking at?”

“How the fuck should I know? It’s your stupid dog Jerry!”

Matt and I could hear the dog barking perfectly as someone inside the house turned down the music. Then we could hear someone stomping around and a loud yelp. The barking stopped.

“I put her in the box... Your dog is a fucking retard.”

“Shut up and get back in here, bitch.”

The music returned to the loud thump, thump, thump from earlier.

Matt moved forward. As we came to the end of the porch, I could see the danger and reason for Matt’s hesitation. They had security cameras on the porch. We would be seen as soon as we moved forward.

“We’ve got to be fast, bro. they may or may not have a door chime. I don’t know, I have never been in here. They are up-stairs and to the back of the house. I will pop the locks with the Electro pick. Then we move fast!” I said.

I could see Matt take a deep breath and then nod. He moved, weapon up and ready. I stayed on his heels. We crept onto the front porch and tiptoed to the front door. Matt moved to the side and pointed his weapon at the large bay window to our right. I grabbed the handle of the large storm door and turned the handle. To mine and Matt’s amazement, the storm door opened. Matt pulled it as wide as it would go, as I got ready to use the Electro Pick on the deadbolt first. I placed the tension wrench in the keyway. But just before I placed the pick inside the keyway, a thought occurred to me.

I removed the tension wrench from the lock and grabbed the doorknob. I turned the doorknob, and it moved. Completing the turn, I gave a small

push and the door opened. My mouth was practically hanging open in astonishment as the door swung open.

“You have got to be kidding me?” Matt whispered.

I stayed perfectly still. “Maybe... a trap?” I quietly asked.

Matt shrugged his shoulders. “Does that change anything?”

I slipped the Electro Pick in my dump pouch, stood and shouldered my weapon. “Nope”

Matt stepped inside, and I was on his heels. We scanned in opposite directions, driving our weapons’ sights to where we needed to look, never letting our eyes get ahead of our weapon and forcing our weapons to keep pace with our eyes. We could hear the dog going crazy in the back of the downstairs.

“Up.” I whispered to Matt. “Head towards the music.”

Matt nodded his head in response to my words. The techno music was unbelievably loud to our amplified hearing. We made our way slowly up the old staircase. Our breathing would stop every time the floor creaked. Our PVS 14s were dimming and brightening as we moved, the various lamps or rooms with lights left on triggering the Auto-Gating in our NOD’s, keeping them from getting washed out from the inconsistently lighted home. As we approached the door the music was coming from, I stepped up to Matt’s left and he instinctively moved to my right. We had trained scenarios very similar to this many, many times. But this was the first time we had ever executed one in real life. I took several slow breaths to calm myself. When I looked at Matt, he was doing the same. I looked at the wash of light from the base of the door then signaled to Matt. We flipped up our NOD’s and readied ourselves. I raised my right foot high and kicked out with all my might. The door frame splintered as the door flung open and, without hesitation, Matt surged forward, yelling commands and profanities.

“FREEZE MOTHERFUCKER!!! MOVE AND FUCKING DIE!!!” Matt shouted.

I was in the room a fraction of a second behind him. I was at a loss for what I was seeing. Jerry was naked, cuffed to the bed. Bill and Floyd were mostly naked. They were both wearing outfits made of what appeared to be leather or vinyl straps that really didn’t cover anything up. The music was so loud, my hearing protection kept randomly killing the sound.

Matt was still giving commands as I swept the room more thoroughly. Bill was complying with Matt’s commands. Floyd was not. He rushed at

Matt. That was a very poor choice on his part. Matt promptly kicked Floyd in the chest and Floyd went flying backwards. He struggled back to his feet. Once he stood up, Matt put a round of nine-millimeter in his stomach. Floyd went back down screaming and holding his bleeding gunshot wound.

I walked over to the stereo and turned it off. The screaming of Floyd and Jerry replaced the ridiculously loud techno music.

“Put pressure on that Floyd...”

Floyd cut me off, “FUCK YOU! YOU RASIST CUNT FUCK!” Matt stepped over to Floyd and kicked him in the mouth. Floyd was suddenly silent, because he was unconscious.

“Or keep running that cocksucker and see where that gets you.” I said to no one in particular. I took a deep breath and tried to push the boiling rage out of my mind. “Matt, you good bro?”

Matt nodded. “Yeah, I’m in control of myself.”

“Good, I am going to take Bill and find what we need. They move... kill them. Doesn’t matter if they are alive or dead.” Jerry’s eyes went wide. “Bill, put some fucking pants on and toss a blanket over Jerry’s dick... I have officially filled my meat gazing quota for the rest of my life, and I suspect Matt feels the same way.”

Bill put on his pants and a shirt, then laid a towel over Jerry’s lap.

“Bill,” I said calmly, but Bill still jumped at my words. The room had been silent while he dressed himself and covered Jerry’s dick. “I need rope or something like that. Where do they keep it?”

Bill stared at me with a blank expression. “How much do you need?” He asked.

“How much do they have?” I answered.

“Uh, not a lot... I don’t know. Um, maybe this way...” Bill started to walk out the door.

“STOP” I commanded as I snapped my rifle up and leveled it at his head. “Stop.”

Bill froze and lifted his hand over his head. He was wild-eyed and clearly terrified. “Bill, let’s move together, slowly. Okay?”

Bill nodded. I lowered my weapon and moved toward him. “After you... and take it easy. Just relax Bill.”

Bill nodded and let out a held breath. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good.” And I followed Bill downstairs.

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Chapter 27

After searching most of the house, I found several interesting items and something that would do in place of rope. I walked Bill back upstairs to where Matt was keeping Jerry and Floyd under control.

“Blue, blue” I called out to Matt.

“Copy that.” Matt replied.

“Why did you say that?” Bill asked as we walked into the room.

I looked at Bill for a minute and shrugged, “So he knows everything is good and to not shoot.”

Bill looked a little stunned, then he seemed to grasp the logic. “I see. That makes sense.”

Matt shook his head, “Good for you, Bill. Now please, shut the fuck up.” Bill nodded and moved to the side. “Henry, are we good?” Matt was back to using his flat tone.

“Good enough... Look what I found.” I held up the ugly rifle with a large metal can on the end. The can was four inches wide and nine inches long.

“What the fuck is that?” Matt asked.

“This is a HI-Point carbine in forty-five, with an oil filter for a suppressor.” I answered.

Matt stared at the ugly stick with disgust and curiosity. “I have never seen that before.”

“Neither have I, at least not in person. I have seen them online in random videos, back when the internet worked. I always thought it was just a gimmick. I didn’t know anyone used them, like, for real.” I said as I set the rifle against the wall. “We should get Mad Scientist Mike to see if he could make some adaptors for some of the guys on patrol.”

“If it works, maybe. But do we really want them having suppressors, even makeshift ones?” Matt asked.

“Hmmm, good point. Meh, we’ll figure it out later. So, Floyd still out?” I asked.

“Appears to be, but who knows? I have stayed put while you went on your little treasure hunt.” Matt bitched.

“Better you than me. Well, hit him with your taser to see if he is actually out or just playing possum.” I urged.

“That is a great idea.” Matt pulled his taser, and Floyd shouted, “I’m awake!”

I smiled, “You coy devil. Clever, very clever.” Floyd stared daggers at me, “Fuck you!”

I smiled wider, “Go ahead Matt.” Matt fired his taser, and both prongs hit their marks. Floyd seized up. Once the five second timer ended, the current stopped flowing. Floyd still had a little fight left in him. “Again please, Matt.”

“With pleasure.” Matt squeezed the trigger and Floyd went on another lighting ride.

Jerry called out, still handcuffed to the bed. “STOP IT! YOU ARE KILLING HIM!”

“Not yet... just getting compliance at the moment.” I said as the taser timed out and stopped the electric current.

This time Floyd’s bravado was gone. No more shit talking, no more anger. He just stared at the ceiling, tears flowing from his eyes. I pulled a couple of my stainless-steel zip ties, swiftly rolled Floyd onto his belly and zipped-tied his hands together behind his back. Once they were tight, Floyd went wild again on the floor, his adrenaline blocking the pain of his gunshot wound. Matt replaced the taser guns cartage.

“Whoa there, Mister *taze-the-shit-out-of-people*. I have a better idea. It’s not like we can just order more of those things online.”

“Okay, what’s your idea?” Matt asked.

“Go down to the bottom of the stairs and grab the big orange electrical extension cord. We will play a little game of ‘cowboys and Indians’.” I grinned at Floyd on the floor as Jerry, still cuffed to the bed, began to cry.

Matt returned swiftly with the cord. He tied a small knot with a loop in it at the end of the extension cord. Then pulled the cord through the loop, creating a makeshift lasso.

“Man, I wish I knew how to tie knots.” I said.

Matt shook his head, “You make fun of me for my preference of movies and actors... but you can’t tie basic knots.”

“To be fair, Matt... Everyone makes fun of you.”

“Such an asshole.” Matt said under his breath.

“Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, please drag that lump of shit down the stairs and onto the porch.”

Without missing a beat, Matt expertly threw the looped extension cord around Floyd's kicking legs and cinched the loop closed. Then he pulled hard on the cord, dragging Floyd behind him. I waited for the inevitable. Once I I heard the “thump, thump, thump...” of Floyd being dragged down the stairs, I smiled at Jerry.

“How would you like to do this, Jerry? You can walk, like a man, or I will drag you face first down the stairs and outside. Your call fuck stick.” I said coldly. Then turned my attention to Bill. “Bill, turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

“But... why?” Bill was shaking.

I shook my head slowly, “NO, this is not a discussion, Bill. You can put your hands behind your back... or I can do it for you. Your decision.” I starred a hole through Bill.

“Okay, okay.... Just ... okay.” Bill fidgeted and then turned around, placing his hands behind the small of his back.

I swiftly zip tied them together. “There, now be silent and still. Do you understand me?” Bill nodded in response.

“Okay, Jerry. Option one or option two? Your call. I could give a fuck less... they both end the same way.”

Jerry calmed himself and nodded slightly. “Option one. I will walk like a man.”

“Good call. I will make a deal with you, Jerry. You act like a man, and you won't suffer needlessly. You have my word.”

Jerry pursed his lips and nodded.

“Okay. Good. Now, where are the keys for those cuffs?” I asked.

“In the nightstand on my left side... Top drawer.” Jerry answered.

I opened the drawer, and I closed my eyes. It was a drawer full of dildos, with enormous bottles of lube. But there it was – a set of handcuff keys on top of a stack of giant dildos. I could hear Jerry laughing. Even Bill chuckled at my expressions.

“I do not see what's so funny.” I said as pulled out my Leatherman multi tool and used the pliers to pick up the keys and put them on the bed. I closed the dick drawer and truly hoped it wouldn't end up in my nightmares. After wiping off as much lube as possible from the keys, I picked them up and unlocked Jerry's left hand. Then looking at him, I said, “I trust you can do the rest?” Thank God for gloves.

Jerry was uncuffed in moments, then stood up with his hands at small of his back. He was zip tied like the other two. I then led Bill and Jerry downstairs and out into the chilly night air. Floyd was still naked and bleeding, only now his ankles were zip tied together. Floyd was standing in the yard, and the orange extension cord was now wrapped around his neck, like a makeshift hangman's noose. Matt had tossed the other end of the cord over a large branch of the old Oak Tree in the front yard.

"Wait here fellas." I dipped back into the house and grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels ole Number 7 from the kitchen. "Alright Bill, sit down. I will help you."

"Wait, what? Why?" Bill was shaking hard now.

"Bill, sit!" I commanded.

Bill half collapsed and half sat on the ground. I gave Jerry a bit of a push and took a deep breath. Then I walked toward Matt who was holding another noose open for Jerry. Matt slipped it over his head and cinched it tight.

"I figured you wanted to send a message." Matt said.

I nodded, "Fucked up minds think alike. Yeah, we need to send a message to the rest of their little group."

I looked at Jerry, "Unless you want to tell us who it was that helped you murder Gloria?"

"It was just us. No one was willing to make any real moves with you running around. They all thought you would kill them in front of their families or some such bullshit." Jerry said.

I cocked my head and pointed to Floyd. "What exactly do you think is happening right now?"

"Huh, I didn't think about that, actually." Jerry's voice cracked.

I spun the top off the bottle. "I am a man of my word, as Bill told you I was... just a couple of hours ago, while you three plotted to kill me and my family... hiding in the bushes and tree line." Jerry's face flashed with an understanding and Floyd began to sob. "Yeah, security cameras... night vision and HAM radios that can scan radio frequencies."

"We should have listened to Bill," Jerry shook his head.

"What did Bill tell you?" I asked Jerry.

"I'll tell you on one condition... take my dog. She did nothing to deserve..." Jerry's voice broke, and he began to weep.

Matt and I gave them a moment. Once they pulled it together, I said, “I will find her a home. It won’t be with me, but I will find her one. You have my word.”

Jerry calmed down immediately. “Thank you. Bill said we should go after other neighborhoods that weren’t as well patrolled and didn’t have you and your friends running around.”

“How kind of him.” I said with a bit more edge to my voice than I intended.

“Would you mind if I had a drink?” Jerry asked.

“I will happily give you both a large drink if you tell me who strangled Gloria.”

“I did.” Floyd said. “I would do it again. I should have fucking killed your whole family tonight.” Then he looked at Matt. “I would have burned you and your cunt alive.”

Matt began to move, but I stepped in front of him. “No brother... NO. he is trying to get you to make it quick.” Matt turned and walked about 5 feet away.

“Open up Jerry.” I lifted the bottle to his lips, and he began to drink. After a few seconds, I pulled the bottle away, then repeated the motions with Floyd. The bottle was mostly full when I grabbed it, but it was now half empty.

“Jerry, would you like to say anything?” I asked.

“Do you think there is a hell?” Jerry asked sincerely.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Do you think I’m going there?” Jerry asked in almost a whisper.

“Yes.”

Jerry swallowed hard, then nodded to me and stared into the night sky. I stepped off to an angle and put two rounds in Jerry’s head. His body went limp and the orange cord cinched tight as his bowels released. Jerry’s shit and piss evacuated his body and his neck popped. I took several deep breaths. Then moved in front of Floyd.

“Anything you want to say?” I asked calmly.

“You mother-fucking, son-of-a-bitch... where do you think you are going when you die? Huh?” Floyd asked with rage and acid in his tone.

“Same place as you, probably.” I said coldly. “Matt, would you please shoot this fucker in his knees?” I asked as I walked off to the side.

“Wait what? You di...” Floyd’s words cut off as Matt shot out his knees and he collapsed. No longer able to support his body weight, he was slowly strangling to death.

I stepped back in front of Floyd. “Gloria was my friend. She didn’t need to die, especially not like that. So, fuck you.”

I walked back up to the porch. Bill was sobbing and had pissed himself. “Stand up Bill.” I grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet. “Turn around.” I commanded. Bill complied, and I cut the stainless steel zip ties off his wrists.

Bill turned around wide-eyed, “What?”

I shoved the bottle in front of his face. “Drink, it will help.” I gently grabbed him by the arm and began to walk down the steps. Bill walked along without resistance. Once we reached the street, there was maybe a quarter left of the bottle.

“Henry, I don’t know what to say... I... don’t know. Things just...” Bill trailed off.

“They just got out of hand?” I asked.

“Exactly. Out of hand.” Bill turned left, and I grabbed his arm hard.

“Wrong way, Bill. We are going to walk down to the river for a little chat.”

“Henry, I don’t have any shoes on, and it’s really cold. I just want to go home.” Bill was almost crying again.

“Bill, you don’t have a home to go to. You know that.”

“But I warned you... I convinced them not to go after you.”

“Yes, you did. Thank you for that, Bill. I mean that.” I still had hold of his arm. “But how did they know what all I had? How did they know what was at Katy’s?”

Bill sobbed, “It wasn’t like that Henry. I was mad and drunk one night... It slipped out. I just...”

I cut him off, “Bill, it honestly doesn’t matter. Your great alternative was to go rob other people that were less capable of defending themselves or that you weren’t related to. That doesn’t make you a hero or wash away your sins.”

Bill was full on crying. He had collapsed to his knees. I felt a presence behind me. I looked and saw Matt. He motioned with his head to the dangling bodies over his shoulder behind us. Floyd was dead. I nodded, and

he gave me a long wink, then looked to Bill weeping on the ground then back to me. I understood the question.

“This one is on me. But thank you for the offer. If you would, go to Josh’s and get him to rally a cleanout crew. Whatever they have in there, it needs to go to the neighborhood food bank along with all the other shit. But make sure the guns get to Mad Scientist Mike. We need more of those filter adaptors.”

Matt gave me quick nod and turned, flipped down his nods, then strode off into the darkness. I let out an exhale. Bill broke the silence. “What about Vicky, Jerry’s dog?”

I looked down at the small man. He had stopped crying to ask about the dog. “That’s tomorrow’s problem. She is warm and safe in there tonight. I’ll have josh find her a home.”

“You aren’t going to take her?”

“Nah, that wouldn’t be right.” I said, reaching down to lift Bill up.

“You still want to go to the river?” Bill asked meekly.

I looked Bill in the eye, “It’s the river or the tree.” I motioned over my shoulder to the two bodies behind me.

Bill’s face went white. “Why? It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Bill, very few men get to face their end with peace and courage. Most die suddenly. It just happens. But you have an opportunity right now. I know that sounds crazy. But it’s true... So, pull your shit together, accept how you got into this position, and for once take some fucking ownership. You have nothing left to lose.”

Something must have clicked in Bill’s head. He stood up straight and chugged the last of the whiskey.

“Yeah... Let’s go for a walk.” Bill said and started walking downhill towards the river.

I followed in behind Bill, weapon at low ready. “You know, Bill, I am sorry for what I did to you at Christmas all those years ago.” I said.

“Thank you, Henry. I’m sorry to... I’m sorry for everything. I have always been a fuck up, ya know. It only got worse when Katy got that job... I ... I had so much, but I always felt slighted and owed. I talked about it with my therapist. She said I was a narcissist, so I stopped going.” He chuckled at that last part.

Bill talked all the way the river’s edge. I felt like a priest taking last confession. I listened as Bill talked about his affairs, gambling, and stealing

money for drugs and prostitutes from his kids' college accounts. Every dark thing he had ever done or thought, Bill told me at a rapid-fire pace. Once we reached the edge, Bill was smiling. "Henry, will you take care of Katy, Timber, and Sahara?"

"Absolutely, Bill." I assured him.

Bill smiled, "Good... I never could." He chuckled to himself. "I feel somehow lighter, like I could float away. That's strange... is that normal?"

"I honestly don't know. I have only seen one other person face this the way you have. He seemed happy almost, well maybe relieved. It was strange."

Bill nodded, "Yeah... relieved, that's accurate. I feel like a kid with no worries. It feels amazing." Bill slowed his breathing and looked me in the eye. "Can I ask something of you Henry?"

"Anything."

"Don't tell Katy and the kids how... I mean..." Bill took a deep breath. "Why we ended up here. They think little of me as it is. I don't know what you should say. I just... I don't want them to know the truth." Bill's tears were flowing freely now.

"I wouldn't do that to you, Brother. As far as I'm concerned, Jerry and Floyd held you hostage and killed you when you wouldn't tell them what they wanted." I said as looked Bill in the eye.

Bill blinked away more tears and took a deep breath then stuck his hand out. I took hold of it and shook it hard, as did he in return. Bill released his grip and turned to face the water. There were pieces of ice floating gently down the river.

"Oh God forgive me... for everything. May you take pity on me. I am so sorry. Please forgive Henry, this shouldn't be his burden to carry, but I am weak... Protect my family... Amen." Bill took in a deep breath and stilled himself as he watched the pieces of ice float down the river slowly, illuminated by the half moon.

I snapped up my rifle and put two rounds in the back of his head. His body crumpled and rolled forward into the icy water.

Chapter 28

I woke up with the sun pouring through the skylights on the third floor warming my face. It must have been noon, at the very least. I could hear kids, lots of kids, downstairs laughing and playing. I sat up and looked around. This was no dream. I was home. I gathered up my gear and went down to the master bath to get cleaned up and hopefully wash off my sins from the previous night. As the hot water cascaded over my head, I heard “Henry?”

I smiled, “Hey Boss.”

Dee stuck her head around the corner of the shower wall and whistled at me, then cocked one of her eyebrows at me. “Hey Big Boy, come here often?”

I shook my head and turned the water off, “Occasionally... How about yourself?”

I stepped out of the shower and reached for my towel, but Dee grabbed it and said, “Air dry, it’s better for the environment.”

“I never knew you were so green,” I laughed. “Now may I please have my towel back, mistress?”

“Mistress? I like that. But no, you may not have the towel. We need to talk, and you always tell me to negotiate from a place of dominance.”

I cocked my head and looked at her, “I don’t think I’ve ever said that.... But I’m going to start. So, what is it that I will be less than thrilled about? Because you wouldn’t be holding me hostage in the cold air with no towel if you weren’t trying to soften me up. So, spill it.”

“I am going to help at the local utility. Their general manger hasn’t been in since the event. Most of the heads of the departments are gone. They are extremely short handed, other than the few field guys that still miraculously come in from other parts of the county. Our neighborhood is the one sending volunteer workers... Josh came by this morning and asked to see you, but I sent him away. You were so out-of-it last night. I wanted you to rest as long as possible... that’s when Josh started telling me all about what is going on over there. The field guys have it kind of under control... but a bunch of their telemetry is down and has been... They have been getting by but... now they are out of chemicals for the water plant. So a “boil water” warning must be issued for the whole system which spans across two counties. Their water treatment plant is having serious issues now, mostly

because no one has seen the one other guy who knew how to run it. Oh, and electricity... Dear God, electricity. They only have three linemen. They are running out of replacement parts left and right and we are not even to the spring thunderstorms.”

“Well shit me a French poodle... I had no idea things were breaking down there.” Dee handed me my towel. “Thanks.”

“So, I am going to go help them a couple days a week. Rose has a few friends from the neighborhood that will help her. We will keep the kids here or at Dons next door.” Dee said.

“Yeah, you are the right person... I don’t like it, but I’m sure you don’t like me doing what I have been doing either.” A shiver ran down my spine. “But we cannot lose the local infrastructure...” I looked at Dee, “I will drive you to and from. If I don’t think you’re safe, then we will have to figure something different out. But, you want to help and more importantly, you are an engineer with applicable skills. You should help... I’m with ya, Boss.”

“I knew you would be.” Dee smiled at me.

“Do me one favor Boss.”

“Anything.” Dee smiled.

“Don’t do physical stuff... you are very pregnant.”

Dee looked at me with a blank expression, then put her hand on her swollen belly. “No kidding... is that what this is?” And with a smirk, she left the room.

I finished getting ready and put my full kit on. I only had a couple of hours until the sun went down. As I moved to the first floor, I found it was filled with children and more than a few preteens. As I maneuvered my way through the crowd, I saw my wife at the kitchen island portioning out spaghetti to at least forty bowels. I finally got to the side door and noticed my rifle was now hanging high, hooked on a large screw. I took my rifle off the hook and watched Dee until she looked up. When she made eye contact with me, I motioned for her to come outside with me.

I waited outside the door patiently, I knew she was probably getting a jacket. The weather was officially cold or at least as cold as it got for East Tennessee. If a person keeps moving, they are fine. However, the very second, they stop moving, the cold sets in. I was bouncing from one foot to the other to stay warm. Then the door opened, and Dee came out all bundled up.

“So, when did we start feed the neighborhood kids?” I asked.

“Don’t exaggerate. That’s not all the neighborhood kids; one or two are volunteering with their parents.” Dee said with smile.

I couldn’t help but laugh, “Well, ya got me there I suppose. Gee, don’t I have egg on my face.” I said sarcastically. “Seriously Dee, we cannot feed everyone. We just can’t do it. We had armed men here last night for that very reason...” I stopped talking as my mind wondered to Bill and the river... and Mark. I shook the darkness I could feel creep in, off as best I could. I looked down at my small and very pregnant wife. “I’m sorry Babe... we cannot save everyone.”

Dee started to tear up, “Then what’s the point? So, our kids can grow up alone? No friends? These babies did nothing wrong. It’s not their faults that their parents didn’t prepare like we did. We HAVE Henry. We HAVE. We can do this thing, this good thing... We can’t help everyone, I know that. But if the parents volunteer, the parent gets food, right?”

I nodded, “Yeah, I get where you are going with this, but...”

Dee cut me off. “No, no buts... I am doing this Henry. We will feed the children of those who help. We can do this, for a while... not forever but for a while. More importantly, we need to. We need to balance the scales Henry...” Dee started to cry.

I scooped her up into a deep hug. “Hey, Boss... I don’t know where this is coming from... but you’re right we can help for a little bit. If that what you feel we need to do, then that’s what we will do. Okay? There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you or our kids.”

Dee wept harder, “Henry, I’m not doing this for me or because it’s the right thing to do... well, in part I am. But I’m doing this for you.”

“I don’t get it. I love you, Boss, and I recognize there is something you are dealing with right now. I don’t understand, but I am here for you.”

Dee cried harder into my chest then suddenly stopped. She stepped back and placed her hand on my bearded face. “You big, sexy, dumb man. I am doing this for you. For your soul and mine. When we are old and looking back on this, I don’t want to remember all the death and pain. I don’t want to remember that time I thought my husband is having a mental breakdown in the shower or the time he had to kill people so we could survive all this, this shit... I want us to look back on this and say, we fed a lot of hungry kids. Yeah, we had to do other stuff too... but we also feed a lot of hungry kids, who can grow up to tell people we were kind and volunteered to help

the neighborhood.” Dee moved her hand to my chest rig and grabbed the shoulder straps hard. “I need you to look back and see that you were more than... than the things you have had to do. I love you, more than is probably sane, but I do love you, Henry. It’s not just you that carries this weight, I feel it too. Because I see what it is doing to you.”

I pulled Dee back in tight for another hug, and this time I cried. “I needed this.” After a few minutes had passed, I dried my eyes and pulled my shit together. “Okay... I feel better now.”

Dee let go of me. “I am going back in to feed those babies.”

“You do that, Boss. I am off to talk to my sister.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Dee asked.

“I wish I knew... but it’s going to hurt no matter what I say.” I stepped away and walked towards Katy’s house. That’s right, it was Katy’s house now. The death of our mother and everything since then has been like a whirlwind. It wasn’t too long ago, pre-event, people would mourn for weeks or even months. It’s bizarre how much has changed and how many things haven’t seemed to change at all. I lost myself in thoughts of what was versus what is. Then suddenly, I found myself standing at Katy’s door knocking.

Katy cracked the door open. Her right arm was hidden by the door and I’m sure holding our father’s 1911. “Henry, is everything alright?”

I took a deep breath. “No little sister, it’s not. You should put on a jacket and step outside so we can talk.”

Katy nodded slowly, “Okay, just a minute.”

True to her word, Katy had put on a jacket and was outside in less than a minute.

“So, why do we need to talk out here?” Katy asked as she scanned around for danger.

“Those are solid instincts little sister, but I’m not here for anything like that. But with the local rumor mill being what it is, I understand.”

Katy visibly relaxed, “Okay big brother, what’s the deal? Why are you being strange?”

“Bill is gone.”

“I know Bill is gone, Henry. I told you that remember... all muscle, no brains.” Katy shook her head at me.

I just stood my ground and waited.

“Hello?” She waived her hands at me and could feel my eyes tear up again.

“Wait... Wait... What exactly are you saying? ‘*Bill is gone*’, what is that supposed to mean?”

I let out a long exhale, “Bill... is gone.” I pulled my little sister into my chest as she began to hit me and scream.

After ten minutes of fury, she had finally calmed a little. The departing adrenaline left her foggy and tired.

“What happened?” Katy asked.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked.

“I’m not sure....” Katy said as she stared off into the grey looking mountain. “Yes. I want to know... what you think I should know.”

“Okay... he got mixed up with some people. Those people did... something very stupid. It cost them their lives, and it cost Bill his.” I shrugged. “I am very sorry Katy.”

“He was such a dumbass.... But he was *my* dumbass.” Katy broke down again. After a few more minutes had passed she asked, “What about his body?”

“It’s been taken care of.”

“Oh...okay then.” Katy stood and slapped away the dirt from her pants. During her crying and fighting, we had ended up sitting on the ground.

I stood up and Katy gave me another big hug. “Thank you for telling me. Closure is a good thing... I think.” Katy walked back up to the house and went inside.

I turned and walked toward Josh’s house, but the sun was setting, and the last thing I needed to do was wander around the neighborhood alone in the dark, especially since I knew not everyone here was friendly towards me. Floyd and Jerry’s full crew needed to be sorted out, but not tonight. So, I changed course and headed for my house. I decided I had had enough bullshit for one day, and I wanted to spend some time with my family.

As I approached my home from the left side of the ally, I saw a large group of people standing around with their kids. I clicked the safety off on my rifle and brought it up to a low ready. I didn’t know what was going on, but I would be ready for whatever it was.

“HENRY!!” Dee called out. I picked up my pace to a fast jog, eyes up and looking everywhere at the same time. I saw Dee move to the back of the group of parents and kids.

I closed on the group, my heart pounding in my chest. “What’s wrong?”

Dee cocked her head and must have read my body language. “NO... Henry... everything is fine. We are clear.”

I stopped my jog and threw the safety back on my rifle. I met the eyes of several of the parents in what looked to be some sort of child pickup line. Some fathers stepped between me and their families. I didn’t blame them, as I would have done the same.

“Dee, what is going on and why is everyone so happy and chatty?” I asked.

“Didn’t you hear the radio broadcast?” one mother asked.

“No. I was busy and not near the radio. What’s going on?”

One of the fathers stepped over to explain, “Josh called out on all the comms channels to tell everyone to listen to the FM/AM radios.”

“Hmm, I didn’t get that message.” I turned my radio off then on. No beep. It was dead... I left the house with a dead radio... Fuck, I am an idiot.

“No, no I didn’t... so what did the radio broadcast say?” I asked the group.

“There is new News and Information station/channel on the FM/AM bands, they are pumping out wide with what they said is one hundred and fifty thousand watts on a bunch of frequencies. They are calling themselves the Modern Militia...apparently they used to have a Podcast before the event called the Modern Militia Podcast and now they took over some radio station... They said the Government was back up and trying to get things moving again,” one woman said with glee.

The man chimed in again, “Yeah, but it didn’t make sense. They said the ‘Federal Coalition of Free America’ was trying to get the supply chain working again and that it was working with the ‘Republic of America’ and the ‘Western Peoples Republic of Democracy’”.

My stomach dropped, “FUCK!” Apparently, that got people’s attention, as everyone turned to look at me and stare.

“Uh, well... it’s obvious, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Pretend it isn’t,” the man said. I recognized him as my transplanted neighbor Don.

“Well, America’s gone, and now we have three new countries... at least... it’s good that they are allegedly working together for now... but how long do you think that can last? Better question is, which country are

we in? What are the laws, money... hell, who is in charge and who put them there?"

End of Book 2

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