

ORCHARD PARK

By

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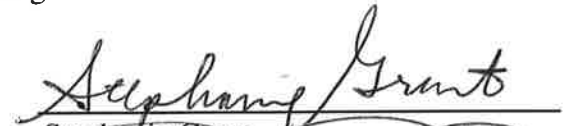

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To Mel, in the hopes that, finding her name in the text, she'll read this one.

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ABSTRACT

Orchard Park is an original novel that explores definitions of family and community in a post-nuclear country. *Orchard Park* borrows from different genres including science fiction, alternate history (itself a sub-genre of science fiction), and fantasy to create an alternate 1983 in which the Cuban Missile Crisis had a much darker outcome. The story follows characters who have lost much to the two-decade long nuclear war, characters who have lost family to a radical new plague, and ultimately explores how these characters behave when placed in extraordinary circumstances. The fictional and eponymous city Orchard Park lies in a post-apocalypse state in which Gerry and Polly are challenged by the harsh natural world, betrayal and deception, and a fundamental inability and unwillingness to trust strangers in a country on the brink of total war.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A complete list expressing the great number of peers whose work and thoughts on my own has influenced and inspired me would take a great many pages, but I feel a few must be mentioned by name for their contributions to this story. I therefore give thanks to my fellow work-shoppers Marshal J. Staggs, Carolyn White, Charles Sebian-Lander, Carmen Cain, John Carroll, Will Byrnes, and Patrick Bradley for their friendship, assistance, and drinks over my three years at American University. If a man may be judged by his crowd, I consider myself blessed.

Finally, Paul Fritter, Jeremy Rood, my parents, my sister Melody, and her husband James have all heard this story in half whispers and rants, and have supported it and me without reading a single word. I owe a debt to my family and friends that may never be repaid in full, but of which I will endeavor to be worthy.

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CHAPTER 1

The recruiters had been explicit in their qualifications for employment—a person wishing to join Project Hourglass must be entirely free of metal. Not a filing, not a pin in a broken arm, not a pierced ear, not high iron content in their blood. Career day at John River High found Gerry glaring out from the wall over the tables and displays in the cafeteria, watching his classmates read pamphlets from the Air Force, from General Motors, from the state hospital down in Staunton. It seemed that half the displays were devoted to Virginia colleges and universities, the other to the armed forces and trades not requiring a further diploma than the one they'd all be given in a few months.

Gerry hated the cafeteria. It had the same airy roof, the same style of rafters as the gymnasium where his class had, through elementary and middle school, spent their recesses because they weren't allowed to play outside. He stared around at those rafters, with the flags from every state hanging down instead of records of sports championships, and remembered fleeing from the other boys who thought intelligence ought to be punished. He gazed through the windows at the parking lot outside and, though thankful to be missing Social Studies, wanted to be outside under the sky, not forced to read pamphlets of schools he had no desire to attend.

Wright Corporate Technology's display, with its little metal phone-booth, or whatever it was, looked more interesting to Gerry. He knew a bit about the company, which had perfected microcircuit boards, and lightweight, blast-fired ceramics, and who claimed to hire more former soldiers than any other two American companies put together. His father always lauded this tidbit over anything else when Gerry attempted to draw him into conversation about the new trolley-car line in Richmond running over WCT's power grid. Just like everything else on the east coast from New York City to Atlanta.

Wright Corp. seemed the only big company hiring in Virginia, though he assumed in high schools all across the country it would be the same. He imagined a few farms in the county, ones that grew soy, or corn, or raised goats or whatever, might have money enough to take on new hands, might have the need of fresh sweat if they grew for the war effort. But now all that effort, those factories making shells, riveting together airplanes and battleships, weren't burning like they had been even three years before. Its money sunk into The War, with those big capitals that the newspapers used, the country just didn't have the funds anymore. All those debts overseas were being called in, all that promised time so much smoke, lost in the cross-breeze of peacetime. Gerry stared at the display and knew if he might ever want a position at WCT doing something interesting, he'd have to somehow slip in the door in the first place. There were a lot of open doors at a company like WCT, leading from the ground floor all the way to the top. He would just have to beat out all those hundreds of other applicants, kids like him, from sea to shining sea.

Gerry stood in line for the phone-booth thing, constantly brushing the hair away from his face and standing on his toes, both trying to look over the shoulders of the linebackers in front of him and keep from catching their attention. His ribs still hurt from the last time he'd accidentally bumped into one in the hallway. The booth whirred and shook a bit, but the blacked-out widows didn't show what was happening to the first kid to try it. When the door slid back Gerry got forced back a few paces as everyone in front of him moved: Kendal Williamson had stumbled from the booth, medical sensors suckered onto his face and chest, with a massive nosebleed.

The crowd thinned out after that and Gerry shuffled forward, his canvas sneakers squeaking on the cafeteria tile. He brushed hair out of his face while the man wearing a maroon jumpsuit with the WCT logo on his breast explained that the booth emitted an increasingly

powerful electro-magnetic field. The computer terminal hooked up to it, the man said, measured the resistance of the person inside.

“For what purpose?” Gerry asked, eying the terminal with interest. The screen seemed so small, much closer to a briefcase than the television sets he had seen before.

“To determine whether he or she might survive working in Orchard Park.”

Gerry felt his mouth fall open and quickly closed it, snapping his teeth together with a little click. “Orchard Park, *Virginia*?”

“Why would you want anyone going in there?” someone behind Gerry asked. “To see how long before they start glowing?” Orchard Park, everyone knew, had been radiated just as bad as cities that had actually been bombed, a strange effect of fallout and the power plant around which the city had been built. Gerry didn’t know why he’d asked for clarification. There was only one Orchard Park anyone spoke about with any regularity, the same as Paris or London.

“Someone has to fix the Field Harness Station when it fails.” The technician shifted his feet and tapped the clipboard against his hip.

“How often does it fail?” Gerry asked, but never got a clear answer. It was his turn to have heart-rate sensors attached to his fingers, half a dozen other lines he didn't ask about. He knew he had never needed a filling or had broken any bones, enough to try the machine. You never get anywhere if you keep standing still, as his father always said. Maybe this machine would be his first open door.

He stepped into the booth, onto the smooth metal surface of the floor, and helped the WCT technician plug the ends of the wires hanging from his body into their appropriate slots in the panel by the door. There was no read-out or display on the inside of the booth, only smooth gray walls that shined in the dull florescent light in the ceiling. The technician stepped away and

the door closed, encasing Gerry. A small space, hardly bigger than a broom closet, but he had never been claustrophobic. His whole generation had been kept inside as much as possible until their teenage years when the scientific community agreed the air was clean enough to breath.

The machine whirred and clicked and thunked. Gerry had read an article a few years before about scientists at the University of Manchester using magnets to create a picture of a person's body, much like a detailed x-ray. He wondered if this machine would do the same, wondered what those clicks and thunks meant was happening to the machinery under the skin of the booth. The whirring and clicking continued until he grew bored. He didn't feel anything except the heat from his body in the close space, the fug of his breath enveloping him.

When the door opened again, the technician had a clipboard in both hands. One of the boards had a form for Gerry to fill out if he was interested.

“Interested in what?” he said.

The technician smiled. “Walking in a place only a few men have walked in your lifetime, young man. Ever dream of exploring strange, new worlds?”

#

Gerry Jameson was born one year and eight months after the world very nearly ended. It seemed to his mother, Alice, that everyone in Beachwood, Virginia marked time in that same fashion—in the days, weeks, months they had reached after October 27th: the day the warheads fell and large swaths of the globe had been unmade.

Alice nursed baby Gerry alone. Her husband the sailor had been deployed almost the entire length of the pregnancy. They had, so briefly, held their breath together as in fraction of a heartbeat the world, spinning in space, had paused ever so slightly and then continued on forever scarred.

Missiles from Cuba, and then our own searching across the oceans, over Europe, over the pole, over cities and towns which would become battlegrounds in the decade to come. Major civilian and military targets in the US had vanished—every known missile silo, manufacturing center, and clandestine facility in the Soviet Union and Cuba reduced to shadows.

As Alice rocked baby Gerry to sleep, her hospital gown still adhered to her skin from the sweat of delivery, she didn't think about Washington DC, or Philadelphia, or the president broadcasting from his bunker, or all that Russian soil which might never grow anything again. She thought of that old story about the clocks in Hiroshima stopped dead at the second of impact. She still felt that skipped beat fresh as a seeping wound.

Alice wasn't the only one. Beachwood, like many other small towns still breathing in America, seemed to have stopped just like all those clocks in the early morning in '62. Gerry grew up in a town whose elders never changed their clothes, or hairstyles, or radio stations, or minds. Beachwood, just south of Richmond along Route 1, felt to him preserved under glass the entire span of his childhood memory.

Because his father was overseas and his mother worked full time in the local library, Gerry grew up in a house of books. He read all kinds of things—stories, articles, manuals—but his favorites were adventures. Tales of ordinary people being shoved into extraordinary situations and, somehow, rising to the challenge. Trapped indoors, he devoured books set in places he had never been, with strange foreign names and plants that didn't grow in pots beside closed windows. Trapped indoors, he dreamed of the day he might go on his own adventure.

The town considered him an unusually bright child and he, being unusually bright, thought the smiles and nods directed towards him when people called him bright were stupid. If he were intelligent, he considered, it was through no action of his own. A condition of his birth, no

different than his gray eyes or wheat-colored hair. He felt pride for neither, and therefore as he turned back to his book, he always let his complimenter walk away without so much as a “thanks,” in return. He didn't see the point in the pleasant manners carefully cultivated and protected over generations in Central Virginia, and refused to have anything to do with them—an attitude which he found, being kicked repeatedly in the gymnasium on his first day of school, made him unwelcome. Young Gerry quickly learned the saving grace of silence and used it well. By the time he graduated high school he hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to any of his three dozen fellow seniors in years.

Gerry expected he wouldn't miss home once he'd left, but spent the first few weeks of training at the Shenandoah Compound absorbed with Beachwood. He listened to the way his shoes tapped against the cold cement of his barracks and classrooms, their dull thud in the rocky, mountain soil in the exercise yards, and tried in vain to remember the linoleum of his kitchen floor, the flat red clay of his backyard.

The compound had been set up like a small college with dormitories, a cafeteria, and administration buildings, all only a short drive up the mountain from Orchard Park. From the firing range, new recruits to Wright Corporate Technology's Project Hourglass could stare down the side of the mountain and, off to the east where the tree line suddenly ended in stretches of barren, colorless dirt, and the first skeletal houses of the dead city stood in the shadow of a forty-foot wall. Many if not most of the Hourglass recruits would spend many months and years repairing the wall and protecting the city inside.

Gerry's favorite classes met outdoors. The ones held in classrooms, where they learned about the power of magnetism and radioactive fallout, felt too much like the kind of education he had wanted to avoid by skipping college altogether. He much preferred learning how to properly

affix a gas mask over his face, building his endurance in long hikes through the oak and pine forests and over the slabs of ancient limestone, honing his eye on the shooting range. When the first dust had settled, armies faced each other across lines drawn in half a dozen countries. Ground was taken, ground was lost; back and forth like the volley of a tennis ball. Even after the war cooled with the dark sigh of ceasefires and armistice, Captain Jameson stayed on his ship in service and returned home infrequently. One of the few father-son outings either tolerated was hunting, and though Gerry found little pleasure in killing deer and wild turkey, he built a quiet satisfaction in his abilities as a marksman, a skill his trainers lauded louder than his classroom participation.

First Mechanic Bryan had nothing but good things to write about Gerry in his reports to corporate headquarters in Cleveland. Though Bryan's contract tied him to WCT for a few years yet, he had begun planning for his promotion to a full time Hourglass instructor. Gerry was obviously intelligent, Bryan had written time and time again, but he kept quiet, separating himself from the rest of the new recruits. Bryan interpreted his silence to homesickness, or possibly to that strange oddity shared by intelligent people keeping company with those considered to be their intellectual inferiors. Most of the mechanics in training got there because they had nowhere else to go—they were ex-military looking to hang on to the kind of life they already knew, ex-cons willing to take dangerous, oddly unexplained labor so long as the checks didn't bounce, high school kids who didn't go to college and wouldn't sign up for a tour watching the world's DMZs. Gerry though, Bryan couldn't place quite as easily.

Some nights during that first year of Gerry's training, Bryan lay awake in Polly's bed inside the Field Harness Station and thought there was a lot of her in the boy. She felt she had nowhere else to go, not after watching her mother die of the newest plague. Widowed to a fallen

soldier she never really loved, traipsing to the end of the earth to live by herself in a city long dead, playing secretary in a power plant that ran all on its own. A source of clean, reliable energy so valuable that every major advance in technology over the past decade from WCT, electric trolley cars, home computers the size of hi-fi stereos, light-weight body armor and NBC filtration equipment for soldiers, could be traced back to money generated by the Field Harness Station. The Wright Corporation itself could only be called a household name now thanks to that unique natural magnetism discovered by Works Progress Administration road-builders trying to cut through the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Bryan often thought of the series of accidents that made a path for a person, made up a life stretching from different landmarks, like string tied between photographs on a cork board. The war, all the dead, all those cities, towns, stretches of empty dirt turned to dust—it was easier to think of it as happenstance than a result of design. The magnetic field underneath Orchard Park, the wonderful source of unlimited renewable energy, had been discovered by accident. Accident had brought him and Polly together, he knew, and accident might pull them apart again.

#

All mechanics who would walk inside the city underwent two full years of training. Gerry's second year lasted a little over nine weeks—Bryan's heart finally gave out one night in September and his replacement was needed ahead of schedule.

Bryan Langdon was born on a dairy farm just outside Warrenton, a small town far enough from Washington DC to be considered livable. Many considered it the last livable place in that ring of suburbs and commuter towns surrounding the ruined capital—the Langdon family considered it the wild west of sorts: no one came through Warrenton unless they had to.

The Langdons were a big bunch, on average over six feet tall, big around as old growth oaks with hearts to match. Bryan's caught up with him sooner than most and as he lay doped up in his hospice bed at the Shenandoah Compound; he thought he might chalk it up to his life off the farm. To be sure, he had hiked down the hillside into the city every three weeks or so, depending on when the call from corporate came in to change the series, but it wasn't the same kind of constant motion and exercise. It wasn't an easy hike with a mulched trail and signposts, however. The paths down to the western gate had been carefully mapped by mechanics over the twenty years Orchard Park had been empty, but little marked those rocky trails aside from memory and rumor passed from mechanic to his eventual replacement. Now Gerry, having the most resistance to magnetism out of the recruits, would have to rely on those rumors.

Those paths occupied some of Gerry's mind at dinner. He sat alone, as usual, at the end of one of the cafeteria's long tables picking at his mashed potatoes without eating and thinking of Bryan's heart and how shrunken he looked in his hospital bed. Gerry scratched behind his ear and felt another pea fly past his head.

At the other end of the table, some recruits, five or six who had banded together on their first week, had created some sort of contraption with a few rubber bands and a spoon and were using it to try and get a rise out of Gerry. They were led by a thin young man with black hair named Tony, a loud, boastful guy, who found Gerry a joy to tease because he didn't fight back. He didn't bother looking up—he knew nothing he could say or do would avoid their harassment, and the odd pea against his head was far preferable to the socks filled with soap bars they had used the week before after Gerry had pushed himself out of the dirt one too many times. They were a nuisance, but one he had forced himself to tolerate.

“Hey!” Tony kept calling, hoping to draw his face up for a better target. Gerry closed his eyes, thinking about a half-finished letter to his mother on the desk in his dorm. She would want to know that he'd been sent in early, sent it not on the scheduled training hike alongside Bryan, but without him, doing the essentials of his job until he got out of hospice. There had been a surgery, he knew, and another had been planned, but Gerry didn't know much about heart conditions, or how they were treated. He hadn't read much about practical medicine in the library, his only training at the compound in basic First Aid.

Another pea skipped across his vision, followed by, “Hey, dick!” and he closed his hand a little tighter around his fork at the laughter from the other end of the table. He'd spent years ignoring assholes like these guys, carefully cultivating a forced calm that, as he'd grown older, had worn thin. He wondered if there was daylight left enough for a quick trip to the range. Emptying a few magazines would calm him down; a safe catharsis for the anger welling in his stomach like a slowly flooding basement.

They're just grunts, he told himself. Too stupid for college, too undisciplined for the army, barely able to walk upright. Tony and the rest were all training to be Mechanics for the wall, glorified brick-layers, repairing and repairing again a wall that refused to stay up for long. A wall protecting the city from, well, something WCT wouldn't illuminate clearly. His instructors kept pointing at pictures of Three Mile Island and saying, “Security” until Gerry stopped asking questions. There was no river here for the Reds to sneak up, like in Harrisburg. They'd have to travel over land, over the mountains where outlaws brewed, where people who still considered a ground assault on American soil a real enough possibility to hoard rifles and ammunition. The same soil that sprouted these boys using a homemade catapult to flick peas at him.

After crying to his mother about the kids teasing and kicking him in elementary school, Alice had given Gerry a bit of advice: let them. Boys like that only wanted to get a reaction out of you, she told him. When you do nothing, they'll get tired and move on to something else. Looking back, Gerry thought his understatement may have been a mistake, but he had followed his mom's directions, suffered in silence. His tormentors eventually had grown interested in other things, like trying to sneak out of the gymnasium altogether to go play outside.

He had found, however, the length of his suffering and bruising to be longer than she had suggested. He rubbed a scar on his knuckle, thinking of a particularly brutal game in middle school involving a broken belt buckle.

At the compound he had sat for over a year in silence, after hoping he'd be free of browbeaters in the real world, considering another course of action. He began to see his earlier attempts at stoicism with Tony as an experiment which had failed. The scientific method suggested, if he carried the comparison, that he try something else—a new experiment.

A pea hit him in the eye and Gerry turned away, the sharp pain jolting him to a decision. While the boys laughed he stood up with his hard plastic tray and walked towards them, his eyes targeted on the small conveyor belt which took their dishes back to the kitchen. If they want a reaction, he thought, let's give them one.

He drew level with Tony and glanced down, expected the usual foot attempting to trip him. Tony was still laughing with the other guys though, he at the head of the table, the pea catapult on his tray. Gerry continued past and set his plate with uneaten potatoes and water glass down on the belt. Gripping his tray, he felt the hard bit of pressed plastic the other boys used as tiny sleds when it had snowed the previous winter. He knew just how tough they were. In three large strides, Gerry returned to the table and smashed his tray into the back of Tony's head.

It caught the top of Tony's shoulders, forcing him forward. The pea catapult broke under his chest as Gerry slammed the hard plastic down again, and again, expected each time to have one of the other guys push him away, or stand up to help Tony. After that first explosive belch of air, catching Tony mid-laugh as he had, the other boys had slid back in their chairs surprised and confused. Gerry smashed the tray down again, waiting for a voice in his head, some sort of sign, to tell him when enough was enough. The edges of the tray cut into his palms and he continued beating Tony, who hadn't moved after the second blow. His ears burned, his teeth ground together, and his throat crackled with a groan of pain and anger.

Through the red, Gerry felt hands on his shoulders, felt the cold floor on his back through his cotton shirt, felt his throat rasping with his breath, his face wet with tears. He didn't know who marched him to Bryan's office, who forced him into a chair. He just watched again and again in his head Tony's back and shoulders flinch each time the tray impacted.

The man who read him the riot act, standing in Bryan's place, looked bored, like he'd spoken these words too many times for them to hold meaning any longer. Gerry didn't know what punishment he would receive, probably a pay-cut, he thought, so long as Tony hadn't died. He knew whatever official reprimand was coming would have to wait until tomorrow, until his got back from his trip into the city.

"Watch yourself, kid," the man said. Whether he meant it as a warning against further revenge on Tony, or as a caution for his shift tomorrow, Gerry didn't know.

Before bed, he wandered outside, walking along the fence from his dorm towards the firing range. The lamps of the compound shone down on him, hazy yellow light rocking with his footsteps in the mountain air. The night turned cold—Gerry wore his red WCT windbreaker and kept his hands in his pockets. He had always loved Virginia in September, when the temperature

and humidity started to drop but before the leaves changed. It felt only recently he'd been allowed to play outside, only recently he'd been able to put faces to the names he'd read in books: hickory, oak, milkweed. Dogwood blossoms, the shadows of black bears and white tail deer; all here at the compound, this little corner of the country left untouched. He passed one of the roving patrols along the fence, dressed in black body armor and carrying an assault rifle, and nodded. Inside his pocket, the hard corner of a little notebook—notes from his year of training—dug into his palm.

On his walk one of the mechanic's mantras, of which there were many when Bryan was in charge, looped in his head: “The series must change.” Bryan believed in teaching through repetition, that the message would stay in place longer the deeper it was carved into the rock. The series, meaning the frequency of the usable power generated by the plant, got changed every so often by mechanics—this was to be Gerry's main function. He'd replace light bulbs and tighten bolts, too, he was sure, but the string of numbers which he must enter into the plant itself occupied his walk. He doubted the simplicity of the task, waiting for the other boot to drop from on high when, in the morning, he'd stop play acting and get to the real job.

Past the firing range the ground dropped at the edge of the valley. There the fence, with its synthetic alloy and razor wire, dropped too and permitted an unobstructed view of the ground below, stretched out between the low ranges. Once upon a time, Gerry knew, the city stood the envy of Richmond, of Washington itself, so briefly the most technologically advanced urban center in the country. Home to some of the world's brightest minds, artisans and architects, and the subject of endless litigation, proposed and passed outright, regarding the regulation, upkeep, and federal usage of Wright Corporation's power plant.

He had read the articles and editorials in his mom's library. With the Field Harness Station's power so vital to the war effort, some argued it ought to be nationalized, taken from Wright Corporation's control by the federal government. Others rebutted that nationalization was exactly the thing the country was fighting a war against. When supporters of nationalization lamented the high price of electricity during a recession, WCT put out TV and radio ads which spoke to the thousands of veterans they employed and its representatives went on talk shows to talk about the difficulty in harnessing the energy in the first place, all the men and women employed to maintain the Station. Gerry supposed he was one of those men now, or would be when, in the morning, he punched the clock officially for the first time.

He stood on the ridge overlooking Orchard Park. Through the clouds hovering low between the peaks he could make out the lights of the city still burning along major streets. The dark neighborhoods worried him, though he knew he'd be walking only during the day. He pulled the notebook out of his pocket and flipped to one of the dog-eared pages with a bold, underlined title: "Walking Orchard Park." Rule one stated clearly, "Never at night." He glanced over other rules he had long ago memorized: "sidearm always loaded," and "no exploring." He'd felt the rules governing non-metallic clothing and his environmental mask were too obvious to copy down.

At the back of his notebook was a section comprised of only a few pages and scraps he'd taped in which he'd marked "Rumors." The things no one spoke directly to the recruits about. Things only overheard in whispers between the veteran mechanics, or by the men and women in the wall guards, come into the compound when their rotation was up. Gerry didn't know how seriously to take these notes, short paragraphs about wild animals wandering the city, trapped inside the walls, pockets of the city free of the extreme magnetism where electronic equipment

would actually work. A single conversation he'd overheard mentioning a mysterious “they” who appeared on the streets. He swallowed these rumors with the same dash of pepper he reserved for his trainers' insistence of communist bands roving the country looking for ways to sabotage the American war machine.

His notebook also held a section devoted to Polly, the station manager, who according to everyone but Bryan had become an oddity, a strange recluse refusing to leave the Station at all. When prompted, Bryan grunted in single syllables about Polly. When unprompted he spoke of her like an old friend he hadn't seen in a while. Gerry's notes sketched a vague picture of a wild redhead gal from the big bad city who loved rock and roll and canned pears. He'd be meeting her the next day, and staring down towards the big black square at the center of the city, the station itself, he knew she'd be due an explanation. Bryan wouldn't be walking with him. If he and Polly were friends, Gerry thought, he wondered if she were the type to shoot the messenger. Bryan seemed that type.

A breeze from the northwest goose-pimpled his skin. He put the notebook back in his pocket and zipped up the front of his windbreaker. His watch read just after ten; he'd need to get to bed soon. It was a long walk to the Station and an early morning for him. Under the spotlights along the compound fence, his shadow stretched out before him into the night's darkness, already reaching towards Orchard Park.

CHAPTER 2

Polly switched records on the ceramic turn table, cursing as she always did the plant below her feet. She had brought a shoe box full of cassettes with her when she took the job, but after a few hours above one of the world's most powerful and esoteric magnetic fields, they'd all gone to static. All that music—rock, punk, new wave, even a few prog-rock compilations—erased just sitting on her nightstand. All she had left were LPs the old Station Manager, Gloria, had left behind: all country and western, big band, and a few choice oldies and blues records. With a little help from one of the wall guards or mechanics she knew she could order some new records, maybe join one of those clubs where they sent you new albums every month on subscription, but it hardly seemed worth it. She preferred to have something to complain about every day, if only to herself.

Living alone had given Polly the habit of speaking out loud, sometimes asking questions to herself and then answering them. She'd spent three years as Manager and had skipped every offered furlough, every chance to simply walk off into the hills and disappear. There was nowhere for her to go. No one in Chicago she could stand the sight of anymore, no new city that held any appeal.

Lately, she'd begun venturing farther and farther outside the station, testing her tether to the walls and back, exploring the ruins of the city. With every change of the series the forms filled out by mechanics had to be entered into the computer terminal program at the edge of the city, where electronics still worked. On the way she passed the bank towers half collapsed, the school with lessons still on the blackboards, the homes with their front doors left unlocked. No one knew they'd never be coming back when the sirens sounded. No one knew it wasn't just another drill.

She saw Orchard Park as a snapshot of the day those invisible fallout clouds drifted west instead of east as predicted, caught the scent of the plant's magnetism, and dove down. Though the mask felt more comfortable after years of use, she never forgot the reason she needed it in the first place. That moment when she first strapped it on to go outside always brought a tiny moment of black panic; the moment it came off once indoors a succored gasp.

The city's other occupants took notice of Polly, too. The guards along the wall watched her wander through houses and abandoned corner markets. The bats smelled the trails she left along the streets free of debris and sinkholes. The coyotes learned quick to avoid the streetlights, even if she wasn't always on the roof with her rifle, learned the small lights, the ones that moved, would lead them to people. Bryan swore he could smell the city air in her hair when she'd been outside, watching from the roof while he crowded her bed.

Elvis's first full album started and Polly walked back to her desk. It had once been a dining room table, back when more than a single person lived in the Station. Once, a team of scientists could sleep for a week in the station dorms if their work required it. A team had stayed those first weeks after the fallout setting up the biological filters and containment system. Now only Polly walked those concrete hallways, cooked solitary meals in the small kitchen, slept in two single beds she'd pushed together. The other rooms she'd converted into storage, into an armory after she and Bryan had cleared out the National Guard Depot. That was two months before the first armistice, before the war sputtered and died like a candle burning slowly down in the votive glass.

The oiled wood of her table-desk shined in the harsh florescent light of her office and she thought of her mother's coffin, and then of Joe's, and then she had to stand up again. For a second she was tempted to shove all the stacks of paper from her desk, the little ceramic clock,

her fancy pen holder, the shotgun, all to the floor. Instead she walked to the window at the other end of the room. The station rose only two stories above the ground, one of the shorter structures left standing downtown, but from her office in the western wing, she could see out to Watterson Park and to the crumbling statue which seemed, from that distance, to be pointing directly at her little window with its security glass meshed with copper. She liked thinking the statue knew she was inside, knew she performed all her secretarial duties and still had time to goof off. If only they could send the new series in by telephone, or parachuted in like one of those illumination mortar rounds and care packages, then she'd never have to talk to anyone.

She'd never have to see Bryan again, she thought, and a small smile jerked at one corner of her mouth. Polly had said to anyone who would listen that she'd never marry again after Joe and she meant it. Whatever she and Bryan had, though, held value. It was worth the interruption of her solitude. Worth the headache of birth control, worth brushing her hair on those days when, every three weeks or so, he'd walk into the Station, big as life and twice as loud, and pulled her off her feet, crushing her to him.

She checked her desk clock again. He was late, no doubt held up by the new mechanic. Bryan knew the trails down to the western wall, knew which city streets were free of debris, which houses to cut through, which parks to avoid. Every turn would need to be explained to the new kid, taught for the eventual day he'd take his final glimpse of the city and go home to wherever it was he was from. Somewhere out west, she thought. Or maybe he'd stay on at the compound as a full time instructor. Polly didn't know which she wanted for him, only that if he asked her to come with him she'd probably shake her head. Orchard Park fit her like skin now—it had been a hard, long chore to make it so, and she wasn't ready to give it up. Not just yet.

She thought of Joe again, not in his army coffin, but as he was in high school. Such a quiet serious kid, only full of energy outside of class on the baseball field or marching with the ROTC. She remembered watching him from the bleachers as she smoked with the other turn-key-kids with nowhere to go after school but home. She remembered watching the sunlight reflecting off his glasses, and laughing when someone called those future soldiers, “losers.” Laughing when he first asked her to the lake, when he first proposed. Laughing because he was the distraction she needed from her mother's hospital bed. Because life with Joe was something to talk to her about while she died from the green flu. Polly had danced at her wedding, all the time thinking the best thing she could say about the union was that she'd have plenty of time by herself. Joe had wed in his dress blues, just like his father before him.

She could see the green eyes Winchester had painted on the statue in Watterson Park, those same eyes he'd brushed all over the city to try and mess with the boys along the wall. To mark for Polly the quickest routes to the Survivor Camp deep under the city, in the caverns, near as they could stand to the magnetic field itself. He had once told her the magnetism alleviated the most painful of symptoms of the flu, those migraines and muscle aches that left her mother bedridden in the dark. Seeing Winchester or one of the other Survivors' eyes, seeming to glow with their sickly yellow-green jaundice, brought the overpowering smell of hospital disinfectant to her mind so fully she sometimes couldn't speak. She wondered how the new kid would deal with those green eyes. Winchester's note was late, too.

Polly turned back to her desk and sat down. Elvis still sang from the stereo, sang about a love that, if it was ever real and not just a song, ended with him. He sang and Polly closed her eyes, letting her chair lean back against the wall, waiting for Bryan's buzzer at the front door. Waiting for the day to end so she could go back to sleep.

#

The city was full of things Gerry had seen before. Virginia, like many other states touched by those Cuban warheads, had left some towns to drift away, their occupants huddling together in the bigger cities under brackish skies. Just inside the wall, a townhouse stood but ended in fragments as the road continued on. Bricks littered the streets from fallen buildings, fallen walls, and trash drifted in the wind, collecting in tight corners. He kept his breathing steady and even as he walked, mindful of debris in the road, peering out through the laminate visor on his mask at Orchard Park—American's most famous ghost town.

A ghost town which now, twenty years after those warheads, sprouted seedlings. Thin little trees with pale bark and dark red leaves. Gerry didn't need to check his notes to know they were blood maples, a new species once bred by the city's botanists to grow in places so much else would not, their seeds scattered when the people fled.

No other living thing moved in the street. No flies, no rats, nothing that breathed besides Gerry in his gas-mask and red jumpsuit.

The National Guard had helped evacuate the city, but they had also left a lot of equipment behind. He saw more than a few personnel trucks on the streets, rusted ammunition boxes abandoned, mortar rounds set aside, out of the way, and forgotten. Once again he checked the ceramic pistol at his side. He thought back to the Rumors section of his notebook, still in his pocket, but didn't see anything on the street that shouldn't be there.

His instructors had shown the mechanics many maps of Orchard Park, but Gerry found it a much different beast to walk the streets. Bryan had warned him that the city moved and changed as buildings fell, as magnetism left unchecked broke the surface and moved abandoned cars, pulled the steel frames of buildings towards the earth, twisting them into grotesque spirals. Gerry caught a glimpse of one of these Twists, as he had labeled them in his notes, and saw the work of giants at play, twisting the way he might have twisted a carton of milk as he crushed it in his hands.

His compass pulled unyielding towards the plant, making its face strapped to his wrist of much more use than the watch beside it, which had stopped ticking once the guard had opened the gate for him. Twice he found the street before him blocked by debris too loose to climb without risk and he had been forced to wander north or south on his way to the center of the city. Through his mask any smell the dead city emitted was blocked by rubber and the charcoal of the filters. When he drew near some of the bigger maples, though, he thought he could make out something; an unpleasant smell, sweet like rotting meat.

He stopped in the middle of a clear intersection to check his map. He fumbled in the shoulder bag, awkward on his left side because of the holster on his right, and took longer than he should have because of his gloves and mask-impaired vision. The map was old, cloth like the ones sewn into a pilot's jacket, and worn from use. Bryan had marked a path for him in red ink, had circled a few landmarks. All the four gates, north, south, east, and west, were marked, as was the front door of the Station. So was a school on Walnut Street, a building near the south gate marked with what looked like a sketch of a television, and several parks shaded in with green. One of the rumors held that coyotes, wild and starving, lived in those parks but Gerry couldn't see them breathing the city's air.

He found the intersection on the map and saw he needed to turn west. His wrist compass directed him left, down 17th Street. Gerry rolled the map and shoved it back in his bag. His hand brushed against his extra pistol magazines, med kit, the sealed bank bag the manager would unlock, and an envelope for her from Bryan. He walked on.

Gerry's breathing, amplified by his mask, began to grate at his nerves. New intersections, blind corners, made him reach for his .45 before stepping out into the open. The rumors passage about Commie saboteurs kept jumping to his mind, as did the note about "they," whoever they were. The louder his footsteps sounded on the concrete and asphalt the more they multiplied in his imagination, doubling and tripling until he was checking behind him as often as the blind corners. The real dangers of the city, sink holes the size of city buses, walls which might fall with the slightest touch, didn't help his tension.

Road debris forced him down an alley, and then into the bottom floor of a townhouse through a hole in the wall. Plates still sat on the dinner table, jackets hung by the door, boots on the mat, all covered in a thick blanket of dust.

In the dust, boot prints. From other mechanics, Gerry told himself, his pulse thudding in his ears. From Polly herself. The front door was shut but unlocked. He twisted the knob and pulled, blinking in the bright sunlight filling a small park outside.

A figure stood in the park, his back to the open door. Gerry ducked back inside, the pistol free from the holster in a quick, practiced motion. He crouched, waiting for a call or shout, waiting for his heartbeat to slow and for his hands to stop shaking.

He risked another look and saw the figure was a statue. Made of some pale material, stone he thought, it kept quite still in the middle of the small square, its left arm lifted up for some purpose, now unknown that his hand was missing.

Gerry closed his eyes, cursing his nerves. He tried three times to slide his pistol back into the holster and finally found his mark. He started to stand up but stopped after catching a glimpse of the open door. He hadn't noticed the street-side of the door in his scare: it was gouged with deep marks and scratches, as if by the claws of an animal. An animal which had stripped slivers from the heavy oak door, and judging from the color of the wood, he guessed recently. He stood, his hand reaching for his gun again. He wondered which of the other Rumors would turn out to hold water.

The square stood empty, though, the low station building casting its dark shadow over the eastern edge. Still standing in the doorway, Gerry checked his map: Watterson Park, making the statue Doctor Charles Watterson, who perfected a stable ceramic catalyst to make non-metallic machine parts for the city, the plant itself, and the .45 on Gerry's hip. His father considered Watterson a genius on the level of Einstein or Tesla. Most important for Gerry, Watterson Park marked the mechanic's entrance to the station. He crossed the park, stepping around the low brick walls, the overgrown grass, the blood maple seedlings, never noticing the green eyes painted on Dr. Watterson's statue.

CHAPTER 3

As soon as Polly sat down on the toilet seat the buzzer sounded.

“Well, shit,” she said, hesitating for a second before deciding Bryan and the new kid could wait outside until she finished peeing. They'd kept her waiting all morning, taking their sweet-ass time strolling through the city.

Her living area was on the second floor of the station, on the long platform of offices overlooking the decontamination showers. She walked along the platform's edge, trailing her hand along the wooden railing, the concrete floor seeping cold through her socks. The worn steps of the stairway creaked with her weight as she stepped down to the front entrance. The station once featured twin doors on the park side, but after the evacuation one of them had been diverted towards a kind of airlock, keeping the air outside from getting in when Mechanics, or Polly herself, entered or left the building. The other door had been carefully sealed, but through its round panel of security glass, she could see the street outside. A figure stood by the door—a small one, obviously not Bryan, son of Sasquatch. She looked around the street but couldn't see him.

The buzzer sounded again, and then the figure pounded on the sealed door with his fist. Polly stepped back, trying to come up with an explanation. Bryan had never not shown up before. He'd been late, sure, but never absent altogether. She wanted the person, whoever it was, inside quickly as possible so she could interrogate him or her about Bryan. But she had procedures to follow first.

She tapped on the window, and when the person didn't turn around, she banged loudly. A masked face peered in from outside. She waved and mouthed, “Badge” knowing anyone outside wouldn't be able to hear, but might read her lips. The masked face looked down, and then back

up as it pressed a WCT ID badge against the window. It bore a picture of a young man with brown hair and the name, "Jameson, Gerald G," listed as a Mechanic Trainee from Beachwood, Virginia. Local, she thought.

She drew the lever along the wall, the latch to pop open the airlock door, and watched the mask disappear from the window. She couldn't see anything on this side of the airlock so she simply counted, giving the new guy twenty seconds to get inside before closing the door behind him. Once she heard the fans for the airlock start blowing she ran back upstairs. From there she could watch him in the showers, could ask him questions and make sure he scrubbed himself clean from outside at the same time.

The airlock fans stopped and the automated system took over. Someone entering from outside would be directed by flashing signs and pictographs, like at a drive-through car wash. The last steps involved a decontamination procedure for clothes and equipment and a shower for the man or woman him or herself.

Gerry set all of his clothing in a low plastic bin, as directed by the cartoon on the wall above it, and his pistol belt and satchel in another. Another door opened by itself and he stepped into a bathroom: a row of toilets in cubicles on one side of the room, a row of open shower stalls on the other. He saw the shower room was open, its walls ending at the bottom of a balcony where the Station Manager's head and shoulders peered down at him.

"You have to watch me shower?" Gerry asked. He moved his hands to cover himself up but decided that it made him look stupid.

"Procedure. You go by Gerald?"

"Gerry," he said. He didn't know what to do with his hands so he walked to the closest shower and turned it on full blast. All the pipes and fixtures moved smoothly, all made of a

copper-colored metal instead of the usual stainless steel. A bar of harsh chemical soap, still in its wax-paper wrapper, waited for him in the dish. The water burst out ice cold but grew warm quickly. He could hear music playing softly from a different room but couldn't quite make it out.

“Where's Bryan?”

“Hospital,” he answered, raising his voice to be heard over the shower. He ducked his head under the spray, but then pulled it out again and said, “I have a letter for you. In my bag. A letter from him.”

“Get it after you're finished,” she said. “Call me Polly, everyone does.”

She watched Gerry nod and then turned away from the railing. She crossed the platform to her office and picked the shotgun off of it. Fuck procedure, she thought. She worked the handle back to feed a shell into the chamber, and then wondered why she'd done that.

Bryan in the hospital meant one of two things: he either broke his toe walking down the stairs again, something stupid like that, or he'd got himself hurt seriously. She hated hospitals, didn't want to think about them. The glossy wood of her desk shone up at her—she spat on the floor, switched off the record player, and went off in search of her boots.

Gerry ended his shower and waited, wrapped in a stiff towel, for his clothes, shoes, and bag to finish their decontamination cycle. He doubted that watching the plastic bins and their many tubes and lights would speed the process but decided it was preferable to his other choice—an interrogation from Polly about Bryan's bum heart. He'd let the letter answer her, once it was done being scrubbed clean by concentrated sound waves, or whatever actually went on inside the bins. He'd read about WCT's “sonic showers” in back issues of *Scientific American*, but didn't know if they'd done anything with that idea after the war started.

Polly walked in through the open shower door with a glass of water and a bottle of pills. He shook out a dose of potassium iodine for himself.

“So what happened?”

Gerry hesitated before answering, glancing for too long at the shotgun hanging by a sling from her shoulder, taking a long sip of his water. He looked towards the bin again, hoping it would make some noise to say it was done so he wouldn't have to explain, but it kept humming.

“He collapsed in a bar in Luray. He was on leave, touring the caverns or something, I don't know.”

“You don't know,” she said, not as a question, more like a statement confirming his.

“Look, all I know is, I was supposed to do a walk-a-long with him but yesterday they tell me I'm all on my own today.” He gripped the towel around his waist and looked for a place to set the water glass down.

“Where's this letter?”

He nodded towards the bin instead of answering. His hair still dripped from the shower. The Station felt cold, air conditioned. He glanced up at the ceiling and through the doorway to the shower, he saw the vents and ducts high above, making all the air inside safe to breathe. He felt like they were standing at the bottom of a giant fish tank.

He thought she was taking the news well, considering he didn't have any real information about her and Bryan's relationship. Everything he knew was cataloged under Rumors in his notebook, stuck in the pocket of his jumpsuit, in the bin with his t-shirt and boxer shorts. She just stared over his shoulder, or more accurately, up at his shoulder because she was a head shorter than his five-eight. Her hair was more of a reddish brown than the copper he'd imagined from descriptions, her nose tiny, dwarfed by her eyes and mouth. Maybe because he only wore a

towel, but she seemed to be wearing too many clothes: a ragged off-white blouse, tightly fitted tweed vest, dark slacks, mismatched gray and black dress socks.

She caught him looking at her socks and said, “I can't find my boots.”

“I'm sure they'll turn up.”

“Here's hoping,” she said, unintentionally lifting one of Bryan's expressions. She took the empty glass from him. All she meant was that the floor downstairs near the plant was just packed dirt. And cold.

The contamination bins gave out little dings and stopped humming. She turned her back to let Gerry pull his clothes back on, knowing he was probably cold standing there, his hair turned dark from the shower. He had nice eyes and straight teeth. Bryan had talked a little about him, said he was smart but a bit of a show-off. Didn't know when to keep quiet, refused to follow an order without knowing the reason behind it. Bryan had never complained about anyone before, but he also hadn't been in charge of training anyone, either. She supposed if his hospital stay happened to be one of the more serious options, she was looking at his permanent replacement earlier than expected. Earlier than she wanted.

“Daylight's burning,” she said. She turned and Gerry was dressed, his canvas jumpsuit in WCT maroon still new, still dark, unfaded from washing like Bryan's. He tied his sneakers—black hi-top canvas shoes, not the work boots other mechanic's favored—and slipped his gun belt around his waist, then the strap of his bag over that. It was the old fashioned type of officer's gun belt, with the leather strap across his chest to help with the holster's weight. The two straps, the belt and bag, crossed his chest, making an X. Making a target.

“You know what you're supposed to be doing downstairs?”

“Pretty much.”

“Pretty much. Sounds a whole lot like 'no' to me.”

“I'm a fast learner. I'm confident in my ability to get the hang of things.”

“Confident in your ability. Right.” She blew a puff of breath up at her hair. “Follow me.”

She crossed through the showers to the hallway door. Outside, a row of open lockers, looking straight out of her high school locker room, lined the wall. She set the glass down inside one of them on the little shelf at the top.

“Need the bag? Drop it in one of those if you want.”

He paused for a moment, thinking, then pulled the bank bag and envelope out of his satchel and hung it up inside one of the lockers. He decided he wouldn't need the map or extra magazines, then dropped his watch and gloves inside the satchel, too, alongside his mask. He peeked inside the locker next door and saw a jumpsuit like his, the next one over held a mask hanging up, the next one a carton of cigarettes and a yo-yo.

“Your boots in one of these?”

“Maybe.” She looked around but didn't see them. She did see a pair of tartan fuzzy slippers she wore around in winter to fight the cold concrete and decided they'd do.

“This one's yours, I guess,” he said. He held out the letter from Bryan.

She took it, said, “Here,” and handed over the shotgun. Gerry took it, juggling it with the bank bag as she sat down cross-legged on the floor. He watched her pull a switchblade from her pocket, flick it open, and cut the flap of the envelope. He turned away—whatever Bryan had to say sealed in an envelope wasn't meant for him. Except for the rustle of the thin, almost transparent sheets, the room was silent of any sound.

But that wasn't true, he thought in the next moment. The music had stopped, true, but there was something else, something he felt rather than heard. A pulse which echoed in his chest.

She huffed, as if objecting to something he had said.

"Fine. Whatever," she said eventually, as if to herself. He turned and watched her fold the letter and shove it into her vest.

"No, no, Bryan, don't mind me. All alone in the middle of downtown Hell, it's just fine." She was talking to herself, pissed one moment, but then she might have been smiling before looking up to see Gerry staring at her.

"Do you know him well?" she asked. The smile dropped from her face.

"Not well, no."

"He says you're an alright guy."

He didn't know what 'alright guy' meant coming from Bryan. He shrugged and held out his hand in an offer to help her off the floor.

She took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. Bryan's note had been a goodbye. The letter had left a bad taste in her mouth and she wanted Gerry gone so she could sleep it off.

She accepted the shotgun and bank bag, pulled on the bit of twine around her neck, and lifted the key from inside her shirt. The usual envelope with the mechanic's instructions—the new series and a warning to keep it secret. A directive she'd break immediately. She picked up her knife from the floor and cut the WCT envelope open, a heavy cream number on good card-stock. Before handing the instruction card inside to Gerry she glanced, in a fraction of a moment, at the red numbers printed in bold. Simple as that, the secret was betrayed. Winchester

and others could continue running off the plant's power. Just as soon as she sent the series down to him.

That was Wright Corp's big secret, after all: a group of outcasts in need of help leeching power without paying for it, why the unique frequency at which power from the Station was transmitted, like a radio signal, to other parts of the country had to be changed every three weeks. Why men like Gerry and Bryan walked through a dead city, why Polly guarded it—to keep the power in the hands of only those who had paid for its use. Polly, and Gloria before her, had hand-delivered the new series of numbers making up that frequency to the Survivors for almost fifteen years between the two of them.

Polly still waited for that letter from Winchester, setting the time for the exact change over from old frequency to new. Once a mechanic changed the frequency, a hundred different signals went out to stations across the country, telling men in charge to open envelopes and get the new series themselves. There was a delay, sure, that these stations which received the energy made up with their own generators and batteries to cover the overlap. The Survivors didn't have a generator. Their lights, their filtration and air pumps, their medical equipment, all ran off power that, if off for too long, could cost lives.

All this ran through Polly's head as she handed the card to Gerry. She knew he'd have to learn this all eventually, just like Bryan had before him. But it didn't have to be today. Today, he could walk home before the sun went down and the coyotes got up and started stretching their legs.

CHAPTER 4

Gerry followed Polly down the row of lockers and through a doorway hidden under the wooden staircase leading up to the platform above the showers. The doorway led to a low hallway, little more than a concrete tunnel. He could feel that pulse harder now, echoing in his chest like a foreign heartbeat.

The hallway ended at another wooden door, this one fastened with a heavy padlock which she opened with a key attached to a ring filled with identical keys. The heavy door swung open to a room the size of a gymnasium—a room which as he looked around resembled a gym more and more. High above the concrete walls, windows let in the sunlight through the open rafters. He remembered the gym where his class had recessed in elementary school and started placing features from it to this room; the basketball hoops would hang there, he thought, and there. The lines would be painted down the wooden floor, which would be much simpler than this elegant parquet pattern. In a real gym, there also wouldn't be a giant hole in the middle of the court, big around as a backyard swimming pool.

“The visitor's entrance,” Polly said, pointing towards the hole. It was surrounded by a waist-high railing, also wooden. She pointed to their right along the wall to an elevator, and said, “The employee entrance.”

“Which one's for us?”

“We can do both if you really want. It's a lot of stairs.”

“The elevator's fine with me. How does it work?”

“Push a button, it goes down.” She mimed a rim-shot with her hands.

“No, I mean, how can ordinary machines work so close to the plant?”

“Non-magnetic metal alloys, mostly,” she said. She pressed the button to summon the elevator. “Ceramics, of course, closer to the plant. For other things, like the elevator and the memo tubes, pneumatics.” She pointed to the series copper pipes running along the concrete near where the wooden rafters started.

“Neat.” The Beechwood Savings and Loan used a similar system for their drive-through.

“I guess.” The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside. It looked ordinary to Gerry: tile floor, florescent lights, simple and familiar as the one at his mom's library. When the doors closed again and Polly pressed the button marked “P,” however, the elevator hardly seemed to move at all. He could only just feel they descended at all, partly because the car shook slightly from side to side, partly because the ride was so long, their decent so deep into the earth, that his ears filled at the pressure. He swallowed.

The car stopped and the doors opened to a short hallway with gray carpet and a few pictures under glass panels showing the plant and the station as it once had been. The massive tower of the plant stood in black and white surrounded by technicians and scientists. A trolley car crested a hill on Main Street, the low black station building in the distance behind it. Men sat at cubicles answering phones, manning typewriters, filling out paperwork. The hallway led off to other rooms, sitting dark, unused.

“Did you get to see DC before the big one?” she asked.

“No. I was too young. You?”

“I was young, but I saw it. A lifetime ago. They had pictures like these in the Smithsonian.”

“All those people—only two guys take their places? You and me?”

“That's the idea. Never pay for two if one will do. Unofficial WCT motto. They didn't get rich passing out paychecks.”

“I guess.”

The hallway ended in another locked door, but this one was slightly rounded, oval shaped with a wheel at the center and a little porthole at eye level like a submarine hatch. The surface had been stained dark with age, like a penny, but he could see spots where the original brassy gleam shined through. The porthole glass was dark, the space behind shining with dim orange light.

Polly pulled the sling of her shotgun up her shoulder a bit and leading into the wheel, turning it with effort. The hatch popped open to the tunnel, carved out of rock and dirt. Orange lanterns, glowing like jack-o-lamps, hung from the rough walls, strung together with a black cable. The lanterns circled the room, passed by the foot of the massive wooden staircase, and continued down another low passage.

“Visitor's entrance,” she said, pointing up the staircase. Gerry looked up—a spiral, revolving around a massive solid beam, but all wooden, step and handrail both. He couldn't imagine having to walk up it; the top, that big hole in the gym floor, looked the size of a dinner plate from the distance.

Polly shut the hatch door behind them. Though the tunnel was rough, dusty, and cold, his heart began to race with excitement. A scene out of those adventures he'd read as a kid, exploring a cave, looking for treasure or ancient artifacts. For a power plant buried underneath an abandoned city.

Another hatch-door ended the tunnel. Beside it a small side-table and a series of pegs for all their gear that couldn't go near the plant. Under the pegs three of the memo-tubes stuck

through the rock and ended in cradles for canisters. One of the tubes held a canister ready to be shot to other parts of the station. The canister, like the tube, looked crafted from copper, or maybe non-magnetic brass. Or glazed ceramic.

Not even a filling, he thought, hanging up his gun belt next to her shotgun and double checking his pockets. His hand brushed his notebook, but he knew it held no metal. The pen next to it might, however small an amount, so he dropped it in a mug full of grease pencils on the table. Polly handed him a clipboard with a stack of forms, secured with a big rubber band instead of the usual metal clip.

“Check your card. Follow the directions, record the readings, walk back out. Slice of pie.”

“And while I do that you do what, exactly?”

“Make sure you do your job.” She turned and spun the wheel and the door opened. Their guns hanging on the rack moved—the magnetism pushing the lead in the shells away from the plant.

“Inside.”

“I got it.”

“Right up there.”

“I got it!” He didn't need a babysitter.

He stepped inside the room. The floor stretched out from the hatch door, a wide slab of poured concrete on which a jumbo jet could have parked with room to spare. The far wall stood as a solid chunk of rock and the plant, looking like a trapped intercontinental missile, stuck out and rose towards the ceiling forty or fifty feet above. Gone were the polished bits of metal, the crew of technicians and scientists. The desks all abandoned, the cubicles empty, only the faint

sound of the plant running filled the massive room. He saw he would be in charge of keeping a dying machine alive, and he sighed.

He crossed the room, feeling the pulse less and less each step closer to the plant. At the base of the tall tower a series of cubicles were raised up off the floor, connected by short flights of stairs. It looked like the sketches Gerry made in class as a kid, tracing the lines of his notebook papers into boxes and staircases with impossible architecture. He couldn't tell how the cubes were supported or the reason behind them all. He stopped at the foot of the first staircase and looked for the first time at the card in his hand, his instructions for entering the new series.

In the room labeled "Transmission," enter the following series of numbers: 9-7-5-5-4-2-6-0-3. The numbers on the card were printed in a bold, red font.

He looked up at the cubicles again and spotted their labels—little wooden signs hanging inside several of the walls. One room, with its wooden dividers painted a deep navy blue, the sign, "Transmission" marked his destination. He climbed the first staircase, found the next he needed to climb, and the next, until he stood in the blue room in front of a wide wooden box the size of an upright piano. Instead of keys, a line of nine levers and nine pedals under them were the only controls in the slanted panel.

He looked down at his card:

Working from left to right, perform the following actions:

- 1. Depress the pedal with either foot.*
- 2. With the pedal depressed, move the lever above slightly to the left out of its current slot and into the slot corresponding to the number on the instructions card.*
- 3. Let up the pedal.*
- 4. Repeat steps 1 through 3 for the other 8 numbers in the new frequency series.*

He found the first lever, the farthest on the left, and pressed down on the wood pedal. Underfoot, he felt the mechanism disengage, much like the clutch on his mother's hatchback. He moved the lever above, with its wooden handle, out of the slot marked 4 in peeling paint and up into the slot marked 9. When he let off the pedal the pulse sound changed slightly, like the whirring of an engine changing gear. He moved to the next pedal.

Meanwhile, Polly opened the canister waiting in the cradle, her message from Winchester sent to the wrong place. Inside a small scrap of paper read, "Saw the new mechanic walking in. Where's Bryan? Awaiting new series." The note was signed with a hasty V and W intertwined.

"Vallum," she said to herself. "I'm helping a crazy person." She didn't know why John Winchester had decided to rechristen himself after the city wall, and she didn't care. She wasn't helping him as much as she was aiding the rest of the Survivor Camp. On the back of the scrap she wrote the new series with Gerry's pen. She started to put the scrap back in the canister but stopped, adding a little drawing of a fist sticking up its middle finger under the numbers.

Scrap into canister, canister into the outgoing tube, lever flipped down to start the suction. Away it went with a little audible suck of air, away down the diverted tubes she, Bryan, and the Survivors set up in order to send messages back and forth. Through the porthole, she saw Gerry at work in Transmission and hoped her message would get to the camp quickly.

Gerry's second set of instructions told him how to read the gauges in a cubicle marked "Meters," and what readings to mark down in what boxes on his form. He saw that each form had two carbon copies underneath, which seemed old fashioned and stupid considering he'd been given a grease pencil to mark them. It hardly made a mark through all three sheets, but he did as instructed, copied down the readings, and read the final lines of his instructions card:

Do not let anyone, including the Station Manager, keep the new series. Once you have finished with your tasks, destroy this card.

How? He didn't have any matches or a lighter which seemed the obvious choice to destroy paper. He'd be able to find some at the compound, he knew, but until then he'd just have to keep the stupid thing in his pocket. He started back down the awkward staircases and wondered why WCT didn't trust Polly, or if they didn't trust any station manager and she wasn't special somehow, or if the sentence was just a bit of leftover wartime paranoia, kept on the card by a company that recycled everything, even form letters.

He walked back towards the hatch and the tunnel considering Polly all alone inside the station. He'd already caught her talking to herself, which wasn't a promising sign, but he couldn't see that she'd be untrustworthy or dangerous. She carried a shotgun, but he carried a pistol. He couldn't see what she'd do with the new series anyway—she lived off the station's power free already. She couldn't send it out of the station by any electronic means because telephones and computers didn't work right around the extreme magnetism. Notes would have to be passed by hand, and guards patrolled the walls keeping her inside as much as they would keep anyone out.

There was a piece missing, he could tell, but WCT wasn't letting him in on it. Bryan sure hadn't. Maybe Polly would, once she got used to seeing him once a month. He just needed to wait, to keep quiet, and to pay attention. All things he'd mastered in grade school.

“How was it?” she asked as soon as he'd stepped through the hatchway.

“Slice of pie,” he said, aping her words. He forced a smile and saw one in return.

“I'll walk you back to the door.” She held out the pistol belt for him. He strapped it on, setting the clipboard on the table. He picked up his pen, noticing that its point was sticking up. He was pretty sure he had dropped it point down into the mug, but didn't know what it meant

now if she had moved it. That small difference got him looking around the small space where she'd been standing. The canister which had been sitting in the cradle was gone. If she had sent a message, there was no one to send it to.

She watched him strap on his pistol and slung the shotgun back over her shoulder. He was looking around the little space like he was counting the nooks in the rock wall. *Observant*, she thought, and blinked when he looked up at her. Had she spoken out loud again?

"I'll walk you out," she said again. She hitched the sling up her shoulder again, needlessly, and started down the tunnel.

"I'll shut the door," he said watching her walk away. He grabbed the wheel and felt it shake in his hand. The whole door shook—it wasn't the door, it was the floor. An earthquake.

He'd read about earthquakes and knew that, while they weren't common in Virginia, they had happened before. He didn't like the idea of being underground while the earth shook but the tunnel seemed solid rock. The plant room, however, was not. He watched a long crack rip through the concrete floor; chunks of rock and earth fell from the ceiling. Chairs left in the cubicles surrounding the plant fell backwards. A large rock from the ceiling crashed onto one of the staircases and shattered it to splinters. Another rock fell much closer to the door and Gerry closed it, spinning the wheel to lock it in place.

He turned to find Polly crouching against the wall beside the table. He joined her not knowing what else to do. The lanterns along the tunnel flickered as the ground continued shaking, dropping them into darkness for long moments before flashing to life again. Staying in the low tunnel continued to seem like a bad idea and he yelled to her to see what she thought. She either couldn't hear or was too scared to answer. He started back down the tunnel towards

the wooden staircase and grabbed her shoulder to pull her along. She ran with him, tripping over loose rocks on the floor, stumbling as the ground moved under their shoes.

As they got near the tall well holding the stairs a new sound sounded over Gerry's heartbeat—an odd slapping and tearing. Ahead, planks of wood, the steps of the staircase, fell to the ground, fell on top of each other, crashing together in a terrible dissonance. Gerry stopped still inside the tunnel and pulled her with him against the wall underneath one of the lanterns still flickering on and off. The ground lurched underfoot, a wave of solid earth, and threw them back off their feet. A large section of the staircase fell, crashing into other sections on the way down, and hit the bottom of the tunnel, kicking up dust and splinters. The ground stopped quaking but pieces of the staircase continued falling, and the loud smack of wood on wood deafened them both on the ground, their arms over their faces to keep the dirt away.

When the steps stopped falling, when the air grew quiet and still, Polly risked sitting up. She felt OK, shaky, scared, but not hurt. She asked and found Gerry wasn't hurt either. They stood up together and slowly, careful of the shards of plank in their way, made their way to see the extent of the damage. The sections of the stairway which had fallen or been knocked down by other pieces were too large to transverse. A team from the compound might spend half a lifetime putting it back together.

Fragments of the wooden planks and supports littered the ground below the well-shaped hole in the earth. They piled up around the edges, and in the lantern light, Gerry and Polly couldn't see the door leading to the elevator, buried in rubble. They'd have to move it all before getting back to the surface.

Gerry coughed in the dust, brushed the hair out from in front of his face, and turned to Polly. She stared up at the sky, at the ceiling of the gym above their heads, as if willing herself to fly towards it.

CHAPTER 5

They started to move the pieces they could, hoping to make a path through the rubble big enough to fit them both. Gerry paused every so often, submitting to a coughing fit. Polly paused at times because her hands wouldn't stop shaking and she'd drop whatever armload of splintered wood she held.

Gerry wanted to flattened the rubble as much as possible in case an aftershock started the ground shaking again. He told her he didn't want to be crawling halfway through a pile of wood that might collapse on him at any moment. She agreed, pointing out that the hatch door opened into the hallway, not into their well, meaning if they could get close enough to spin the wheel they might be able to climb over everything. They worked, pulling planks out and placing them aside, pausing to catch their breath, pausing to wait until their hands stopped shaking and the panic passed them by.

When they could see the door he insisted they take a rest. They were both dead tired and sore, scared and shaky with adrenaline and fear, and they agreed to climb back over the pile to flat ground and sit down.

When he'd caught his breath enough, he asked, "Why doesn't WCT want you to know the new series?"

"It's complicated, Gerry."

"I'm confident I can keep up."

Polly shook her head. "Because they know it's getting out to squatters."

"Squatters? Squatters where?"

"Under the city. In the caverns under the city."

It made sense to him. WCT would want to protect their power source. No such thing as a free lunch, and all that. “Who are they?”

“Green flu survivors.” She sighed, resigned to telling the whole story. “They've been here for years, long before I started as manager, living close to the plant. They say it helps with the pain.”

“The magnetism? That's hippie nonsense, though, like pyramid power.”

“I'm just telling you what they say. They can live off the Station's power but only if they have the frequency to tap into.”

“And you help them.” It wasn't a question. There wasn't disbelief in his voice so much as incomprehension.

“You know anyone with the flu? Anyone in your family?”

“No. Beechwood never had a case that I know of. I've read about it though, passed through fluid exchange like an STD.” He didn't say anything else, seeing how her face closed up, went solid when he mentioned the mechanics of the disease, not really a flu at all, but an autoimmune disease that presented with localized jaundice in the eyes and influenza like coughing and sinus pressure. Pressure that grew into migraines, grew into muscle pain so intense the victim couldn't stand upright. Or so he had read. He'd never met anyone with the green flu, but she obviously had. His guess was that he knew, or had known, a survivor very well. “You?”

“No,” she lied, “not until I met these people living underground.” That's all they wanted, they'd said, to live. To live without fear of being handed a pink-slip from a gloved hand, fear of being run out of communities they'd help protect and build, fear of batteries thrown at them on

the sidewalks, crosses burning on their front lawns. She tried to explain all this to him but he just stared off at the wall. She wasn't sure how much was sinking in.

“Gerry,” she said, “you have to keep this. You know what will happen to them if Wright Corp finds out they're here.”

He closed his eyes. He and the other mechanics, some of the wall guards and a few of the meaner mercenaries WCT hired would be sent into the tunnels with loaded rifles, looking to removed every man, woman, and child with green eyes out into the cold. That was the best case scenario. Gerry had met a few of the WCT Mercs, heard them laugh about their time in the army, the villages they'd burned in Turkey, in Korea.

It didn't stop them from being in the wrong, though, he considered. They leeched power without paying for it. They risked the jobs of everyone who knew about it, including his own. He couldn't help they were sick, but he couldn't agree they were owed anything because of it. Until he figured out what to do about it, though, he silently agreed that he would keep quiet. Maybe there was a middle ground he hadn't considered yet. Gerry had always trusted in his ability to find a solution. He just needed to keep mouth shut and pay attention.

“Once we get out of here, we'll go send a report to the compound about the quake. A truck will be down to the south gate for the morning shift change. Until then, you have to bunk here, I guess. You can't be walking the city in the dark for too long.”

“Send a report?” Her words knocked thoughts of the Survivors out of his head. “How?”

“There's a terminal at the edge of the city.” She hated it in the way she hated few things in the city, but was forced to travel there to file paperwork, to type information from handwritten forms into a computer system that made copies of all her records and copies. WCT's bureaucracy at work—everything in triplicate as long as it wasn't employees.

“A computer terminal? You know how to use one?”

“Enough to get a message through.”

He considered another of the Rumors in his notebook—a computer terminal worked somewhere in the city. Close to the wall, she said. He knew the gate guards could use their radios most of the time. He could ask for a ride, though he thought Polly was probably right. He'd be sleeping in the station. A jeep down from the compound would take hours, one of the reasons mechanics just hiked down the mountain into the city, and they wouldn't send it if they didn't need to. Gas didn't grow on trees.

“We need to get through to that door, first,” she said, standing up. She offered a hand to him but he refused, pushing himself up off the ground. She had made it clear they weren't on the same side.

They eventually exposed the door handle enough to try to turn it, but couldn't find the right leverage needed. They cleared still more of the wood out their way, moving faster and more recklessly now that they were so close. Gerry's hands grew bloody with scrapes and splinters. He thought back to that scratched door in the townhouse, about the repeated warning not to walk outside in Orchard Park after dark. He didn't know the time, wondered how long they'd been underground. Wondered if the sun was still up.

They cleared a space in front of the door big enough to stand and they tried the handle together, finally pushing the hatch open. Two of the photographs in the hallway had fallen, as had some of the furniture in unused rooms. Polly hoped the elevator would work OK after the quake, but decided to keep her fears to herself. Gerry had enough to deal with, she thought. Under the florescent light of the hallway she could see how filthy they both were, their hands and

faces stained dark with dirt and dust. Trails of sweat cut pale lines down his neck beside his ears.

The doors opened when she pressed the button, a good sign, and they stepped inside. She held her breath the whole ride up, wondering what would happen if an aftershock caught them inside the car. When the doors opened again at the parquet floor of the gymnasium, she rushed out and crunched on broken glass. Above, some of the glass had fallen from the windows and shattered. One of the pneumatic tubes had come off the wall, too, drooping but not severed. She would have to do a full inspection after Gerry left, she knew, but for now their main problem was the lack of sunlight coming in through the skylights. Night was falling over the city.

She led him back to the showers for a scrub and found some gauze and iodine in her office for their cuts and scrapes. Gerry pulled long slivers of wood from his palms before wrapping them up. She had fared a little better, no bits of wood stuck in her skin at least.

“Where is this terminal?” he asked. He sat in her chair behind the desk in his underwear, inspecting his jumpsuit for tears and holes.

“In an old dentist's office on Reed, near the south gate.” She had dug out her own jumpsuit, a red so faded it was almost orange, and wrapped her hair up in a scarf so it would sit easier under her mask. She'd also found her boots with her jumpsuit.

“How far?”

“Maybe twenty blocks along Main, then half a dozen down Reed. We have about an hour of daylight left. After that it should be well lighted down Main along the trolley tracks. I don't know about Reed. I've never been down there at night.”

He stood up and stepped back into his jumpsuit. He tied his shoelaces and they walked down to the locker area again to get his bag. She grabbed the rucksack she usually carried when she wandered, with extra ammunition inside, a bottle of water, her map of the city, tool bag, and a roll of duct tape.

He had spread his own map on the shower wall, his gun belt and satchel in place, his mask sitting on top of his head. She pointed out the intersection for the office, snug in the middle of a neighborhood of brick townhouses and a private school. Thinking back to the dark neighborhood, she went back to the lockers and found a pair of flashlights. She handed one to him and said, "Never outside."

"What?"

"Never outside. Only use it indoors. The coyotes know we carry these lights."

"Coyotes?"

"Bryan calls them chupacabra." He thought they got trapped in the city when the walls went up and mutated in the radiation, but she wasn't so sure. There were always ways in from outside. Maybe they were just some new animal that liked the taste of bats and hated sunlight.

"That's why I'm not supposed to walk outside at night? Mutated Coyotes?" He thought of his walk in the daylight. The city would be dangerous enough in the dark without the wild animals.

"There's a lot of reasons." They could be up to anything in the dark and the guards couldn't see well. Something she had learned quickly work for WCT: if employees could be watched, they were being watched.

CHAPTER 6

When the city first sprouted from the valley, Main Street was just a dry creek bed renamed. Though the face of Orchard Park had changed more than a dozen times since that muddy track had been christened, Main had always followed, whether in dirt, or brick, or pavement, that same general north-south course. Just before the bombs, the city had planted street lights along the path commuters took by trolley, in their cars, or by foot, running to the north down, deeper into the valley towards the city center; to the south up, higher into the hills, into the communities of brick row houses which perched on the rock at the city edges like winged devils of cathedral roofs.

Their route curved just enough that neither Polly nor Gerry could see the gate both knew stood at the southern-most point along the wall. The buildings of downtown, church spires, unfinished skyscrapers, all stood between their views on the street, standing just out front of the station to the west. They walked around the rigid corners of the black glass and concrete of the building to reach Main Street at the south. The streetlamps of the city glowed still, though darker pools clouded the asphalt in places where bulbs had blown. The sun was falling fast.

Polly had walked these streets, but never at night. She walked with a round chambered and the safety on, knowing the noise the pump-action made might be noise too much. The coyotes feared her, she knew, but she didn't trust in their fear. Her breathing seemed so much louder in the silence of the city, echoing in her ears because of the mask, pressing around her face like a gloved hand.

Gerry gripped the strap of his satchel tight as he walked. The bag, still awkward on his left, tended to move forward, pressing itself against his stomach where it might be in the way. He shifted it around to his back and heard the clink of extra magazines against each other,

against his dead watch, against the hard plastic of his med-kit. He shuddered in the warmth spreading across his face from his breath.

The road grew steeper and he ground his soles into the asphalt sparkling in the lamplight for traction. He saw the moon, just a sliver showing, through weak, undetermined clouds. Light reflected off Polly's laminate visor, off the glaze on her ceramic shotgun. The branches of blood maples shook slightly in the breeze and made the patterns casted shift from deep cracks in the pavement to loose bricks in the road. He tried to picture the city in sunlight to compare it with dusk, to see if the earthquake had caused much damage on the surface. His shoes crunched on fallen leaves, bits of garbage, and the soot and grime of streets with no sweepers.

A firehouse, its giant doors open to the street, spilled light onto the sidewalk. The truck was missing, but Gerry could see into the garage bay, half filled with debris from the open, crumbling back wall, collapsing bricks on the concrete floor. He looked at the buildings on either side of the house—their lights burned, too. Bulbs all along Main Street shone brightly, shone still, and illuminated a host of things he hadn't noticed on his walk in. Plants, not just those red trees, grew in the cracks in the brick sidewalk, in the spaces between car hoods and windshields, in the squares and patches of grass where other, now dead, trees had once shaded the street. He had been told Orchard Park was a ghost town, but everywhere were signs of life, rises in the blanket over the patient's chest.

He stepped over a manhole beside a curve in the trolley line and saw a pair of ovals on the surface. They looked like green eyes staring up at the sky.

“Who painted this?” he asked. Polly didn't turn around—he figured she couldn't hear him through both their masks. He didn't ask again, thinking it a better idea to keep silent, anyway. He didn't know much about coyotes, or chupacabras, whatever, but knew her shotgun was too

heavy to carry around as some kind of ruse. Moreover, he couldn't see any angle in lying to him. Unless she wanted him out of the city for a more important reason than her solitude.

Ahead of Gerry a few paces, Polly kept her eyes jumping, scanning a few streets ahead, watching the corners for shadows, for signs of movement, straining her ears for any sound of paws padding on the asphalt. For claws clicking against brick. She had heard his question and dismissed it as pointless. He would learn everything soon. But it didn't need to be today. She had a lot more to do before she could go back to bed. Bryan's letter shifted against her breast under her vest and she gripped the stock of her gun tighter.

They came up to the turn, where a burger joint stood empty on the corner, and she led Gerry west, deeper into the neighborhood. There the buildings stood closer together than on Main and was darker for it. Fewer streetlamps perched on the sidewalk, the lights stretching out from the facades of row houses dimmer, more like gas-lamps than the modern, blue-white florescent along the trolley line. Cars sat on flat tires alongside both curbs. A few windows still glowed from lamps left burning in front rooms. If not for the dirt, blood maples growing wild, and the house on the far corner which had collapsed into the street, they might almost be walking any other neighborhood in any other city at dusk. She stared up at the sky and knew it wouldn't be dusk for much longer. She quickened her pace.

Reed curved slightly to the south. They kept to the middle of the street, Polly in the lead, Gerry behind, their shoes hardly scuffing the layer of washed dirt and fallen, dead leaves. Three blocks along, a dead oak, once thirty feet high, had fallen across the road and onto the front stoop of a house across the way. Polly climbed onto the truck and slid over to the other side while Gerry stepped up on a faded car hood for height. His sneakers squeaked against the hood loudly

and they both stopped, holding their breaths. The neighborhood's silence gave them permission to step forward again.

Polly waved at him to get his attention and then pointed to a wide brick building, a story taller than the houses on either side, at the corner of Washington Avenue. Gerry nodded, stepped onto the tree trunk and then down to the street, and followed.

She took him down Reed alongside the building to the back entrance, as the front had long ago been barricaded by a pair of Dumpsters, several benches from the nearby park, and a rusty National Guard truck. Those same technicians who had sealed the station and rigged the airlock had placed one here, where their radio still worked. For years a ham radio set had sat on a desk in the top floor's corner office, until WCT decided radio signals were not secure enough. They had replaced it during Polly's first year with a computer terminal with a direct line to the Shenandoah Compound, a line, they promised, which could not be tapped by anyone. A line which, they swore, would not sever. Soon after the terminal came instructions for the station's manager to type copies of her daily status reports into a program on the terminal. Once a week, Polly gathered her paper copies and hiked to the terminal, walking safe in the daylight, to fumble and curse at a television strapped to a typewriter.

She had also been given a set of instructions, a manual stuffed into her backpack, on how to use a specific program in case of an emergency. This program, she had read, allowed her to send a message to the compound up the hill. With it she could type out an SOS, or a report about a flood in the plant, or any other disaster. She wasn't sure if an earthquake killing a staircase she didn't even use counted as an emergency exactly, but it was definitely worth reporting. Something about the timing of the quake, almost immediately after entering the new series, struck her as odd. Odd enough, at least, that she carried a half-formed thought about it with her

all the way from the station to the back door of the old dentist's office. She led Gerry through the empty parking lot at the back of the building, unlocked the door, and checked the street again once more before stepping inside. A single lamp, near the side of the building, still glowed. The far corners of the lot stood black.

Gerry hardly glanced at the dark corners of the parking lot. He had convinced himself over the past few minutes that if there were coyotes running wild in the city, they didn't want anything to do with either him or Polly. Simple paranoia, he thought, that's all it was. Walking any city at night, let alone an empty one, was spooky. Soon enough they'd be back at the station, hopefully finding something to eat, and a place for him to sleep until morning. He started to wonder what kinds of supplies the manager received from the compound, what kinds of things he'd be responsible for lugging in to her when she ran low. He imagined shelves and shelves of dry foods and tin cans. Maybe she'd have a frozen steak or two, or maybe some ground beef. The compound had cooks, its own little garden around back for fresh vegetables. He couldn't see Polly harvesting crops somewhere in the city, even if the air supported plants. His stomach rumbled quietly.

She led him through an airlock a lot like the one at the station. The other side of the lock spat them out into a hallway. Beige walls, gray carpet, all lit from above by flickering lights in the ceiling. He watched her remove her mask and stuff it into her backpack before taking his off, too. The building's recycled air cooled the sweat on his face. The doors she led him past had labels painted on the frosted glass: "Exam Room 3," and "Supply Closet." The hallway ended at a stairwell, marked by sign and a directory for the building, listing the offices that once occupied the other floors. The entire building seemed to have been dentists and orthodontists.

“I locked the back door, right? Yes. I did.” Polly was talking to herself again. He thought it best just to let her. She brought out her ring of identical keys and selected one. It opened the stairwell door, though he couldn't tell how she knew the key from all the others. The stairwell, like the hallway, had cool, clean air blowing cool. Unlike the hallway, the stairwell's lights were off.

Polly flicked on her flashlight and he followed her up the stairs. Their shoes, his sneakers, her boots, dropped heavy on each dusty step. Gerry's palms throbbed under their bandages. He flexed his fingers and heard the leather of his gloves creak, and underneath, heard the tape and gauze crinkle. His gloved hands, their footsteps, the jingling of the straps of Polly's rucksack, and the whirring of the air system were the only sounds in the stairwell. Under all that, under their muffled footsteps, he could feel rather than hear his pulse.

They reached the top landing and Polly unlocked another door, leading into Doctor Braun's Pediatric Dentistry. Another dim hallway, another stretch of dusty floor. He noticed boot prints on the carpet in the flashlight's beam from where Polly or someone else had tracked in mud once and never cleaned it up. Open doors showed dentist's chairs with their spotlights and trays of instruments, all left as they had been the morning the citizens evacuated. How horrible, he thought, to start the morning with a root canal and end it with fleeing for your life.

The air seemed less musty here, less used, he supposed, by managers filing paperwork. He wondered if Polly ever needed to use this emergency computer program before but didn't ask. An office at the corner of the building, Doctor Braun's judging by the label on the door, was also locked. Polly once again found the right key from her ring quickly and they stepped inside. The room was dark.

Polly flicked on the lights and found the office as she had left it—cleaner than the rest of the building but still in disarray. Files left open on the desk, cabinet doors open, her muddy boot prints smeared all over from the last hurricane. She set her shotgun and flashlight on the desk and let her rucksack drop to the floor beside the chair. The computer terminal, an inoffensive gray, sat on one corner of the desk. Cables ran from the back of the rectangular case to the wall where they connected to other lines that ran out of the city underground. She'd never touched any of them.

She took the desk chair and let Gerry find a corner of the wall to lean against. The machine sprang to life when she pressed the right buttons, just like every other time.

“This will be a minute warming up,” she said to Gerry. “Smoke if you got 'em.”

“Don't smoke.” He stood by the windows, the blinds down but turned open, and seemed to stare out at the street below.

“Not even once?” The machine made those horrible crunching sounds she knew meant it was working correctly. If an engine made those noises, she had told once told Bryan, she would have shot it. Put it out of its misery.

“I tried my grandfather's pipe once. Awful—I was sick all afternoon.”

“Your secret's safe with me.” She had only ever used the program for filing paperwork, but knew WCT made their software pretty idiot proof. One of the reasons it sold so well. She reached into her rucksack and fumbled around for the manual just in case.

Gerry heard her fumbling and watched her take a small book, no larger than a paperback novel, out of her bag. A manual perhaps, he thought, and turned back to the window. He was fascinated by the terminal but didn't want to let on how much. He started out at the street and tried to memorize the signs so he could find this building again. Just in case, he told himself.

Already he was planning the excuses he might give to his trainers about wandering inside the building—to familiarize himself with the terminal in case of emergencies. Really, he just wanted to play around with the terminal alone. Maybe he could convince Polly to let him borrow the manual she flipped through while the machine booted up.

Eventually he heard her typing, or at least hitting keys. As she typed the sky grew darker, the streetlights seem brighter as the daylight faded. The sound made him watch the street more firmly. It reminded him of walking past his father's home office and hearing typing. They'd had computer terminal at home for a few years as Captain Jameson needed it for work. Gerry was not allowed in the office, let alone to use the computer, but that hadn't stopped him wanting to. He'd read books on computing, manuals for different operating systems, magazines for home computing enthusiasts. He'd absorbed a world he'd never really stepped foot into.

“There,” she said. “That should be it.” He turned away from the window and watched as she pushed back in her chair from the desk. The terminal shut down, its grinding sounds cutting off in an abrupt silence. “Let's get back to the station. Get something to eat.”

“Sounds good.” He waited while she threw the manual back in her bag and slipped it back onto her shoulders. Again she led the way out of the office, locking the door behind, and back down the hallway to the staircase.

“Was anything out on the streets?”

“I didn't see any coyotes, if that's what you mean.”

“It is. Doesn't mean they aren't out there, though. Don't let your guard down.”

He didn't reply. Her flashlight beam pointed the way down the dark stairwell. He couldn't care much about coyotes he hadn't seen after a promise of dinner had been made.

He found the parking lot dark and empty as they had left it. He shifted the bag on his hip and checked to make sure he hadn't misplaced his pistol somewhere. All was as it should be. The station would be downhill from the neighborhood, he thought, which might make the trip back, though in the dark now that the sun had set, a little faster. He glanced up into the sky and through his mask he could just make out a few stars. Orchard Park had, even half illuminated as it was, more light pollution than the compound. Being outside at night was a relatively new experience for him, having always looked at stars as a child through windows. Under only the sky, a sense of emptiness filled him as he tried to understand, not theorize, about the distance between his feet and those lights.

They followed the trolley line back to the station. Their route, now more familiar to Gerry, did seem shorter, though he noticed Polly still checked street corners and dark spaces around buildings. Instead, he watched the ground for objects, for large cracks and shifts in the pavement, things that might trip him up. The city remained silent even at night. Those crickets and noisy night insects at the compound didn't live in the city, the mask amplifying his breath so it drowned any sound of the wind, or their footsteps.

Polly led him around towards the east side of the station. He glanced back to the west, to the park and the entrance he had used in the morning, but kept up his pace behind her. The station's east side ran alongside sunken railroad tracks which ran north until they disappeared into a tunnel running underneath part of the station itself, a much lower building that looked to him like an aircraft hanger. Remnants of a chain-link fence marked a steep concrete slope to the tracks below where he could just make out more organized debris—barrels and street signs set up for display, a museum to the city's garbage. Gerry made a note to ask Polly about it later.

The station's second story jutted over the first on the east side, hiding the doorway under a wall of glass and concrete. A set of doors, doubles to the set at the mechanic's entrance, marked the visitor's entrance to the station, once used by princes of industry and other assorted men with big hats. A small lobby, empty and sealed from the outside, remained preserved under glass like a pinned butterfly. Polly and Gerry passed these doors, under cover of the story above, under the glowing spot lights recessed in the black concrete, walking north.

Polly checked every bench beside the glass, glanced in every empty planter. Another entrance to the station waited on the north side of the station building, one she used rarely, but which would take them back to her living quarters through sections of the station she needed to check, anyway. It also gave her a chance to examine, in brief glances away from the dark corners in front of them, the building, the sidewalk, the street, for signs of damage from the quake. In the dim moonlight that station's dark glass seemed a solid, unmarred surface. No cracks appeared to her in any windows.

A concrete staircase, running between the main wing and the annex, took them up and around to the north side of the building. She spared a brief look at the annex before deciding any damage could wait to be discovered—she didn't use the annex, where cargo and personnel shipped in by rail could be unloaded. The north door was locked, just as she had left it weeks before, though one of the old trashcans with an ashtray built into the lid had fallen over, spilling pale sand over the rubber doormat. She stepped over the sand, not wanting to track it inside, and unlocked the door. Another airlock, much smaller for this entrance, scrubbed the air clean before letting them both into the station.

She pulled the mask off her face and set it on top of her head. “We can shower back at the east wing.”

“OK.” She watched Gerry remove his mask, too, and drop it into his bag.

The north airlock opened to a hallway filled with empty classrooms Polly used as storage. Here spare light bulbs, spools of wire, and lengths of pipe waited under lock for when they might be needed. She led him up another staircase and into a long hallway on the top floor of the building, and a long series of windows looking out over the station. From here they could see down to the gymnasium roof, could see the windows that would need to be replaced. To the south she could see the roof greenhouse left to grow wild, half of his structure collapsed all together, glass reflecting weak moonlight.

Hallways ended at staircases, staircases led to other hallways, until they found themselves back at the gymnasium. They showered, each on opposite ends of the room, and while Gerry placed their jumpsuits, clothing, and equipment in the decontamination bins, Polly went up to her room to change. Fresh underwear and she dug a pair of black jeans and a black t-shirt from her drawer. She couldn't find her slippers—she wondered sometimes if it was a quality of the station, one of its magic tricks, that didn't let her keep up with footwear—so she pulled on a pair of thick socks.

She hadn't given much thought to a meal after offering one to Gerry so she rummaged around in her kitchen for something that looked appealing. Her lead-lined pantry, to protect the cans from the plant's magnetism, was still fully stocked—vegetables, soup, beans—and dry foods, too. She didn't know what Gerry liked and was too tired to expend her usual energy on a meal so she grabbed a box of spaghetti and jar of sauce. She had frozen ground beef for meatballs but felt it would be too much energy to actually make them. They wouldn't starve without them, she thought.

Gerry found his way to the kitchen by smell. He had searched the lockers beside the shower and found a jumpsuit in faded navy blue with the old WCT logo from the '60s embroidered on the chest. Polly's small kitchen also had a small round table so after ascertaining that she didn't want help, he sat down.

“There's beer in the fridge if you're thirsty.”

Gerry stood up again. “You want one?”

“I'll get it later.” She turned back to the stove top. He picked a glass bottle from the fridge and twisted it open. It was cheap beer but cold, the same domestic brand his mother only bought when his father came home on leave. He drank half of it in one long gulp.

They ate at the little table in the kitchen in near silence. He felt exhausted from the day and every twirl of his fork made his hand ache sharply from his cuts. When the pasta was all gone they had more beer sitting at the table. Gerry spun his bottle cap on the table like a coin and watched as it listed towards the back wall, towards the plant.

“Well,” Polly said. “Let's make up one of these beds for you.”

“OK,” he replied. He stretched in his chair. “What time is it?”

Polly leaned through the kitchen door, looking into her office, and said, “Almost eleven. The wall shift changes between 7 and 8. You'll be able to get a few hours sleep, anyway.”

“I could use it.”

She led him down from the platform to the rooms underneath, separated from the showers and airlock by a concrete hallway. Most of the rooms were dark offices filled with spare furniture and banker's boxes labeled with dates. File storage, he thought, and followed her to a room with a pair of bunk beds with bare mattresses.

She flicked on the lights and said, “I'll find you some sheets. Give me a minute.”

“OK. I'm going to check on my equipment.”

“Knock yourself out.”

His equipment had finished its decontamination cycle. He removed his notebook and hung up his red jumpsuit in one of the empty lockers but carried his bag and pistol into his bedroom. He hung both from one of the bunk supports and sat on the bottom mattress. Flicking through the pages of his notes, he contemplated more to write down but yawned instead, wanting only to sleep for a while. He also remembered he left his pen in the tunnel below.

Polly found him like that, flipping through a pocket-sized notebook, when she returned with some sheets and a thin blanket. He told her he didn't need help making the bed when she asked. She thought she understood—she felt dead tired, too, and had trouble keeping her eyes open with a full stomach.

“Here,” she said, and handed him a small alarm clock. “I set it for 5. Should give you plenty of time to eat a quick breakfast and get to the gate.” It had been a gift from Bryan, a little brass number with ceramic parts, but she figured he would need it more than her. She never slept more than a few hours at a time, anyway, and usually took three or four naps during the day to make a full eight hours. “Good night.”

“Night,” he said back. “See you in the morning.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

She turned to leave the room but then glanced back at Gerry, unfolding the sheets she had left him to make his bed. She wished she could pick his brain, find out what kind of impression his first day had left. Find out whether his promise to keep the survivors' secret was genuine. Time would tell, she thought. She waved a final goodnight and left him to sleep. Only after settling into her own bed, in her pajamas with her desk lamp burning on the bedside table, did she open Bryan's letter to read it through again.

CHAPTER 7

Tony didn't die, but had been concussed severely. He'd needed almost thirty stitches. All this Bryan told Gerry while sitting up in bed, sipping chicken broth from the bowl. The surgery had been a success, and Bryan, a self-proclaimed fast healer, fared well over the weeks Gerry had spent in the compound's version of solitary—locked in his room.

A grown-up version of being grounded, Gerry had thought, walking circles around his dorm. He'd added many notes about the city to his book, finished several drafts of his own report about the earthquake before selecting the best to submit, but mostly he had considered the people living under the station. He tried putting himself in their place, considering their life from the point of view of someone who didn't have many other choices. It wasn't any use—he'd never met anyone with the green flu, had never spoken with any of the survivors living in the caverns under the city. In order to make his mind up, to decide definitively he would need to meet them.

Half of his brain focused on that challenge while the other spoke to Bryan about the earthquake. He told the former mechanic with a brand new valve in his heart, securing his place as far from the plant as possible, about the shaking earth, the deep cracks tearing through the concrete floor. Gerry flexed his now healed hands and remembered the itch and burn of his bandages. He brushed hair from out of in front of his face and waited for Bryan to speak. The older man just leaned back, his soup bowl resting on his stomach on top of the thermal hospital blanket. Bryan closed his eyes and let out a long, uninterrupted breath.

“How long after you entered the new series did the quake start?”

“Um,” Gerry said. He had to think about it. “A few minutes, maybe. Long enough for me to check the gauges and walk back to the tunnel.”

“Hmm.”

He let Bryan sit in silence while he considered what the one thing had to do with the other. He couldn't see how changing the frequency at which power left the station could shake the ground.

“What are you thinking, sir?”

“That you better stop calling me 'sir,' for one.” Bryan kept his eyes closed. “For second, I don't much believe in coincidence.”

After Gerry returned to his room Bryan's words flicked through his mind, a book opening to a well-thumbed page all on its own. Flu survivor squatters, earthquakes, mutant coyotes. He sat at his little desk flipping through his notebook without really taking anything in. It was late, he would need to get to bed soon—time to change the series again in the morning. A long walk down to the city, a long walk to the station. He grew tired just thinking about the walk, let alone the new assignment.

WCT Corporate wanted a photographic record of the damage to the station and the plant during the quake so they had shipped a special camera to the compound. Gerry picked it up from his desk and turned it over in his hands. It looked like any camera he'd ever used: lens in front, range-finder at the back, dials for aperture and shutter speed adjustments. The innards made it special, evidently, as did the film, both of which were made of materials resistant to the plant's extreme magnetism. He'd been given a few rolls of film and instructions to, “be thorough” in capturing the quake's damage. Being WCT, he also had instructions to log each roll of film to make sure he wasn't taking pictures for any personal purposes, though he couldn't imagine what those might be. Bryan had escorted photographers from National Geographic into the city before, he knew. Gerry didn't think other magazines would care about Orchard Park unless some young starlet was caught there cheating on her equally famous husband.

And so the next morning his bag hung a little heavier on his shoulder as he hiked down to the gate. The guard, not one of the ones he'd met on his previous exit from the city, opened the gate with hardly a word or glance. He considered that it might be his imagination, but the walk to the station seemed faster than before. Even Polly answered his knock as if she'd been standing right by the door, waiting.

"Hey," she said after Gerry had showered. They met beside the lockers where he stood pulling on the old blue jumpsuit he'd worn the last time. "How's things? How's Bryan?"

"Good. Surgery went well. Seems to be recovering OK, too."

"Good to hear." She took the banker's bag from him and unlocked it. This time, he noticed, she made little pretense about opening and reading his instructions card.

"What's that?" she said, pointing to the camera hanging around his neck.

"Corporate office wants pictures of the earthquake damage."

"Anything to keep from coming down here themselves." She rolled her eyes.

They rode the elevator in silence. Gerry ran a hand through his still damp hair and then rubbed the moisture off on his hip. The hallway with the pictures of the station under glass hadn't seen much damage, but he shot a frame anyway.

Polly turned at the sound of the shutter. "This is my good side," she said, lifting her chin up a bit so that the right side of her face pointed towards the camera. She was happy to see Gerry crack a smile. She had inherited her mother's attitude that a sense of humor could lubricate even the most awkward working situations. With a small exhalation of breath, not quite a sigh, she remembered that it was Bryan's sense of humor that had begun her attraction.

She tried to keep out of the way as Gerry took snapshots of the ruined stairwell. She kept wondering when he'd ask about the floor she and a few survivors she'd recruited had spent days

clearing but he was too busy playing shutterbug to mention. While he took pictures she walked down to the plant door and the tubes to send Winchester the new series. Along the way she stepped over stones and clots of dirt loose on the floor, not yet cleared by her or the survivor helpers. She remembered how the ground had trembled and squeezed her fist.

Gerry stood up from his crouch and started winding up the used roll of film. The damage had been worse than he remembered, even with the well clearer than before. He doubted the staircase would ever be repaired. With fresh film in the camera, he turned down the tunnel, taking single frames here and there where the wall had cracked, where a chunk of stone had fallen. As he walked he realized he whistled an old song he'd heard on the radio a week ago. He wondered if he'd been whistling the melody long and pressed his lips together.

He took many more pictures of the plant room, the clipboard tucked under his arm as he lined up shots. The long crack in the concrete floor ran from the hatched doorway all the way to where the odd cubicles started at the power plant's base. Stone and dirt from the ceiling, some mounds the size of station wagons, littered the floor. One of the cubicles had been smashed completely by a trash-can sized boulder. He looked up at the roof of the cave and then raised his camera up, too, to get a picture. The rough rock looked fine to him, but he wasn't an expert, and couldn't remember staring at the ceiling much on his last visit.

The plant seemed fine, still churning away. Gerry let the camera hang around his neck while he climbed the steps, kicking clots of dirt out of his way. He changed the series with ease, recorded the new readings on the gauges, and took a snapshot of them because one's face had cracked, though its dial still moved. As he walked back to the hatchway, he was surprised to find he was holding his breath.

Polly held her breath, too, watching Gerry walk the length of the ruined concrete floor. Her pulse began to beat faster, as if she stood on the edge of a cliff waiting to be pushed off. She started around the tunnel, which felt so much closer than usual, looking for something. Looking for some small sign that the ground would start shaking again. Nothing happened—she and Gerry stood together in silence, both hardly breathing.

A quiet hissing noise started. She turned her head to the pipes and, her heartbeat deafening in her ears, reached out as a canister fell into the basket. She heard Gerry exhale beside her, his breath whistling slightly, and she grabbed the canister and unscrewed the lid. Before she could unfold the message inside the tunnel went black.

There had been no warning, auditory or otherwise. The lights simply went out, as if she had flicked a switch. Through the open hatchway she heard the plant's noise change, the spinning sound of machinery grow slower, as it shut down. She heard Gerry curse under his breath beside her, then his shoulder against hers as he stepped beside her in the tunnel. A second later light flashed—he'd grabbed the flashlight from his shoulder bag, the flashlight she'd given him on their walk through the city and never demanded back.

“What now?” he asked. He pointed the beam at the ceiling between them so that their faces were illuminated but the light wouldn't blind either of them. His face glowed in the light like a camper telling a ghost story.

“Here,” she said, reaching for the light. He handed it over and she directed it to the scrap of paper in her hands. It read, “Sorry.”

“Winchester.” She balled the paper in her fist and let the canister wedge under her arm drop to the floor. She heard it thud in the dirt—the plant so quiet now only her and Gerry's breath sounding in the tunnel.

“Who?”

“One of the survivors. Their leader, more or less. This is from him. His handwriting.”

“Sorry about what, the plant dying? As in he killed it somehow?”

“I suppose so.”

“How is that possible?”

“No idea. Not even a little one.” She slammed her fist down on the little table and heard the cup of pencils spill. “God damn it, this is bad. This is really, really bad.” She could hardly see straight for visions of strangling the survivor, his green eyes bulging.

“There has to be a protocol for this. Right? Something we have to do if the power goes out completely?”

Underneath her anger, her trembling hands which she knew forecasted panic, she thought back to all the contingencies she'd been forced to memorize, back to the Wright Corporate Technology's Station Manager Exam she passed in order to earn qualifications for the job, but couldn't remember a single thing about the plant stopping all together. It was a constant, like the sun itself, thought to always run. Assumed to run forever with a little upkeep.

She had decided on sending another message via the computer terminal near the south gate when the spinning started again. The sound grew louder, the prop of an aircraft getting up to speed, and then the lights blinked back on all at once.

“Thank Christ.” She flicked the flashlight off and tossed it to Gerry. “Let's get back upstairs.”

“Good plan.”

In Polly's office, while she paced behind her desk, her arms crossed in front of her chest, Gerry stared around at the photographs on the walls. One wall was white concrete with a

window out to the park below. The other two were the same dividers that made up the cubicles around the plant, though these almost touched the ceiling. To these she, or other managers, he guessed, had attached pictures. Some in frames echoed the blank and white pictures in the elevator hallway below, showing the plant, the station as it used to be. Groups of men in white lab coats holding clipboards. One was a candid shot of Eisenhower speaking with a man in a double-breasted suit, pointing at something out of frame. Other pictures had no frames, were in color, and showed people in environmental suits waving. A Polaroid taped to the wall showed Bryan, sitting at Polly's kitchen table, a manic grin as he ate cake with his bare hands. He drew closer to that shot and wondered if Bryan would ever step foot in Orchard Park again with his heart valve and all.

She still paced, so Gerry took one of the chairs in front of her desk. The blackout, though quieter than the earthquake, scared him in a much different way, and his leg shook up and down, bouncing on the ball of his foot as he thought.

The note, taking credit for shutting down the plant, was the kind of thing villains in comic books did. He didn't know who Winchester was, or what he wanted, but his note indicated a level of control over the power the survivors used without payment, a kind of control they might ransom. A kind of control they definitely shouldn't have, especially if Winchester, the man in charge evidently, felt the need to flex his muscles. Something would have to be done, Gerry decided, but he didn't know what that something ought to be. He leaned back in his chair and brushed hair back from in front of his face. Perhaps he would need to continue watching, and waiting for a solution to present itself.

Polly heard Gerry's leg bouncing up and down and squeezed her arm. She had always seen a difference between making a decision and following through with it, between plan and

action. Knowing she would need to send another message and visit Winchester, confront him about his note, didn't increase her desire to do either. While she paced she kept tabs on the sky outside her window and knew she'd have plenty of daylight to walk the city. She knew all of the paths up from the survivor's camp into the station which would bypass the streets outside, so even if the sun set while she talked, or whatever, in the caverns she'd be safe getting back home. Gerry would have plenty of time to get back to the compound, too, doubling her report. Going over the logistics didn't help, however, so she continued to pace.

She didn't know Gerry well, but guessed if she made mention of visiting the survivor camp he'd be curious. Some people are quietly curious and some not; some would let it go, some would insist on paying the same visit. Until she was certain, absolutely certain he wouldn't tattle, wouldn't pose a danger to the camp, she would make sure he kept his distance.

“OK,” she said, frustrated with her hesitation, “let's talk this through.”

“OK.”

“One: I need to send a message to corporate by way of the terminal.”

“Fair enough. I don't see the challenge in that.”

“Two,” she said, as if Gerry hadn't spoken, “I need to send Winchester a message, too. See if I can find out what the gray hell he's up to.” A half truth seemed a good compromise. She realized as she had begun speaking that avoiding Winchester or his note altogether would be suspicious. Gerry would be less likely to second guess her this way.

“OK. So it's a time issue?”

“Not exactly.”

“Because I can visit the terminal for you, I suppose.”

“You what?” She stopped pacing and turned to stare at him.

“It can't be too hard. I know computers a little, and you have a manual. Write out what you want me to type and I'll send it on my way back to the compound. You can do whatever you want then.”

She turned back to the window. There was something more to his offer, she knew, but couldn't guess what it was. She didn't like it—just another person she had to deal with who had a secret agenda. But it did get him out of the way, which was essential. Another compromise if she chose to look at it that way.

“You sure you can handle this?”

“Define 'sure'.”

“Certain. Positive, confident. Pick your synonym.”

“Sanguine?”

“That works.” She picked the terminal manual up from her desk and tossed it to him.

“Chapter 27, I think. I don't know, there's an index.”

“I'll find it.”

She followed him out, walking above of the showers and airlock and standing beside the glass so see him step onto the pavement. In his mask, he gave her a thumbs-up. She waved in return and watched him turn south, towards Main Street. For a while she watched the empty stretch of street, the park beyond with the statue and its painted eyes. It had been a long time since she'd traveled down to the camp, walked those hidden paths through the city sewers and into the bedrock, deep into the earth near where the plant harnessed the unique magnetism spawned by happenstance, or nature, or whatever magic held sway in a place that never seemed to obey any rules. One of the first things she learned about Orchard Park: the city had a mind of

its own. As Bryan used to say, quoting his grandfather, the only constant in life is how much it changes without your say-so. The city had run with that saying like a dog let off its leash.

She dressed carefully, wrapping her hair in a scarf, though she knew she wouldn't be walking outside. She grabbed her rucksack, and carefully folded a jumpsuit to carry with her, alongside her mask, just in case. Instead of the shotgun she usually carried, she stopped by the armory and swapped it for a ceramic MP5. It was shorter, a carried the presence she wanted. With the shotgun, her usual precaution around the station, she visit might be social. With a sub-machine gun, she knew no one in the camp would doubt why she was there. She didn't want Winchester to have any doubts.

CHAPTER 8

Gerry thought he would have more trouble finding the dentist's office again. The day grew warm in the sunlight and by the time he found the burger shop which marked the turn his eyes stung with sweat. October had grabbed onto the leftover summer heat and was holding on, and as he turned onto Reed, he silently thanked the tall houses on the block for shading him. His eyes still burned, though, and without a way to rub them through his mask, he walked slower, careful to avoid anything in the road that could make him trip.

Polly had given him two keys, one for the parking-lot door and one for the office, but didn't tell him which unmarked key opened which door. He guessed right on his first try and tried to mark the key with a pen but the ceramic surface would not take the ink. Walking through the airlock, he decided it didn't matter, wondered if in time he'd be able to tell the difference between all the keys just like she did, feeling on the outside of a private joke, something unimportant but inexplicably riveting because she was keeping it from him. He rubbed his eyes and wiped his sweaty forehead once he could take off his mask and then stuffed it and his gloves in his bag before setting up the stairs.

The terminal waited where they had left it, sitting on top of the desk in Doctor Braun's office, resting in a sunbeam from the half open blinds. He took the chair behind the desk and switched the monitor and CPU on, watching the assorted code and text crawling across the screen in green type. While he waited he dug the manual out of his bag and found the chapter on the program, called the Emergency Messaging System, and read enough to know he probably wouldn't need the book for much.

The operating system booted up and Gerry saw an interface many computing hobbyists would trade limbs to spend five minutes with—a series of pictures, typically called icons he knew, that represented different programs and commands. No more hunting and pecking with complicated command lines, he thought, smiling. Using the directional keys, marked with arrows on the keyboard, he found the picture for the EMS: a white flag rippled as if in a breeze.

“Neat,” he said to himself. He highlighted the picture and pressed “Enter,” launching the program. From there it was a simple matter to type the message Polly had written out for him, mark it as “Urgent,” two steps down from “Emergency,” which according to the manual ought only to be used to call in the cavalry, so to speak. For Red invasions into the city, or the like. Gerry shook his head at the stupidity of the thought. What self-respecting communist, pending armistice or no, would pick central Virginia as his first stop?

He hesitated before closing down the system. The windows still shone with sunlight. He had plenty of time to play around with the system, all day if he wanted. He'd be able to come up with some excuse for why he arrived back at the compound late. Ultimately, he decided he would have more opportunities and exited out.

He leaned back in his chair as the terminal shut down and stretched his arms above his head. Glancing out the window he estimated he'd be back at the compound in time for dinner, which he would be taking in his room now that he was still grounded. The terminal died with a final wheezy groan. In the suddenly silent room, the air conditioning blowing was almost a roar. He leaned over to pick his bag off the floor and heard something, a dull thud from the hallway.

He froze, listening hard, but didn't hear anything further. The air conditioning stopped blowing and the new silence echoed in his ears alongside his heartbeat. Careful not to make noise with the desk chair, he picked up his bag and slipped in over his head. He stood up,

wincing as the chair groaned, and then stood behind the desk, his hand on the grip of his pistol. No sound followed that initial thud and he began to question whether he had heard anything at all. Thoughts of communists had made him paranoid, he decided, and he let out a low, whistling breath.

He stepped into the hallway, still keeping an eye out for something, like a piece of dentistry equipment, a potted plant, which had fallen. Something which could have made a thudding noise. The hallway at the rooms seemed still. He secured the deadbolt in the office door, and paused. He couldn't remember if he'd locked the parking lot door.

Pistol in hand, he spun to face the hallway and saw a shadow duck into a doorway. Only his training kept him from firing a shot in surprise. He stepped into an open door, too, and edged around the frame to peer down the hallway.

“Friendly or hostile?” he said, wishing he'd said something simple instead.

“Friendly, mostly,” came the reply. “I'll step out—don't shoot, OK? I'm unarmed.” A deep voice, a man's voice, in plain English. A slight lilt, an accent Gerry couldn't place.

“I won't shoot if that's true.” He stayed in the crook of the doorway, his pistol aimed down the hall, as the man stepped out. He had his hands up at his shoulders like in Western. A tall man, taller than Gerry anyway, with long black hair and a brown jumpsuit. Gerry swallowed when he saw the man's eyes, the whites a sickly yellow green. One of the survivors.

“What do you want?”

“We need your help.”

“We who?”

“We the camp. My name's John. What's yours?”

“What do you need help with?”

“A project.” That's wasn't an answer, Gerry thought, but John didn't appear to be armed. Gerry stepped out into the hallway, his gun still trained on the survivor, but with a clearer shot than from the doorway.

“Not interested in projects.”

“You'd be helping a lot of innocent people.”

“Innocent people who turn off the power for half the east coast.” He swallowed, his throat dry, his pulse hammering.

“Innocent people who didn't know what Winchester was up to until he'd already done it.”

“I'm going to need more in order to trust you.”

John smiled. “More than a .45 on an unarmed man?”

“Yes. Because most people would've asked me to put it down by now.” Which made him think John wasn't alone.

Gerry was proven right but didn't have time to gloat. As soon as he finished speaking an arm wrapped around his neck, another held the back of his head, and he couldn't breathe. His hands reached up to fight his attacker but the hold was strong. He thought he fired a single shot as the hallway turned black.

#

Below ground, Polly followed a trail left years ago by other station managers, marked through the tunnels and caves by strips of tape that reflected in a flashlight's beam. She knew it was the same material used by the team who created signs for fallout shelters, whose emblems were created to be illuminated by cigarette lighters and matches in the darkness caused by falling dust. Gloria, the manager before her, had told stories from Fairfax, one of DC's suburbs, which had gone to twilight after the capital warhead detonated. Polly followed the path, watching her

feet, and remembering of the panic in Chicago, hundreds of miles away from the closest bomb. Remembering the crowded hospital basement, crying for her mother upstairs.

The taped path ran into the lanterns, and she followed the trail marked by survivors, using stolen power to light stolen bulbs. Salvaged might be a better word, she thought, as no one in the city needed the lamps anymore. Her boots hardly marked the packed dirt, worn from years of footsteps, worn from flooding and moisture. The dirt gave way to stone in places, wet rock in the cold caverns. She pulled her collar up around her neck and waited to see if her breath would mist in front of her face. It hadn't snowed much in Virginia since she'd lived at the station, and what little snow covered the city seemed a dusting compared to the lake-effect inches from her childhood. All snow seemed to do in Orchard Park was show the prints of coyotes running at night.

This path, she knew, bypassed the giant cavern near the survivor's camp, with mineral deposits and rock formations in unique shapes like the caverns in Luray not too far away. The lanterns on her trail only showed bare stone walls, stretches of packed dirt with wooden beams for support. The yellow light occasionally reflected on wet stone, rivets of water running in tiny lines down the face, slowly wearing at the bedrock. Her footsteps made the odd whisper, her boot leather creaked at times, but her breath sounded by far the loudest as she walked.

She reached a guard post, a little wooden chair and table usually manned by some red-faced youth, but which stood empty. Gripping her machine pistol she slowed her pace up the short rise into the camp's main cavern. The most direct path between the station and the camp led into the edges of the survivor's settlement, where small vegetable gardens had been built in wood beds full of good, stolen soil. The lamps burned still, but only seedlings grew in the soil. She must have missed the harvest, she thought, remembering the corn, soy, cabbage, and other

green stalks in the beds. Beyond the gardens, under the shadow of the water tank, the first tents started.

When the camp was young, each person or family had been given the same bolt of brown canvas, the same supports, and an equal share of the cavern floor in order to make their homes. Over time, canvas had been dyed, tents expanded, land bartered, until no two tents looked alike. At one corner a mostly wooden structure stood a story above the others, a balcony reaching out over the street between rows of tents. Another home looked to be two or three tents stitched together with rolled-up cutouts for windows. At the edge of the cavern, where the sloping ceiling met the floor, the medical tent stood marked with a green cross. Most of the damage from the quake had been repaired, though a few tents were still pooled on the ground in a heap, their supports shaken down. Polly had helped pull the hospital back up off the ground a few weeks before. Most tents, however, had their stoops and porches full of survivors drinking tea, darning clothing, gossiping as if nothing exciting had happened all week.

She shifted her gun on the sling so it hung under her arm. She began looking around for Winchester, or one of the guards, but could only spot the civilians—those not affiliated with Winchester's collective. Those who just wanted to live in peace. She started out through the paths between tents, the camp's streets, and turned right at an intersection she remembered. Maria, who ran the camp's library, might have an idea where Winchester was hiding.

Maria had her feet up on the low counter, her nose in a book as usual. She was a slight woman, near forty, with a few streaks of gray running through her blond hair and a taste for cardigans in all weather. She glanced up when Polly ducked under the flap of the library tent but then looked back to her book.

“Need something?”

“Looking for Winchester.” Polly wasn't surprised by the cold welcome. Maria, though usually willing to lend a hand, liked fictional people better than real ones. Polly had grown used to it, and hadn't expected hugs and kisses from anyone in the camp.

“Other side of the lake, last I heard.” Maria looked back up at Polly over the top of her glasses. “What'd he do this time?”

“Thanks.” The lake was the camp's main water source, which they scrubbed clean and piped up to the tank by the gardens. The water filled a small cave off the camp's main space, and the survivors had built a dock for canoes they used to get from one side to the other. The air ducts, allowing clean air to blow from the surface, also ran through the cavern over the lake. Polly had paddled out onto the still, glassy surface to help patch the ducts before, but had never wandered far enough to cross the lake itself. That short stretch of shore, separated from the camp by the water, was Winchester's land.

One of the stories Winchester liked to tell involved his parents, who had founded the camp. A few years after the bombs fell, he said, his family and a group of other green flu survivors, wandered the country. They had been kicked out of cities all along the east coast, had caravanned and bivouacked from Albany to Jacksonville, and found the closer they drew to empty Orchard Park the better they all felt. The empty city seemed like the perfect place to found a new community, but by that time WCT had started putting up the wall. As Winchester said, no wall is perfect. The caverns in that part of the Virginia hills had many hidden pathways. The first survivor community settled under the city and, as their numbers grew, expanded to the other side of the lake.

Polly had heard these tales, and as she walked through the camp, she thought back to those first bombs, of the chaos of those years after: war, terror, hunger, and most of all, the quiet. As everyone waited for the other shoe to drop, standing by their living room windows, they talked in whispers. The radio whispered, too. The whole country had turned down the volume, and silence grew, multiplied, stretched from sea to shining sea until the young folk, who had grown up hiding in closets and dreaming of sky, had swallowed all they could take and started shouting.

“All those tapes,” Polly said, thinking of her erased music. She shook her head and continued walking, winding her way through the canvas town to the lake on the other side.

At the dock, she watched the thin surf, caused perhaps by the pumps deep underwater, lap at the rocky shoreline. The boards under her boots were worn, waterlogged and stained, and creaked with her weight. The cave made her ache with cold, seeping through her skin. She dug her gloves out of her bag and brushed against her mask and jumpsuit. She stared out at the water and decided the warmth would be worth the time it took to step into the jumpsuit. It fit over all her other clothes, and once her boots, gloves, and scarf were back in place, the gun hanging under her arm, she felt ready.

There was no one on the dock to help her cast off in one of the canoes, no one to help her row. She knew the lake, longer than it was wide, had only two landings: at the dock and on the far side. More lanterns had been strung up over the water, following the air ducts from the camp to where the system angled up to the surface. Where the chimney appeared above ground was a closely guarded secret, like a lot of other secrets whispered in the camp. She hadn't bothered to ask Maria what Winchester was up to, knowing that either the woman wouldn't have known at all, or that she would keep it to herself.

A survivor names Kevin had taught Polly how to paddle a canoe by herself without going in a circle. Sitting on the wooden support bar without cushion and seeing how low in the water she was even by herself, she nodded again that pulling on the jumpsuit had been a good idea. The rowing motion became awkward with the gun under her arm so she let the sling slip off her shoulder and she stashed it on the floor of the canoe by her feet, resting it between two of the wood ribs. Those ribs, exposed as they were, always made her feel like she had hollowed out some sea beast and was rowing its carcass.

She wasn't sure what she would say to Winchester when she finally caught up with him. Part of her hoped she wouldn't have to say anything; that her presence in the camp would need no explanation and he would start talking all on his own. She had never known him to keep silent about one of his ideas, whether it be smuggling bags of top soil in from the compound to mix in the garden, or patching in to one of the pneumatic messaging tubes at the station, running a line down to the camp. She also remembered that though it had been Winchester's idea, the actual smuggling, the actual work to set up a tube, always fell to others. To his loyal band of misfits, as she sometimes called the more radical survivors. To herself and Bryan. To Gerry, eventually. All in the service of a madman named after a wall.

Though part of her counted on silence, a much smaller part started, as she rowed, to dream up things to say. Words to keep him talking long enough to let slip whatever he was up to. Threats, promises if need be, to keep the power up and running. Most of all, she wanted to know how he had managed the blackout in the first place. If she could figure out how he'd done it, she could make sure he didn't do it again. More lives than the survivors' counted on the plant, on the station she managed, for power. The survivors might not care much about the outside world, not that they'd been given much reason to, but she felt duty bound in the slimmest, most

unusual definition of the word, to perform her job. No questions got asked when she did her job. No investigations into the plant by stooges from corporate. No risk of discovery of the survivor camp.

So Polly paddled on, her oar tracing softly through the water, following the yellow lamps. Pillars of rock, of stone, big around as small houses reached from ceiling to floor and cast shadows over the water and over her as she continued on. The water rippled as she moved along, but farther out away from her canoe, the still water reflected like mirrored glass, so that the yellow light seemed to glow both above and below. She shivered in the cold and flexed her stiff fingers in her gloves.

#

Gerry woke up tied to a dentist's chair. He couldn't move his head much as it too was strapped down, but the restraints around his chest, holding his arms to the rests of the chair, felt like leather. Belts, he guessed, though he couldn't imagine two people wearing so many. His head was fuzzy still but he thought he had counted two, at least two, as one had spoken and the other held him. So many belts suggested either more men than he had seen, or a premeditated plan to strap someone to a chair.

The room seemed empty, the hanging lamp above him that a doctor would use to illuminate his mouth dark. The blinds had been pulled up so that the neighborhood, the city outside the window, glowed in the afternoon sunlight. He tried to calculate how long he'd been out but couldn't remember when he had finished typing the message.

He was still alone a few minutes later, though he admitted it could have easily been thirty seconds. The cloud in his head hadn't lifted yet and he tried to regulate his breathing, taking deep lungfuls of air to force it into his brain. The belts around his arms rubbed against his skin at

the wrist, the one across his forehead grew slick with his sweat. More time passed and he began to consider that he'd simply been left there, tied to a chair, though he couldn't see the logic to asking someone for help and when it was refused leaving that person incapacitated.

He thought back to Winchester, this villain from the comics, and saw his hand in this. John had said he wasn't with the man but this, leaving a prisoner to sweat alone, tied up before beginning an interrogation, was also the kind of thing found in those hard-boiled detective books Captain Jameson liked. The kind of move of someone who, when cutting the power to a city, to half the country, sent a note first. The kind of move by someone who might paint eyes all over the city, marking territory he couldn't possibly use. He made a mental note to add a few notes on Winchester in his notebook.

Gerry tested his restraints again but found them secure. As his head cleared, anger took the place of the cloud and he pulled at the leather, knowing it probably wouldn't make much difference, feeling the skin underneath redden and raw. He wanted to pull the chair to pieces. He wanted his pistol back, wanted to turn back time and shoot John in the leg. He wanted to push his pain and humiliation from himself to the survivor, like shedding a skin and strangling someone with it.

He heard the door behind him open and tried to turn his head towards it. Struggling made him weak though, so he sat back, let his arms fall. He heard the rush of air being pushed out of a cushion, the creak of leather as someone behind him took a seat.

"You'll hurt yourself if you keep that up." He couldn't quite tell if it was John's voice or not. He thought it sounded similar. When the voice didn't speak again Gerry decided to keep quiet for as long as possible. If the man really wanted help, he would ask for it again eventually,

maybe even go into more detail. If he wanted something else, something that required restraints, well, Gerry would rather put knowing it off for a while yet.

“You can relax for a bit. We still have a bit of time to kill.”

Gerry let, “Until what?” slip out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

“Until Winchester gets here.”

Gerry closed his eyes. He wasn't sure this wasn't Winchester speaking. It seemed the kind of thing people did in comics—pretend to be a lackey for a villain, all the while being the villain himself. He chastised himself for calling Winchester a villain. All this was the work of a child playing at being a hard man. The man deserved no more respect than that.

He thought back to the man's words, “time to kill.” Gerry always hated that expression, suggesting both that some time held more value than other and that it lived at all. He was smart enough to accept the philosophical axiom that time was a construct of man, an illusion to help us regulate our lives, and the idea of time as a scientific idea, a measurement, but didn't like giving it, even in his mind, life beyond paper. He considered it alongside his distaste for predetermination, the idea that he, Gerry, wasn't in control over his own life. He didn't know where these thoughts were coming from in his chair. Maybe John had drugged him. Maybe his head was still fuzzy from the choke hold.

His silence wasn't working. The man sitting behind him, possibly John, hadn't reacted at all when Gerry refused to answer his innocuous questions and eventually stayed silent himself. The room grew darker and Gerry knew the daylight was fading. Soon they would need a lamp in the room to see anything. He grew bored as his head cleared, sitting and waiting for a man who probably was already there beside him. Despite the restraints the chair was comfortable, more so than his bunk at the compound, and he felt himself dozing.

“Hey there,” the man said. “Still awake?”

Gerry had decided to answer the next question the man asked, decided to try the opposite of silence for a change. He wanted to see what would provoke a reaction from John.

“Yep. Bored though. Got a magazine or something?”

“Funny,” the man said. Gerry tried to shrug. The approach would be a stretch, he knew, not being a natural at sarcasm. But he had read it a bunch, knew how it was supposed to work.

“Bored, huh?”

“And a bit angry.” A little truth in that, he thought. He knew it couldn't happen to often, but that the best lies had true seeds. He also had to pee, but decided he could keep that to himself.

“You're the one who shot at me, pal.”

“Oh, it's not that. I mean, I always liked George's songs better, but that's still no way to go. Too young, too young.”

He heard leather creak and felt the man stand up behind him. “I always hoped for a reunion myself. But then I was always more of a Stones fan.”

“Of course you are,” Gerry said. “You're a goddamn thug.”

Light blinded him suddenly. He shut his eyes and tried to turn away from it but couldn't move his head. His eyelids glowed red—the man had switched on the dentist's spotlight.

“‘Thug’ is a pretty harsh word there, young man. You might want to rethink your vocabulary.”

“Fair enough. How about ‘sadist’?”

“I prefer ‘anarchist’.”

“Of course you do. How about this—we cut the pretense.”

“Which is?” The light shifted enough that Gerry felt he could safely open his eyes. The man stood over him, only an outline of shadow, his hair framing his head so that he might have been wearing a helmet.

“We aren't really waiting for anyone.”

The man laughed. “Fair enough. Call me Winchester. Everyone does.”

“Hi, Winchester. I'm Gerry. How about you cut me loose and let me get out of here.”

“Can't do that. Not just yet. Not until you hear what I have to say.”

“We both know if that's all you wanted you would've spoken up by now.”

“I wanted to get to know you first. To see if I had you pegged right. We really do need your help, Gerry.”

“Help with what, exactly?”

“Does that mean you'll hear me out?”

“Untie me. I'll hear you out. Scout's honor.” It seemed a safe enough gamble. Under the light, Winchester was still a shadow, and there was another person somewhere, too, probably so he couldn't just rush the man. He felt the strap over his head loosen, then the one around his chest, then his arms and legs. He rubbed the raw skin on his wrists but kept his seat, waiting for Winchester to speak.

“The blackout was regrettable, but I had to try again. We don't have many opportunities, but I made another miscalculation. I thought I had to wait until the series changed, until the plant shifted enough before trying. I see now I was wrong. I see now that I need a mechanic.”

“A mechanic for what? What are you trying to do?”

Winchester walked back to the doorway and flipped on the lights in the ceiling. He crossed back and turned off the dentist's spotlight. Gerry saw the man who he had seen before,

the same black hair, the same green eyes. The other person wasn't in the room, but he enjoyed being able to turn his head to check. Winchester pulled the chair he had been using by the door over beside Gerry and sat down. He held Gerry's pistol in his hand.

“I'm trying to tap into magnetism. I'm trying to bypass the plant altogether in order to supply the camp with power directly from the source.”

Gerry waited. It sounded sane enough, a decent idea in fact, but there had to be a catch. He felt he was missing something, that it was right on the tip of his tongue, just out of reach.

“You need a mechanic to do that?” It sounded like he needed a whole second power plant.

“I need someone who can resist extreme magnetism, yes. I need someone who can get close to the source, where the plant harnesses energy and converts it to usable power.”

“Why didn't you ask Bryan?”

Winchester sighed and dropped his eyes to the floor. “I hadn't finished the receiver before you replaced him. Believe me, I'd rather be asking him.”

Gerry had a hard time believing Bryan would have helped Winchester blindly. He glanced out of the window and saw street lamps had turned on, their sensors telling circuits that it was dark enough. His stomach growled, and his curiosity got the better of him.

“Walk me through it.”

“I take you down to our camp, to a pathway we've cut through the rock and into a series of caverns we've found. You carry the receiver with you and place in the right spot. We connect the wires. If I'm right, the camp gets power without having to rely on getting the new frequency.”

“So what's the catch?”

Winchester looked genuinely surprised. “Catch?”

“There has to be another boot to drop. You've risked too much here for it to be that simple. What, after I set the receiver up you put one behind my ear?”

“After you set the receiver up you never hear from us again. That's the bargain.”

“You're putting an awful lot of faith in a stranger.”

“Desperate times,” he said, not finishing the adage.

“No, what I mean is, there's nothing in it for me. Aside from a few promises I doubt you'll keep.”

“Feed a mouse a cookie.” Winchester grinned.

“Exactly. Today I help power your camp, tomorrow I help feed your campers.”

“We feed ourselves fine. All we want is to live in peace. That's hard to do without power. We need things underground: air pumps and filters, irrigation, electricity for medical equipment. Lights.”

“Ever thought of living someplace else? Somewhere above ground in the sun?”

“That's my people's land down there, son. I won't just give that up.” Winchester's jaw had set hard with these last words. Here was the reaction Gerry had hoped to see. Now to push.

“But it's not your *power*, asshole. Not until you pay for it like everyone else.”

“We've already paid!” Winchester stood up. “Each and every one of us has paid, far and away, past what we ever owed!” He leaned over Gerry, the pistol's barrel pressing into his chest.

“Look at me. Look me in the eyes and tell me again I haven't paid Wright Corp.”

Gerry looked and only saw green. He saw the eyes of a madman, willing to do anything to get his way. Willing to put everyone at risk. He saw the eyes of a zealot and felt he finally understood Winchester.

“I help you, you stay out of the city? That's the deal?”

“That's the deal.” Winchester stood up again, pointed the gun at the floor. “That's all I want.”

“I'm gonna need my bag,” Gerry said, looking around for it. “My mask is inside.” Going along with the plan, at least in the short term, seemed the best way to diffuse the situation. If Gerry could get out on the street he might be able to slip away.

“You won't need it.”

“You have a way underground from this building? Of course you do.”

“No.” Winchester smiled again. “You won't need it because the air in Orchard Park is clean. It's been safe to breathe for years.”

CHAPTER 9

Polly beached her canoe on the far shore and jumped out. Her boots splashed in a few inches of water as she pulled the craft up the loose, sandy soil. She could make out the lights of Winchester's camp from the water's edge, but didn't see any movement close to the water. She slipped her gun's sling over her shoulder and dropped the oar in the bottom of the canoe. The lack of welcome, warm or otherwise, began to worry her a bit like the migraine that might be back any moment.

The path from shore to the tents led her past one of the air-pumps, a tall pillar of wood surrounding a ceramic machine that drew air from above down to the camp. She always assumed somewhere along the way the air was scrubbed clean, somewhere between the pumps here at the edge of the shore and the other side of the lake, but never had much involvement with how the survivors maintained themselves. Patching leaky ducts was one thing, understanding how they worked another. As Bryan said, you didn't need to know how to butcher a cow to cook a steak.

The tall wood structure vibrated as the machine inside did its job, seemed to shake the ground under her feet the closer she stepped towards it. She had a quick violent vision, a memory of crouching under Gerry's chest as the staircase crashed and fell, and reached out a hand to brace herself against the tower. Once her knees felt stronger she walked forward again.

Winchester and his people lived at the edge of the cave which housed the lake, so the walls curved up as they turned into the ceiling. Unlike at the bigger camp, these tents were more uniform. As the oldest, Winchester's was more wood than canvas and had a brick foundation. One large square sat in the middle and other, smaller tents branched out into other rooms. Fifty yards away a collection of smaller tents sat, organized into rows, all uniform khaki canvas.

It looked less the collective of the other camp, more the encampment of an army. She couldn't decide, stalking towards the larger tent, how much of the look she should blame on Winchester's unique personality, and how much on the people who followed him, like he was the green-eyed second coming of Christ.

The ground between Winchester's place and the other tents had been well trod, hers weren't the only prints in the dirt, but she didn't see any boots to go with them. No one was around, even just hanging out in front of their tents. She squeezed the grip of her short rifle tighter. Hiding, like a dog that'd pissed on the carpet and was hiding from its master, fearful of punishment. And here she continued to hold on a slim, infinitesimally thin hope that he'd deny everything.

The big tent-house seemed empty, too, no lights burning in the windows. She wondered how many homes in Orchard Park he'd lifted all the glass from, how many living rooms stood open to the elements so he could pretend this home, this settlement on borrowed land, was permanent.

On the wide front porch of his home, a single guard stood, leaning against one of the supports, a Kalashnikov hanging from his arm. He held his free hand loose across the grip and ate an apple with the other.

"Winchester home?" Polly asked.

"Nope." The guard, he eyes green as any of survivors, lifted the apple to his mouth and took a loud careless bite.

"Know where he is?"

The guard chewed for a bit, and then said, "Nope. Up the tunnels, maybe. Ain't sure."

"Thanks for nothing." She walked off.

Behind the smaller tents a trail, a series of tunnels, once followed a stream that the survivors had dammed to make the lake. Somewhere along these tunnels, she knew, a path led up to the surface, somewhere outside the city walls. This trail had been marked by the first survivors, if Winchester could be believed. She couldn't bull's-eye when she'd started believing him in the first place. Maybe she'd just heard the same lies so many times that they stuck with her, the way you'd learn the wrong words to a mumbled verse. Maybe she'd just let him use the survivor card too many times, playing on her mother's death, siphoning sympathy from her rapidly draining tank. Polly followed the lanterns leading to the trail, strung up on short poles hammered into the ground like signposts, wondering what would happen when her tank ran dry altogether.

She glanced inside some of the tents she walked past. Some seemed well organized, blankets folded at the ends of cots, others messy as if their occupants had left in a hurry. The sights didn't tell her anything useful. Winchester, his men, still hadn't appeared. She began to think it was suspicious that he left only one man to look after his tent, his home, while he was off doing whatever it was he was doing. She thought back to the empty guard post she had passed earlier. More information she couldn't use yet.

She kept walking, wanting the confrontation to be over with. She had work to do at the station. For the first time in hours she thought of Gerry, wondered how he was getting on, wondered if he had made it back to the compound yet. He had proven himself capable during the quake, but she didn't know what that meant quite yet. He might fall apart completely at the sight of his first chupacabra.

The entrance to the trail had a hinged gate, made of wood secured to the rock face with copper nails or screws. Another table and chair beside it, both empty. An ashtray rested on the

table, a few long cold butts stubbed out inside. She contemplated sitting at the table, or back on Winchester's porch, and just waiting for the man to reappear. She might trade something for one of those apples the guard had. But she also knew he couldn't affect the plant from his house, and that he might be off working towards something more dangerous. She lifted the latch for the gate and let herself into the dark tunnel. More lanterns glowed inside, strung up like others, hanging from pegs in the wall. Their yellow light seemed brighter in the close walls, the low ceiling of the tunnel.

Eventually she found herself at a fork. One path seemed to lead up, the other deeper in the earth. They both looked natural as opposed to sections of the path which had been drilled or dug by hand through the earth, through the rock. Neither path was marked in any way.

“Well, shit.” She wondered if she should flip a coin. Instead she leaned against the rock wall, felt the moisture seeping through her jumpsuit to cool her skin, and tried to think logically. If Winchester was off performing more mischief that would affect the plant, he would need to get close to it, suggesting the tunnel leading up would be the choice. She didn't know what he would be doing deeper in the ground, but also knew if she had the opportunity to find out what devilry he'd done to stop the plant altogether, she ought to take it, whether she'd find him or not. She chose left, the tunnel leading up, and stood up from against the wall hoping she'd made the right decision.

Above Polly the path winded, turning in on itself again and again like a staircase, as it led towards the surface. She would find the path came above ground not outside the walls of Orchard Park as she suspected, but into the middle of Cahoon Park. A cave could be found there, once used as shelter for picnicking families and teenagers looking for a little privacy, but

now home to hundreds of coyotes, sleeping together in a pile like rats. Coyotes who, now that the sun was dropping down below the mountains to the west, below the horizon, started to stir.

#

Gerry stood under the parking lot's spotlight and took a shallow, tentative breath of the city. He smelled garbage, the stink of decay, and the sickly sweet bloom of the blood maples growing up between the cracks in the pavement. His eyes didn't burn, his nose didn't itch, he didn't feel sick. None of the things he had been told to expect would happen if he took off his mask touched him at all. The evening felt warm so he unbuttoned his jumpsuit and pulled off his gloves. He wanted to laugh as he stuffed them into his bag next to his mask.

So much of the city might be explained by that simple lie: the air was still good. Or good again, he thought, he wasn't sure how deep the deception went. It might be possible that the air had never been irradiated in Orchard Park. He felt heady as he looked around the lot, drunk with surprise and sudden fear of the company for whom he worked.

Winchester surprised him by handing out his pistol.

"A measure of trust."

"That's one word for it," Gerry said. He ejected the magazine and found it was still full. He slid the pistol into his holster with the safety catch on. Another word, he thought, would be "stupidity."

"Now what?"

"Now follow me. And keep quiet."

Winchester walked north along Washington Street and Gerry followed. Walking the streets without a mask felt foreign, like walking a completely different city. His vision was liberated and he took the opportunity to watch the corners and alleyways they passed, looking for

coyotes he still didn't quite believe in. Without a mask, he began questioning so many of Polly's warnings, remembering the time and care she had taken to wrap her hair in a bandanna so it would fit snug under her own needless mask. He admitted that Polly could have been fooled, too, that she had believed all the lies WCT had spun in order to keep people away from their power plant.

The easiest way to spot a cover-up, he had learned, lay in the motive. WCT, under threat of nationalization, might have wanted an excuse to separate the city from the rest of the country, to literally put up walls around it to keep everyone but personnel under their control out. It still wasn't enough to be believable, he thought. His head seemed clearer now, so far away from the chair, clear in the night above. His thoughts felt sharper than they'd ever been.

A part of him spoke up as they crossed another empty street. That part probed everything he'd read about radiation for information about the effects of walking irradiated areas without protection. It wasn't a plethora of information, but he couldn't shake the idea that he could still be in danger. Maybe Winchester was just a lunatic, luring him into a slow, painful death. He slowed as he tried to calm his breathing, chastising himself for believing Winchester so blindly, and letting the survivor draw out the distance between them.

Gerry pulled the mask out of his bag and slipped it over his face, a quick practiced motion. He tightened the straps and pulled his gloves on, too. When Winchester turned around to see why Gerry had fallen behind, he had a pistol trained on him once again.

"Second thoughts, Gerry?" His voice was a whisper.

"Tell me where we're going," Gerry said, matching Winchester's volume.

"I already told you. We're going deep underground, under the city, so you can assist with my project. What's going on? I thought you were on board."

“A moment of clarity. I decided 'better safe than sorry' ought to be my mantra at the moment.”

Winchester nodded and said, “Fair enough. Keep it on if it makes you feel better. There's a school up ahead. From there we can get into the caverns and then down to our camp.”

“And if I changed my mind?”

Winchester's face remained blank. She stepped closer—Gerry shifted so his other hand supported his pistol, still aiming at the survivor's chest.

“As you said, Gerry,” he said, taking another step closer, “I've risked too much already.” Before Gerry could react, Winchester placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled. A piercing, call that echoed between the buildings and up into the sky.

Gerry renewed his grip on the pistol and waited. In the distance another call sounded—the low mournful cry of a coyote. From another part of the city another cry, and then another much closer.

“You can run with me,” Winchester yelled. “They'll be on us soon enough. You can run with me or you can run alone.” He pulled a short pistol out of his jumpsuit pocket, a black revolver with a snubbed nose, and set off up the street, in the direction they had been walking. More calls sounded, louder than before.

In the seconds after Winchester's offer, Gerry remembered he'd locked the doors to the dentists' offices. It would take time to open them, time to find the right key, time he judged by how close the cries sounded he didn't have. His heart racing, his hands shaking, he took off after Winchester, towards the school which promised safety. As he ran he ripped the mask off his face so he could breathe easier and stuffed it into the bag swinging at his side.

His sneakers gripped the asphalt in the middle of the road, but soot and grit had gathered over the years near the curbs, creating slick areas he couldn't always see in the light of the street lamps. Up ahead he heard a snarl, and saw Winchester lift his arm, pointing his revolver into an alley. The shot exploded in the quiet street and for a fraction of a second Gerry saw the man's face illuminated in the flash.

Later, he would remember Winchester's face as blank in the moment he shot the coyote, though his glance was quick. That blank face, not the smile of a sadist or the stuff jaw of a survivor, but a face that showed nothing. A face that shot an animal, something alive, and felt nothing.

Barking accompanied the howls. Gerry followed in Winchester's wake, slowly gaining ground on the older, slower man. Soon they were running only a few paces behind each other, treading in the same steps. Gerry risked a glance behind them and saw eyes glowing in the darkness, low black bodies in the street light darting after them thirty or forty yards away. He drew back the slide of his pistol and pressed the safety catch, turning it off.

"There!" Winchester pointed to a building at the next corner, a three story brick facade with a sign Gerry couldn't read over the front doors. The entrance stood a few steps higher than the street on a small landing. They leapt up the stairs and slammed into the doors, which didn't budge against them.

Gerry turned towards the street and saw coyotes, a whole pack, too many to count in the dark, racing towards them. They barked and cried *en masse*, snapping and fighting with each other even as they ran. Gerry leveled his pistol, leading one of the coyotes in the front, but felt a tug on his shoulder. Winchester pulled him inside the door, which he had pulled open instead of pushed, and then slammed it closed.

“The locks!” he said, stomping on the bar which slid into place in the floor. Gerry locked the other door the same way, and pressed similar locks at the top of the door up into tracks in the wall. The doors shuddered as bodies slammed into them on the other side. He could hear coyotes on the other side scratching, barking, snarling.

“Will they hold?”

“Haven't failed yet.” Both men stood doubled over, listening to the howling and scratching on the other side of the door. Gerry couldn't seem to catch his breath, pressed the safety again and slid his pistol back into the holster—his hands shook so badly he was afraid of shooting himself in the foot. He also didn't want any further temptation to shoot Winchester.

“You have a real funny way,” Gerry said, still panting, “of talking people into things.”

“It worked, didn't it?” Winchester panted too, and ran both hands through his hair.

“I'm gonna guess you didn't hear the word 'no' a whole lot as a kid.”

Winchester laughed and slapped Gerry on the shoulder. “You better start having some fun, kid. This job will kill you if you let it.”

When they could breathe standing up, Winchester led him through the school, never having to second guess a turn or look for a landmark. They walked along empty halls, past dusty classrooms, past open lockers with books and coats inside. Garbage and torn sheets of paper littered the ground, showed muddy prints from other visitors. All the clocks sticking out from the walls had stopped years before. Out of habit Gerry checked his wrist, found his compass in place of his watch.

Their path took them into the school's basement and through a door whose lock had been smashed in. They weeded through pipes in the boiler room, down a narrow brick hallway lit from above with bare red bulbs. Winchester in the lead seemed to disappear before Gerry's eyes

as he turned, into the wall itself, through a jagged hole. Gerry found the survivor in a small alcove dug out from solid dirt. In the floor of the alcove a hatch stood open and waiting for them. Gerry peeked down and saw a ladder leading down into darkness. Until then he hadn't really understood what "underground" had meant in terms of where the survivors lived.

"Have a flashlight in that bag?"

Gerry pulled it out and shone the beam down into the hatch. Brick walls, curved slightly, and a solid floor.

Winchester dropped down first, Gerry after, onto the floor of a tunnel. Gerry searched around with his flashlight but couldn't find any sign or marker that would suggest what the tunnel was. A shallow trench made up the floor, but there were no tracks for a train. He couldn't see any pipes or thick cords for power lines.

"What is this?" He hated being confused, hating having to ask to gain information he felt ought to be obvious.

"Old sewer system. Dry now, thankfully, that the city is empty. We can get down to the caverns ahead, not too far."

They followed the trench. Gerry handed over the flashlight and let Winchester walk in front. The pipes he had looked for sprang from the ceiling after a few yards and ran above them and beside them along the walls and ceiling. The air tasted musty, wet, but held no foul odor. Wherever the station's sewers let out was apparently far away—the walls and floor looked wet but from condensation, not waste. Their footsteps echoed and he heard the sound of dripping water but couldn't locate the source. He imagined their path sloped down, just enough that he could tell a difference at all, but he couldn't be sure. His pulse was only just starting to return to

normal. He strained his ears, listening for padded feet on the brick, for the scrape of nails, for snarls and barks and howls. His hand lingered at his holster.

Though the tunnel turned this way and that as they walked no lights appeared, no lanterns, no bulbs. Gerry's flashlight beam stayed the only illumination.

“How did you manage this in the dark?”

“I didn't come up this way.”

Gerry rolled his eyes. Every answer he could get from Winchester seemed designed to illicit more questions. He decided he would give up asking. He wouldn't learn anything from Winchester's words he couldn't learn by quietly paying attention.

The tunnel turned again and began to fall more steeply, steep enough that Gerry's sneakers lost traction on the wet brick. The curved walls before them grew clearer in the darkness as the first light, a lantern glowing at the end of a cable, appeared. It had been set on the ground, its cord leading off down the tunnel to another lamp, the second one broken, dark. As they passed it Winchester bend down and fiddled with the cable, with the lantern itself, until it glowed the same yellow as the other. A few dozen paces later they came on another lamp. Still the tunnel descended.

The lanterns appeared more regularly, prolific enough that Gerry was able to switch off his flashlight altogether. A sound, faint at first but growing louder, blurred their footsteps until it was all they could hear—a buzzing, like static on an old TV set. The light grew brighter as the tunnel ended at a well.

Below them, draining in the center of the well a whirlpool spun; above them a fall of water, a steady stream of runoff. Gerry guessed it might be the remains of the creek beside which the city had been founded when the state was still a colony. Perhaps simply water running

from the hills above into the valley, the same underground source which had, over eons, carved the rock into caverns where the survivors lived. The well, brick like the rest of the sewers, roared with the falling water. They looked out over the pool from their perch, partway up the well, from where their dry tunnel met the room.

Winchester crouched down and stepped off the edge of their tunnel. Another ladder, this one made up of foot-holes in the brick, led them down to the edge of the pool where Gerry's sneakers slipped, splashed, and soaked through.

“Oh, yes,” he said, shaking his soaking foot. “No, I can see why you'd want to live down here. No dry land, no sunburn.”

“Someday,” Winchester said. He edged along the wall they had climbed down towards another ragged hole in the brick, a passage glowing with lamp light.

“Someday. When the guards on the wall leave?”

“When Wright Corp. stops pretending we don't exist.”

“I'm not sure I understand.”

“You don't have to. Only enough to help us.”

Gerry closed his eyes to keep from rolling them again. He knew he could find the school again, knew he could find this tunnel, follow it to the well. He didn't know how complicated the path that lay ahead would be, but knew if he could remember it, map it out, WCT could rid themselves of their difficulty. He was tired of Winchester, tired of running from coyotes, tired of walking. He wanted to get back to his bunk, back to the job he had signed up for. If the survivors were out of the way, or silenced, he'd have time to explore the city, time to explore the computer terminal and its operating system.

Winchester had proven himself a problem. He didn't know about the other survivors yet but he couldn't imagine all of them behaving like the green eyed man beside him, willing to leave half the country without power to prove a point.

He followed Winchester into the passage, following the yellow light. They passed other, smaller tunnels that branched off but continued down one larger, well-worn burrow.

“How did a guy like you get elected leader of anything?” Gerry didn't know why he asked. He intended to keep the question inside but it fell out, one glass too many between his hands. Maybe Polly was starting to rub off on him, he thought.

Winchester took so long to answer Gerry held out hope that he hadn't been heard. “It helps if you run unopposed. The camp, as much as I love them like family, are stuck with same mentality from twenty years ago—this idea that a community can self-govern, can take care of itself without a leader.”

“Socialism.”

“Worse than that. At least the trains run on time, or whatever, right? No, at the camp nothing ever happens because nothing can be agreed upon in the first place. Do you know how long it took before we recycled our waste? We were still just digging holes and burying our dead five years ago.”

Winchester grew more animated as he spoke and the passage rang with his words, bouncing off the walls until it could have been a whole group of people arguing. Gerry took it in, the man speaking largely to himself, ignoring the volume of his voice as it echoed. A monstrous sight. Madness encapsulated in a man gesturing to himself, walking alone before him. The lamps reflected off of dirt and solid rock, light that seemed to seep into the survivor's eyes, burning there like the eyes of a feral animal.

They continued on, their path falling deeper into the earth. A cave opened before them the size the living room in Gerry's Beachwood house. The cave lay empty, a string of lanterns continuing on through a low passage in the rock through which a bus could have only just driven through. The ground sloped steeply and both men braced themselves with their hands as they slipped down. They met a cave one hundred times the size of the other, a cave dwarfing anything Gerry had ever seen.

Above Gerry, almost covering the passage they had walked down, a formation hung like a curtain of stone icicles. A pool in the distance reflected the pointed formations in the ceiling so that they seemed to meet their perfect twins on the floor below, making a stone mouth of jagged, rust colored teeth. He could see a path leading down into the cavern, marked and lit by yellow lanterns. He tried to follow Winchester but he caught a glimpse of the cave roof thirty feet above, disappearing into darkness, and he passed a row of perfectly even conic deposits, and a shelf carved into the rock the right size for a body to rest. He had to stop and stare.

Here was adventure. He felt like those heroes in his books who carried torches through pyramids, leaped over the mouths of active volcanoes, walked deep underground in search of buried treasure or to invade a villain's hideout. For the first time, he felt his new job was living up to the hype.

"They should put this place on the goddamn brochures," he said, speaking aloud to himself again. A picture of this one cave, for there seemed to be more leading off of it down the lanterned path, would definitely increase applications to WCT, he thought. The irony, he knew, was that the company didn't know: these people, their camp, their paths through the caverns. He started to point out another curtain formation, a frozen waterfall of stone, but realized he was

alone. Winchester had continued down the path and left him staring around on his own. He hurried to catch up.