

DEEP END



SUPERNOVA EMP SERIES BOOK TWO
GRACE HAMILTON

SUPERNOVA EMP

Dark End

Deep End

Bitter End

Final End

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

RELAY PUBLISHING EDITION, APRIL 2020
Copyright © 2020 Relay Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. Published in the United Kingdom by Relay Publishing. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Grace Hamilton is a pen name created by Relay Publishing for co-authored Post-Apocalyptic projects. Relay Publishing works with incredible teams of writers and editors to collaboratively create the very best stories for our readers.

www.relaypub.com



DEEP END

SUPERNOVA EMP SERIES BOOK TWO

BLURB

They'll either find salvation or face damnation.

Screams of agony. Cries of terror. The sounds of a dying civilization echo all around Josh Standing as he navigates the aftermath of this new post-apocalyptic world. All traces of modern advancements have been wiped away by the supernova EMP when he washes ashore on the Georgia coast.

Alone.

And when a psychotic gang takes Josh prisoner, he's torn between grief and gratitude that his daughter isn't discovered nearby. Josh swore long ago to serve and protect—and he desperately wants to help the other prisoners—but his daughter needs him, too. If she's still alive.

Circumstances are only slightly better for Josh's wife Maxine and their cancer-stricken son as they settle at the family farm in West Virginia. There, they discover Maxine's beloved mother has been heavily effected with the aftereffects of the supernova, and her battle-hardened father struggling to keep the family together. Even worse, a local militia is targeting the farm for its resources, which causes further dissention in the family over how to handle the attacks.

When the dust from the firefights settle, the choice between duty and family will be the difference in who is left standing.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[End of Deep End](#)

[Thank you!](#)

[About Grace Hamilton](#)

[Sneak Peek: Bitter End](#)

[Also By Grace Hamilton](#)

Josh put up his hands.

Whatever the man behind him said next was whipped away by the surf crashing against the black rocks where the lifeboat had been wrecked.

Shoved squarely in the middle of his back, Josh pitched forward to sprawl in the sand.

"I said, *who* are you?"

The voice's accent suggested the owner of it was American, at least. It still didn't tell Josh where the *Sea-Hawk's* lifeboat had been smashed to pieces, but it was a fair assumption they hadn't made landfall thousands of miles from their launch point in North Carolina.

"I didn't hear you ask. The waves."

Josh was cuffed around the back of the head hard. "You heard it the second time. Who are you?"

Josh lifted his chin out of the sand. "Josh Standing."

"And what are you doing on our beach, Josh Standing?"

"We were wrecked here."

“We?”

“My daughter, Tally, and our friend, Poppet. We were thrown off our ship into the lifeboat. The currents caught us and the boat was smashed to pieces. Have you seen my daughter?”

Josh was cuffed hard by the hand again, then grabbed by the material of his sodden shirt. “Just answer the questions until you’re given permission to do otherwise.”

The man yanked Josh up onto his knees. Josh looked sideways. The man was blond-haired, in a checkered shirt and jeans. He was perhaps in his late twenties, and a straggly beard made a fair attempt at covering his jaw. He held a snubby Colt Cobra—the same make and model Josh had bought for his wife, Maxine, to hide in a lockbox beside their bed for protection when he worked nights. Back when he’d been a cop. Back before Cody Zem. Back before he and Maxine had drifted apart. Back before his son, Storm—or Tic-tac as he was sometimes called—had gotten sick with cancer.

And back before he’d lost Tally.

“I need to find my daughter. I didn’t see her get out of the water. I was knocked unconscious. Please. I’m unarmed, I’m half drowned, and I have no idea where I am. Please. Let me find my daughter.”

Checkshirt slapped Josh’s cheek with his free hand and his eyes blazed. Josh couldn’t tell if it was with inherent badness or whether Checkshirt was another victim of Supernova Supercharge, but he was definitely on a hair trigger in his head, and Josh hoped that didn’t extend to the Cobra.

“Get up. Don’t give me any excuse to shoot you.”

Josh got up. He was a full head taller than Checkshirt, and even though the man was younger, Josh reckoned he could take him down in a one-on-one.

“Can I put my hands down? Please?”

Checkshirt leveled the Cobra, but nodded. "Steve!" he bellowed over his shoulder. "Got a live one!"

From over a grassy dune ahead, a figure came into view and then stomped down through the sand. Steve was African American, mid-thirties, and wearing a Dodgers T-Shirt that did nothing to conceal his physical size. A black Heckler & Koch swung barrel-down from his shoulder, and there was a thick-bladed Bowie in a sheath on his belt.

Josh could take down Checkshirt in a fair fight. Steve was a whole other ball game entirely.

"Graves and Stillson have taken the Vancouver 28 out. Should catch up with the ship in an hour or so. Whoever's piloting, it looks like they don't really know what they're doing," Steve finished, looking Josh up and down, seemingly appraising his threat level in much the same way Josh had done with him.

"You're going after the *Sea-Hawk*? You saw it?"

"We see everything along this coastline," Checkshirt offered uncharacteristically, and then addressed Steve. "He's looking for his daughter and another woman. Anyone found them?"

Steve shrugged. "No one's reported back that they have. Maybe they'll wash up dead later."

The words cut through Josh like razors. There was a nanosecond where he thought about making a break for it, but he was shoeless on a wide-open beach up against two armed men. He wouldn't get ten feet.

"Please. Help me."

Checkshirt laughed. "Help you? Dude, you're the one who's going to be helping us. Move out!"



Josh was handcuffed by Steve, and Checkshirt, who Steve called Harve, marched him away from the surf, the rocks, and any clue as to where Tally might be.

Harve as a name suggested a middle-aged character from a garbage sitcom Josh might have watched on cable when he was growing up. A paunchy racist guy with questionable hygiene and no girlfriend. No threat at all.

But this Harve was anything but. If you cut him in half, he'd have danger written all the way through—not a physical danger, but the danger that comes when morality is subtracted from intelligence. Josh got the impression Harve was as sharp as the knife he'd happily stab him with.

They trudged up the dunes, through the rough scrub, and came to a flat, windswept area of land that stretched to the horizon. There was a stony track, and four horses being watched over by a young man with raven-black hair tied back in a ponytail. Two of the horses were hitched to a rickety-looking market wagon, and the other two were saddled.

Harve pushed Josh on towards the wagon.

"Where are you taking me?"

"That depends on your level of cooperation, buddy," Harve said without any tone in his voice that suggested he felt Josh was his buddy. "You do as you're told, and we take you back to the camp to meet Trace. If not, we put you in a grave."

Steve climbed up onto the wagon seat, and Ponytail sat himself in the saddle of the nearest horse. When Harve had secured Josh in leg irons in the back of the wagon and padlocked the chains to a riveted rail, he patted Josh's cheek. "Now, you be a good boy and I promise not to kill you slowly." Harve grinned at something he obviously thought was a hilarious line and then got up onto the saddle of the last horse.

"Do it!" he called to the others, and the horses headed off down the track.

"Anything from the others, Jackdaw?"

Ponytail shook his head. "Last I saw was them heading towards Maiden's Point. Carly was bitchin' about having to go down through the rocks. You know Carly. Always bitchin' 'bout something."

Josh heard Harve sigh like he knew all too well what Carly was like.

"Can I ask a question?" Josh ventured when the party had settled down to a silence that was as stony as the track they were heading across.

"If you must," Harve said, not looking back.

"I've been out at sea for a number of weeks. This is the first time I've seen land since the supernova. Catch me up?"

Barnard's Star, light years away, had exploded—the effects of which had taken just a little over six years to hit the solar system, and the consequences of that extrasolar event had hit the Earth harder than a baseball bat in the teeth. All the electronics on the *Sea-Hawk* had gone down, and a number of the crew had turned into insane murderers.

As a probation officer and ex-cop who'd been taking a group of ten probationers on a team-building adventure, Josh had gotten a lot more adventure than expected.

His nineteen-year-old daughter, Tally, had reluctantly come along when she'd rather have been at home partying or up in the mountains climbing. To further complicate matters, his son, Storm, and near-estranged wife, Maxine, had been in Boston. Storm had just finished his last round of chemotherapy and had been on the satellite phone when the first wave of madness had hit. In the last few weeks, Josh had lost emotional contact with his wife, and then physical contact with his son and now his daughter.

It felt like his whole life had slipped through his grasp.

“World’s gone crazy,” Steve said, reining the horses forwards into the teeth of a stiffening breeze. The wind was bringing dark smudges of clouds which, promised a needling rain if they didn’t make it to shelter soon.

Harve didn’t look pleased that Steve had talked to Josh, but he didn’t say anything, just shook his head slightly. Steve faced forward and seemed to not be bothered that what he’d done had rankled Harve.

Josh could see these men were an uneasy band—if they’d been thrown together since the Barnard’s Star event in tumultuous circumstances that in any way mirrored what he’d lived through on the *Sea-Hawk*, then the tension between them was understandable. Being chained up in the back of the wagon meant there was very little Josh could do to take advantage of their non-cohesiveness, but his grasp of situational awareness told him to bank the information for now. He might be able to use it to better his lot sometime in the future.

“So, what’s the situation here?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Jackdaw commented.

“I do. But please, the more I know, the more chance I have of finding my daughter.”

Harve laughed then. “Where you’re going, your life expectancy will be what you’ll be concerned with more, not where your daughter is. If she’s dead already, she’s in a better place than you.”

Josh had no idea what Harve meant, but the laugh, all hollow and void of humor, chilled him sufficiently to still his tongue. There was no way out of the leg irons, and he was a passenger to wherever these men were taking him, so there was no point wasting energy on Harve and the others. Energies he would need, should opportunities to escape presented themselves.

Well, at least I hope they do...



The spit of sandy scrub where Josh and the others had washed up turned, after an hour or so, into open grassland. This landscape was cut by a single strip of blacktop looking like it came *from* and was going *to* nowhere.

No signage appeared along the route to give Josh any clue where he was. The rain stayed off, but the air had little warmth. The clouds scudded busily overhead, and the tussocked grass to either side of the road sighed and rustled in the wind.

Josh's three captors said hardly a word to each other. Their faces remained set and stony. Perhaps they were concerned about what might happen when they got to wherever they were going, and the reaction of this person called 'Trace' who Harve had said he was taking Josh to see. There was certainly something more in the atmosphere surrounding the two men that suggested their silence wasn't just about the personal tensions between them, not even in the apocalyptic situation they'd found themselves in.

This didn't bode well, and as the horses clip-clopped on and rain began to fall, Josh felt even more disconnected from the beach, Tally, and Poppet. Since the supernova and its effects on those around him, Josh had found in his more reflective moments—which had been few and far between—that a sense of dread and anxiety had crept up on him. He would never have described himself as an anxious guy or susceptible to sad thoughts before the supernova, but where some of the crew and probationers on the *Sea-Hawk* had become murderous and overly aggressive, Josh knew he'd been changed, as well. As if there wasn't enough going on for him to deal with on the outside; he didn't look forward to having to battle any internal demons focused and enhanced by whatever had hit the Earth.

Josh shook his head and held his face up to the rain, trying to use its cleansing sting to wash away those black thoughts bubbling up from his mind. He needed to be at his best if he was going to get out of this, and letting that dreadful tide rise within him wouldn't be helpful.

As the rain eased, Steve and Harve looked back sharply when they heard drumming hoofbeats on the road. Josh opened his eyes from where he'd been concentrating on squashing the negativity back down to see a horse and rider almost upon them.

The rider was burly, with wild black curls of hair framing a bearded face. As he approached, Josh saw the face was ruddy and the lips thin, with a chin that jutted with self-importance.

Harve turned his mount around to face the newcomer as he pulled his horse to a stop. "Where's Leif, Carly? What's the deal?"

Josh noted again that Carly—the one Jackdaw had described as always *bitchin'*—was indeed someone who oozed attitude.

Carly reported back with barely disguised contempt for Harve's apparent position of authority. "Back at Maiden's Point. I'm heading to camp to get some ropes. We found someone trapped in the rocks. Got themselves wedged in and can't get out on their own. Need some ropes and tackle."

Harve rolled his eyes. "Why are you bothering? We don't have time for this."

"Harve, you might enjoy casual sadism, but I ain't leaving a woman to die in the rocks. That might be your way, but it ain't mine."

And with that, Carly kicked his horse forward and was off. Harve shouted after him to come back, but Carly was gone, clattering across the tarmac like someone's life depended on it.

Josh's heart was clattering like Carly's horse.

A woman? Trapped in the rocks?

All he could think of was Tally, washed up, regaining consciousness, and trying to use her climbing skills to get herself out of the water over the savage black rocks. Tally was an excellent climber and free-runner, but if the fatigue and exhaustion Josh felt were in any way replicated in his daughter, then perhaps she'd slipped... made a mistake and gotten herself stuck.

Josh thanked whoever was looking over them right now that it had been Carly and not Harve who had found her, because it seemed Harve wouldn't have bothered to rescue her. He'd have left her to die.

The party moved forward in silence, the tension still lingering, with Josh feeling that Steve and Jackdaw were trying not to exacerbate Harve's anger by discussing Carly's behavior with him.

But Josh couldn't help clinging onto the first new leaf of hope in the forest of his dread. He looked back with unalloyed hunger at the route they had traveled, across the windswept landscape, back towards the sea through the pitter of rain, willing Tally to be okay—to be saved.

When Carly came back past them again at a near gallop, he didn't even bother to stop and speak to Harve and the others. There were two other riders with him, both with their faces down in the rain, hats jammed onto their heads, ropes and gear slung over their shoulders. The Stetsons blackened with rain, their coats slick with it, and the sudden clatter of hooves all spoke of another time, and another place. As if Josh was looking back down through a tunnel of time to a past where America had been a lawless and dangerous place. The black silhouettes of the riders haring off into the distance like a posse in pursuit of a fugitive, or a gang fleeing from justice, brought home to Josh in one hard hit the uncompromising truth that, while he had been at sea, the country he had known had been upended, and its treasure scattered like garbage.

And his first encounter with this new world had seen him lose everything dear to him, and end up in irons in the grip of a fresh

tyranny he could only guess the extent of.

He had no idea what he would find at the camp he was being transported to, or who this *'Trace'* would turn out to be, or what awaited him after the cryptic *'You'll be the one helping us'* line from Harve, but the doom-laden hollow in his gut was nothing compared to what he felt when the party turned off the track, beginning a descent along a bumpy, unpaved track down into a deepening trough between grassy banks, and what he saw above him.

If the chill of the afternoon rain and the strained atmosphere of the men around him hadn't been enough to extinguish the one spark of hope he had of Tally being rescued, then the ten, black and bloated bodies, hung from gibbets by the side of the road and swinging in the wind, snuffed it out of him forever.

Maxine's mom, Maria, hadn't stopped screaming or kicking the walls of her room all night.

The seething rage emanating from the upstairs of the ranch house came in stark contrast to the surreal attempt at normality below.

Maxine's dad, Donald, had given them soup from cans and coffee brewed in the grate of the wood-burning stove. Storm's eyes had kept flicking to the ranch house ceiling as they ate, the sounds from above shifting from screams to wails to chattering obscenities. Maxine wanted more than anything to go up to the room and comfort her mother, to see if there was anything she could do to help, but Donald had forbidden her with one stiffly raised hand.

"She'll kill you when she's like this. We just have to wait. I can't even get near her right now. In the morning, she'll have exhausted herself, and she'll sleep for a few hours. After that, I can get in, clean her up, and give her some food."

Her dad's face was more lined and creased since the last time Maxine had seen him a little over a year ago. Back then, he'd been a well-appointed seventy-year-old rancher. Hair white but still bountiful, strong-armed and sure of foot. He'd had to be in order to work his two hundred head of cattle micro-ranch on the outskirts of Pickford, West Virginia, for nearly fifty years. Donald was what in the past

would have been described as a “man’s man.” He liked to yarn with his buddies on the front porch, drink beer, work hard, and carry himself with proud and steely morality. He liked Johnny Cash and sour mash whiskey, and was himself tall and broad as an oak.

However, since the supernova had hit, and the effect it had had not only on the people of West Virginia, the population of the nearest town, and, specifically, on the woman he loved, Donald’s tree trunk frame had gotten the look of a hollowed-out canoe. He was still afloat, but he didn’t look like he’d survive a trip through many more rapids.

Maxine noticed a considerable slowdown in his movements, his mouth pursed with thin lips, his red-rimmed eyes downcast... and he was prone to deep, resonant sighs that either he didn’t realize he was emitting, or he didn’t care who heard them.

Maxine had never seen her dad appear so tired and worn... until now.

Looking at Donald and Storm side by side at the table made them seem like they were on the same point in their personal continuum, too—pale, exhausted, and seemingly tiny in their chairs.

“We can’t leave her like that,” Maxine said softly as Donald ate two mouthfuls of soup before pushing his can aside.

“I haven’t left her, Maxine. You think I haven’t tried to help her?”

“No, I’m not saying that—but she needs to take something to calm her down maybe...”

“She’ll bite off your fingers.”

Donald held up his hand, and she saw there was a ring of scabs over a healing bite wound in across the palm.

Maxine looked at the brown crusts with wide eyes. It would have been a shocking enough sight at the best of times, but to find out that her mother had done that to her father....

"She musta heard you arriving, and it got her riled up. Don't worry, she can't hurt herself up there; there's nothing sharp or dangerous in the room. I have the situation under control, but you hafta trust me, Maxine. You have to let me deal with her in my own way."

"She's not one of your animals, Dad. You can't just keep her locked up and feed and water her when necessary. She's my mom," Maxine choked out.

Donald's eyes flicked up. They weren't exactly full of tears—of course, Maxine had never seen her father cry. Indeed, if you looked up *stoic* in the dictionary, there would be a picture of Donald next to it—but there was at least a mistiness to the orbs which suggested normally unused emotions were bubbling to the surface.

"I know she's not one of the animals. But please do me the credit of knowing I'm looking after my wife in the best way I know how, and I'll thank you not to interfere."

There couldn't be silence, not with the sounds of distress coming from upstairs, echoing through the house and hacking at their hearts, but the voices around the table fell silent for a while, until Storm, looking from Donald to Maxine, then back to his grandfather, asked how the farm was adjusting since the supernova.

Donald looked like he was relieved to have something else to talk about, and Maxine felt a little of the tension drain out of the room. "Well, there never was much money to get us started on a huge agribusiness. We keep things traditional here. *Organic*, the hipsters might call it." Donald smiled and winked at Storm. "You a hipster, boy?"

Storm shrugged. "Second gen millennial, Gramps—if you're gonna start handing out labels. You'll need water wings if you're gonna use words like *hipster*; that's so ten years ago that its voice has broken and it's about to start getting interested in girls."

Donald laughed, and ran his hand through the peach fuzz of hair on Storm's head, where hair was gamely trying to grow back after the chemotherapy he'd received for his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The illness that had taken Maxine to Boston for treatment in her college friend's clinic. "Still giving as good as you got, boy. That's good to know. We'll make a farmer of you yet."

Storm didn't look like that was the career path he'd be choosing, even if his admin position at Morehead Mercy Hospital, where Maxine was a wound care specialist, hadn't been destroyed by the supernova.

"Boy, you can look like that as much as you like. But you've seen the way America—and maybe the world—is right now, and it's not the gunman or the scientist or the politician who's going to get the world back on its feet. It's the farmer. We're gonna need farmers more than we're gonna need bullets."

"You think the situation is going to recover, Dad?" Maxine asked, feeling a chill for the first time even though there was a good fire burning in the grate.

Maxine's mother sounded like she was stomping her foot down on the floor above them, rhythmic and incessant. One beat every three seconds.

Donald's shoulders hunched, as if the beats were being made against his own spine. "I don't know how we get back from this, Maxine. No idea at all. There's been no radio or TV since that night. There's been no authority swinging by to see if we're okay, or to even take a census. None of my neighbors have heard anything at all. We're in the dark. Even after the worst natural disaster, you'd think things would be getting fixed up by now. No one's seen FEMA, the police, the National Guard, or the Army. Not even the Red Cross. Did you see anything on your way here?"

"There were some troops back in Cumberland, but they didn't look like regulars. I think they were operating for themselves because

they had the guns and the equipment to be able to do so. I don't think there was anything like a normal chain of command they were following," Maxine said, thinking back to her run-in with General Carron in the Cumberland Community Medical Center. If she hadn't fought like a wildcat in a cage to get away from them, then she wouldn't have been here to tell the tale. She'd escaped on her way to being shot for looting in the parking lot. That didn't sound like the kind of authority she'd want to be under any time soon. She didn't elaborate for her dad or for Storm, though—she didn't want to depress them any more than they already were, so she tried to block the noise from above out, however much she ached to see her mother. She concentrated on the practical... for now.

"Surely, it's impossible for us to make the ranch work—just the three of us? We'll need help. More hands."

The M-Bar Ranch had been a lot bigger when Maxine had grown up there, but as time had passed and her parents had gotten older, they'd sold off parcels of land to surrounding farmsteads in order to consolidate and make the small business more manageable. But even at forty acres of pasture and rotating crops, the M-Bar wasn't an easy proposition. And especially now that all of the systems and businesses that fed into it had disappeared overnight. It seemed too daunting. Plus, Donald had always wanted to do most of the work himself, and wasn't one for delegating to farmhands and the like. "*I like to get my hands dirty,*" he would say when she'd been growing up. "*If I have the breath, I can do the work.*"

Donald nodded. "It's not going to be easy, that's for sure, but I've been getting by. I have seed to sow for next year's pasture. As well as the Black Angus, I have chickens, some hogs, and last year we took on a small flock of sheep. It's not much, but it's a start. We can talk to neighbors. See what we can consolidate. Gram Tinkerman has a plow we can use with a team of horses. When Maria had calmed, before you came, I was about to go over to his place and talk about working out a plan. He doesn't have beef, and I know he's low on seed. We can work this out. And you're right, we're going to need a

few hands. But for bed, grub, and lodging, I think we can persuade some people to join up with us."

Donald, it seemed, had done a lot of thinking since the supernova. He continued, "The bulls did their thing with the ladies, and we're going to have calves soon who'll do well on the pasture we've got already. The creek is still fresh, and there's good fishing there."

Maxine admired Donald's ambition, even if there were so many variables to consider. His attitude was comforting, too, but she couldn't help wondering if his optimism was misplaced. "Not everyone is going to play ball, Dad. We've seen quite a bit of fighting on the way here. Once resources get scarce, there are going to be bad guys as well as good guys."

Donald nodded slowly. "We can defend this farm if we need to. I'm not afraid to stand up and be counted on that score."

Maxine's eyes settled on the picture of Donald in his fatigues on the wall. A young man who'd gone to Vietnam and come back, like so many others, changed and hardened. A man who had been a corpsman, a combat medic equivalent in the Marine Corps, and had seen and been part of many battles. He'd been with the Corp when Saigon had fallen in April 1975, taking part in the largest helicopter evacuation in history. Then he'd come back to West Virginia to work his father's farm, marry Maria, and start a family. She knew when he said he'd stand up and be counted just how much of that was the truth, and how far he would go to carry out that promise. He'd already stood up and been counted in one hellish situation, and post-supernova America might prove to be a different but as intense kind of hell for them all to stand up to.

She was suddenly washed by the coldness of being without Tally, and to a lesser extent Josh. Although Tally hadn't been far from Maxine's thoughts on the dangerous journey from Boston to the M-Bar Ranch in West Virginia, Maxine had been focused on keeping one child and herself alive, and it had only been when circumstances had

allowed that she let herself think of the perilous plight of her daughter and husband.

Tally was a strong and healthy nineteen-year-old, in college and wanting to go on to study law. She was a badass runner, climber, alternative sports nut who lived it to the max, and when she wasn't studying with her head in a book, she could be found monkey-vaulting over street furniture, back-flipping off a brick wall, or dangling five hundred feet over a sheer drop from a 'binered cam on fingertips covered in magnesium carbonate.

Maxine knew Tally had the smarts and abilities to survive, and as she was on a ship with Josh, that she would at least have a responsible parent by her side. Whatever Maxine's diminishing feelings towards her husband were—as of late and more times than not, she'd thought about leaving him to his job and his focus outside the family unit—she knew the man would keep Tally safe.

But the weeks, now nearly two months without hearing from them, leapt up in a little bloom of anxiety in her gut. Knowing that when the madness had struck the U.S., Tally and Josh had been out in the middle of the Atlantic with ten kids chewed up by their upbringing, their environment, and the justice system... well, that gave Maxine pause as she eyed Storm across the table.

She had already come close to losing one of her children to cancer, and although she didn't know one way or the other if Tally was okay, she suddenly felt the distance between them playing out crazily in her mind like a reel whirling around because of a deep-hooked game fish.

The thumping from above came almost in time with the creaking, wooden-cased clock on the kitchen wall, its pendulum swinging in the candle light. Maxine could almost imagine that the one was timing the other.

Donald looked up at the clock, too. "I've made you up a coupla beds in the bunk house. Been using it as a storeroom since the 80s, but the

bunks are okay and the mattresses are okay. You'll sleep better out there."

Maxine nodded. She'd had some crazy fantasy about getting back into her old room and sleeping there for the duration. But as it was across the hall from her parents' room, and the noise being made by her mother was increasing in intensity, she knew she couldn't sleep there, and if she was going to be of use to her dad in dealing with the ranch and her mother, then sleep would need to be found.

The bunkhouse was a converted barn, with red-painted wood with white sills to the windows and a steeply raked roof. In happier times, it would have looked like a picturesque addition to the M-Bar, but now as they trudged towards it, it only accentuated the distance between an agreeable past and this unholy present.

The whimpers and roars from the upstairs window of the ranch echoed behind them as Donald unlocked the bunkhouse door and shooed them inside. Her father had lit an oil lamp, and the space inside was welcoming.

"You haven't told him," Storm said when Donald left them and dragged his sorry shadow across the yard back to the ranch house.

"About what...?"

"You and Dad."

The memory burst open in Maxine's head like a dashboard airbag. She hadn't thought about her disintegrating marriage in forever. There'd been no time. No space for it. She had almost forgotten why she was so angry at Josh—how he threw himself into his work to deal with his own feelings about, first, their growing apart, and then Storm's cancer. The last time she had spoken to Josh, on the *Sea-Hawk* satellite phone, they had been cold, harsh, and bitter with each other. She couldn't help speaking her mind, and Josh couldn't help pushing back with sarcasm and bile. Was the marriage in a terminal decline from which it would never recover? Maxine didn't know the

answer to that. But Storm pointing out that she hadn't mentioned it to Donald and hadn't pronounced it dead maybe meant there was a thready *bip-bip* still coming from her marriage's life-support machine.

"No, I didn't. How do you feel about that?"

Storm shrugged. "I dunno, Mom. I really don't. If Dad shows up, I don't know if I'm going to have the energy to keep pretending to him, that he hasn't let me down... let *us* down over all this. Maybe it'd be better if he didn't come back."

Storm blew out his cheeks and his eyes bulged with the shock of his own words. "Am I wrong to say that? I dunno where it came from. It's just... god... as I'm getting stronger, I'm getting angrier about the whole situation between you and him."

Any words of reply caught in her throat, so she hugged him instead.

Storm had never once mentioned to her how he was being affected by the way the Standing family was circling the drain. She had picked up cues from both her children, of course, but couldn't give them an injection of hope or certainty she wasn't feeling herself.

She kissed the top of Storm's head. "We'll work it out, Tic-tac. But I don't know what that will lead to."

"I love you, Mom."

"Good."

"But I don't know how I feel about Dad right now."

There were many minutes of silence where words would only have cut deeper wounds. So, she waited until Storm was ready, and when he was, she thought he must have settled on something, because he upped and changed the subject, bringing his face off her shoulder and kissing her cheek.

"Do you think you're going to be able to help Grandma?"

“I hope so,” was the best Maxine could come up with.

So many questions. No answers. Not even the beginnings of any.

And with that, whatever optimism she had felt upon finally arriving at the M-Bar had now almost completely drained away.



Storm fell asleep on the top bunk almost immediately, his snoring a gentle and calming counterpoint to the noise Maxine’s mother had been making in the ranch.

Through a window which looked out into a clear night of scattered stars rising above the black bulk of Alleghany Mountain, the white smudge of the Barnard’s Star supernova hung like a tattered cloud of smoke. It was six light years away—Maxine understood that much about it, knowing that whatever forces it had unleashed when it had exploded had taken just over six years to reach the Earth. She had no understanding of what those processes had been; all she understood was the effects they’d had.

The complete collapse of civilization had happened almost immediately. In Boston, she and Storm had only just escaped with their lives as people had become murderous and nearly insane. Destroying everything they could, burning buildings, attacking their fellow Bostonians and killing them... Initially, she’d thought the effect was localized, but when they’d escaped the city, they had met others who may not have been as intensely insane and unpredictable, but who’d been just as dangerous. As she lay there looking at the sky’s newest nebula, Maxine wondered if the effects streaming from it would last forever, or, if like a tide, once it had passed or receded, at least the machinery of the Earth would start to work again.

She looked from the nebula to the window in the ranch house behind which her mother was locked.

Were those same particles, or whatever the exploded star had been spewing out, constantly rushing through the minds of those affected? Would the tide reduce there, too? Would there be a time when her mother, driven to this incomprehensible state, would suddenly find her mind her own again?

Maxine didn't know and could not even guess.

But it seemed in that moment that she might never find out, as first one muzzle flash, and then the boom of a gun blast, and then after a second, another harsh flash filled the window of her mother's bedroom, to be followed by the unmistakable rapport of a second gunshot.

They reached the camp just after nightfall, having left behind the avenue of the hanged an hour or so before. Josh was sick to his stomach after seeing the bloated faces and the rusty chains around the necks of the dead. He'd counted over fifty such bodies as the wagon went past, all in various stages of decomposition, before the track had turned into a low valley through which a narrow waterway sparked and flared in the lowering sun.

The rain had eased off as the sun had fallen below the cloud base, illuminating a landscape of stumpy trees casting long shadows.

Harve had kicked his horse on, leaving Josh to Steve and Jackdaw.

"Is that where we're going?" Josh nodded towards the collection of white tents and trailers corralled on the other side of the river, across an iron-framed bridge.

"That's the spot," Steve breathed out heavily, as if it didn't feel much like coming home to him, either. "My advice to you if you're in the mood to take it, fella, is to not ask too many questions once we get there. Just provide the answers. If you want to stay alive."

Steve's advice sounded genuine enough for Josh to nod and push the myriad of questions he wanted to ask back down his gullet. They could wait. He had to stay alive to find out what had happened to Talley, and then he had to get them both out of here.

The wagon rolled across the bridge, and the smell of the camp started filtering into his nostrils. Wood smoke, human waste, cooking, and something else... the scent of something like anxiety and fear.

Sweat. And plenty of it.

Also, underneath all those more pressing aromas, there was still the tang of salt from the ocean in the air, and although they'd moved many miles, Josh realized that the distance they'd traveled hadn't been all inland, and might have run parallel to the water in some respect.

Night closed like a lid then, and if Josh craned his stiff neck up to look over the side of the wagon, he could see open-flamed torches, braziers, and campfires burning between the trailers and tents. Shadow people moved around the fires, and on the breeze, he could hear someone playing a guitar, along with a flutter of laughter and an argument, the words of which he couldn't make out.

Josh could see perhaps a hundred tents and several trailers—Airstreams and the like, which were not attached to trucks, but had been modified to be hitched to horses or mules.

Ruddy faces with glittering eyes in the firelight watched the wagon roll past. There were horses dotted around the camp, as well as dogs begging for scraps by the fires. Women watched from the open flaps of the tents, and there were also small children, naked from the waist down, trotting around in the grass with their hair awry and their faces dirty.

It was like an army camp had married a refugee camp and had this construct as a child.

Gunshots followed by raucous laughter made Josh spin his head to the other side of the wagon. Two men were firing Glockes into the air with wild abandon, followed by a hopping dance around a campfire. Their chins were greasy from eating chicken legs pulled from fires,

and there was the stench of cheap hooch as the wagon rolled past. Cheap hooch and acrid vomit.

They reached the center of the camp and found a large, early 20th century Colonial that had delusions of being a set for *Gone with the Wind*. It had, quite frankly, seen better days. There was a neoclassical pillared entranceway that jutted out from the porch, which had been blackened at some point in a fire. Some of the twelve windows on the front side of the house were boarded up, and it looked as if someone had taken an ax to one of the pillars holding up the roof over the veranda.

The house itself was set back from the rest of the surrounding tents and fires, separated by a picket fence that had once been neat and white but now, in the flickering lights, Josh could see had been damaged in places, and all but knocked over in others.

It was less *Gone with the Wind*, more *Universal Horror*.

Steve brought the wagon to a stop, and Jackdaw peeled away on his horse to go up to where the camp continued beyond the Colonial. Steve jumped down as Harve came out of the house and jogged down the steps to the track.

More than anything in the world, Josh wanted to ask him if he knew if anyone resembling Tally had been rescued, but he remembered what Steve had said, and he waited, even though the question was burning away in his throat like a red-hot flame.

Harve used a key to unlock the leg irons and then dragged Josh off the wagon and handcuffed his arms behind him.

"I'm not going to run," Josh said truthfully. "You don't have to do this to me. I want to see if Carly brings back my daughter. I have no quarrel with you. None at all."

Harve snorted. "Yeah, well, we have a quarrel with you, Josh Standing, and we're about to get to the nub of the argument, so to speak."

Josh ascended the steps onto the veranda. The front door wasn't original to the building, or at least that's the way it appeared. It was covered in studded steel plating. It was such a hefty door that, if you were trying to break into the place, it might be easier to smash your way through the wall.

The entrance hall was marble floored, with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. They were obviously dark, but at least the opulence had been maintained inside the building. The hallway, lit by candles and increasing the horror movie vibe, had five doors leading off from it, and a wide marble staircase led to the upper floors. The marble banisters and the balustrade were cracked and smashed in places.

There'd been a fierce gun battle in this entranceway in the not too distant past.

"Is this him, Harve?"

The voice from the shadows at the top of the stairs, just out of reach of the candles in the hall, was musical and intelligent. A refined voice of a southern gentleman from another age. Josh saw a delicate hand come out of the shadows, followed by an arm in a yellow-checked jacket.

The man reached the top of the stairs as Harve answered, "Yes, Trace. Washed up on the beach. Said he was on the clipper."

Trace was a man of perhaps thirty-five. He was dressed like his voice sounded. In a dapper yellow suit with thin green lines, which could have come from a 1930s musical. He held a black, gold-topped cane in the crook of his arm like a regal scepter, and his hair was slicked back to provide a widow's peak Josh could have shaved his face on.

Josh blinked.

Trace was also wearing spats over patent leather lounge shoes.

The violence of the day had mutated into weirdness, and Josh suddenly wondered if he was still asleep in the back of the wagon.

Trace came delicately down the steps, his dark eyes all aglitter in the candlelight. He carried just a little more weight than was good for the line of this jacket, and there was the suggestion of a double chin behind his razor-edged goatee.

If Trace was the kind of man who liked to make an entrance, he was certainly succeeding.

For all his neat clothing, well-carved facial hair, and the soft steps he took as he descended with all the care of a dancer, Josh could feel the unpredictable danger of the man emanating from him like a silent siren of alarm.

Trace's eyes were fixed on Josh, too, in the same way Josh's eyes may have fixed on a donut when he'd been a cop. There was hunger in the gaze that sent a series of shivers down Josh's spine like a wave of blue fire from a match dropped into a puddle of spilled gas.

"Well, well." Trace was close to Josh now. "Hello, Mr. Standing."

Josh could smell Trace now. A delicate aroma of rose water and hair oil. Perhaps a hint of lavender. There were so many contradictions on display between the man and his surroundings. A southern gentleman in a bullet-riddled house, dressed for a night on the town in a limo with white-walled tires, in a house surrounded by a camp of rootin' tootin' ne're-do-wells that was reached along an avenue of strung-up bodies as a welcome to the uninitiated.

"You have me at a disadvantage," Josh said, trying *polite* out on Trace.

"Yes. Yes, I do. My name is Trace Parker, and this is my world."

Trace had said it like he meant it, and Josh believed him.

"What's on the ship, Mr. Standing?"

"Ten probationers from Jacksonville, North Carolina. I'm their probation officer."

"Criminals?"

"Hopefully ex-criminals."

Trace smiled. "Hopefully." He'd rolled the word around his mouth slowly and with precise annunciation. "Not a lot of hope left anymore, Mr. Standing. Not in these parts. Not for... you."

Trace took the cane and touched the silver end to Josh's chin. The metal was cold, and there were sharp edges. It felt solid and heavy against his skin. Josh's eyes were at the wrong angle to make out the casting or the carving on the end of the cane, but he would bet it wasn't at all pleasant.

"Criminals aside. What supplies? What armaments?"

Josh didn't know if Trace's men had already made it to the *Sea-Hawk* and found the truth of the situation, but there was no point lying, especially as he didn't want to incur the wrath of Trace Parker—which he could feel heaving below the man's surface like a shark ready to strike. He wasn't going to give him any reason to unleash it.

"Three submachine guns we got from the ocean liner *Empress*; four handguns. Some fire axes. There's enough food for a few more weeks, for a dozen or so people. Canned mainly. We'd rationed it out sensibly."

Trace weighed up the answer. If poker was his game, Josh wouldn't bet his wages on a match-up. Trace nodded again. More to himself than to Josh.

"Is there any news of my daughter?"

Trace cocked his head, fixing Josh with the stare of an innocent child seeing the full moon for the first time. It was as if his face was surprised by the wonder of Josh's words.

The cane came down in one scything arc which exploded against Josh's hip with all the ferocious savagery of a boot heel coming down on a cockroach.

The pain sucked all the air from Josh's lungs, and he felt like his eyes were going to pop in his head. Unable to stop himself from falling, he keeled forward, hands still handcuffed behind his back.

Josh's shoulder and cheek slammed into the cold marble, and suddenly Trace's spats were huge in his vision. It was almost a comical cartoon of a view. Giant spats beneath yellow pants, and a pain in his hip that felt like it was being dug out with the shattered end of a broken bottle.

Josh found a breath and sucked it from the dusty marble of the hall floor.

"What did you say, Mr. Standing? I'm sure I didn't quite hear you."

Josh said nothing.

"That's better," Trace replied to the silence.



Josh was dragged up two flights of stairs by Harve and Steve, then put in a room that was just bare floorboards with one window which had been covered in a sheet of metal riveted into place. It had the same sense of workmanship as the door to the front entrance of the mansion.

Trace had not asked Josh any more questions. He'd turned on his heel and walked quickly down the side of the stairs to disappear through a door in the gloom of shadows.

Steve and Harve had seemed to know what was expected of them and hooked their arms through Josh's and bumped him up the stairs.

Josh's hip throbbed and ached, but as the hours passed, and the night deepened into the pre-dawn, the bright pain dulled to warm embers of discomfort. He lay on his side and tried to move the leg through all expected movements. There was no crunch of bone or sense that anything had become dislodged internally. It would hurt for a few days, but there didn't seem to be any lasting damage—for which Josh was thankful.

He was more worried now about Tally being rescued and brought back to the mansion than he'd been over Harve leaving her where she'd been. Josh had correctly surmised Trace's unpredictability and had his theory proved in the most spectacular fashion.

Bringing Tally back here, into this situation with these men, printed a new dread on the layers of fear and anxiety already present.

The microcosm of what had become of the world had been there on the *Sea-Hawk* and the *Empress*. The murderous ideation, the increased aggression, and the desperate measures people would take to survive by taking out their opposition. Josh wondered what Trace Parker had been before the supernova had hit. What kind of man had the potential for this? To have in just a few short weeks attained the set-up he had in the mansion. To have men like Harve and Steve following him. What did he have over them? What was Trace's secret?

If it was just pure violence and threat, then Trace wasn't the obvious man to employ those tactics. But it seemed that the people around him were genuinely scared of him, so much so that they would do his bidding in this way.

Thinking about Trace gave Josh a welcome respite from the pain in his hip and thoughts of Tally's plight.

When his head was clear enough, he started to take more of an interest in his surroundings and to see what his options might be. With his hands still handcuffed, those options were going to be severely limited, but at least they'd left his ankles unbound. Perhaps Harve and Steve believed there was no way out of the room and nothing in

it for Josh to use, but that wasn't going to stop him looking. It was clear now that if he was going to escape with Tally when she arrived, he was going to have to be ready.

The room was perhaps fifteen feet along each wall. High-ceilinged and a little drafty. The floorboards were old and warped, the varnish cracked. One by his shoulder wobbled side to side as he leaned against it. There were two screw holes at the end nearest to him, but only one screwhead was visible. A sizable chunk of corner had been broken away at some point, probably by someone clumsily lifting the floorboard to look beneath it. If there was a loose screw Josh could get his hands on, one thin enough to fit into the keyhole in the handcuffs, he might have a chance of opening them. The handcuffs weren't fixed-center cop-issue; they were on a short chain, and as Josh felt around the mechanism, he could feel exactly where the key would go to open them. Sadly, they weren't recreational handcuffs, either, with a spring release lever on the edge.

Josh was still barefoot, and he knew that when the pain in his hip subsided, there would be the opportunity for him to try to bring his legs through his arms and get the cuffs into a more accessible position. But before he did that, he'd need to make sure he had a screw or a nail ready to pick the lock. It had been his party trick when he'd been in college, and it had been a while since he'd attempted the switcheroo, but Josh was still pretty much in shape, and his decreased food intake over the past few weeks had, if anything, made his frame leaner. He was no Houdini, but getting his legs through his arms while still handcuffed was a distinct possibility.

"Up here!"

Josh started. He'd been so focused on the floorboards, the loose screws, and the idea of using one to get free of the handcuffs, he'd completely lost track of what was going on outside the room.

Footsteps came down the corridor.

Something was being dragged along beside the feet.

A jangle of keys.

A fumble in a lock.

A door opening.

Not the door to this room, but another—perhaps across the hallway.

Steve's voice thrummed the air. "Harve isn't happy with you, Carly. And he's not going to like this."

"We'll see what Trace says in the morning." Carly's voice. There was a strain to it... he had to be carrying or lifting something. "I didn't risk my life on those rocks for nothing. Help me get her inside."

The next day dawned fresh and blue. The mountain was all pinks and russet. The cattle in the pasture grazed, and Bobby, the farm dog, barked because his routine had been interrupted.

The dog didn't understand why Donald hadn't come out of the ranch house already to feed him and the other animals, to get the day started. He barked at the screen door while Storm searched for some food to give him, going through cupboards without finding much luck. In the end, he opened a can of corned beef and put it on a plate by the door.

Bobby looked like he couldn't believe his luck.

"You've made a friend for life there," Maxine said to her son as the farm Collie licked his hand before scratching at its ear and barking orders for the rest of the morning routine to be reinstated.

Maxine wiped the soot from her hands, left over from where she'd been starting a fire in the grate to boil creek water for coffee. She turned from the view over the farm toward Alleghany Mountain back to the interior of the kitchen.

Donald sat silently at the table, his head in his hands. He hadn't spoken a word since Maxine had taken him downstairs after running to the house upon seeing the muzzle flashes and hearing the gunshots from her mother's room last night.

Heart pounding, she'd burst into the house and pelted to the stairs. There'd been nothing but silence in the house as she'd sprinted up the stairs three at a time, terrified of what she expected to find in the bedroom when she got there.

As she'd launched herself down the corridor, the first sob had reached her ears, and it hadn't been her mother crying.

Hanging onto the doorframe to swing herself around using her forward momentum, she'd come across a scene from her own personal version of hell.

Her mom, Maria, was in a stained nightshirt, frozen in fear, her eyes wide with shock. Her hair was mad-professor wiry, grayer than Maxine had ever known it. Maria had lost at least forty pounds since last year, and skin hung from the undersides of her arms like flapping sacks. Her chin was etched with deep wrinkles and slathered in saliva.

She was chained by one wrist and her ankles to iron rings which had been set into the wall. Iron rings that Maxine certainly didn't remember being there before. Maria's legs were drawn up underneath her, and her eyes were fixed on Donald.

Donald was on his knees in the center of the room, sobbing. For all Maxine knew, it was the first time in his whole life he had cried, and he was sure making up for it. His head bobbed as fat tears fell on his shotgun and the floor. Donald's shoulders shook and his back quaked. The noise coming from his mouth was not one that Maxine recognized, either. It just didn't compute as a sound her father would make. This bluff man's man farmer and Vietnam veteran.

It sounded like a chain being dragged through a tree trunk.

It sounded like a collapse in a worked-out mine.

It was a sound from the end of the world.



Both shots had been pulled wide at the very last moment. Sent into the wall three feet to the right of Maria. Donald had gone there with the idea of putting her, and then maybe himself, out of their collective misery, but in the final analysis hadn't been able to carry out that dark purpose.

Maxine didn't know if it was a genuine feeling of hopelessness that had overtaken her father, or if the effects of the supernova had pushed him towards the unthinkable now that Maxine and Storm were there to look after the farm, but whatever it had been had robbed Donald of his immense strength and stoicism.

He'd let her lead him down the stairs to the kitchen table where he still sat, the cup of coffee Storm had made him in the night still undrunk by his side. Forehead resting on the palms of his hands.

Maxine had approached her mom in the half dark, the only light coming through the window from the stars and the smudge of the Barnard's Nebula.

She'd sat by her mom, and tried to hold her, but the older woman's body had stiffened, not yet ready to let go of the fear. Maxine had checked her over as best she could and found that no pellets from the shotgun had gone astray.

Maria hadn't made eye contact with Maxine after ten minutes of trembling silence. There had been no look of recognition, no joy at seeing her daughter, no wide smile or tight hug. Just the hollow look of a person whose mind was no longer in residence.

The best Maxine had managed before Maria had finally moved away from the wall and rolled onto the bed, pulling the blanket up around her bony shoulders, had been to squeeze her mom's hand before it was snatched away like the limb of a wary animal disturbed by a predator.

Maxine had closed the door behind her with a sigh and a feeling that everything good and wonderful about her remarkable mother had

unraveled and lay tangled up in a mess that, if one were to pull at the threads of it, would be freed, but just get caught up in ever tighter knots.

She'd then sat with Donald, who'd been equally uncommunicative until the first dawn light had begun to fan the sky, bringing deep black shadows to the room.

"You want a can?"

"Hmm?" Maxine looked up, snapping out of her review of the previous night.

Storm was holding a can of corned beef, the exact same brand he'd given to the dog. Maxine shook her head.

"If I ate anything, I'd throw up. I know it."

Storm shrugged and opened his can, digging at the contents with a fork at the other end of the kitchen table. He'd told Maxine on the last leg of the journey to the M-Bar that the chemo-induced ulcers in his mouth had almost healed, and he was starting to enjoy eating without it becoming a stinging agony.

Corned beef wasn't exactly *haute cuisine*, but after the months he'd gone through with a mouth that had tasted like the floor of a tortoise cage, making him wince even when he sketched a smile, it must have tasted like a prime ribeye with a rich sauce, Maxine considered.

"Can I get you anything, Grandpa?" Storm offered, but Donald was just a statue of stiff flesh and misery. His eyes closed, his mouth set and shoulders hunched.

When Storm had eaten half the can, he stood up. "I'm going to have a look around the farm. See if everything is okay." He scratched his head. "Not that I'd know if it was or not. I mean, I really don't know one end of a cow from another."

"One end moos, Tic-tac. One end doesn't," Maxine said.

“Gotcha.” Storm headed out and walked with Bobby jumping around his legs towards the pasture.

Maxine reached out to stroke Donald’s hand. The skin was dry and papery. Perhaps he was a little dehydrated. As a nurse, Maxine was well aware of the signs and symptoms of that condition. Skin, when pinched gently, should bounce back into shape immediately, but when dehydrated it would take a second or so, and wouldn’t flatten completely for a few more. She didn’t want to start pinching her father, so seeing as he didn’t pull away when she touched him, she tried a more direct route. “I’m going to make you some coffee, Dad. You haven’t had anything all night, and you really should take something. We don’t have to talk about what happened if you don’t want to. I have a pretty good handle on it anyways. But I don’t want you making yourself ill. Okay?”

Donald said nothing. He remained seated where he was for another hour, ignoring the fresh cup of coffee Maxine had boiled for him on the grate. Staring at nothing, totally lost within himself.

That was until Bobby’s excited barking outside the ranch house was followed by Storm flinging open the door and shouting, “Grandpa! There’s a calf being born... and... and I think it’s stuck!”

Then, like a statue suddenly come to life, Donald rose slowly from the table, pulled his Stetson down from a peg on the wall, and turned simply to his grandson. “Show me.”



The words backing up in Josh’s throat threatened to burst out of his mouth and alert Steve and Carly that he was taking an interest in what was going on across the corridor. The pain in his hip caused by Trace’s cane was almost forgotten now as he hoped against hope that his daughter was being locked into a room just feet away.

He waited for the sounds of Carly and Steve's footsteps to recede down the corridor before he risked a whispered communication, his lips against the wood of the door, forehead slick with sweat from the effort of moving.

"Tally?" Her name had been little more than a sigh laden down with a cargo of longing and parental concern. He couldn't be sure if there was anyone else in the vicinity, though, and didn't want to invite another beating, or worse.

No reply.

"Tally...?"

Again, nothing.

The sweat was running in his eyes; he blinked to clear them and chewed on his lip.

What if Tally was injured? Unconscious? Incapable of replying to him?

What if she were dying, feet away from him? Just out of reach?

A jumble of thoughts burst through his mind. None of them pleasant.

"Okay," Josh whispered to himself. "Let's do this."

The trick with moving handcuffs from the back of a body to the front is not about flexibility, per se, but about speed and determination. Josh had seen the move the first time at a party when a friend had bet others there that they couldn't restrain him in handcuffs. Mart Zimmer had been a cocky, handsome boy with more self-confidence than the smarts to back it up. What he'd lacked in intelligence, he'd more than made up for in likeability. Once a pair of cuffs had been acquired and there were a bunch of ten-dollar bills on the table among the beer bottles and bowls of Doritos, Mart had been locked into the cuffs behind his back. Josh, like everyone else there, had thought that Mart was full of BS, and laid his money down in the

sure knowledge that he'd get the cash back once Mart had exhausted himself and scraped all the skin off his wrists.

Losing that first ten dollars had been a salutary lesson to Josh. *Never underestimate the opposition*, Josh had learned that day. When Mart had been free of the cuffs and his wrists were intact, Josh had decided that copying the move for his own party trick would make his life a little more interesting, and might bring in a little extra cash. Of course, once he'd learned the maneuver and his friends had all known he could do it, the trick lost its allure—especially because, with speed and determination, nearly *everyone* could learn how to do it, though the beauty of it was that most people didn't know it was possible in the first place. The benefit was in the *showing* them they could.

Josh stood and took a breath, straining the cuffs apart behind his butt. The move was half brute force and half technique, and you had to get both of them right or you'd end up on your backside, or with the cuffs between your legs, looking foolish with nothing to show for it.

Josh pulled the short chain between the cuffs taut, bent his knees, and dropped hard and fast. The move hurt brutally against where Trace had hit his hip, but his shoulders had widened a little, his backside had been forced between his elbows, and like escapology magic, the cuffs were behind his knees.

Still using the momentum gained in the drop to carry on moving his arms, Josh scraped his wrists down to his bare feet and then flipped them over his toes as he brought his knees up to his chest.

Josh was breathing hard, and the starburst of pain in his hip was trying to push itself to the front of his consciousness, but now that the cuffs were in front of him, he didn't have self-indulgent seconds to wallow in it.

He moved up onto his knees and came to the loose floorboard with the broken-away corner. He dug his fingers into the hole and pulled.

The board, only attached at one side, came up easily. He looked into the floor space below and saw the thin, rusty nail which had been in the wood before the floorboard had been broken; it was laying among the dust and debris.

Josh fished out the nail and set to work on the handcuff lock latches.

He knew the best tool to get this job done would have been a bobby pin, but he had to improvise with what he had. It had cost Josh another forty dollars and several drinks to persuade Mart to teach him the next stage of the process. Working with the lock. The first thing Mart had told Josh was that pretty much all handcuff locks were the same. All of them. It seemed counterintuitive, but that's the way it was, and so if you could learn to pick one, you could pick them all. Unless they were cop-issue solid cuffs, and very few of those turned up at parties where Mart exhibited his skills for beer and cash. And, when they did, he'd just politely refuse to continue. The locks in handcuffs were simple to the point of stupidity, and with a bobby pin could be opened pretty quickly by anyone with the ability to get the pin in the lock and trip the mechanism. But Josh didn't have a bobby pin; what he did have was a nail and the determination to get to his daughter. The other thing working in his favor was that the cuffs hadn't been placed on his wrists cop-style with the keyhole facing away from his fingers.

Small mercies. Take them where you can.

The nail was awkward to manipulate, but there was enough of an angle to feel for the latch and click it. The handcuff on his left wrist sprang open, and he was free.

There was no applause or ten-dollar bills to pick up, but the rush of freedom felt just as good.

He moved to the door.

It wasn't a security door, and the lock looked original. There would be a simple latch inside on a ratchet for him to flip over with the nail.

He put his tool inside the lock and felt around for resistance.

There.

Josh placed his ear against the wood and listened. He didn't want the door to swing open on Harve's hard face or the arc of Trace's cane. The corridor beyond the door was silent. In fact, this whole area of the mansion was as quiet as the proverbial mouse.

He snicked the lock and found the next latch and clicked it. The chances of there being a third tumbler in the lock was remote, but he felt for it just the same.

Nothing.

The door opened easily onto the corridor. There was a little natural light, as dawn was pushing through the drapes over a window at one end of the corridor, but the day working its way over the horizon was going to be cloudless and bright from the oblong shape of the light behind the material. Josh would have preferred it to still be night to provide more cover for his escape, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

He stepped across the corridor. There were two doors which could have been the ones Steve and Carly had opened.

The first opened at the turn of the doorknob, and it clearly wasn't where Tally had been dumped. Josh moved to the second door. With a hand near trembling in anticipation and the adrenaline produced by his escape, Josh tried turning the handle.

The door didn't open.

Its lock was the same construction as that on the door he'd just gotten himself through, and knowing there were only two tumblers to snick open gave Josh added impetus. Heart thumping in his throat, mouth dry and feet cold on the floor, he completed picking the lock and opened the door.

Of course, it had been too good to be true.

Josh realized then how much denial he'd been in, in not considering other possibilities. He'd been so focused on trying to will Tally into the room.

Lying on the floor, gently snoring and with her wrists in handcuffs, was Poppet Langolini.

Tally had hiked away from the sea with no food, no weapons, and no idea where her dad was.

Crisis was becoming her new normal.

As the *Sea-Hawk's* lifeboat had foundered on the rocks and been smashed, her father's hand had slipped out of hers and he'd been lost to her. Her other arm had been snagged in a rope line, and she'd been hit in the face by a substantially-sized piece of orange plastic.

That plastic had turned out to be a lifejacket which must have lain unseen in the lifeboat when Goober Nash had made Tally, Poppet, and Josh jump into the water to it. She'd seen Goober order Lemming and Banger, two of the other probationers, to recover all the lifejackets and flares and rations from the lifeboat before it had been slipped into the water off the coast. Goober hadn't been taking any chances, and had meant to make sure all of the safety equipment remained on board the *Sea-Hawk*.

Perhaps Lemming or Banger had left at least one or more floatation devices hidden under a tarp, taking pity on those who were being put off the ship, and Tally, half-unconscious, dazed and choking on the seawater, had been carried on the current because of it, unable to get back to where her father and Poppet were.

When she'd regained enough of her senses, she'd beached below a ridge of grassy dunes, exhausted and completely unaware of where she'd washed up. There'd been no sign of her dad, Poppet, or the *Sea-Hawk*. The tidal break had washed her around a short headland and across the small bay. The small strip of land across the water had blocked full sight of the sea, and she'd been alone on the windswept beach.

Tally had untangled the line from around her ankles where it had wrapped itself and unhooked her arm from the lifejacket. There'd been no signs of life in any direction, and if truth be told, she hadn't even known if she'd landed on the same stretch of land where the lifeboat had been wrecked or somewhere else entirely.

She'd spent a fruitless hour calling for her father and Poppet until she'd had to come to the conclusion that she was on her own, and if she was going to get out of this situation, she was going to have to do it herself. Hopefully, she and her father would meet again soon, but searching for him blindly—and without any knowledge of where she was or where he might be—would get her nowhere.

After all, Tally had no idea if Josh and Poppet had drowned, or if they'd washed up or out to sea. And as the afternoon had threatened imminent rain, and she'd had only the clothes she was standing up in to aid her survival, she'd known if she didn't want to risk dying from exposure, she'd need to find shelter to get dry.

She'd trudged up the dunes and looked across a bleak landscape of tussocked grass and muddy tributaries covering a vast area of wetland. At first it had seemed like she'd been dropped down into a wide-open, flat wilderness, until a gray line of transmission towers on the very lip of the horizon had caught her eye.

Tally had had no doubt that chances of electricity thrumming through the lines connecting the transmission towers was low—her experience on the *Sea-Hawk* and what she'd heard about the *Empress* from Poppet suggested that when the effects of the supernova had hit, everything had just stopped. This told her there was a strong

possibility all machinery and generators on land might be wiped out, too—but those transmission towers would be leading somewhere, and they might lead to civilization.

Or what was left of it.

It had taken her almost to nightfall to maneuver herself across the marshy ground, wading through shallows over muddy sand. She'd had to swim a couple of times across deeper creeks, which had drenched her clothes all over again, but the exercise of crossing the landscape had dried her out between dips.

She'd reached an electricity substation surrounded by a high steel fence just as night had fallen. A rusty, once-white gate had been swung open, leading to a small brick building beyond inside the compound. The building had looked like it was being used as a storage facility for the electricity company. A sign had proclaimed the substation belonged to the Johnson Power Corp of Thunderbolt, Georgia—so at least she'd been washed up in the United States, which up until then, she hadn't been quite sure of. But the promise of getting to shelter had still been stalled by what she'd seen in examining the building itself. The door to the substation had been smashed open, splashes of blood remaining on the brickwork around it. This probably confirmed that what had happened to the people on the *Sea-Hawk* was more than likely to have happened there, too.

The dead body just inside the substation storeroom, head smashed and Johnson Power Corp overalls drenched in dried blood, had added another layer of certainty to the situation.

Tally had known she couldn't pass up the chance of shelter at this point, even with the evidence of the violent death of the man, so she pulled the gate closed behind her and walked into the compound, then crouched by the body.

The body had been stiff and very cold as she'd pulled it from the storeroom and rolled it onto its back outside. She'd placed the man's

arms across his chest and found a few sheets of cardboard inside to give the corpse some semblance of dignity.

The rain had been holding off, and she'd needed to be out of the stiffening breeze and inside the storeroom. Tally had felt exposed and vulnerable outside, especially after seeing the violent way the power worker had been killed. The gate being unlocked had suggested that the worker had been trying to make it into the storeroom when he'd been set upon by persons unknown. The fact that the gate hadn't been locked behind him indicated that he'd not had time to lock it, or maybe that his pursuers had forced their way through before he'd had a chance and then killed him just inside the small building.

It had then occurred to Tally that maybe the keys to the gate were still in the vicinity. The messy chaos and blood spatters meant that whoever had carried out the heinous act hadn't been thinking strategically. In very much the same way that crew members of the *Sea-Hawk*—gripped by a sudden, supernova-induced bloodlust—had attacked each other, then Tally and the others, the power worker had been killed in a frenzy of violence.

It had taken a few minutes of scrabbling around on the floor and the area outside the storeroom for her to find the keys, but when she did, locking the gate had been her first priority.

That had at least made her feel safe. As safe as someone could feel outside civilization, with a dead body for company and murderers on the loose in the area.

So, not very safe at all, but at least she might have heard if someone was trying to get through the gate.

Inside the storeroom hadn't been a lot warmer than outside, and she'd rubbed herself down trying to get circulation back into her tired arms and legs. There'd been no blankets—why would there be?—but she'd found a few cans of beer in a grocery store bag. Perhaps they'd been left there by the power worker for a treat between

jobs. A little more digging along the racks of transformer parts, tools, and spares had revealed another grocery bag containing a bunch of candy bars, plastic packs of beef jerky, instant coffee powder, and a carton of powdered milk.

All the comforts of home.

She'd also found two packs of cigarettes.

Tally wasn't a smoker, but a smoker had to have a way to light up. And that meant matches or a lighter, and that meant a way to make a source of heat. She hadn't found either of those things in the storeroom with the beer and the candy, so with a deep sigh she'd gone back out to the body, lifted the cardboard, and begun to go through the pockets in the overalls.

Tally had been glad of the near full dark, which had meant the horrendous injuries the man had suffered weren't visible. He'd been starting to smell bad, so she'd searched him with one hand while her other remained placed over her nose and mouth to filter out the worst of it.

Tally had soon located the lighter, a silver Zippo in his pants pocket, and covered him up again, going back inside the storeroom and closing the door behind her. She hadn't been foolish enough to set a fire inside the building, but she'd wanted to be away from the body for a few minutes at least.

So much of her world had been upended in the last few weeks. She'd been shocked to the core that she could even think about searching a dead body. It was so far outside her frame of reference. In that moment, as she'd hugged her knees and clutched the lighter tight in her palm, she'd wanted her mom or dad to be there to tell her that everything was going to be okay. There hadn't been any time to reflect on her situation as she'd made her way across the wetlands to the transmission towers and the substation; she'd been too focused on the need to get out of her wet clothes, but then, in the

dark, the image of her hands searching through the dead man's pockets had invaded every corner of her thinking.

She was a college girl. She was nineteen. She wanted to be a lawyer. She wanted to hang with her friends, and she wanted to climb or free-run.

She didn't and had never wanted *this*.

It had taken a few minutes to bring her breathing back under control and to stop the trembling that had overtaken her.

I need a fire, and I need a plan, she thought.

The fire had been the easy part. She'd known that lighting it might bring inquisitive people her way, but the lock on the gate had been sturdy, and the rolls of razor wire along the top of the fence should deter all but the most enthusiastic of interlopers. There'd been crates on wooden pallets in the store full of spares, so she'd broken one open with a small fire ax she'd found next to an extinguisher at the back of the storeroom. There'd been more than enough paper-wrapped components to use to get the fire started, which she'd lit on the most sheltered side of the building—this thankfully being on the side opposite of the body.

Once the fire had been lit, she'd started to plan.



Two hours later, she'd come to several inescapable conclusions. Finding her dad had to be a priority, but how to do it? She had no idea where he might have washed up, or even if he had. What about Poppet? Would they be together or would they have been separated, too? Having no real idea how many hours she'd been in the water, or where the currents had taken her, meant that just searching the wetlands without purpose was unlikely to lead to a significant find.

What she needed was equipment, food, transport, and if the death of the power worker was anything to go by, a weapon of some kind. Her mom had given Storm and Tally knowledge of the gun in the lockbox under the floorboards by her bed in case of a home invasion, and had let them come to the range on a few occasions to learn how to shoot the Cobra. Tally wasn't like many of her friends who were vehemently anti-gun—she was more ambivalent to their possession and use. She saw them as necessary in many circumstances, and so the idea of finding a gun for personal protection was as important as food and water. Especially if she meant to find her dad.

She'd find none of the baseline things she needed by going back to the beach. If she was going to think about this practically, what she needed was to get to the town or city that the transmission towers had fed with electricity before the supernova. There, if she kept her head down and stayed out of the way of people, there'd be a chance she might be able to get what she needed.

The warmth from the fire was beguiling, making her drowsy as she dried out and got to feel more comfortable. She'd eaten two of the candy bars and drunk a beer. That warmed her inside, but she knew alcohol wasn't a good way to stay hydrated; in fact, it could have the opposite effect. She'd need to find clean water soon, too. Any water she'd crossed in creeks so far had been undrinkable.

On the *Sea-Hawk*, she'd constructed a pretty good heat-based filtration system to turn seawater to fresh, but she'd had the advantage of materials that could be readily adapted to the project. There was none of that in the substation. Here in the windswept wetlands of, she assumed, coastal Georgia, she'd have to move further inland to find water she could drink. Even then, there'd be no knowing if it would be fresh or healthy.

There were so many things to consider when the normal, accepted, and coddling certainties of life had been taken away. Water, food, staying warm, and an ability to defend oneself were the life essentials now. When the faucets were turned off, the store was empty

and all you had was the ability to make one small fist, then the idea of fending alone was beyond daunting.

And then there was the consideration of her father, and where he might be at that moment.

As much as the pull of wanting to find her dad had been gripping her, the need to do it methodically and with the right tools was rising.

Before the supernova, she'd given Storm a collection of books for his e-reader about survival and prepping for disaster. He'd been bored with having to sit for long periods while recovering from the chemo, and appreciated some nonfiction that would have practical applications. She'd chosen the books for Storm on the basis that the two of them had a long-term plan to go and do some wilderness climbing when he was recovered. And so, the more they knew about the baselines of survival, the better. The knowledge she'd gleaned had stood her in good stead on the *Sea-Hawk*, and she hoped, now she'd found herself in a more desperate survival situation, that the snippets of knowledge she'd gained would continue to come in useful.

But those had to be considerations for the morning. In the night to come, she'd be warm, and the edge would be taken off her hunger by the candy bars—even if they offered only empty calories. She'd need proper sustenance soon.

Her eyelids became droopy, her knees drawn up under her chin. She caught herself drifting off a couple of times. It wouldn't do to fall asleep in front of the fire outside the building. The fire would eventually burn itself out, and who knew what the elements would throw at her? So, shaking her head, she stood, patting the last of the embers down with her shoe. She moved around the substation to the door, trying to avoid the cardboard-covered body lying five feet from the entrance.

That's when she heard the rattle of the gate as someone tried to open it.

She spun away from the door and looked into the well of darkness engulfing the far side of the fence. The sky had been overcast, not showing any stars or moonlight, the clouds having moved in as she'd sat by the fire. Any warmth and comfort she'd accrued in the last two hours had left her body now, leaving her shivering.

She was able to see a few feet beyond the fence, but see she saw no shapes, and nor could she hear the sound of movement.

It was possible an animal had brushed against the fence and clattered the frame in the small amount of play between it and the gate. But the sound had definitely been a rattle, not a single movement, as if someone was trying to see if it would open.

Tally's eyes, which had been staring into the ember's moments before, began adjusting better to the darkness. She could see the tall lattice of the nearest transmission tower stretched over that section of sky, and feel a thin breeze ruffling the grassy tussocks, and in the distance the call of a disturbed waterfowl crackled and croaked.

She wrapped her arms around her torso and took a step towards the gate, but froze before her foot fully touched down, keeping her weight on her back leg.

This could be a mistake. A big one.

If there was someone out there, and they were watching the substation, they were likely armed. There was a distinct possibility that there was more than one of them, and going towards the gate would provide a better target for their shot if they were about to make one. So, Tally turned, and with a near leap, bounded through the substation door and pushed it closed behind her.

In the darkness of the small building, she heard the raggedness of her breathing and the thumping of her heart. There'd be no sleep for her now, not when it was clear she was not alone. She would have to

find a way to get out from behind the fence without drawing attention to herself, with no weapons and no element of surprise.

If she couldn't do that, she'd be trapped there until the persons or person watching moved on, or found a way to open the gate for themselves.

The bullets tore into the wood by Josh's head as he pushed the shaking Poppet to the ground and tried to shield her from the gunfire.

The air was filled with the rat-a-tat-tat of small arms fire, and the decking exploded at their feet in a fashion that threw up dust and splinters.

"I said, don't move." Harve's voice cut across the space at the back of the mansion. "I'm not a sports shooter. I like my executionees to not try to make a contest of it."

Poppet was in a bad way.

She wasn't injured physically, and she wasn't necessarily terrified. Her body was being wracked by the ravages of acute alcohol withdrawal. It had been as much as Josh could do to get her to her feet and drag her out into the corridor, down the back flight of stairs to the rear of the mansion, and out through a window. Josh should have known something wasn't right when he'd said the word, "Poppet," and she'd answered, "Vodka."

They hadn't had any time to find her a barrel of Dutch courage. Matters were too pressing for that. Josh had wanted them both out of the building, then on the way back to the coast to find Tally.

Poppet Langolini was what in another time would have been called a *gangster's moll*. Her husband, Joey Langolini, had died helping Josh get her off the abandoned liner *Empress* in the middle of the Atlantic, killed by the ravaging bursts of machine gun fire from the supernova-affected crew. She'd been in the lifeboat with Josh and his daughter when it had smashed into the rocks, and like the others, had been thrown into the water.

Josh hadn't realized how much alcohol the fifty-year-old platinum blonde had needed to retain her equilibrium on a day-to-day basis. She'd located Captain Rollins' rum store on the *Sea-Hawk* within an hour of coming aboard—"I know where addicts hide their stash," she'd said, winking at Josh—and had kept herself busy drinking it while she'd helped them navigate back west to the U.S.

Obviously, being wrecked in the lifeboat without any alcohol, and then trapped on the rocks, rescued, and brought by Carly back to the mansion, had not been conducive to her performance. The first thing she'd done when Josh had picked her up was to be repeatedly sick on the floor, and then reach out a hand which had been vibrating like a jackhammer.

Josh had seen many drunks exhibiting similar symptoms on the streets of Jacksonville when he'd been a cop, but never in a woman from such a gilded background as Poppet's. The well-heeled very rarely suffered withdrawal from alcohol like this. They had enough money to keep their drug of choice flowing.

Poppet had hobbled down the corridor clinging to Josh. She'd just about managed the stairs, and then he'd had to heave her out of the window first before following her through.

It was then that the bullets had spat at them, freezing Poppet where she'd stood and causing Josh to move to protect her.

"Don't shoot!" Josh called to Harve, putting up his hands. "We surrender!"

Another burst of gunfire smashed into the wall.

“What makes you think I want you to surrender, fool? I just want to enjoy myself before I hang your carcasses with all the others in the avenue...” Harve called back cheerily, as if he was making arrangements to meet up for a drink and maybe a meal with an old friend.

“Harve? Why are you trying to kill my house?”

The voice was that of Trace Parker, his laconic Southern drawl unmistakable.

Josh risked a look up. Trace was sticking his head out of an upstairs window, looking with some distaste at the bullet holes peppering the clapboard wall of this aspect of the mansion.

“They’ve escaped, Trace. You know what we do with people who try to escape.... I thought...”

Trace sighed. “That’s it, Harve, you didn’t think. You’re like *three* bulls in a boutique china shop. Please try to work out why it is I might not want you to kill Mr. Standing right at this moment.”

Poppet was hugging onto Josh’s torso now. He could feel her trembling as he looked across the grass to the trees where Harve was standing. Harve was bare-chested, his suspenders hanging around the waist of his pants, and he stood in front of a white canvas field tent. A small cigar was bobbing in the corner of his mouth, and he held an Uzi outstretched in one hand while his other hand dug into his pocket and pulled out a fresh magazine.

Trace’s question was dumfounding Harve to the same degree it was baffling Josh.

Why exactly did Trace want to keep him alive? Not that he was complaining, but life seemed to be treated extremely cheaply here if the bodies on display in the avenue were anything to go by.

Harve’s face was nonplussed, and his mouth hung open on a slack chin.

There was a clink as the two pairs of handcuffs, the ones Josh assumed he'd picked up from the upstairs rooms, were thrown by Trace from the window to land on the grass.

"Harve, were both Mr. Standing and Ms. Langolini locked in their respective rooms, and were they both handcuffed?"

"Yes, Trace... of course, they were..."

"And you decided to shoot them before we found out how they got out of their handcuffs and rooms?"

"I... I..."

Trace scratched his head. "I can see the cogs whirring, Harve, but I can't hear the ticking. Getting out of handcuffs and escaping from locked rooms draws us towards two considerations. Firstly, are there any implications for our security here in Parkopolis? And secondly, Mr. Standing and Ms. Langolini are smart and resourceful. What kinds of people do we need to assist us in our mission in Savannah, Harve? What types of people, *specifically*?"

Harve clapped his mouth closed. Josh could see the burning resentment and humiliation in his eyes, but Harve didn't let it seep through the words coming out his mouth.

"We need smart and resourceful people, Trace. Smart and resourceful people to go into Savannah."

"Exactly. Sometimes, Harve, I think you don't see the big picture. Now, stop shooting my house, handcuff them again, and put them somewhere with a guard to watch over them. Clear?"

Harve slipped the magazine back into his pocket and, flicking the safety on the Uzi, dropped it back into his tent.

Josh would have enjoyed the moment so much more if Poppet hadn't bent over, retching and splashing vomit over his toes.



Harve had pulled Jackdaw and Steve off whatever duties they'd been engaged in to come to the mansion and keep watch over Josh and Poppet. Neither man seemed happy with the arrangement. Once again, Josh was struck with how much animosity there was between Harve and his two lieutenants, and then how much there was between Harve and Trace.

But he had learned some useful information before he and Poppet had been dragged back inside the house, only to be handcuffed through the bars of two chair backs in the center of a large dining room.

Josh assumed it was the dining room because of its size, not because of any furniture in it, because pretty much all the furniture had been removed, the carpets taken away, and the floorboards exposed. There were three chairs, two of which Josh and Poppet were secured to, and one that Jackdaw took, while Steve leaned against a wall. Both of their guards had Glockes on their hips and seemed more than a little grumpy about being there.

So, they were close to Savannah, Georgia, Josh thought to himself. Though, he had no idea what the *mission* Trace had spoken about might be and why they needed smart and resourceful people to go and carry it out for them. If they weren't prepared to go into the city themselves, what could be stopping them?

Secondly, Josh had never heard of a town called Parkopolis in Georgia or anywhere else for that matter. The connection to Trace's surname seemed on the surface to be a ludicrous notion. *What kind of person names a place after themselves?* he thought. That took a severe amount of hubris—but then, what he'd seen and heard and felt of Trace did not suggest someone who was unfamiliar with the concept.

Too many kinks in the situation to flatten out now. Josh needed more information, and the one person he hadn't yet pumped for that was Poppet.

He wanted to know if she'd come ashore with Tally, when she'd last seen his daughter, and what she remembered, but Poppet was still in no state to engage with questioning at that level of intricacy.

When she wasn't moaning softly or retching, she sobbed big tears down the front of her tattered and filthy blouse.

"Joey... Joey..." she said again. The delirium in her voice was plain to hear. She was coming in and out of consciousness as her body battled the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal.

"What's up with her?" Jackdaw asked, eyeing Poppet suspiciously. He'd already moved his chair back away from the woman as if he expected what she was suffering from to be contagious.

"She needs a drink," Josh said.

Steve held up a plastic bottle of water he'd taken from the leg pocket of his cargo pants.

Josh shook his head. "Not water. Something stronger. She's going through acute alcohol withdrawal."

"She's a drunk?" Jackdaw asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I... prefer... lush," Poppet almost whispered. It got the point across.

"You want a *drink* drink?" Steve asked.

"More... than life... itself," Poppet said, raising her head to look at the man. "But... you're not... going to give me one... are you?"

"Sorry, lady. Harve said water only. No food. No spirits."

"Pity..." Poppet breathed. "But... I suspect... it's for the best..."

"How so?" Jackdaw asked, genuinely interested.

"I can't... imagine alcohol is going to be easy to come by in America from now on. This cold turkey... might be a blessing."

Poppet's head dropped forward as if the effort of getting those words out had drained her completely. Steve shook his head and Jackdaw scratched his.

Steve and Jackdaw appeared to be the most reasonable people Josh had encountered since being washed up, but he knew that reasonableness was only prominent when you measured it against the murderous Harve and the chilling Trace. In normal circumstances, he could see the two guards as very much a threat; it was just that their particular brand of threat was being mitigated by more threatening folk.

"Why doesn't Trace want to go into Savannah himself? Or send you guys? What's so dangerous about Savannah?" Josh ventured.

Jackdaw's eyes fell.

Steve pushed himself away from the wall and looked at Josh the way a bad teacher might look at a slow child. "No alcohol, no food, no answers."

"If I'm going to be sent somewhere, then I'd like to know why. What's in it for me?" Josh pressed.

"What's in it for you?" Trace's voice startled Josh once again. He turned his head in the chair. Trace had entered the dining room through a door at the far end. He was walking towards them, but he was so light on his feet, it was almost like he wasn't walking at all, but rather gliding. Trace moved like a ghost.

Jackdaw and Steve snapped to attention. They were definitely afraid of ghosts.

"Well, let me tell you, Mr. Standing, what is in it for you."

Trace was dressed in a green linen day suit, and he carried his cane, but his spats had been replaced with brown leather shoes that had

been scrolled and carved with immense precision and skill.

He stopped by Josh and gave a small, hook-lipped grin. "It's quite simple, Mr. Standing. You get to live."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"I have no doubt of it, Mr. Standing."

Trace shooed Jackdaw away from the chair, set himself primly down on it, and crossed his legs with the exactness of a watchmaker placing a spring.

"As I'm sure you know, we are some five miles outside Savannah."

Josh nodded.

"Savannah used to be such a lovely city. Did you ever visit it?"

"No."

"A shame. I heartily recommend Harper Fowlkes House. A finer example of classical Greek revival architecture you'll not find in the South, Mr. Standing. Well, what I mean is, you wouldn't have found. I understand it's suffered a ruinous fire on the Night of the Madness. But I digress. Like many cities since that night, Savannah has fallen to those most badly affected by the events of that fateful night. They've become places, in just a couple of months, of high danger, disease, anarchy, and fear. I can't in good conscious send good stout fellows like Steven or Jackdaw here into that, can I? I mean, it wouldn't be fair, would it?"

"I suppose not." Josh had fully gotten the idea of the kinds of people Trace *would* send into cities like Savannah.

"Excellent!" Trace trilled, patting Josh on the knee with a plump pink hand. "I see we're going to get along famously."

It took all of Josh's strength not to flinch his knee away from under Trace's fingers. Trace seemed to pick up on this and, with a tight grin, gave a little squeeze.

"You see, with all systems broken down, the cities have become areas of great resources. Resources we need to extricate. Before the cities are razed to the ground by fire, or made non-traversable by vermin and pestilence. There is a clock ticking down, so to speak. We need to get in there and get out what we can before it is all destroyed. Food, ammunition, weaponry, medicines, water purification equipment. You understand, Mr. Standing, this is a grave emergency. We have to save as much of this for ourselves and future generations as possible."

"You're sending people into that hell?"

"Yes. I am. People like you."

"I take it all back," Poppet said suddenly. "I want a freaking drink, and I want one now."



Trace ordered Steve and Jackdaw to take Josh and Poppet outside to the cage, where he would join them shortly.

"Cage?" Josh asked as they were marched through the house, past the kitchen and out to an area of ground by a low brick wall that had metal shutters over it. The shutters were padlocked closed with thick chains and guarded by four men with H&K Mp5s at the ready.

"You'll find out soon enough," Jackdaw hissed as they approached.

Harve came out of his tent. He was shaved and had put on a clean shirt over his naked torso. Hair slicked back with water in a near approximation of Trace's widow's peak.

"Getting to the meat an' potatoes, are we?" he asked, coming over and looking Poppet up and down. "Not bad in your day, I suppose. Past it now, of course."

Poppet said nothing—not because, Josh thought, she was purposely not rising to the bait, but because her body was shaking with the DTs. Her jaw chattered, and the hands in the cuffs behind her back worked like whisks.

Withdrawal like this, Josh knew, could last from forty-eight to seventy-two hours. If she was lucky, she'd not suffer seizures or hallucinations. The DTs, nausea, and general body shock was bad enough without mixing in those specters of the condition. In many respects, it had probably been a good thing they'd not escaped together that night. She would have slowed him down, and as soon as anyone from Parkopolis had picked up their trail, they would have been caught.

Harve seemed a little unhappy his insult hadn't hit the mark, and so he rounded on Josh. "What did you used to be, then? Before the Madness?"

"I'm still what I was before. A probation officer for young offenders."

This amused Harve to no end. "*Young* offenders? Oh, that's priceless, it really is."

Trace approached from the mansion. The sunlight was generous and warm. Dappled shadows thrown off by the trees gave the whole scene a surreal atmosphere, and one of contradictions. So much beauty happening at a time of such ugliness.

Trace had his cane over his shoulder.

"So, here we all are. Mr. Standing, you're aware of what I require of you, and where I require you to carry out my orders. But there's just a couple more things to put in place, because of course you are so smart and resourceful."

"I'm still listening."

"You will be going into Savannah for me, and you will be going in with a squad of my other scavengers, but because of the extreme dangers you will encounter, I will obviously not be sending any of my own men with you."

Josh raised an eyebrow.

Trace nodded and tapped his nose. "I see you're already computing your chances of escape."

Josh began to open his mouth, but Trace put a finger to his own lips. "Please don't insult my intelligence, Mr. Standing; of course, your first thought was escape. You've already proved your motivation in that direction. So, let's not kid ourselves. I need you to understand, like my other scavengers, what the consequences are if you do escape, and believe me, Mr. Standing, you will, once we set you down on the outskirts of the city, be able to walk away. But, like my other scavengers, you will not walk away. You will instead come back here on schedule and with the items I task you with recovering."

Josh felt that wave of blue fiery dread once again shivering up and down his body.

Harve stepped over the small brick wall and began to unlock the padlock holding the shutters closed. The rattle of the chain moving through the two handles set Josh's whole body on edge. He wanted to be uncuffed. He wanted to be running. He didn't want to know what was in the cage because he knew that, whatever it was, Trace was sure that it would stop Josh from running away, and the look in Trace's eyes, that hungry avarice mixed with triumph, told Josh that it probably would.

"You see, my scavengers know what I keep in this cage, Mr. Standing. They know what I will do to the occupants if they run or disobey orders. They know I will because they've already seen me do it." Trace paused and licked his lips. "Now, Harve."

Harve pulled back the first metal shutter on a rusty, squeaking hinge and let it clang to the ground.

“Please, Mr. Standing. Do look in.” Trace pointed toward the dark space that had opened up beneath the shutter. Josh could see stained bricks just inside the rim, slick with moisture and smudged by mold.

He took a step forward toward the newly uncovered space. The first thing he saw, down in the dark, were a number of blinking eyes. At first, it didn’t compute. As if what he was looking at didn’t want his mind to comprehend it. A vision that was ashamed to lodge in his head. A sight that would rather have just moved on by and found a different head to make sick.

Then the overwhelming clouds of confusion parted, and a dawning horror cast its awful light over Josh’s thoughts.

He was staring at the tear-stained, dirt-smeared faces of at least twenty children.

Maxine had been sitting with her mother for three hours or more. She was trying to build up the courage to unlock the chains from around her ankles and wrists. She'd come into the almost bare room with her head in the right place—the place to defy her father and release her mom, who was curled up in the fetal position on the bed, wrists and ankles raw, her eyes hollow and her lips streaked with mucus.

But the roar and scream as Maxine had approached with the key had stayed her hand. Rage strained at the chains, fear exploded from the mouth, and eyes wept their confusion straight at Maxine.

So, she'd sat down cross-legged on the floor, out of reach of her mom's frenzy, and waited.

Three hours.

The mom she had known her whole life—the resourceful, wise, practical woman with a wicked grin, a sparkle for every occasion, and confidence that was infectious—had been erased by the effects of the supernova.

Storm came up a couple of times to make sure she was okay and bring her coffee. He didn't say much, just looking at Maxine with a face full of strained concern. It was moments like this when Maxine wished Josh—even the Josh who had become adrift from her affec-

tions—were around to run interference with his son while she dealt with Maria. Right now, Tic-tac could do with having a father around just to put an arm around his shoulder.

Maybe Storm would shrug it off, but it would be better all the same.

Each time he dropped in, Storm had squeezed her arm and left Maxine to the vigil—it made her wonder which one of them needed the support more.

For so many other people, the Barnard's Star explosion had also detonated inside heads and brought on a sickening madness that had seen Boston burn. Along the way to West Virginia, Maxine and her son had come across unholy amounts of destruction and many individuals who had not necessarily become insane, but whose levels of aggression had been tuned to the max.

Whatever had turned off all the electricity and machines had had a devastating effect on the population, too. Maxine didn't understand it—there had been a scientist guy on the TV being ridiculed for warning that something was coming. Something major. Professor Robert Halley, a pop-culture scientist with a '90s ponytail and a counter-culture hangover, had been on rolling news programs and a couple of talk shows where he'd obviously been let on for comedy value on the proverbial TV Freak Show. But he'd been right. Something had come. And now Maxine was looking at the most personal and devastating effect of that *something*.

Her mom. Reduced to a snarling animal who'd had to be chained to her bed by a husband who didn't know what else to do.

After her dad had gone with Storm to deliver the calf that had been breached in its mother's birth canal, he had come back to the kitchen of the ranch exhausted, covered in dirt and hay. His arms had been slick with the filth of a difficult birth, and Maxine had warmed some creek water on the fire so that he could wash. He hadn't spoken about the incident with the shotgun in Maria's room—that was obvi-

ously too raw, Maxine thought, and she hadn't pushed him. But at least he'd been talking.

He'd talked about the night he'd lost his wife.

"I was out on the porch with a beer and the radio. Mom was inside fixing us some supper. We planned to spend some time looking up at the nebula and enjoying the show. First, I knew something was wrong. I heard a crash from inside the house; a thud as your mom went down. I got up to come into the house and musta blacked out there and then. Hit by a headache that felt like I was being kicked in the temple by a mustang. When I woke, it was all I could do to crawl into the house. By that time, your mom was up wrecking the kitchen. Never seen anything like it. I tried to hold her, but she had the strength of ten men. Threw me away like I was made of paper. Snarling like an ornery dog and spitting like a wildcat. She started throwing anything she could get her hands on at me. Pots, pans, glasses. When she ran out of things to throw, I tried again to get hold of her. That's when she bit me."

At that point, Donald had stopped washing the skin of his arms and gripped the side of the sink like he'd needed to steady himself before continuing.

Maxine had placed a hand on his shoulder and realized in that moment that that was probably the first time she had touched her father in such a tender way since she'd been a small girl, back when the tall giant of a man had looked like he was bigger than the world. And now, washing the birth-dirt away from his skin and telling this story of personal tragedy, he'd seemed small enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

Donald had sniffed, nodded, and then dipped his hands back into the water to continue cleaning.

There are some things that you can't wash away, Maxine thought.

"My hand hurt like hell, and she wouldn't stop wrecking the place. I tried again to get her to calm down, but she wasn't listening. And then the second headache and blackout hit. When I woke up that time, she was already trying to set fire to the place. She'd grabbed a newspaper, lit it in the hearth, and was moving towards the window to set light to the drapes. Maxine... I didn't know... I just... so, I hit her. Just the once. Just *once*. I've never raised my hand... never would... just... I didn't know..."

Maxine had squeezed her hand over his shoulder.

"I know, Dad. I know."

"And she went down unconscious. I tied her up with clothes line and waited for her to wake up. Which she did, about ten minutes later. She was wild, Maxine, wild and crazy. Spitting, screaming, and growling. I went to the phone, tried to call Dr. Challis, but the phone was out. There was no power in the place. So, I carried her best as I could to the truck to take her to the emergency room, but the truck was dead. Nothing was working. Nothing on the TV, the radio, nothing. The world had gone dark."

Donald had begun drying his hands on a towel by then, scraping roughly at the skin of his arms, making the liver-spotted flesh red and raw.

Maxine had wanted to go further than just the hand on his shoulder, and pull him into a full hug, but hadn't been able to. It had been like the barriers which had fallen slightly were back up.

She hoped they would come down again in time.

And so, she sat with her mother chained to the bedside wall, with the key in her hand and her father's words echoing around her head. The desperation of his experience on that night rushing through her now.

What should she do?

Could she risk letting her mother free? Would that be too dangerous to Maxine, Storm, and her father? Would she be able to cope better than her dad? Or... would she find herself fighting on the floor with her mom?

Or would she respond differently to Maxine? Would she allow herself to be released, and perhaps listen and respond to Maxine's training as a nurse?

Maxine stood up and took a step.

Maria exploded from the bed in a savage whirl of limbs and blood-flecked spittle.



Tally's heart felt like it was about to burst out of her chest and drag her headlong out of the substation storeroom.

She was ready by the substation's door, breathing hard. Not from anxiety, but to oxygenate her body and get the adrenaline circulating that would prepare her for the explosive movements she'd need to carry out in the next minute.

The ladder she'd found in the back of the storeroom leaned against the wall. The dead man's rucksack, which she'd found among the pallets and crates, undisturbed by whoever had attacked him, now contained the cans of beer, the candy bars, rolls of paper to use as fire starters, an empty plastic water bottle, the lighter and the fire ax—blade in the bag, haft sticking up between the zippers at the top. The zippers weren't fully closed, so she'd be able to draw the ax when she needed to. She hoped she wouldn't have to, but that depended on what happened when she left. Her supplies were meager, but they would have to do until she got to the nearest town.

Tally had slept in the storeroom. The idea for the actions she'd decided on had come as she'd seen the toe of the ladder poking out from behind a couple of crates of circuit breakers and copper busbars. As

she'd lit the area up with the flame and lighter, she'd reached down and the ten-foot ladder had come out giving her the idea for what to do—as if her fairy godmother had touched her head with her glittering wand.

It would be a risky course of action, but when she considered all the angles of the situation she found herself in, it seemed the best. And it would give her the best chance of getting away.

She didn't feel entirely rested, because a few times every hour she'd woken to go to the door and listen for sounds of any activity outside. She'd heard nothing all night. Perhaps whoever had been out there trying the gate had moved on, uninterested in Tally, but she thought it more likely they were waiting, hidden with good sight of the gate to ambush her when she unlocked it.

But Tally wasn't going to unlock the gate. She was going to leave the compound by a different route. Now her limbs were warmer, her muscles more relaxed, and the sugar rush from the candy bars had given her the boost she needed; she was ready.

Opening the lock to the gate would leave her too exposed. She remembered that the mechanism was tight, the outside of the lock stained and old. There was no guarantee that the lock would open the first time, so the exposure wasn't worth the risk.

She'd reasoned that she couldn't stay in the substation indefinitely, either. She had maybe three days before her supplies ran out. She certainly didn't know how much fuel was left in the lighter. There was no water—just the beer—and less than ten candy bars. Those numbers didn't increase her level of survival in any way whatsoever.

So, she had to get out fast, and away from here even faster.

Thing was, moving fast through a complex environment of obstacles was exactly what her love of free-running—*parkour*—had prepared her for. She wasn't competition standard in the same way Storm was as a track athlete, but she was strong, wiry, and unafraid. All the

things that you needed to be a good free-runner. She'd gotten into the discipline in school, enjoying both the high-intensity training and the sheer exhilaration of flying over concrete, not to mention her love of the feeling of ground rush when hanging high up over space.

Based on that, she'd made her plan, and she was ready to carry it out.

All she hoped was that whoever was outside—if indeed they still were—would be cold and achy from their night in the grass, perhaps wet and tired, and Tally would have the drop on them.

Tally knew that there were too many overly optimistic thoughts in there, and that whoever was out there could have military survival training, making them very prepared for anything. The thing that suggested to Tally that this might not be the case was that anyone with military training, tactical awareness, and a pile of survival smarts would probably have been able to get through the gate or over the razor wire fence already, and would have made it into the substation compound during the night.

Tally's position, still in the storeroom, ready with rucksack and ladder—alert, awake, and crucially unmolested by person or persons unknown—made her more positive reading of the signs seem more likely.

The frenzied killing of the power worker could also indicate that there was no rhyme or reason to whoever had rattled the gate the night before. It meant the danger was multiplied if the killer or killers had returned through habit or instinct to the place the poor man had been killed, but Tally was sure she could outwit, and better, still outpace an adversary gripped by murderous rage—the kind she had seen from the crew on the *Sea-Hawk*, and the sort her dad had told her about from when he'd been on the *Empress*. Matching up against someone that crazy, but who still knew how to operate a gun, really didn't bear thinking about.

So. *Ready*.

Tally gripped the aluminum ladder with one hand, thankful it was light enough to carry that way, and reached for the substation door.

Three... Two...

Tally yanked the door open, twisted the ladder through ninety degrees to the vertical, and leapt through the doorway.

The day was bright and clear, and Tally worked on memory rather than sight. She didn't head for the gate, but swung left and headed for the fence nearest to the brick building. It was nearer than the gate by a good ten feet, and she was almost upon it, her eyes having fully adjusted to the bright morning in three seconds. Using both hands, she dug the base of the ladder into the gravel-covered earth and clanged the top of the aluminum ladder against the steel fence at just over forty-five degrees. There was a three-foot gap from the top of the razor wire to the top rung of the ladder.

Without thinking, Tally began to run upward without holding on with her hands, trusting her acutely honed sense of balance to keep her true. There were eight rungs, and as her legs pumped her up each one, she threw her arms wide—outstretched as the ground fell away beneath her.

Sixth.

Seventh.

Eighth rung.

Tally launched herself off the top rung. She had all the air she needed and flipped herself head over heels, clearing the razor wire with space to spare. She felt herself reach the top of her arc, and began at her highest point to prepare for landing.

Head and feet now on the right orientation, the grass on the other side of the fence came up fast. A drop of fifteen feet was nothing to a free-runner of Tally's experience. She put her ankles together, bent her knees, and prepared for impact.

Tally hit the grass with a *whoof* of expelled breath, and she carried forward into another roll designed to strip speed and momentum from her trajectory. Within a second, she was up and pelting away from the substation.

It was ten more seconds before she realized she could hear the *thump thump thump* of feet and the ragged breathing of someone in fast pursuit.

B*ut the children. The children.*

Flames gusted from the top of the Home Depot on East Victory Drive. They weren't even in the city proper, and the devastation was already immense. Pillars of smoke rose thick-limbed and black all around the horizon, between the myriad of trees which had been planted for shade, and the low roofs of buildings yet to be torched.

Josh gripped the MP5 Harve had given him as they stopped on Route 80, five miles east of downtown Savannah. The sky was a grayish blue—the haze of smoke from the forty or so fires Josh could see were scraping the color from it—and the particles of soot blown on the gentle breeze were catching in his throat.

"I could just shoot you now," Josh had said to Harve, clipping the magazine into the machine gun at the roadblock back in Thunderbolt.

Harve had winked. "Sure, you could. Go ahead if you want, but kill me, and six kids in the cage will be taken out and burned alive. It's only three kids for someone like Jackdaw or Steve, so you could off one of them and save three kids from a roasting, I guess. But yeah, go ahead. Any time you like."

Don't think about the children.

Along with the MP5, Josh and the men with him had been given a shopping list of items to carry back with them.

A *shopping list*. It sounded so ordinary. So insanely out of whack with what it actually represented. They weren't taking a trip down to the mall or going antiquing in New England; they were seven men walking into a burning city, filled with who knew what dangers, expecting to source items that had probably been looted already anyway.

The town of Thunderbolt was as far as Harve and the rest of Trace's men had been prepared to go along with them, and where Josh and the others had been armed. Thunderbolt was relatively quiet, and other than Trace's men, deserted. Everything useful that could have been taken from it had already been transported back to Parkopolis. But the quietness of the place was ultimately unrepresentative of the savagery that pervaded the air over Savannah like a pall of poison gas. Several bodies were hung from oak and palm trees lining Route 80, as warnings to anyone using this road to come out of Savannah. Other bodies lay where they'd fallen. Buildings were long burned out, and as they'd ridden into town on horseback, an all-pervasive sense of threat had been exuded from every broken window and wrecked car. A crude barricade was set across the highway about a mile west from where it crossed the Wilmington River.

Josh had been told by others in the scavenging crew that the last time they'd walked into Savannah from Thunderbolt, the Home Depot had as of yet not been burned, and so they were to go there first.

They hadn't been allowed to ride into Savannah, either, instead expected to go in and out on foot. "Why?" Josh had asked.

"You're more expendable than horses," Harve had replied.

Now, Josh and the five men with him were three miles from the barricade, looking out across the deserted parking lot to the Home Depot as fire and smoke looped up from the roof in thick gout.

“What’ll we do?” Ralph Plains was a dumpy, bald-headed guy who was losing his hair, sweating in the heat and at the situation he found himself in. Trace had the man’s son, a boy named Billy, in the cage.

Don’t think about the children.

Josh shook his head. “Looks like the fire has only recently started—which means it hasn’t spread, but will. It also means that the person or persons who set the fire are still around. It could be a trap to draw us in. They may have spotted us coming up from Thunderbolt and set this as a lure.”

Josh checked himself. He was talking like a cop, taking charge. This was his first trip into Savannah after finding out what hold Trace had on the small population of Parkopolis—their children—and the people he was with should be leading here. It was their children who were in the direct line of fire. Josh didn’t even know if his children were alive, but one thing he did know was that they weren’t in an underground cage waiting to be set on fire.

Gerry Hobson, a thirty-year-old architect from Thunderbolt, had moved out of the town with his wife and young daughter Sophie when half the population had gone crazy on the Night of the Madness; he’d been captured two days later by Trace. Now, he licked his lips and fumbled at the grip of his MP5. This was a man who wasn’t used to holding weapons, let alone using them. He looked at Josh like a drowning man would look towards a guy on the beach with a lifesaver. “Okay, Josh. You’re right. So, we should go on?”

Barney McClure, a fifty-year-old ex-Army sergeant with a buzz cut that was growing out iron gray above his ruddy, pock-marked face, shook his head. “No. We go in. I want to get this trip over and done with as soon as we can. I say we approach through the trees there, stay low, and go in an entrance furthest from the fire. I’m not prepared to risk my son by going further into Savannah than we need to. If we don’t get everything on the list, then maybe we reconsider. But I say we go in here.”

The three other guys nodded, Ralph and Gerry looking apprehensive, and Josh shrugged.

“Barney, I didn’t say what we should do one way or the other; all I did was suggest what might be going on. I don’t have a kid down in the hole...”

Don’t think about their faces. Don’t think about their eyes.

“Exactly,” Barney said, mounting the curb onto the grass shoulder at the side of the road. There was a path leading into the parking lot, and he started down it, barking back over his shoulder, “You’re not the one who has to shoulder the risks. We do. So, keep your opinions to yourself. We move out. Come on.”

The muffled crump of an explosion from somewhere inside the store caused them to check momentarily as they ran flat-out and heads-down across the parking lot. There was a burned-out Toyota Land Cruiser fifty yards from the store entrance, and Barney gave the signal for the seven of them to crouch behind it.

Josh looked around the side of the burned metal to the store. There were smashed windows along the front of the building. A couple of bodies lay on the concrete, bellies bloated. They’d been there a while.

“What can you see?” Barney hissed, tapping Josh on the shoulder insistently.

“No movement. The fire looks like it’s at the back of the store on the right-hand side, nearest the road. Can’t see anyone on the roof.”

“Okay,” Barney said. “We go left. Get around the back of the store and go in. Clear?”

Josh and the others nodded.

Barney led and Josh held the rear, looking forward and back as they ran, MP5 on his hip. He remained alert to any movement at all, but they hadn’t seen anyone since they’d left Thunderbolt—and that situation didn’t look like it was going to change any time soon.

You could just run. You could. No one would blame you. You could escape, get away. Leave Trace and his murderers behind.

The children. Don't think of the children.

He couldn't do it. He just couldn't. He wasn't built that way.

Protect and serve. That's what he'd pledged to do back in the day, back when he'd been a cop.

He couldn't leave those children to die, whatever it meant personally for him. It broke him inside, but he knew he couldn't make any other choice.

Trace knew exactly what to do to make people do what he wanted. He had his finger hovering over the button, and he was not afraid to press it.

Three days ago, when Trace had proudly showed Josh who was in the below-ground cage, Josh had already picked up on his increased breathing, his sparkling eyes, and the grin on his pudgy pink face. Trace enjoyed the power. Enjoyed turning the screw, and enjoyed exploiting the good in people for his own end.

What good man could leave those kids to burn?

Not *this* one.

Josh ran on. Towards the store, and towards whatever awaited him there. Away from Tally, wherever she was.

They made it to the rear of the store without incident. A dingy alley backed onto a wide area of dense scrub set between the store's service entrances and the Harry S. Truman Parkway. Beyond a caged-off storage area was a wide, orange roll-up aluminum goods door, next to a fire exit with a *do not obstruct* notice on it. They could see smoke rising at the far end of the store, but this section was clear. Ralph tried the fire exit door and it opened easily. It had either already been broken into, or people in the store had used it to escape.

Barney went first, and this time Josh followed him, keeping the 180 degrees to their right under observation while Barney did the same on the other side, and the others came in behind them.

They'd entered the warehouse section of the store. Hundreds of pallets and storage cages ranged around them. Most had had their contents ripped down and opened already. Guts of open crates and packaging materials were spewed across the gray floor. An abandoned forklift sat frozen; its front section speared into a tower cage which had toppled backwards into another. The driver sat dead at the wheel, and the smell of rot coming off him made Ralph gag and cover his mouth

More cages had been pushed over, perhaps by hand, spilling hundreds and thousands of wood screws and galvanized nails. And there under the forklift driver's rancidity was the clear stink of spilled oil insinuating itself into the rancorous atmosphere. When the fire reached the warehouse and met the oil, the place would go up like tinder. Time was not on their side. Josh looked up at the ceiling of the warehouse, and as if to confirm that assessment, he saw tendrils of smoke convecting through the roof girders and around the dead light fittings.

"We should split up," Josh said, and Barney flashed him a look of annoyance. "It you think it's a good idea," Josh added, trying to keep any sense of sarcasm to a minimum.

Barney didn't say anything because his eyes said it all. *I've told you once; don't make me say it again.*

Gerry pointed towards an exit into the store proper, some thirty yards away through the wrecked warehouse. "I've got no idea where to find the things we need in here. It's all barcoded. At least out there we might find the things on the list in the aisles since those have been signposted."

Before they burn, Josh thought, but he didn't say it.

Their shopping list—such as it was—was for tools, axes, saws, planes... indeed, anything that would assist woodworking efforts. Carpentry was a skill everyone would have to acquire; Trace had said to them before sending them off with Harve toward Thunderbolt.

They were to bring back any weapons they found, as well, and had been given directions to places beyond the Home Depot where they might find some.

Jackdaw had given them a bunch of empty rucksacks and duffel bags to bring back their finds, and enough spare ammo to get themselves out of any sticky situations where they might find themselves.

On the ride in, Ralph and Gerry had told Josh about roaming gangs who were not only fighting their own turf wars in the city, but defending Savannah from Trace's insurgency. Ralph and Gerry had been, they said, chased out of the Savannah Historic District already, and that was why, Josh reckoned, Barney had such a desire to get everything they could from the Home Depot and hightail it back to Thunderbolt.

"Oh my God!"

It was Ralph. Josh spun, bringing the submachine gun up at Ralph's alarmed utterance.

Ralph was pointing at the forklift. Now that they had passed the machine, they could see the other side of the driver.

He was empty.

Half his torso had been ripped away; the innards removed. There'd been chunks of flesh torn from his forearm and bicep. Teeth marks and scratches covered the rest of his skin, and there were places where enough of his arm and torso had been removed to show bone.

Bone that had been chewed through.

“Dogs,” Gerry said simply and without need. The injuries to the forklift driver were more than obvious.

“Okay—Josh, Gerry, and Ralph, you go left when we get through the door. Rest of us’ll go right.”

Leaving behind the driver and his hideous post-mortem injuries, the crew made their way into the store proper.

Although the ceiling, once they moved out of the warehouse, was as smoky as what they’d seen before, there was still no evidence of flame in the far corner of the store. There were pops and crackles as things were licked by flames, but nothing they could see. The two groups split, and looking up at the signage, Josh and his two companions struck out down the aisles, hemmed in by the orange, metal-framed storage racks.

Josh led the way, gun at his shoulder, trigger finger poised. Whatever had torn the driver apart might still be in the building, burning or not. The other thing that niggled at Josh’s mind was that, although the dead guy in the forklift was in an advanced state of putrefaction, he’d not been dead since the Barnard’s event. The body had been there in the forklift maybe two weeks, max. Josh had seen enough dead bodies dumped on waste ground to know this. There’d been too much damage to him to tell what had killed him—perhaps in his desperation to get away from whatever had attacked him, he’d climbed up on the dead forklift to get up onto the storage cages and just been caught there.

Maybe whatever had eaten his body had been chasing him.

Ralph and Gerry were silent behind Josh, maybe thinking the same thing. Whatever the dangers in the store, the fire was likely not going to be the only one.

They reached an intersection. The aisles here were full of displays for furniture and bathroom fittings. Many of the porcelain basins had been smashed in what appeared to be a frenzied orgy of mindless

violence. Other displays had been knocked over, and a couple of attempts had been made to set fires here some time before, though they either hadn't taken or had burned themselves out.

Josh looked up, trying to see the store signs which might tell them where the equipment they were looking for might still be found, but the smoke running across the ceiling was getting thicker, making the air hazier. He couldn't feel the heat of the fire, but the smoke told him all he needed to know about how desperate the situation was right now.

"If we haven't found anything we need in three minutes, I say we get out of here," Josh said.

Before Gerry or Ralph could answer, one of the tall display racks, filled with paint cans of all descriptions, began to topple to Josh's right. He caught a can of magnolia dislodging out of the corner of his eye, and had just enough presence of mind to step away from the teetering column and duck out of the way of other falling objects before a spray of bullets tore open the side of a garden swing seat to his left, sending sprays of torn material and foam up into the air.

Josh rolled onto his back and saw the bullets spitting from the muzzle of Gerry's MP5.

The high paint racks went over completely, and Ralph disappeared under a crash of metal and gushing paint.

Gerry was still firing over Josh, into the area beyond the fallen racks.

"Look!" Gerry was screaming as he fired. "Look!"

Josh swiveled and rolled onto his knees, gun up, ready to empty the magazine into whatever threat was there. But when he raised his head up to look through the racks, he could see nothing in the aisle beyond them.

Gerry had stopped firing. Ralph was calling for help from below the wreckage, and the smoke above had begun dropping ever lower.

In the after-echo of Gerry's gunfire, Josh thought he could hear running footsteps, but that sound was covered almost immediately by the detonation of a muffled explosion way off in the distance of the store.

This was crazy. It had been crazy to even come in here, and it was crazy to stay. He completely understood the reasons Barney and the others had wanted to take the risk, so they could make sure their kids were safe, but this mission into the burning store was tantamount to suicide.

"Keep watch. I'll get Ralph," Josh said, and with that he began kicking away the rolling cans on the paint-slick floor, trying to get to where Ralph was lying with just his feet showing from the wreckage, and his voice, filled with pain, calling for help.

He'd just about reached Ralph's left foot when a German Shepherd, snarling and howling, leapt across the aisle, aiming its glistening canines at Josh's throat.

And behind the dog came people. A screaming glut of half-starved wraiths. Pickaxes and shovels in their hands, and murder in their eyes.

T*hump. Thump. Thump.*

Tally couldn't distinguish between the thumping in her chest and the thumping of the footsteps behind her.

Tally had no idea who was following and no intention of looking back to see; if she didn't keep her eyes on the ground ahead, there could well be pits or natural furrows in the grassy earth that would trip her—even if her concentration only lapsed for a second.

She ran hard toward the next transmission tower in the line that stretched off into the distance. There was a rise in the ground to the left of it, which was the start of more solid ground than could be found here on edge of these wetlands. And there was a row of scrubby bushes and trees beyond that. If she could get to the tree line, she might be able to give the pursuer the slip.

Maybe.

Breath hot in her throat, Tally ground on, pumping her arms. The air was warm and humid in her mouth. Thick, almost. She'd been on a boat for more than six weeks and then shipwrecked. She hadn't done any purposeful exercise in all that time. Too wrapped up at the beginning in her anger at her dad for making her go on the trip to help him babysit the four female probationers among a complement of ten and an all-male crew. Then, once her anger had been dispersed

by the Barnard's Star supernova effects, she'd spent the rest of the time trying to keep herself alive against the savage attacks and the machinations of Dolan "Ten-Foot" Snare, the probationer whose level of aggression and cunning had been multiplied exponentially by whatever the supernova had done to everyone. Even she'd felt quicker to anger and more willing to get physical since the new smudge of the nebula had appeared in the night sky.

Tally didn't think the aggression that was driving her forward now had in any way been augmented, however. Right now, she was convinced she was running for her life.

Tally could feel the lactic acid building up in her muscles as they started to ache with the constant movement and exertion, and knew she would soon enough hit the wall between her desire to escape and her ability to carry out that desire. She would hit it and she would start to slow, and whoever was behind her would catch her.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The thudding footsteps were nearer. She was sure of it.

If she was going to go down, she figured she should go down fighting and with a weapon in her hand.

She knew she wasn't going to make the next transmission tower. She knew she wasn't going to make the tree line.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Closer.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

A hand on her shoulder.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Tally dove and rolled into the springy grass, reaching behind her head to the rucksack and gripping the haft of the fire ax. She pulled it clear as she came up, flipping the blade to face her pursuer and

screaming the most fearsome battle cry she could as it came upon her.

The cry died in her throat as the all-black, man-sized, alien ant monster brushed her ax aside with an armored fist and crashed into her.



"I don't want to hurt you," the ant said.

Tally had been struggling for thirty seconds as the creature bore down on her, straddling her shins and holding her down with black-armored hands.

"Stop struggling and I'll let you go. I had to stop you before you reached the trees!" The ant's voice was muffled and distant.

"I was calling to you the whole way, but the mask... it stopped you hearing me!"

Ant mask.

Gas mask.

The voice was that of a man, a young man. There were red hairs sticking out of the hood of his black coverall. He was covered in tactical belts and webbing, and his chest, arms, elbows, wrists, and knees were strapped with armor shards. His gloves had heavy protection on the back, and tactile rubber fingertips which were biting into Tally's upper arms.

"Let go of me!"

"I want to! I do! But if you keep running, running in the direction you were, you're going to die. Not at my hands, but because of the people you'd be running into! Trust me!"

The rush of fear and anger were running hot through Tally now, and she could feel her muscles tensing involuntarily as if her body

wasn't going to hold back getting this guy off her, whatever her mind told it to do. It was like she was trapped in the same body with an angry tiger.

She yelled and tried to free an arm, to reach for the ax, pick it up, and bury it in his face. Right in the middle of his face!

And then Tally caught herself.

No. Stop.

Don't give into the rage.

He's telling you stuff. If he wanted you dead or hurt, he could have done that by now.

A cool wave of rational thought splashed over her. She told her arms to stop resisting, and they did. She made her legs relax. She pushed the murderous thoughts from her mind.

"Okay. Let me up and I won't run. I promise."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll trust you. But if you are going to run, don't run that way," he said, pointing to the trees. "Trace Parker's men have an observation camp there, and anyone trying to get in or out of the city, they kill. Or worse."

"Worse?"

"You're a pretty young woman. Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"No."

The ant released her hands and got up off Tally's legs. Then he reached down, picked up the ax, and handed it to her. It felt heavy in her hand. She could have used it there to hack him down, and there

was still a bright nugget of that thinking at the back of her mind, but she suppressed it like she had before.

The ant trusted her enough to give her the ax. That had to count for something.

"We should get away from here. It's too exposed. If they send out a patrol, they'll see us. Follow me."

And with that, the ant turned and headed inland, but away from the wetlands and the transmission towers.



His name was Henry Grange, he was nineteen years old, and he wouldn't take off his gas mask.

They'd found a hollow in the grass where they couldn't be seen from the tree line. He told her, "Whenever I move into a new area, I leave the mask on for twenty-four hours. Precautions."

"Precautions against what?" Tally had been given a foil survival blanket Henry had taken from his pack. She'd offered him one of her candy bars, but he'd pointed at his mask with the shoulder-shrug equivalent of rolled eyes. She'd taken the bar back and eaten it herself. The survival blanket warmed her, though, and that warmth soothed her aching muscles. "Precautions against what?" she repeated.

Henry did the shoulder thing again and pointed at the mask. "Gas, obviously, alongside some sort of EMP attack of unknown origin. I don't know if the weather has fully dispersed the gas. There are still plenty of crazy people on the loose, burning and killing, so I guess they're either pumping new toxins into the atmosphere, or the initial bursts are lingering."

"There's no gas."

“How do you know?”

Tally had to admit that she didn’t know for sure, but when she told Henry about her trip on the *Sea-Hawk*, what had happened out there and how she and her dad had reckoned it had only started when whatever had hit the earth from Barnard’s Star had arrived, Henry refrained from again insisting the world’s problems had been caused by gas attacks—but he still didn’t take off his gas mask.

Henry stood up and, surveying the bleak landscape around him, said with finality, “We need to get out of here. We’re still too close to Trace’s men.”

“I need to find my dad.”

“Was he washed up the same time as you?”

“Yes. We were in a lifeboat. It smashed on the rocks. Me, my dad, and Poppet.”

Henry rubbed the top of his head with a gloved hand. “I’m sorry...”

“About what...?”

“I saw Trace’s men dragging some dead bodies out of the water.” He pointed back in the direction from which Tally had approached the transmission towers across the wetlands.

The news hit Tally like a blast furnace toppling over. Her legs throbbed and became rubbery. Even though she was sitting down, she had to put out a hand to steady herself. “Bodies?”

The gas mask nodded. “Two of them. Dead, for sure.”



“Dad! Stop! Dad!”

Maxine ran from the kitchen out onto the porch after her father. She hadn’t seen Donald with a shotgun in his hand since the incident in

the bedroom upstairs, where her mother was still chained. The shame of that knowledge thudded into her as she thought of it. Shame that she'd still not been able to find a way to bring peace to her mother or her family. However much training as a nurse she'd had, and regardless of her experience of dealing with difficult patients, she still couldn't fix this. And that hurt almost as much as feeling the desperation of the state of affairs she found herself dealing with now.

To Maxine, the family was the basic unit of life. You found a way to deal with things together, all facing the same way at the others' shoulders. But Donald was a taut bow string, Maria was in the grip of unescapable madness, and Storm wasn't out of the woods with his cancer treatment, while Josh and Tally were lost somewhere out in the wide Atlantic. Maxine didn't know what shoulder would be the one to stand next to now, or with whom she was going to face down the challenges to come.

"Stop!"

Donald was stalking across the yard, past the dead truck and the barn, heading for the road outside the M-Bar. The sky was big with a brisk trail of scudding clouds. It was going to turn into another warm one, but the trail Donald was leaving on the air was deathly cold.

The morning had started with the usual tensions in response to Maria's howling and screeching. Donald had thrown down his spoon from the porridge Storm had made them all and clattered out of the house, only stopping long enough to snatch his Stetson from its hook and plant it on his head.

"Shall I go after him?" Storm had asked. Since he'd helped Donald deliver the breeched calf, Donald had softened considerably to the boy and his daughter in the face of his family's dysfunctional condition. Maxine had advised against either of them following, though, until she'd later noticed Donald through the kitchen window... com-

ing back towards the house with a face that looked like a time bomb with three ticks left.

Donald had crashed into the house without a word, pulled the shotgun out of his cabinet, and, still saying nothing, had walked briskly through the door like a man who wasn't going to brook any disagreement over the action he was about to take.

Maxine ran after him, the warm Virginian morning sun casting sharp shadows over the earth. "Dad, wait! What's the matter?"

They reached the road. Donald broke the gun and slipped two cartridges into it, taken from his pocket just then.

"What's the matter?" Maxine was breathing hard, and she had to stand right in front of her father to make him even look at her. He was scanning the road and the surrounding land that sloped up to the mountain with a face that could take the tops off bottles.

"Damn them. Damn them all!"

"Who? What's happened?"

"In the night. We've lost ten head of cattle."

"Lost...?"

"I don't mean they've decided to go on vacation, Maxine, I mean someone came to the ranch in the night and took them. There's a bull gone, too. Plus, sacks of feed from the barn."

Maxine felt slightly weird saying the word, because it felt like a word you only heard in reruns of old series like *The High Chaparral* or *Bonanza* that she'd used to watch on TV when growing up a million years ago, but she said it all the same. "You mean they've been *rustled*?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Who by?"

That genuinely stumped Donald, but he was riding a fizzy bomb of anger and hurt. His knuckles were white against the blue-black steel and walnut stock of his gun, and his arms were shaking with the effort to grip it so tightly.

"You said it happened in the night," Maxine reasoned. "If anyone came here to steal overnight, they're going to be long gone by now."

"I'll find them."

Maxine put her hand gently on Donald's arm. "Dad, come on. You go after them angry and you're not going to find them. You'll just blunder around out there, and I pity the first person you come across."

He didn't look like he cared who'd done it, and Maxine believed in that moment that, if he'd seen anyone outside the ranch right then, he would have given them both barrels of his guns and then reloaded to make sure.

Donald fixed her with what Maxine recognized as the hardest stare in his armory. The one he'd reserved for her when she'd disappointed him with her behavior, or when she'd gotten old enough to talk back and point out the background hypocrisy of parents who told you to do what they say, not what they do. That look sent Maxine hurtling back down the years to crash into her younger self, and she immediately felt the danger billowing in her father. The danger of a spanking or a grounding. Maxine was ten all over again, and Donald was suddenly the tallest man in the world.

"I'm going and I'll thank you not to try to stop me. You can't move ten heads of cattle without leaving some trail for me to follow, and I'll follow them all the way to Perdition if I have to. No one steals from me. No one!"

Maxine knew this wasn't just about the cattle. This was everything he'd experienced since the supernova bubbling from the pot of his temper and burning on the stove of his patience. This was something

he could take charge of in a world where everything had been taken from him. Maxine had felt it, too, and she reckoned it was an emotion familiar to a million people who were still able to think coherently, rather than engage in utter destruction.

But that simple truth wasn't going to work on Donald. He was too fired up. Too riled, and he wasn't the kind of man to consider the psychological processes going on within him; Donald's world was black and white. Stress, depression, and anger management were things that only happened to other people. The way he saw it, he'd been wronged, and a man did what needed to be done in order to right a wrong. He couldn't do anything about the supernova, he couldn't do anything about Maria, but he could do something about this.

He struck off towards the fencing that bisected the road from the bottom pasture where the cattle had been feeding, and Maxine could do nothing but follow.

In the end, it wasn't Maxine's words that stopped him—it was the break in the fencing that had been created to take the cattle and feed them through, made by whoever had taken them. They'd clipped the barbed wire in the fence through and pushed three posts to the ground. Once they'd gotten the cattle through, they'd pushed the posts back up and high-tailed it away along the road.

Donald put the gun down against the fence and surveyed the damage.

"We need to get this fixed up now or we could lose the whole herd," he said.

The cattle on the other side of the fence were looking at Donald and Maxine with their big brown eyes. An accidental nudge from any of them against the broken fence, and they'd all be able to file out of the pasture onto the road.

"Go back and get Storm. There's some timber, barbed wire, and tools in the work shed. Load up your buggy and get it up here. I'll keep watch on the herd."

Maxine hesitated. She looked at the gun, and it seemed that Donald read her mind. "I'm not trying to get rid of you, I'm trying to save the herd. We need to fix the fence and then work out a roster for who's going to watch over the road overnight. As if we haven't got enough to do, without some scum suckers coming over here and stealing from us."

"If you're sure," Maxine said, knowing the quaver in her voice told the story that she herself was not sure at all. The whole idea of leaving Donald there with the gun really didn't appeal, but he was right about the fence. They were lucky the cows in this pasture hadn't made a break for it already.

"Yes. Now, go. For once in your life, do as you're told."

And that sealed it.

When she brought the buggy drawn by Tally-Two—the plucky and resolute horse they'd found on the road, who Storm had renamed after his sister in an echo of *'Tic-tac,'* his own family nickname—with timber and equipment, she was relieved to see Donald had been as good as his word. The shotgun was still leaning against the fence where it had been when she'd left.

Along with the tools, Maxine had brought some cans and canteens of water. They worked long into the afternoon, mostly in silence, fixing the fence and pausing only occasionally to rest.

When they'd finished the job to Donald's satisfaction, he picked up the shotgun and put it on his shoulder, looking down the road and then shading his eye in the still bright but waning sunlight.

"Shall we go back now, Dad?"

Donald took a long while to answer, but in the end, he lifted his Stetson, wiped the sweat from his brow, and replaced the hat first.

“Yes, but don’t for a moment fool yourself thinking this is over, Maxine. I’m going to find those SOBs, and they’re going to face a reckoning.”

And as Donald turned and began to walk back to the M-Bar, Maxine believed him, and she knew that it was going to take everything she had to stop him.

Josh forced his leather-jacketed forearm into the snapping dog's mouth and fired the MP5 one-handed at the advancing crowd. There were perhaps a dozen of them. Pasty-faced men and women. Clothes covered in filth, swinging picks and shovels.

The gun bucked in his hand, and the savagery of the attacking dog made the spray of bullets go over the heads of the nearest attackers, but at least it made them duck and pause. That gave Josh the half-second he needed to turn the gun on the dog and dispatch it with two bullets. It fell away fast, leaving a ragged tear in the fabric of his jacket and a mess of bloody slather, but the material of his undershirt was intact, and that meant his skin was, too. It was going to hurt and bruise like crazy, but he hadn't had chunks taken out of him like the guy on the forklift.

Some of the crowd, realizing they no longer had the element of surprise, were falling back behind a tall rack. Others, their faces as desperate as their lack of tactical ability, came at Josh.

He could still hear Ralph below the cans of paint, calling out, but there was nothing he could do for him until he'd dealt with this.

"Stay where you are!" Josh called. "Don't make me..."

But a stream of bullets spat past him. Gerry was already firing.

Two of the attackers went down with their torsos ripped open. The others dove for cover. Josh fired over their heads again. He couldn't bring himself to fire at a retreating enemy, but Gerry had no such qualms. Two more went down, squealing and writhing.

"They were running away, Gerry, they were running!"

Gerry fired two more shots into each body, stopping their thrashing once and for all.

"Don't care," he said, like a toddler being told off for behavior he thought was entirely reasonable.

Josh shook his head. The look of utter despondency on the faces of those who had attacked them remained fresh in his mind's eye. How crazy or without hope did you have to be to attack men who were armed with submachine guns? Why would they take such a risk?

What was going on in Savannah that would have caused such action to look reasonable?

Josh couldn't get his head around that kind of thinking, and so he parked it while he pulled at Ralph's exposed foot. "Cover me," he said to Gerry, mindful that, of the dozen or so attackers, only four had gone down.

Ralph, covered in paint of a myriad colors for almost the whole length of his body, came out from beneath the cans. However, not all of the red on him was paint. There was a sizeable gash on the crown of his head where a can had smacked into it, and the unnatural angle of his wrist suggested it was fractured. Josh, from his first responder training, knew people often sustained this injury when throwing their arm out to break their fall. The wrist bone would snap and the arm, at the point where it joined the hand, would take on a vaguely S shape.

It was going to hurt like hell to fix it.

“Keep your wrist hard against your chest. Stop it moving around. We’ll isolate it properly when we get out of here.” Josh held onto Ralph’s other hand and helped him fully to his feet. Ralph nodded and tucked his arm into his body, his face sweating with the pain.

A nearby rack still contained a few packs of paper towels. Josh took a roll from the cellophane and used it to wipe the paint from Ralph’s face, and then he pressed a wad into the injured man’s good hand so that he could hold it against the wound in his head to stop the flow of blood.

“It was a damn trap. A damn trap!” Gerry was swinging the MP5 barrel around, covering the whole aisle they were on as well as the aisles to the left and right that he could see through the racks. “They were waiting for us! Pushed the racks over to stop and confuse us, then come in with the picks!”

Josh was less interested in Gerry’s assessment than what was developing over their heads. Up above them, the smoke that had once been gray was now black, and much thicker.

“Can you walk?” Josh asked Ralph.

“I’ll run if I have to. Just get us out of here.”

“Okay, we’re near the front of the store now. Let’s go that way,” Gerry said, taking his newly minted tactical awareness role rather more seriously than he had when Barney had been giving all the orders.

“But that’s towards the fire,” Josh argued, pointing out what he thought was not an unreasonable reality.

Gerry shook his head. “Won’t you just stop arguing?” It came out in a plaintive whine, the sort of thing people having a fight over the dinner table at home might say—but not here in a burning store surrounded by murderous near-savages.

Gerry began heading down the aisle towards the front of the store. Ralph, favoring his weirdly bent wrist with a wince and pressing the

bloody towel to his head, looked questioningly at Josh. "It's better if we stick together, right? I can't fire my gun, and if those guys come back again, can you hold them off on your own...?"

Josh was almost at the point where he'd happily leave them both to their own devices. But then Gerry turned the corner at the end of the aisle, and a paint can slammed into Josh's back.

He stumbled forward, almost crashing into Ralph.

Ralph was already running as another can of paint smashed open at Josh's feet. The attackers were lobbing cans and other objects from behind the racks.

Josh scrambled up and hurried after Ralph.

They turned the corner to find Gerry on the floor, his head a mess of blood and torn flesh. Two attackers, thin and starved like those they'd seen off in the first attack, were beating at Gerry with a short length of mahogany.

Josh shot them both down and then spun away, crashing into a display of light fixtures.

"We're dead," Ralph said simply. "We're not getting out of here."

Josh could see there was nothing he could do for Gerry and there was no point trying, but he bent to the body all the same. He had to look beneath it.

Josh hadn't been able to see Gerry's MP5, and the cold fear of that knowledge gripped him as he rolled Gerry's lifeless body over in the vain hope that the dead man had fallen onto his submachine gun.

He hadn't. And that was immediately confirmed when Ralph's chest exploded outwards as he was shot several times in the back. Ralph went down with a sigh and rolled across Josh, taking three more bullets as he did so, all of which had been meant for the ex-cop.

Josh got up and ran.

Bullets zinged and spat as he turned down an aisle and began running towards the back of the store, towards the warehouse. The smoke was so much thicker now, and it felt as though it was curling around his head in thick swirls as he ran. There were footsteps behind him, and more firing, but whoever had the gun wasn't adept at running and firing at the same time.

Josh turned down a cross-aisle and skidded to a crouching halt, going down on his knees and turning. The person with the gun turned the corner, and Josh fired a ragged burst up their body to explode their chin and rock their head back.

It had been a woman.

The MP5 clattered to the ground and Josh retrieved it. He took one glance at the dead woman's body. Filthy and ragged like the others. There was a definite sense that this woman, and the others, were living some kind of terrible existence. A city like Savannah would have been stuffed with tinned food and other consumables. There was no real explanation as to why the woman looked so poorly nourished, or why she'd joined a band of others intent on killing anyone they came across.

None of this made any sense at all to Josh, but he didn't have any time to consider it. He had to get out of the store.

He jogged on, Gerry's MP5 slung across his back and his own gun at the ready. It was getting difficult to see more than ten or twenty yards ahead. He looked back to see if there was anyone else following him and rammed into a body coming the other way. In a desperate tangle of limbs, they went down. A gun fired, and three shots burst past Josh's left ear before he realized he'd crashed into Barney.

"It's me! Stop firing!" Josh shouted at Barney's blood-smeared face. There was a deep laceration to his chin and part of his ear was missing, but the biggest change in Barney was in his eyes. There was real fear in them—deep-rooted and unrelenting. He pushed Josh off him and stumbled to his feet. Looking around, swinging the barrel of his

MP5, Barney took no notice of Josh and wobbled off again in the direction of the warehouse. There was a star of blood growing between his shoulder blades, too, and with horror, Josh saw the short haft of a knife sticking out through the material of Barney's shirt.

Josh got up and ran after the other man. "Barney, let me help you. Wait!"

But Barney wasn't listening. He stumbled on, his feet loose at his ankles, making his gait all the more difficult to maintain. He slammed into a rack and almost went down on one knee, but with supreme effort, he brought himself back to standing and carried on towards the entrance to the warehouse, or what Josh thought was the entrance to the warehouse. The thickness of the smoke was such now that it was difficult to tell if the doors were twenty or fifty yards away.

The rack in front of them, full of faucets and other plumbing supplies, toppled, causing a sparkling rain of chromium plated metal to crash around them. Two cracks on his shoulder told Josh he'd been hit, but the worst of it had at least missed his head.

Revealed behind the rack was a row of attackers. They came swinging through the smoke with their picks and shovels. Josh brought the gun to bear, but a movement from the side of him told him he'd been caught in a pincer movement. A thick wooden haft smashed down on the barrel of Josh's gun so that the weapon got jarred from his hands. Another pick arced down above him, and it was all he could do to catch the wooden handle and begin wrestling against its owner.

Barney got off three shots before he went down in another flurry of blows. Three attackers around him, smashing again and again at his head.

Josh had just enough time to turn the guy he was fighting with around and use him as a shield against another pinch-faced attacker, planting the business end of a pickaxe in his compatriot's skull. Josh

pushed the jerking body at the man who was trying to twist his pick-ax out of his friend's head, looking around for his weapon. It had skittered away in the melee, far out of his reach.

"Gah!" Josh shouted, remembering that he still had Gerry's MP5 slung behind him. Ducking another blow from the side and pulling on the gun strap, Josh pulled the MP5 around and began to fire.

Two attackers went down with screams, but the gun coughed and died. There had only been six shots left in the mag.

Josh ejected the magazine and had just enough time to slam another into place before the last of the attackers were on him. He shot two of the five quickly and they spun away. But the submachine gun was useless for close-up fighting when the assailants were within arm's reach. One blow stunned his chest as a pick handle crashed into him, filling his head with pain.

He turned the MP5 around and began to swing it like a club.

The stock connected with the side of one of their heads, and the man went down with a yell. Josh continued the arc downwards, and the second of the three had his knee zig-zagged sideways as the bone and sinew within snapped and tore.

The third attacker looked wary for a moment, holding his pickax out in front of him. Josh could see the thinking going on behind his eyes. Was it worth the risk to his life to try to deliver the blow?

"Don't do it. Don't..." Josh said, his voice croaking and full of smoke.

"I... have... to," the thin-faced attacker answered. "I... have to... I can't..." His voice trailed away as if the software in his brain had rebooted and the program was set to kill.

With a scream of bloody rage, the attacker raised his pick.

Josh had already turned the MP5 around and unloaded half the magazine in the thin-faced man's chest.

"Thank you," he whispered as he went down.



The long slow walk back to Thunderbolt was punctuated by explosions from the Home Depot as the fire spread to the whole store.

Josh had made it out through the warehouse, and instead of skirting the burning store, not knowing who might still be inside if he came out the front doors, he'd climbed the fence into the scrub and run down to the highway.

Taking the off-ramp back onto Route 80 as the building had gone up, he'd heard the roof tearing back like the lid of a tinned can left too long on a campfire. Flames leaping up, licking at the base of a huge cloud of smoke. Looking back after nearly two miles, with the sooty banks of destruction rising high, Josh figured he'd be able to see the smoke rising from Parkopolis.

As he walked, he couldn't stop thinking about the last man he'd killed and his final words.

"Thank you."

Such torment in one body that the release of death was welcomed. Was this what the supernova had done to these people? Driven them on to murder and destroy, but left them with the insight that what they were doing was wrong? Had the particles, or whatever they were coursing through the atmosphere, plugged directly into people's aggression circuits so that they couldn't stop themselves from attacking, maiming, and killing?

He'd seen something like it back on the *Sea-Hawk*. The crew had turned on each other, and then those who had survived the frenzy had come for Josh and the probationers. But he'd never considered for a moment that the killing was out of the control of the mind of the killers. It must have been like being a passenger in a car driving

through a crowd of people at top speed. Having to witness the horror and yet unable to do anything about it.

No wonder the man he'd shot had thanked him.

The attackers in the Home Depot had been thin to the point of emaciation, their skin pale and their faces filthy. They had neglected themselves to the point of near starvation. Was that a factor in what had changed them, or were they refusing to eat and drink as a way of stopping the rage and aggression that had taken them over on autopilot?

Josh shivered in the heat. Was this going on in every town and city across the United States?

Was Parkopolis, even though it was sick to the very core under the control of Trace and his men, at least a place of relative calm compared to the rest of the country?

Josh looked back toward the rising smoke, and on past it to the broken city of Savannah, Georgia.

What on earth was it like in there? What madness prevailed? And would he have to go back in there again and again on the callous whims of Trace Parker in order to find out?

Maxine felt like she'd been walking all day, but when she looked at her watch, it was only ten after noon.

She was tired and thirsty, and she didn't want to be doing this—but unless she tried, the reckoning Donald had sworn would probably end in all their deaths. Certainly, that of her father, and she wasn't prepared to let that happen.

The heat was killing her, though, slapping her shoulders and heating the insides of her lungs like roasting meat.

Maxine rested in the shade of a tree, took a canteen and map from her pack, and drank from one while she consulted the other. She was still three miles outside Pickford, over rough country, and as she wanted to get there, talk, and return before midnight, she would have to press on.

She wished she didn't have to make the journey, but she could see no way around it for now. If the men from Pickford and their leader Dale Creggan weren't stopped from their course of action, then there'd be a fight, and that would be that.

Dale Creggan's men had come to the M-Bar two days before. Storm had seen them from an upstairs window and raised the alarm. Maxine, who'd been on *Pasture Watch* all night, had only recently gotten to sleep after Donald had relieved her in the field.

Donald had insisted on a 24-hour watch on the herd since the ten head had been taken, and although between the three of them they could do that, it didn't leave a lot of time for all the other things on the farm that needed to be accomplished. Tending to the other animals, feeding them and mucking out stalls, using the plow they'd borrowed from Mr. Tinkerman to prepare the fallow field for next year's cattle pasture, and a thousand other things. They had good stocks of food and live animals they could trade for goods and turn into meat, but preparations for next season had to be made. They'd also be plowing much earlier in the season than they usually would have because Tinkerman would need his plow back, so it wasn't ideal, but Donald had pointed out that they had to make the best of the cards they'd been dealt. But his first priority was building an enclosure that would keep the cattle safe at night so they could be better watched from the house; meanwhile, Maxine had pulled the night shift in the pasture and Storm had slept.

Maxine had been woken from her near slumber by Storm running down the stairs, shouting as he ran.

When she'd looked through the window, she'd seen the men, too. Three armed fellows on horseback. Stetsons, dusters, and boots, looking for all the world like they'd stepped out of a Western.

"We're from the Pickford Regional Government," a fat, nut brown man with a swarthy chin blue with stubble had said from the lead horse. The other two, White Hat and Black Hat, had hung back, but as Maxine had seen clearly upon joining Donald in the yard, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, both had had their hands on their guns, ready to lift them at a moment's notice.

"And what's the Pickford Regional Government?" Donald had asked, his shotgun across his chest. "I ain't ever heard of them."

Blue Chin had smiled. "It's an organization in its infancy. Dale Creggan has assumed the mantle of command, reluctantly of course, and he's sent us out here to spread the good news to you and your neighbors."

“Dale Creggan? The bloodstock agent? *That* Dale Creggan? I can’t imagine there’s going to be many thoroughbred horse racing for a while, so I guess he’s got to do something to keep himself busy. I didn’t even know he was back from Kentucky.”

Blue Chin’s smile had lost a little of its illumination over that. “Mr. Creggan’s organizational skills are what he’s offering to the community in these troubled times. He’s very public spirited.”

Maxine had raised her hand then. “What about the sheriff, the town council? What’s happened to the organizations who were there before?”

Blue Chin had looked at her like he’d trodden in something a guilty dog would leave behind. “Perhaps you haven’t been keeping up, lady. Like everywhere else, half of Pickford went crazy. We only just managed to fight them back and save a little of what we could. Unfortunately, there were none of the original town authorities left once the battle was over. Mr. Creggan and those of us who fought for the town have instigated a local government to run things in the area until the world we knew comes back. I’m Sal Laurent, and I’m one of your deputy governors.”

“I don’t remember an election,” Donald had said.

“There will be elections in due course, but for now we have to do some imperative things. We need to maintain the security and safety of those in the area, and we need to ensure those infected with the disease are removed so they can’t spread their corruption to the healthy folks on the farms and in the town.”

Maxine couldn’t believe what she’d heard. “Disease?”

Laurent had rolled his eyes. “Yes, disease. What else you think sent those folks crazy? Some kinda rabies, I shouldn’t wonder. A biological weapon dusting the country alongside the EMP attack that knocked all the machinery and power out.”

“How do you know it’s a disease?”

“Well, we don’t have no scientific proof if that’s what you’re asking. But it stands to reason that’s what’s going on. Some fast-spreading bug that gets in the mind, like rabies, and sends the carrier mad as a wounded cougar. We’re checking over the properties in the area, too. Make sure there are no more carriers around.”

Maxine had prayed that her mother, who was quiet at the moment back in the house, stayed that way. She really hadn’t liked the way this was going.

Donald had shifted on his feet. “Well, we’re all fine here, so you can go on your merry way, Mr. Laurent. If we need you, we’ll call.”

Laurent had thrown back his head and howled with laughter over that. “That’s not how it works, Mr. Jefferson. We also want to make an inventory of your resources so that we can see how we can best provide for everyone back in the town. Mouths to feed, you understand.”

“I think I’m beginning to,” Donald had hissed.

Laurent had raised a hand. “No need for animosity off the bat. Sir, we’ve all got to survive. In return, we’ll provide you and your family with protection and security. I’m sure you realize your cattle will be attractive to the more desperate elements in the community when food stocks start to run low, and that’s where we come in.”

Maxine and Donald had exchanged glances, the same thought occurring to both of them at the same time. It was the classic protection racketeer’s tactic. Commit an act of aggression against property or person, make them worried and anxious for their survival, and then turn up a few days later to offer protection against the threat they themselves had created.

“Oh, you do, do you?” Donald had asked.

“We most certainly do,” Laurent had answered, his smile back to full beam, but White Hat and Black Hat’s faces had remained stony, their hands staying on their guns.

"Turn your horses around and leave my property. We don't need your protection, and we're not submitting to any search or inventory."

Black Hat's horse had skittered as he raised his rifle. White Hat had moved his to shoulder height. Laurent had remained still, instead answering, "Now, can't we all do this in a friendly—"

"You ain't my friends."

"We'd hate to use force."

"Then don't," Maxine had told the man.

"You're leaving us little choice. We have to come to some sort of accord here. Let us see around the property, make some lists, and we'll be gone before you know it."

"You're pointing a gun at me and my daughter. We already *know it* and we don't *like it*," Donald had said, his hands tightening on the shotgun.

"You'd be down before you pulled the trigger, Mr. Jefferson. Please understand, this isn't a request; it's an order."

"So is this," Storm had called from an upstairs window just then. Heads had turned and looked up. He'd been hanging halfway out with a carbine in his hands, pointing it right at Laurent's head. "And this order, Mr. Laurent, is that if you don't do what my grandfather tells you to do, I'm gonna shoot you. And that'll be before your thugs have a chance to get to their triggers."

Laurent had licked his lips. "Okay, folks, let's keep everything cool here. Why don't we go away now and say come back in a few days? Three, maybe? In the meantime, you can think it through. You can either live here as you have and work with us, or we can come back with twenty men and run you off your property. Up to you."

With that, Laurent had turned his horse around and trotted out of the yard and back onto the road, his Hats following him.

And now, after a day of arguing with Donald that they couldn't defend the ranch from these men, and couldn't travel with Maria, Maxine was on the move.

It followed that if Creggan's men saw her mother and the state she was in, they would kill her because of their belief that she was diseased. Maxine, against Donald's express wishes and Storm pleading with her to stay safe—*"Don't take away the only parent I've got left, Mom! Don't leave me like Dad did!"*—was walking into Pickford to chat with Dale Creggan.



They'd made camp after a hard day's walking, stopping in a forest of longleaf pine on the outskirts of Pembroke. They'd avoided the town itself, in which fires were still burning, and settled in a gully near enough to a stream to get water, with enough dead dry wood on the ground to light a fire.

Tally had walked like a robot. Stiffly following the brisk pace set by Henry in his black body armor—black pack, black boots, black utility belt, and black NBC hood around his black, ant-faced gas mask. The boy was fit and had the stamina of two horses. Tally had had to ask him a couple of times to stop so that she could take a breather.

She hadn't told Henry that it wasn't just a breather she needed, but also to slow the thoughts and fear blasting around her head like shotgun pellets. The damage they'd left in the body of her thinking felt near terminal. Henry wouldn't talk to her about what he'd seen of the bodies pulled ashore. *"There's no time for talking now; we need to go,"* he'd said, and with that he'd marched off.

Tally had had a choice to follow or stay in an area without food or real shelter, and where there were people Henry said would kill her... or worse. Following the guy with the equipment, the plan, and the guns had been the only real option.

In Henry's leg holsters were two SIG Sauer P226 pistols. In addition to those, they had stopped in a hollow where a bag had been hidden which contained two AR-15s and ammunition for all four guns. Henry had lifted the bag with little effort and placed it over his shoulder, and then marched on without a word.

Again.

Late in the day, Henry had led them past Pembroke, which he'd said was a "No-mark town about thirty miles west of Savannah, but in an area where Trace Parker's men were not operating as of yet..." as they were "maintaining their ring of fear around Savannah."

Tally hadn't really known of what Henry was speaking, but the mention of Trace Parker, and the possibility that it had been his men who'd pulled her dad and Poppet's bodies from the sea, had welled up a mess of sadness from her gut to tear prickled eyes.

When the fire had been lit to boil water from the creek, Henry had given Tally a high energy bar from his pack to eat. It was chewy and nutty, but it did nothing to fill the emptiness inside her.

That had *nothing* to do with hunger.

Henry finally took off his mask as night fell, and his pale, freckled, almost feminine face was underlit by the flickering glow from the fire. There was the suggestion of a red-haired beard on a nondescript chin. A full mouth between well-defined cheeks sat beneath intense blue eyes and a high forehead. Out of the mask, his voice lost all of the muffled boom of having to speak louder to be heard. Freed from the plastic and rubber, and at the normal conversational tone, his voice had the twang of the southern states, with the attitude of someone who wasn't ready to let go of their teens. It alternated between the two timbres and occasionally had a harshness and directness that spoke of hiding awkwardness and overcompensating for shyness.

"Even if it wasn't your dad I saw them dragging up, if he's captured, he's as good as dead. And if he's not captured, then he'll need to get as far away from Trace and his boys ASAP or he's gonna *be* dead. I can see the look in your eyes, Tally. You ain't stopped thinking about going back since I met you. But trust me, you go back, you might as well have drowned."

Tally couldn't deny the logic, but the thought of leaving her father behind to a cold grave or the prospect of one filled her up with shame, regret, and some anger. "I can't just walk away."

"You can. Trace's men killed my dad and my mom. They burned down our house, and I only just got away with my life. They don't care, Tally. If you resist them, they kill you."

"And I can't just leave my dad to that, either. I'm sorry about your family, Henry, truly I am. But you have guns and equipment. Help me go looking for him. Please!"

Henry chewed on his own energy bar and fixed her with his Hollywood-blue eyes. "Let's think about this logically, okay?" Tally said nothing, but Henry continued anyway. "If your dad is dead, going back won't help, right?"

"I... don't..." Tally sighed. "No... it wouldn't. I guess."

"If your dad is alive and he's been captured, are we—you and I—going to be able to get him out of a heavily fortified base with perhaps two hundred men, who are all armed to the teeth and have a nice line in hanging people they have a beef with as a deterrent?"

"Unlikely."

"Now you're getting it. But, let's consider this: if your dad survived the shipwreck and wasn't one of the bodies I saw being dragged from the water, what would he do?"

"I don't know."

"Tally, you know your dad. One of the most important skills you need to stay alive is to be able to predict the behavior of others. We can't just exist by reacting to what happens to us. We need to think, weigh up, and prepare. We need to make the best guesses based on what we know. So, what would your dad do, if he was not captured and was still alive?"

"He would look for me."

"Exactly. So, where would he look? Where's the best place for you to go, for him to find you? If you want to be found, you go to a place where you can be found. A place you both know. It's not rocket science."

Tally was finding this all very uncomfortable. She hadn't even begun to mourn for the possible loss of her father, and Henry was making her focus on the practical and the believable. "I don't know. My home?"

"And where's that?"

"Morehead City. North Carolina."

"Is that where your mom would be? If she's still around, that is?"

"No. She was in Boston with my brother. He has cancer. He was having his last treatment of chemo there when this all hit."

"The cities are death traps now," Henry said, seemingly without worrying about how that information would affect Tally.

"Who died and left you in charge of optimism?" she demanded.

Henry's eyes flashed. But his face changed with a wash of contrition. "Sorry. I didn't... sometimes I speak without thinking. I..."

"It's okay. Cities are death traps. Go on."

"Population gone crazy, no sanitation and no power. Everyone out for themselves, it'll be chaos. That's why I'm avoiding them. If your mom and brother had any sense, they would have got out but fast."

Tally thought of her strong, brave, and above all practical mother. "If their minds weren't affected by the supernova, I guess they would have left. Yes."

Henry nodded. "And they would have made the journey back to Morehead? All that way?"

Tally thought, and then it occurred to her that perhaps they wouldn't have. "Morehead is going to be just as crazy as Boston or Savannah. Right?"

"Absolutely," Henry said, putting more wood on the fire.

"My grandparents have a farm in West Virginia. Nearer to Boston than Morehead City. My brother would be suffering the side effects from his chemo, so I reckon my mom could have made for there."

Henry nodded. "Makes sense. Any rural area that can be defended is going to be better than a city, town, or just being out in the open. That farm sounds perfect. In the short term at least."

Henry's face became concentrated in thought, and he counted out some calculations on his fingers before stopping and looking up, as if something else had occurred to him. "Your dad, if he couldn't find you here in Georgia... Assuming... well, you know what I'm assuming..."

Tally didn't want to countenance what he was assuming. "He might try Morehead first, but that's not too far out of his way en route to West Virginia, I guess. I think he'd head there."

"If he knows his stuff, I think he'd assume you were heading there, too," Henry said, his fingers flicking again as he nodded to himself.

"It's likely, yeah... what are you working out?" She pointed at his fingers.

"Oh, that. I'm just working out how many days it would take us to walk there. To the ranch. About twenty-five days."

Henry added more wood to the fire as if what he'd just said was the most logical thing in the world, and as if it were a foregone conclusion that he'd accompany her and get her to where she was going. He turned and began looking for something in his pack. Rummaging way down into it. Tally wondered if she should tell him that she might want more discussion about what they were doing and where they were going, but it suddenly occurred to her that everything he'd said had been logical and reasonable. Her dad... if he could... would make for there, and so should she. She kept her own counsel, finding that she didn't mind the idea of him coming along with her. In any case, Henry was off on another tangent.

He brought out duct tape-covered boxes from the pack, along with collapsible tools, two knives, another survival blanket, and a whole bunch of other survival gear.

It seemed like Henry's pack was prepared for any eventuality.

"I guess you're a prepper, right? Is that the right word?" Tally asked.

Henry half-shook his head. "Kinda. My dad was the expert. But he's dead now, thanks to Trace. This is all his gear. You could say I inherited it."

On the *Sea-Hawk*, Tally had become stronger and more confident since the disaster, just from having to step up to the plate and get things done. She guessed that a similar transformation had occurred with Henry. The necessity of survival driving his single-minded behavior. For her part, she'd managed to build a water purification still, and she'd persuaded some of the probationers to overthrow Ten-Foot when he'd been intent on abandoning Josh and sailing the ship away. She'd done things she never would have thought herself capable of because the moment had demanded it. Tally had a little survival knowledge, based on what she'd read in a rudimentary book on prepping and wilderness survival that she'd bought for Storm's Kindle. She'd used the little knowledge she'd accrued to good effect, but the *Sea-Hawk* had been a self-contained world with

finite resources and people. Here on land was another proposition entirely.

Henry had been thrust into a similar position, she reasoned, but the mainland was not a contained, finite area which could be traversed with predictable results. What he'd said about her father—if he was alive—made a lot of sense. Going back on her own to where the lifeboat had been wrecked, running the risk of capture or death would not help anyone. Least of all herself. She had to believe in her dad, and her mom and her brother. Believe they had survived and were all on their way to West Virginia and the M-Bar Ranch.

Because if she didn't, that would suck all the hope out of her world. Every last drop of it.

"Here..." Henry had finished searching in the pack and was holding something out towards Tally. It was a kind of bracelet, but not like one she'd ever seen before. It looked as if it was made from coiled climbing rope, and there were a number of embedded attachments among the coils of cord.

"What is it?"

"Put it on. It's a paracord survival bracelet. It's got a flint fire starter, scraper, compass, whistle, and parachute cord buckle all built in. If we get separated or our gear gets taken, it'll give you an edge until we get back together. You can have this, too."

He pulled out one SIG and unstrapped the holster from his leg and belt, handing it all over in one tangled lump.

"If you need me to show you how to use it, I'll teach you as we go."

"To West Virginia?"

"To West Virginia. We leave at first light."

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just send you to Harve and his boys for a little bit of their particular brand of fun, Mr. Standing. Harve has been champing at the bit since your aborted escape to have at you, and nothing I’ve heard so far minds me to stand against him having his way with you.”

Trace Parker leaned back on the red velvet chaise longue and sipped at his margarita, which a beautiful woman he’d called Lacy had been placing in his hand as Jackdaw and Steve had brought Josh into one of the reception rooms of the mansion.

The room had been sumptuous once, like the rest of the mansion, but now had a decayed glory—lots of cobwebby brocades and moldings, dusty mirrors reflecting the yellow candlelight, and furniture that had seen not just better days, but better centuries. There was a distinct smell of damp in the room, too, which all but made Josh wrinkle his nose.

Lacy was anything but matched to the faded decrepitude of the room, though. She was tall, thin, and looked to be made from cut glass. All her angles were as sharp as hell, and her near-black eyes seemed to slice Josh into chunks as Jackdaw kicked his calves from behind and made him fall to his knees. Lacy was in a tight black dress with a savagely V’d neckline, holding a thick pearl necklace over mountainous cleavage.

She'd arranged herself on the end of the chaise lounge like a complicated and beautiful piece of origami, and was proceeding to rub Trace's feet through his argyle-patterned socks. Trace had yet again changed his clothes and dressed like a young buck from an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel—all cravat and bright yellow waistcoat taut over his ample stomach, and a plaid lounge jacket above plus fours. He was taking his role as lord of this particular manor to extremes.

"You'll do what you want to do, Parker, but there's things you need to know about Savannah. Things that have implications for all of us. For all the country."

"I doubt that, Mr. Standing, I doubt that very much indeed. I only agreed to this meeting to hear what lame excuse you might have for coming back with nothing to show for your endeavors, other than the deaths of several of my hostages."

Josh had been hurried back from Thunderbolt to Parkopolis by Jackdaw, along with the other three men who'd survived the battle in the burning hardware store. The other survivors had told a story of scattering when they and Barney had been attacked. They'd run for the front of the store and made it out some time before Josh, then run all the way back to Thunderbolt empty-handed to plead with Trace's men not to harm their children in retaliation for the failed mission.

They were blaming Barney completely for the screw-up, Jackdaw had told Josh. One of them saying over and over that they should have listened to Josh.

That was no real consolation to the ex-cop, however. Gerry and Ralph were still dead, and the poor wretches still in Savannah—whatever proportion of the population that represented—were being tortured inside their own bodies. It was a horror story that washed through him with unholy dread. As if things weren't already bad enough. Josh had spent the journey imploring Jackdaw to let him see Trace, to tell him what he had discovered in Savannah. He hadn't known if Trace would even see him, or if he would be amenable to changing course, but Josh was going to try anyway.

While he'd waited outside under guard, Jackdaw had gone into the mansion to seek permission for the audience. He'd returned an hour later and taken Josh inside, telling him, "You make this good or this will reflect bad on me, Standing; and if it reflects bad on me, you're gonna suffer."

Josh knew he had rightly identified Jackdaw, the youngest of Harve's men, as the one who would listen to reason and maybe get him in to see Trace. If it had been Steve he'd spoken to, he didn't think his argument would have gotten through the tough exterior, and if it had been Harve who'd brought him back from Thunderbolt, it would have been an impossible ask—and probably gotten him a beating for his troubles. That it had been Jackdaw who'd met him at the roadblock was fortuitous, and he'd worked on the young man all the way back to Parkopolis.

But now that he was here in the presence of Trace Parker, all bets were off. It could go either way, and the conversation seemed more than likely to go down in flames.

"My problem is that I'm too lenient and too compassionate," Trace said, offering his other foot to Lacy to rub. "You failed in your mission. You came back empty-handed, and instead of having your head put up on a pike after I've roasted a couple of children in the cage as a warning to the others, here I am actually listening to you. When I sat in meetings—in a world that seems so desperately long ago—underlings would come to me with their ideas for advertising campaigns that I knew right from the first syllable would be a waste of my very valuable time. But I nodded, listened, and made these underlings feel like they were contributing to the company I had busted my backside to make ascend to greatness. You remember the Chucky Bar campaign, Mr. Standing? That was one of mine."

"I... no..."

Trace ignored Josh's negative and plowed on, his eyes sparkling with happy memories. And then, astonishingly... he sang. "Chucky

Bar! Chucky Bar! Your Best Friend Near or Far. Chucky Bar! Chucky Bar! The Best, Best Bar to Eat in Your Car!"

Josh had no idea how he was supposed to respond, and so he didn't.

"The genius of the Chucky Bar, of course, is that the blend of chocolate they'd created was deemed too hard on the tooth, too difficult to be successful, and then we at Parker-Leeming-Flambard—well, me specifically—came up with the idea of a chocolate bar you could leave in your glove box that wouldn't become all melty and horrid if it had been in there for a while. You must remember the commercial, Mr. Standing. The cartoon car running around the cartoon sun trying to get its sunlight fingers inside to melt the Chucky Bar? No?"

Again, Josh shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't watch much TV—well, didn't. I just want..."

Trace sighed and sipped at his drink. "A thousand apologies, Mr. Standing, I do tend to go off on a tangent sometimes, but the point of my story is a valid one, I feel. Too many times, my open-door policy to allow even the most subordinate of employees to come to me with their utterly worthless ideas meant I had less time to be brilliant on my own. And I'm sensing now that you're going to offer up something as inane and valueless as one of those imbeciles. And yet here I am, being compassionate and accepting. It'll be my downfall, Mr. Standing, you mark my words. It will be my downfall. Now you go ahead, and we can get this over and done with the least amount of pain... for myself."

Josh's head was throbbing with the surreal nature of the conversation, such as it was. There was a deep thread of threat and implied violence running beneath Trace's words. The entire set-up of Parkopolis was testament to that, but the blithe tone, self-absorption, and insanely confident self-glorification on display just piled weighty levels of present danger into the room. Trace was not only dangerous, but he was childish, mercurial, and unpredictable. The knowledge that he'd been a high-ranking advertising executive at the top of his own firm perhaps explained in some ways why men

like Harve, Jackdaw, and Steve followed him without the need to have those dearest to them threatened. Josh imagined that Trace Parker was indeed a very rich man and had promised wealth and control to those who followed him once things in the world got back into a more equitable condition.

Power bought with money and threat. It was ever thus. Pre- or post-apocalypse.

Which made the things Josh wanted to say even harder to articulate in a way that Trace and his ilk would find palatable.

Thank you. The last words of the man he'd shot in the Home Depot, reverberating through the moment. Josh would try for that reason alone.

Thank you. For those two words, if nothing else.

"The people in the city. The crazy ones, as you call them."

"Yes?"

"They're not crazy."

Trace laughed, and even Lacy suppressed a giggle.

"Have you been up close to them?" Josh asked.

"Well, I've shot a few. One needs a certain amount of intimacy for that."

Josh shook his head. "Have you tried talking to any? Captured any?"

"No. Of course not. For the first few days, they were setting light to my property and trying to murder me. That tends to act as a barrier to good conversation, don't you find?"

"Yes. I had similar experiences on the *Sea-Hawk*. But I've discovered something I think is significant. Something that might mean you

don't have to threaten anyone. Don't have to keep kids in cages to make people work for you."

Trace threw his head back and laughed, then stopped suddenly in mid-guffaw, dropping his eyes and fixing Josh with a stare made from razors. "I like keeping children in cages. It works. Why would I want to stop? Come, come, Mr. Standing, I'm feeling the boredom setting in..."

Josh held up his hands, the pistol in Jackdaw's hand already smooshed into his ear. "Hands down, now," Jackdaw hissed.

Josh put down his hands. "Okay, I'm sorry. Parker, the crazy people are not crazy. They can't help themselves. Something changed in their brains, something fundamental. But the people who attacked us were starving themselves to death because they couldn't help their acts of violence and rage. They're not in control, but they can see what they're doing is wrong. It's horrifying to them. One of them thanked me after I'd shot him down. He thanked me because death would give him some peace. They're not mindless zombies, they're victims, and we—you—could be doing something good. We could be helping them. We could find some doctors. We could find some medication. Round them up, maybe. Treat them."

"We could...?"

"This is not the way we should be allowing our fellow citizens to suffer, Parker. You have to see that. There's a greater good to consider here. For the future."

Trace handed his drink to Lacy, took his feet off her lap, and stood up, flexing his toes against the floorboards.

"What an over-developed sense of public duty you have, Mr. Standing. I would commend you if I didn't want to see you hung from a tree for wasting my time."

"It doesn't have to be this way."

Trace bent over at the hips, suddenly screaming into Josh's face, spittle spraying over his cheeks. "Yes, it does! Yes, it damn well does, Mr. Standing! You know why it does? Because that's how I want it! I am a king here. An unassailable king! Why would I want to work to fix this? What's in it for me? Hmmm? I ask again, Mr. Standing, what's in it for me?"

Josh knew then that he wasn't dealing with a remotely rational despot; he was dealing with a sadist who enjoyed inflicting pain. Someone who got intrinsic comfort from the misery of others. As Trace returned himself to an upright position, smoothing down his jacket and twisting his neck to a more comfortable position behind the bright yellow cravat he wore, Josh could see no spark of humanity, duty, or empathy left inside the man. Whether it had been there before was debatable, but perhaps the switches that had been flicked in Trace's head by the supernova had honed this part of his character to the sharpest of points.

As the gun pushed into his ear, and Trace retrieved his cane from the side of the chaise lounge, Josh wondered how close he was to death now. How close to the end was coming for him.

Trace Parker held the silver-topped cane across his body. One hand at each end. His arms were trembling slightly, and his pudgy face had a sheen of sweat over it that almost glowed in the candlelight in the room. Trace looked like he was building up to commit murder, psyching himself up behind those cold, wet eyes as Josh looked right back into them.

If he moved, Jackdaw would shoot him.

If Trace's hand dropped from the silver end of the cane so he could use it as a club, then he was dead.

Josh tensed; whatever happened, he would have to react fast. He was on his knees, so that meant moving explosively would be difficult. He didn't know how quick Jackdaw would be on the trigger, either, but it didn't seem he'd get far before a bullet was fired.

Trace let the gnarled end of the cane swing free.

Club it was. Death was coming.

Josh readied himself, knowing Jackdaw wouldn't fire before Trace made the first blow. He wouldn't want to rob Trace of his sadistic moment of pain and murder. Josh decided he would push into the barrel of the gun, hoping to at least slide it over the top of his head before Jackdaw fired. He could reach up and take the wrist to turn the arm, perhaps as Jackdaw let another round go with a chance of burying it in Trace's chest.

Maybe... but if the world was built from maybes, perhaps he wouldn't have found himself where he was, about to be sacrificed to the rage of Trace Parker.

Trace took a step forward, his mouth a slit. His eyes bright as gimlets.

Trace raised the cane.

Wait 'till it comes down.

Wait until it starts to move.

That's when Jackdaw will hesitate. That's when you'll have your chance.

But the cane didn't come down. The blow was not begun.

"Trace?"

It was Lacy.

Trace blinked. "Yes, my love?"

Trace bent his ear to her mouth, and Lacy whispered some sentence in his ear which Josh could not hear. Trace nodded.

"A good point well made, my dear."

Trace turned back to Josh, his hand back on the silver head of the cane. The death blow had been averted. At least for now.

"It seems there may be something you can still help us with. Mr. Standing. Now, isn't *that* a surprise?"



Poppet lay curled on a mattress under a filthy blanket when Josh was placed in the room with her. She was still sweating from withdrawal and shaking from the DTs, but there was color returning to her cheeks. The illness hadn't entirely run its course, but being without alcohol for this long was at least giving her a chance.

"What... what are you doing here?"

Josh sat on the floor cross-legged. They still hadn't bothered to handcuff him, knowing that there was little point—the room they'd put them in had no windows, the floorboards were solid, and he knew that after their last escape, there was someone waiting outside the door with a gun. And, anyway, why would he try to escape now? If he did, he would be consigning those children in the cage to Trace's whims, and Josh wouldn't do that until he knew how he was going to rescue them.

"In all honesty, Poppet, I don't know. I thought Trace was going to kill me where I knelt, and he got mighty close."

Josh shivered at the thought. The precariousness of life now hurt him. He was being held at the fulcrum between the madness caused by the supernova and the scourge of the sadism exemplified by people like Trace, who seemed above all to be using the advantage presented to them by this strange apocalypse to build power bases, subjugate populations, and live out whatever sick fantasies they might wish to. As a cop, Josh had met a number of evil people who'd truly been living across the line—but they hadn't been the majority, the prevailing condition. They'd been the exception. All that Josh had seen from the moment the supernova had become apparent was the entire flipping of society. Nature, they say, is red in tooth and claw,

but mankind had lifted themselves above that with morality, philosophy, laws, and understanding.

In a night, that had all been swept away.

And what was left in its wake was terrible and profoundly troubling. Josh had had no time until now to rationalize any of this to himself in any meaningful way, but now, after coming so close to meaningless death, he felt acutely the sense of meaning that had been sucked out of the world. No longer was everyone just working to improve the lot of their own or the world's people; it seemed now that all that mattered was who you could kill or steal from.

Josh felt the hollowing in his soul. All established norms had dissipated, and his family had been scattered in that uncertainty.

"I wish Trace would kill me," Poppet said sourly. "I feel like a burning train that fell off a mountain into the middle of an explosives factory. Just make it stop."

Josh held out his arms.

Poppet said nothing, but understood. She crawled off the mattress and put her arms around Josh. He hugged the shivering gangster's moll as much to comfort her in her withdrawal as to comfort himself in the intense swirl of uncertainty that surrounded him.

He didn't know where his children were, where his wife was, or how he was going to get out of this mess.

All he had was this hug.

It was a start.

Dale Creggan, ex-bloodstock agent, was brash, beautiful, and blond. He could have been anywhere between thirty and sixty years old, and exuded a macho charm, but he also had an impressive flair for emotional intelligence. He knew how to act soothing and appear entirely calm—even gentle—so that he appeared nothing less than authentic. In fact, Maxine thought that if he hadn't taken it upon himself to be a politician before the supernova, he certainly made a plausible one now. He sat in his office in the Pickford town hall, which had been built in a faux classical style, with Romanesque columns, a raked portico, and stylishly antique windows. It was a building that had not suffered the severe burning many of the other buildings Maxine had observed in her walk through the town. It was almost unique in that.

"We defended this building first and last," Creggan explained in answer to Maxine's enquiry. "It was some battle, but a bunch of like-minded folks congregated here as it became apparent that many in the town had become infected with the biological weapon dropped on the U.S. by foreign powers unknown. We fought a battle and then hunted down the stragglers. I see public health safety as my number one priority, Ms. Standing, I'm sure you understand."

"I see a difference between public health safety and protection racketeering, myself," Maxine told him, not bothering to correct his as-

sumption that she wasn't married. Whether he was being polite or not, she didn't care—she had no plans to make this man her friend.

Creggan held up a slim hand that was protruding from a fine Armani suit. His shirt cuffs and collar were stiff and white, his skin scraped clean. His eyes bright and his lips moist. "Now hold it right there, madam. I was given to understand that you came here to fix a problem, not make one. We here in the Pickford Regional Government want to protect everybody in the area, not just ourselves. We can't have pockets of people just hoarding their resources to themselves. How is that fair?"

"It's true, I am here to try to smooth things over, but if you're so interested in fairness, is it fair for your men to sneak up to our ranch and steal ten head of our cattle, just to put the fear of God into us?"

Creggan blinked, his face aghast. Maxine couldn't help thinking that it was the politician's version of horror. The kind of expression carefully cultivated for the audience, but also, she had to admit to herself that Creggan was good. He could fake authenticity with the best of them.

Creggan shook his head. "You have had cattle stolen? That's abominable, and I shall happily help you with the resources to find the culprits and bring them to justice."

Maxine shook her head. "Please understand, Mr. Creggan, that we will not stand by if our stock is taken in this way again. We will defend ourselves. We are putting contingencies in place to ensure it can't happen in the same way again."

"And I am glad to hear it. Truly. I mean to get a strong handle on crime in the district. We don't know how long it might be before the federal government is in a position to take control of the state, let alone the country. Until then, it is everyone's duty to maintain order and to equitably share the resources that we have."

Maxine put her hands on the desk and riffled her fingers. "In that case, Mr. Creggan..."

"Dale. Please."

"In that case, Dale, what are you willing to share with us?"

"I'm glad you asked. I'm setting up an administration here of the best talents in the area. We will have logistic skills, administration skills, law enforcement skills, and management skills."

"It doesn't sound like you have much beef, or pork, or eggs."

Creggan gave a thin smile. "No, indeed we do not. But how many cans of beans do you have? How many bottles of cooking oil? The Pickford Wal-Mart will have enough unperishable foods in its warehouse and shelves to share out to everyone."

"I saw the Wal-Mart as I was walking in this afternoon. It looked half burned. Like so much of Pickford."

"There was some stock lost, it's true, but, Ms. Standing, we saved enough. Enough to share."

Creggan pulled a ledger from a drawer on his side of the desk and took a pen from the pocket inside his jacket. "Why don't you tell me what it is you have and what it is you need, and I'll make sure it's delivered to you in the next few days when Mr. Laurent comes to take the full inventory of your ranch."

"We don't need anything. We're fine. And we'd like to be left alone, please."

"Ms. Standing, I'm sorry, I don't know if I've made myself clear, but this isn't an opt-out or opt-in scheme. This is about how we deal with the realities of life now. We don't want to pull rank on you."

"Then don't."

"Then don't make us. Ms. Standing, all we want to do is make sure everyone is provided for. We have children here. We have frail peo-

ple here. You must realize they need your help, too.”

Maxine had thought Creggan would take this tack. The emotional blackmail play. She told herself firmly not to be taken in by it. “Dale, if you were so concerned for us, I don’t think you would have sent your men to steal our cattle.”

“And we come full circle. Please, Ms. Standing, listen...”

“No. You listen. My father is not going to let your men waltz in and threaten us again. I’ve come here to try to warn you. I’ve come here to let you know we don’t want to be part of your club.”

“It’s compulsory, I’m afraid.”

“As I said, we have contingencies.”

“Then I think we’re done here, Ms. Standing. Would you like to borrow a horse to go back? It’s a long walk.”

Maxine wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. She’d walked there and was going to walk back. “No, thank you. The exercise will do me good.”

Maxine stood, turned, and made for the door.

“Oh, Ms. Standing, I must apologize for not saying anything sooner....”

She looked back, her hand on the doorknob to the outside. “Saying what?”

“Please give my kindest regards to your mother. Maria was one of my mother’s best friends when they were growing up. You knew that, I take it?”

“No. I’m sorry, I didn’t.”

“Well, my family did move away for a time, of course. My mother died so young, when I was but four years old. I would so love to come to the ranch to hear your mother speak of my family. In these

troubled times, the links we have with our past are so important. So, I know we have our differences, but would I be able to come over to speak with your momma one evening? I would so value that opportunity. And I'm sure your momma would enjoy telling me all about mine."

Maxine's heart cracked with panic, but she managed to hold her face together. "I'm sure she'd enjoy that."

"Good!" said Creggan. "I'll drop in as soon as I can."



The screams woke them at four a.m.

The fire had burned itself out, and although the night was close and humid, the sound sent a chill through Tally's body. The night had been warm enough for them to sleep out under a nylon survival sheet Henry had tied between trees to keep any unexpected rain off them in the night, and the loam in the trees west of Fairfax, South Carolina, was comfortable enough to sleep on. They'd made good progress over the last two days. Henry had told Tally they were now sixty miles north of Savannah, and if they continued in this way, they could be in West Virginia and at her grandparents' ranch in another twelve or thirteen days. Even faster if they could acquire horses.

Traveling parallel to Route 321 out of Georgia and into South Carolina, they'd been avoiding towns and keeping off the road for the most part. Henry had stopped wearing the gas mask due to Tally's insistence on what had caused the world's changes, but it was still hooked to his belt as a contingency, bouncing there like the deflated ghost of the Ant.

They'd picked up cans of meat and beans where they could, from wrecked or partially burned-out houses along the way. For the most part, it seemed people who had been affected had left their homes in

the initial frenzy, and what they hadn't destroyed or burned, Henry and Tally could take. Henry had insisted they didn't stay in any of the deserted houses overnight. They didn't know who might come back to them, and keeping away from people seemed to be the best policy right now. They may have been out of the reach of Trace and his men, but who knew what was going on in the rest of the country.

Henry's knowledge seemed sound enough to Tally, and to be honest, she was still too worried about what had happened to her dad to argue with him. The further she got from Savannah, the more heavily she felt guilt welling up in her, but Henry's logic was as sound as his knowledge of survival, and she'd decided to ride out the guilt. When they got to the ranch, and were hopefully reunited, then it would be a different matter. The thoughts skidding around her head had made it more difficult for her to get to sleep, but the hours of walking had exhausted her, and her full belly had made her want to curl up under her space blanket. After an hour of hard thinking that night, she'd drifted off.

But... the screams.

They snapped her eyes open. Henry was already up, SIG Sauer in hand, and he'd put his ant mask back on.

"What... is that an animal...?" Tally began, but Henry shushed her with a wave of his hand and then shook his head. He reached down to where Tally had left her own gun, took it from the holster, and pressed it into her palm.

More screams.

Not animal. Definitely. And confirmed when a woman screamed "No! Stop!" and there came a volley of shots that echoed through the woods, cutting off the scream with grim finality.

Henry pulled Tally to her feet by the arm and motioned her to get to cover against the rough bark of a tall and thick loblolly pine. With her face pressed against it, the citrusy aroma of the tree got into her

nostrils and went some way to calming her thumping heart. Henry had moved forward in a crouch and was nearly out of sight.

Tally racked the slide on the SIG in the way Henry had showed her yesterday—*“Push the slide, don’t pull it”*— and chambered a round. She understood the basics of firing the handgun but hoped that she wouldn’t have to. Theory and practice were two different things, after all.

The night was as quiet as a wood might get but for the wind rustling the tops of the trees, the occasional hoot of an owl, and chatter from a nocturnal bird. But right now, the absence of the screams and gunfire pressed a heavy silence into her ears and raised the anticipation of more of those supremely frightening sounds coming again.

She breathed in the smell of the pine through her nostrils and then exhaled through her mouth in the time-honored way of calming oneself further by taking control of her breathing. She’d learned that particular skill from Storm, who’d been full of neat techniques to help in situations of high anxiety—Tally had used them when things got hairy on a cliff climb and she’d needed to focus, and Storm had used them to calm himself when things had gotten on top of him after his diagnosis of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

Tally could hear Henry moving off. He hadn’t told her to follow him, and so she stayed put. The sharp snap of a twig in the loam, far off to her left, was followed by the heavy flutter of birds’ wings as something took off from between the trees and flapped up into the sky.

Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth.

Another crash through brush. A flutter of wings, and a howl. But the howl was human. Male. *Not* Henry.

A voice.

“No!” Male.

Shots.

The branches of the loblolly pine she was sheltering behind vibrated as two bullets slammed into it above her head. Other shots rang out. Crashing through branches, smacking into trees nearby, and further away in the dark. The firing was random. Wild and desperate.

Another yell.

Tally raised the SIG, finger in the trigger guard. She pushed her spine against the bark, ready to react the second she saw something.

But she didn't see anything.

A body running at full pelt smashed into her from the side. Someone had run blindly into her, coming out of nowhere in the dark.

Arms flailing. Breath hot. Crashing her to the ground with all their weight on top. Trapping her hand on the gun. Pushing her trigger finger down....

Firing off a shot into the howl of another scream.

The explosion, the concussion, and the clink of the spent cartridge trying to exit from the firing chamber of the SIG, then the body on top of Tally going suddenly limp.

Savannah was an open sore.

The gold-leafed dome of city hall, seventy feet high and dominating the skyline between Yamacraw Bluff and the twin pillars of the Talmadge Memorial Bridge, sat blackened with soot from fires which had been from within. The windows set in the white stone façade looked like eyes that had cried into too thickly applied mascara, completing the impression that the building, like the rest of the city, was bitter, beat-up, and broken.

The trawl through the city, following Harve's crazy instructions, had brought just one gun battle, that being a mile from Thunderbolt, which Josh and others had overcome with their superior firepower and solidly motivated desperation.

The dead bodies of the five they'd had to fire upon, who had come for them out of the shadows of a burned-out gas station, had been as emaciated and unhealthy looking as those Josh had seen before. It hadn't been so much a battle as his own party shooting fish in a barrel. To even call it an 'attack' was crediting it with more authenticity than it deserved.

'Suicide mission' would have been more accurate.

They'd made it all the way into the city without being attacked further, which at least offered a crumb of comfort on a day when they'd

been told by Harve that, if they came back empty-handed this time, the consequences would be unfortunate... for them *and* the children. And, this time, they were after specific, non-negotiable items.

Items that just added to the crazy and made Josh wonder whether the madness was rising around him in a drowning tide.

Josh had been taken from the room that morning, leaving Poppet sleeping and very much on the mend from her withdrawal symptoms. They'd both been allowed from the room under guard to see to some meager washing up the night before and then been given food. Josh hadn't been summoned to Trace for orders or more of his prissy grandstanding, and therefore he'd had to deal with Harve taking him down to a room in the mansion where seven other men, three of whom Josh recognized from the Home Depot debacle, had been assembled to get their orders.

The men were all hollow-eyed, dirty, and unshaven. Josh had been able to smell them as he'd been brought into the room. Timothy—one of the survivors from his first trip into town, a broad-shouldered, prematurely balding thirty-year-old—had whispered to Josh that they'd been locked up, beaten, and treated like animals since the failed trip. He hadn't been allowed to see his wife or visit his daughter in the cage to check on her—which seemed to be a privilege that had been removed from all the men in the group. Timothy's eyes had been wet as he related the update, and his head sunken.

"We can't screw up this time. We can't. You were right about the Home Depot. You're a cop..."

"Ex..."

"I don't care. I'm a damned dentist. You have experience and skills I've never learned or wanted. They've told us to look to you, Josh, and you better make it worth our while."

Timothy's fingers had been digging into Josh's upper arm as the man spoke, the quaver in his voice demonstrating high emotion and even

higher levels of anxiety. Josh hadn't been expecting this, not being put in a position of authority. He'd turned as Harve came into the room with his face thunderous—followed by Lacy, the epitome of cool calm.

Harve had unrolled a map of Savannah on a table, thudding stones down on each corner, high color in his cheeks. Not a happy bunny, Josh had observed. In fact, his face had held the same expression when Trace had slapped him down for considering shooting Josh on the night of the escape. Josh thought he'd caught a slight tremble in Harve's hand as he'd smoothed out the map. Another bad run-in with Trace? Sent there to be his errand boy? There was a lot of pride in that body, Josh thought. Pride that looked like it had been given a good kicking.

Lacy had observed from across the room, smoking a thin cigar held delicately between her watchmaker's fingers.

"You'll take Route 80 from Thunderbolt until you hit Drayton Street here, and head north until you reach the Savannah River at Yamacraw Bluff. That's your target area for this mission."

"That's right in the center of things," Josh had said.

"Top of the class," Harve had replied without humor, the color still high in his cheeks. As he'd leaned forward, the collar of his shirt had opened, and up on Harve's shoulder blade Josh had been able to see a fresh bruise with a small tear of blood weeping from a break in the skin. Had Trace been at him with his cane? It seemed like there was enough evidence to suggest it.

There was something very rotten in the State of this particular Denmark, Josh had thought with grim resignation. Every day and every way, the clouds lowering over the mansion and the impromptu settlement were darkening.

"I can't see there being any big-box stores there to get tools or equipment. It's a tourist district down by the river. It'll be all hotels and

cafes. What's Trace expecting us to bring back from there that's useful?"

Lacy had peeled herself off the wall and come towards them. "Trace isn't expecting you to bring back anything. The Harbormaster is."

Timothy and the others had exchanged fearful glances with each other at the very mention of the label.

"Who...?"

Lacy had rolled her eyes. "Just be aware, Joshua, that we are what you might call a subsidiary outpost here at Parkopolis. Part of a wider endeavor, you might say."

Harve had snorted his derision at that, Lacy stabbing him with a look in response. "Not in front of the children, Harvey. Trace is the master of all he surveys."

"For now," Harve had said.

"Harvey..." Lacy had pointed at Josh and others. Raising a questioning eyebrow.

Harve had shaken his head at her. "Who cares? They're all going to be dead in a day if we send them in there."

Josh had opened his mouth and Harve had exploded into action, a Colt Government M1911 drawn and being pushed into Josh's mouth before he could get a word out. Harve's eyes had smoldered furiously.

"One word. Just one."

Josh had offered the slightest of nods, and the barrel had been scraped back over his teeth and out of his mouth.

"So..." Lacy had begun, squeezing Harve's uninjured shoulder with the hand not holding her cigar. Blue smoke had tumbled from her nostrils and curled around her face. "The mission has changed. Whether Trace or someone else gave the orders is not important. A

decision has been made to concentrate on gold and silver on this trip."

Lacy must have picked up on the questions on Josh's face without the need for him to express them. "No, indeed," she'd said, "we can't eat, build, or heal with gold and silver, it's true, but it has been concluded that at some point in the future, systems of commerce will have to return to the United States, and precious metals will be the basis of that. In the absence of being able to get into the Federal Reserve, alongside the usual materials we'll take from the city, we'll also be collecting gold and silver. That is your mission today, and that is what you're going to do. Without question. Are we all on the same page?"

Josh and the others had nodded.

Jackdaw and Steve had accompanied them into Thunderbolt and to the roadblock. From there, they'd been armed with MP5s and, other than pausing for the brief gun battle, made their way easily down Route 80 to the intersection with Drayton Street before going north towards the river.

Cars had been rolled onto their roofs, windows smashed, and others set alight, evidence of an orgy of violence. In the closer-packed streets now that they were off the road, there were bodies everywhere. Dogs prowled between buildings, the stench of decay and corruption hung over the city now, clinging to the senses. If Josh had ever looked for a representation of Hell on Earth, he couldn't have imagined anything worse than this. They passed an overturned Mercedes SUV and disturbed a family of rats which had made it their base. The creatures scurried out of the windows in all directions—perhaps thirty of them.

One ran over Josh's foot, sending a wave of revulsion up to his gut. "I hate rats..." he said to Timothy, who looked like he was about to jump up onto a chair like he was a housewife in a stupid sitcom.

Someone else sent a line of bullets across the concrete as the rats scurried. Missed every single one, too, but did manage to disturb a clutch of more rats that had congregated in a rolled and burned Prius.

“Stop firing!” Josh demanded. “Leave them be. You’ll only bring more out and waste ammo. We don’t know what we’re going to be up against down the line.”

The shooter, Crane Lefèvre, a fifty-year-old with a paunch and what Josh would have described before the apocalypse as an *unfortunate* ponytail, made his weapon safe. “Sorry. Rats, man.”

Josh nodded and walked on, leading the wedge of frightened men. But now he kept as wide a berth as he could from all the vehicles in the road.

Without the usual coddling of city services—waste removal, working sewerage systems, and an operational power grid—Josh could see how a city like Savannah could fall back into the clutches of nature more quickly than he would ever have imagined. And with a population that was hidden or insane, unable to feed themselves or, in the case of those fully affected by the supernova, unwilling to do so, this would be a pattern that was repeating itself all over the country—or maybe the world.

He thought of his family’s modest house in Morehead City. Had his neighbors burned it down? Was it destroyed and derelict? Were there rats moving through his things?

Savannah was the big picture, but when Josh thought about the exact and the specific—his house and his possessions—his sense of terrified awe at what was happening in Savannah turned into a kind of personal grief for what might have been happening in his home. It wasn’t as strong a feeling as what he felt for his distanced family, but for the first time, the enormity of the task of not only getting the U.S., but even just his life back on track, took the wind out of him.

"You okay, Josh?"

Timothy, walking alongside Josh, was regarding him with an awkward concern. Awkward, Josh guessed, because Timothy was placing maximum store in Josh to get them in and out of Savannah alive, and anything that Josh showed on his face to suggest that he might be as terrified as the men he was leading would be a real destabilizing influence.

"Yes. I'm fine."

"You look like someone just kicked your dog."

"Just the rats, Timothy. Just the rats."

Timothy didn't respond, but Josh knew he didn't believe him.

They carried on along Drayton Street, hearing dogs barking in the distance and occasional small arms fire. Way off, perhaps more than a block away, they heard something substantial rumble and collapse. A dusty white cloud came up between the buildings to the west, the clatter of rubble moving down a debris field, and the harsh smash of glass assailing their ears as they walked.

The city was consuming itself.

They didn't speak, their hands holding tight to the submachine guns. Josh felt a buttery sweat between his palm and the grip-frame. Several times, he had to wipe his hand against his pants to get the skin dry again.

Timothy consulted the map he was carrying and pointed ahead. "Raynesford Jewelry up ahead. Looks like it hasn't been burned out yet."

"Okay," Josh said, wiping his palm again. "Brian, Grover, Luke, and Marty, you take Raynesford, and we'll carry on to the next stop. What is it, Tim?"

"Timothy," one of the other men said assertively.

In Josh's experience, when someone had no control over the bigger picture, they would often focus on the tiny things they *could* control. Things that might seem prissy or argumentative, but to them might leave a crumb of comfort on this table of terrors. So, with compassionate acquiescence, Josh clarified, "What's the next stop, Timothy?"

Timothy thanked Josh with his eyes and a slight nod of the head. "One more city block, then west on Bay Street and it's on Bull Street, opposite city hall. Berkovich Jewelry and Couture Pieces."

The four men indicated by Josh peeled off and started to find a way into Raynesford Jewelry. The scavenge team had been told to concentrate on high-carat gold, silver—no plate—and high-end watches of the Rolex type. It made no sense to Josh to be getting this stuff rather than useful gear, but they had their orders. "You know who this Harbormaster is, Timothy?" he asked.

The other man shook his head. "I heard the name, and I saw Trace's men look like the contents of their guts had turned to water just at the mention of it. They didn't give us chapter and verse and don't generally take us into their confidence. I just guess everyone works for somebody, and Trace works for this guy."

As if dealing with Trace wasn't bad enough. The level of evil he'd experienced emanating from the man was breathtaking as it was. But to know that there was a monster even the monsters were scared of was all the more unsettling, to say the least.

They turned onto Bay Street and made their way toward city hall. Someone had gone down the whole street and burned the trees. Empty jerry cans of gas, orange and buckled from the heat, lay discarded in several places. The trees had gone up like candles, and the stench of their ash was on the wind as it rustled their stiffly burned branches. Every so often, a fall of sooty powder would be dislodged by the breeze coming off the broad, gray expanse of the river. On the far bank, flames which were still burning licked around the roofs of the buildings they devoured.

The whole scene was one of desolation and destruction. It banged against Josh's heart. Such a terrible thing to have been done to a beautiful and historic city.

A terrible thing to be done to the world.

Rich and Walt, two solid guys in work shirts, moved ahead of Crane, Timothy, and Josh. The way they moved showed they wanted to get this done, to get back to their families as soon as they could. They'd been happy to take direction from Josh as they'd left Thunderbolt and gotten into the short firefight, but Josh could sense now that their impatience was growing.

The store they were looking for was on Bull Street, fifty yards down the road, just beyond the U.S. Customs House which was itself gray and burned out with hollow windows.

"Guys, hold up there," Josh called out, looking around. "Let's keep close. I know you're eager to get this over, but..."

"We haven't seen anyone since a mile out of Thunderbolt," replied Walt.

"And that should make us wary," Josh said. "Let's just keep cool and stay together. Okay?"

Ralph and Walt exchanged glances, but jogged back all the same.

They could see the length of Bull Street now. It had been barricaded at some point with burned-out cars. There were corpses on the sidewalk with terrible injuries. Some had been burned, and judging by the agonies of their contortions, that had probably happened while they'd still been alive.

Josh averted his eyes as they walked slowly past and arrived at the barricade. It had been crudely constructed, just cars pushed together. Josh couldn't tell if the side they were on was for the defenders to hide behind or where the attackers had swarmed towards it.

The cars were on their roofs, so there was some visibility of the street beyond. Josh could make out the façade of the store they were heading for. The security windows of Berkovich Jewelry had been smashed, but not broken through. The white stones above the store in the building overhead had been burned out, too, but the store itself didn't look to have suffered fire damage—on the outside, at least. What it was like inside, they would have to find out.

Remembering the rats in the cars on Drayton Street, Josh said, "Maybe we should find a way around the barricade. We don't know what's inside these cars. I don't want to be competing with rodents again..."

A scream of alarm behind Josh shook him from his thoughts of rats. As he spun, he saw that Walt was pointing back forty yards to city hall.

Walt cursed and took a fearful step back.

City hall was alive with bodies.

There were residents swarming from the doors, running down the steps. Some were climbing from the windows and dropping to the street clumsily, not caring if they stumbled and fell before picking themselves up. Their clothes were ragged and torn, their faces black with soot and dust—hair awry, cheeks pinched, and expressions wild. Soon there were fifty or sixty of them running towards Josh and the others.

For a moment, Josh wondered if they were running from something rather than towards something—as if there was something wholly terrifying behind them to drive them out of city hall towards the barricade.

But that thought was blown away in the same way his wariness of the rats had been by Walt's scream.

Because that's when the shooting started.

He'd fainted on top of her. The round Tally had been forced to fire as they'd gone down had torn the material of his shirt over his shoulder, grazing the top layer of skin and causing a drop of fresh blood to drip onto her cheek.

God, he was heavy. Tally was strong, but she was pinned thoroughly to the ground by the weight of the man. The unpleasant stench of sweat and long-unwashed armpits assailed her senses. She could also hear his hungry belly rumbling and feel his leg twitching convulsively.

It wasn't until Ant-Man appeared between the trees and hauled the dead weight off of her that Tally was able to breathe properly again. She sat up coughing.

"Is he dead?" Henry asked, pulling off his mask with a rubbery plop.

Tally shook her head. "No, I think he fainted. He hit me at full-speed and we went down together. The gun fired and he collapsed. He'll need something for his shoulder, but he's breathing just fine."

She handed the man's gun to Henry, who put it behind the belt at the back of his pants. "Did you see what he was running from?"

Tally shook her head. "No, I only saw him. When he hit me."

Henry grinned. "I heard a lot of crashing. There could have been other people around, crazies, but they're well gone now. I followed him back here to make sure you were okay."

Tally stood up and looked down at the body rolled against the trunk of the loblolly. He was perhaps twenty-five, with a straggly hipster's beard and a nose that had been broken and set sometime in the past. She couldn't tell how tall he was, but he looked long. His thighs and arms were thick, and from what she remembered from being underneath him, his limbs were somewhere between muscle and fat. He was carrying some heft. Gold rings shone on his fingers, and his jeans and bloodstained shirt looked expensive.

He stirred.

Tally knelt down, uncapping a canteen and holding it to the man's lips while Henry got to the first aid kit in his rucksack.

The man took an automatic sip from the canteen and his eyes flickered open. It was still too dark to see what color they were, but they were quick and sharp.

He pushed the canteen away. "We've got to get out of here. They'll kill us."

He tried to get up, but winced as the pain in his shoulder became apparent to him and caused his knees to buckle. Henry was back with sachets of sterile water, a wound pack, and tape. "Who's going to kill us?"

The young man shook his head. "I don't know. There were four of them. Guys, I think. They came at us from nowhere while we were sleeping. Killed the others... with knives or machetes or something quiet and sharp. I was lucky. I'd woken up for a whizz and was away in the trees when I heard the screams. They were in the middle of the camp... killing..." his voice faltered, and he held back a sob. "We don't have time for this. We have to move!"

Henry shook his head. "I've scanned the area. There's no one around. Whoever they are, they've gone. Guess it was more of the craziness we've seen everywhere since the attack."

"Did... did you find the bodies?"

Henry nodded; his face screwed up with the memory. It sent a shiver through Tally to see it etched so painfully in his expression. "Yes. There were three of them. A guy and two women. That all?"

The young man nodded and wiped his watering eyes with the back of a grubby hand. "They didn't stand a chance."

"What's your name?" Tally asked as Henry rolled back the young man's shirt over his shoulder and began to clean the wound. "I'm Tally, and this is Henry."

"Greene. Greene Davidson."

"Were they your folks?"

"No. We met a couple of weeks ago on the road out of Atlanta. Just fell in together."

"Like us," Henry said, nodding to Tally.

"Where were you headed?" Tally continued.

Greene shrugged, which made him wince again. "Nowhere in particular. We figured if we kept moving, stayed off the roads as much as we could and away from the cities and towns, we'd be able to forage enough to keep fed. We stayed in isolated places overnight if they were empty. Made camp in the woods if we couldn't find a place. It was okay... well, as okay as anything in this madness can be."

Henry finished dressing the wound and rolled the top of Greene's shirt back up, closing the tear in the material with a couple of safety pins. "That'll do until we can get you a new shirt."

Tally was still wrinkling her nose at Greene's stale body odor. He needed a bath first before putting on a new shirt.

Greene looked up at the crowding trees as their branches snickered in the breeze against the dark sky. "I'd feel safer if we were moving away from here..."

"You can stay here if you like. I'm going back to your camp." Henry stood up, then pulled his sidearm and racked it ready.

"Why?"

"Waste not, want not. First rule of survival."



Dawn began to show its sleepy face through the trees as they recovered what they could from the campsite. Greene had come with Tally and Henry because, as he'd said, he'd rather be with them than alone.

The three bodies had had their throats slit and had bled out where they lay. Only one of the women, the one Tally assumed she'd heard scream, had showed any sign of struggle, as there were defense wounds on her hands, and her face was a frozen mask of fear. Eyes open still, mouth wide, with a froth of blood around the lips.

They gave the bodies some dignity by covering them with cut-down branches, and then Henry cast his eyes over what they could recover.

In all honesty, there wasn't a lot *to* recover. The group had mostly lived from day to day. There were more empty cans of soup than full ones in a rucksack. Small water bottles which Greene said they re-filled as they went. None of them were hunters, Greene told them, or even knew the first thing about fishing, so they'd looted where they could and traveled as light as they dared. They didn't even have a tent or temporary shelter.

"I was a software developer," Greene said, recovering his own rucksack and hefting the strap onto his uninjured shoulder. "I wasn't into

the wilderness or any of that crap. But you can't stay in the cities now. That's actual suicide."

Henry agreed. "It'll be decades before we can get back to the cities. By that time, they'll have all been burned to the ground. And once everyone has stopped killing each other, who knows how many people will be left to go into them anyways?"

Tally hugged herself, then continued picking through a rucksack that had belonged to one of the women. She found clean underwear, and a number of paperback novels with lurid romance covers. Who had time to read anymore? And who had the strength to carry books instead of food? Tally shook her head. The three dead and Greene were only living on borrowed time anyway—*damn it*, who wasn't these days?—but it still didn't make the deaths any less troubling. If people were out there in the woods hunting in a pack just for the hell of it, their brains twisted by the supernova, then they should take that into consideration when moving and camping.

The trees around the clearing were closely packed and gave a claustrophobic atmosphere to the area where the bodies were now humped under greenery. The dawn light seemed to make the area more threatening than the darkness, though, because now she could see how vulnerable they were to a sneak attack. Too many places for killers to hide and spring out on them unannounced.

"I think we should get going; get a few hours between here and where we next stop. Henry?"

Henry looked up from where he was putting the remaining paltry number of soup cans into his rucksack. "For sure."

"Where are you headed?" Greene asked. The implication was clear—he wanted to come along, too. There'd been a hopeful twang to his inflection.

"We're heading north. My grandparents' farm in West Virginia," Tally answered, getting up and cleaning the dirt from her hands.

Greene's face showed that he wished she'd offered him the chance to tag along without him having to ask.

It wasn't that Tally had any real reason to doubt Greene, but there was something stopping her—a sense that maybe someone who was a little on the fat side, with no discernable survival skills or smarts, could be more of a hindrance than a boon.

And then she hated herself for even thinking it. He was a guy in need, and you didn't turn down a guy in need. What had she become?

Damn the supernova. Damn this world.

"You can come along if you want," she said.

Greene's smile rivaled the dawn light.



"No! Maxine, no!"

"It's just for the night. We take her up to the lodge. I'll make sure she can't get free and come back to the ranch, and when Creggan has come and seen the grave, and they've done their inventory, then we can decide what we're going to do next. There's no point starting a war now!"

Donald thumped the kitchen table and looked up to the ceiling, as if his eyes could drill through the timbers right into the room where his wife was imprisoned.

"If they come here, Dad, and they think she's infected, they'll kill her. That's what they've been doing in Pickford! Killing anyone who's been affected like Mom. They think it's a disease. A plague. A biological weapon. They might even kill us because they think being in contact with her has infected us, too."

Through the window, she could see Storm out near the paddock beneath an oak, digging the grave she'd asked him to. Storm was getting stronger by the day. No longer suffering from the chemotherapy he'd received in Boston all those weeks ago. The last course of treatment seemed to have done the trick, and it gave Maxine the hope that his cancer would never return. If it did, in this post-supernova world, then who knew how her son might survive? Storm rested his hands on the shovel and took a breather. His face was healthily flushed as he surveyed the mounds of dirt and sod he was creating.

"Tell Storm to leave the grave open. If Creggan comes here, I'm going to kill him."

Maxine sighed and reached across the table to take her father's hand. The years peeled away, and suddenly, feeling the back of his hand under her palm, her mind was transported back in a flash of teenage memory to a time when she would have reached for his hand, and Donald would have stiffened rather than responded. A time when she'd told him she was moving from the farm to the city to study, and that she'd made up her mind and that was that. Donald had stiffened in exactly the same way he did now, as if he were a dam about to burst with rage and anger, but because he didn't want to lose the control, he held himself in, denying the expression completely. Maxine imagined Donald doggedly putting the stones back into the wall of his self-preservation, which her notion of letting Creggan come to the farm, had displaced. Donald was getting himself back behind his baseline tortured equilibrium in front of her. He wouldn't make eye contact with her, staring instead at a spot on the wall behind her, his lips thin and bloodless. His eyes filmed over with tears that refused to fall over his eyelids' lips.

"Dad, please. He's coming up here tomorrow. I wouldn't put it past Creggan to come early, maybe even tonight just to keep us off balance. Let me take her. I'll make sure she's comfortable, and we can go get her as soon as Creggan and his men have gone."

Donald said nothing. The muscles at the side of his mouth bulged.

He said nothing.

But he didn't say no.



The lodge was the grand name for a shack that Donald had built deep within the pines and used for years as a place to store equipment and canned goods for hunting trips that had become less of an event as he'd gotten older. The door was still padlocked, and although one of the small windows next to the door was broken—perhaps by a falling branch in a storm—the lodge itself was intact.

Maria had walked alongside Maxine, across the fields and away from the ranch to the closely forested foothills of Alleghany Mountain. The day wasn't too warm, and Maxine had balked at tying Maria's hands together with farm rope, but knew there'd been no choice. What was strange was how Maria, still wild-eyed and tousle-haired, had come from the room without incident. It was as if the mere fact that she'd been locked up in the room had been the thing that had angered her the most. When they'd been outside the ranch house and ready to set off, Maria had faced the sun, as if drinking in the radiance of something she hadn't experienced for a long, long time.

Maxine didn't want to steer her mother on a lead, and so she'd tied a rope around each of their waists with a yard and a half of linking rope to keep her mother close as they walked—close enough, she figured, to catch her if she made a break for it.

Maxine carried the chain from the bedroom in her rucksack, figuring on using it when they got to the lodge to secure Maria overnight. She wasn't entirely sure how she would do that yet, but there were enough sturdy beams from when Donald had constructed it to provide a strong fixing point. She'd stuffed tools and fixings into the bag, too.

Maria had been humming to herself as they came into the trees, making childish noises of appreciation as they walked in their shade. She'd drunk from the canteen Maxine offered her—not holding the canteen itself, but allowing Maxine to bring it to her lips so she could sip at the water inside.

Once they sighted the lodge, five miles from the ranch and deep in the forest, it was already afternoon, and Maxine was ready to rest. She'd left Storm and Donald to finish the counterfeit grave, but had been exhausted enough already by her argument with Donald before she'd set off, and felt that tiredness all the more after their five-mile trek up to the tree line and beyond to the top of it. The weather was holding, however, and that seemed to be the only blessing visited upon them today in this hellish situation.

Maxine opened the padlock on the door and pushed it open on squeaking hinges. The inside of the lodge, just a dusty room with flat board walls, was dry and still. There was an empty gun locker affixed to one wall, its door swung open so anyone looking through the window could see there was nothing inside worth stealing. There were a couple of chairs, as well as a small table on which sat a cardboard box of canned meats. There was a wood stove to boil water collected from a brook running down from the mountain about five hundred yards to the west of the lodge, plus a couple of bed rolls tied with twine. There'd never been electricity in the lodge, but there were two oil lamps hung from hooks on a ceiling beam that would provide enough warm light to illuminate the space.

"Donald."

The first coherent word from Maria that Maxine could remember hearing since she'd come back to the ranch hung in the air for three or four seconds before Maxine could bring herself to respond.

"Mom...?"

Maria was looking next to the woodstove. On a small stool, covered in dust and cobwebs, was a battered Stetson. Maria lifted her tied

hands and pointed towards the hat. "Donald," she repeated.

The hat was one of Donald's cast-offs—filthy with age and frayed at the brim, but his all the same. And that moment of recognition from her mother blossomed a flower of hope in Maxine's heart, that Maria might make it through this madness.

Maria walked towards the hat, and, of course, the rope that joined them together meant that Maxine had to follow.

Maria bent, picked up the hat, and held it between her fingers. Running them around the brim as if she were reading the very braille of memory.

But the next words she spoke toasted the flower of hope in Maxine's heart immediately to ashes.

"Gabriel," Maria said, her eyes fixing Maxine to her as surely as the rope. "Gabriel Angel gave it to Donald."

The firing was coming from behind them.

Josh and the others ducked as the first ranks of people running from city hall went down in a welter of bullets. Bodies splashed down in their own blood as the machine gun rounds chewed into them. Josh couldn't help noticing the blissful expressions on some of the dead as they went down, as if they were happy to be released from their torment. Such was the rush of people from the building that the next wave began tripping and falling over the bodies of their dead and dying compatriots.

Josh and his men found their own weapons and set to firing into the crowd of attackers. The city-hallers began to scatter, running back up Bull Street and around the corners out of sight.

It was all over in twenty seconds, and a terrible silence descended that was only punctuated by the sounds of boots thumping over the hood of one of the wrecked vehicles in the barricade.

"Are you guys crazy? Don't you know coming out here in daylight is going to get you killed?" The voice was female and sounded like it had lived a thousand lifetimes already. It belonged to a thick-set woman who was nearly as tall as Josh. She looked to be in her mid-forties, with thick blond hair tied back in a rag. Her face was streaked with dirt and dust, and her clothes—denim shirt and pants

stuffed into the tops of tan leather cowboy boots—had all seen better days.

“No, don’t answer that,” she said, holding up her hand. “Of course, you didn’t know. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have done it.”

She’d been followed over the barricade by a man who appeared to be in his thirties, just as dusty and crumpled as the woman. He had a beard you could hide a rat in and was slinging an AR-15 by its strap over his shoulders. He walked stiffly past Josh and the woman to the straggling line of people who’d been shot. Those who were still alive, he dispatched quickly and cleanly with a Beretta pulled from a leg holster.

“We can’t leave them alive,” the woman responded to the look of distaste on Josh’s face. “They try to attack again. They crawl after us. If you don’t finish them off, then when they can’t get at you, you just hear them sobbing all night. It’s... kinder this way.”

Josh shook his head and sighed. The woman had spoken so matter-of-factly, as if she were reeling off a shopping list or what she wanted to watch on the tube that night. “I understand. It’s just...”

Josh didn’t get any further, as he was interrupted by Timothy groaning, resting his hands on an overturned SUV and suddenly vomiting copiously, only just avoiding his shoes with the spatter.

“It got me like that the first time,” the woman said to Timothy.

Timothy nodded as he retched.

Her name was Jayce Barker, and the man was Elvis Mandle. Once Jayce had gotten over laughing, like she said she did every time she introduced Elvis to other people, she led Josh and the others across the barricade and into the store next to Berkovich Jewelry and Couture Pieces. There was a nondescript entrance, a discrete frontage, and a name above the door, Ballantine, which didn’t in any way prepare Josh and the others for what lay inside.

It was a gun store. And not just any kind of gun store.

Beyond the nondescript entrance was a hefty security door which had to be opened with three keys. And through that was a glittering Aladdin's Cave of weaponry and ammunition. This was the kind of luxury gun store where billionaires sent their assistants to buy silver-plated Purdeys. There were racks and racks of high-end firearms from manufacturers such as the aforementioned James Purdey & Sons, plus Holland & Holland and Westley Richards as well as such Italian manufacturers as Fabbrica Armi d'Abbiatico e Salvinelli and Perazzi. There was a display for a BA338TP hunting rifle that looked like it had been made for a science fiction movie, which boasted not only a "Jet Lock Targeting System"—*Never miss another shot!*—but also a price tag that looked like it could finance a science fiction movie all on its own.

Josh asked Timothy for the map and the instructions from Harve. Ballantine's wasn't marked on the map or the scrawled piece of paper. That meant that Harve, Parker, Lacy, and whoever the Harbor-master they were working for was couldn't know about this place. Looking around the space with its myriad of weapons, Josh thought that if they had known about it, they would have been there already. In spades.

"We didn't know about this place," Josh commented, looking around in wonder.

"It's not the kind of place that needed to advertise," Jayce said. "It's the kind of place that, if you had to ask where it was, you knew you couldn't afford to buy anything there. Come on up. Meet the others."

At the back of the store was another security door that led to a set of concrete stairs placed next to yet another security door marked "Vault. Strictly No Admittance to Unauthorized Personnel."

Josh and Timothy exchanged glances as they followed Jayce and Elvis up the stairs. What could be kept beyond this door that needed to be kept away from the treasures in the main store? At the top of

the stairs was a cramped corridor leading to a small, wood-paneled office that looked like it dated from before the Civil War. There were the obligatory dead-eyed computer monitors, but also green steel filing cabinets, ink blotters, and leather chairs that spoke of quiet business acumen and whispered conversations. Beyond the office was a large room that, when Ballantine's had been operational, might have served as an area for entertaining favored clients. Long green leather antique armchairs set against more wood-paneled walls, a long mahogany boardroom desk, an empty fireplace, a drinks cabinet, and dark portraits in oils showing men in historic garb pointing their rifles and shotguns at various flocks of game birds, with their faithful gundogs at their feet to patiently guard a brace of pheasants. If it hadn't been for the motley crew of Jayce's people, numbering around ten, and the sheepish faces of the men Josh had sent to Raynesford Jewelry, he might have thought he'd been transported back in time to Merrie Olde England in a time machine.

In front of them, Crane stood up and sketched an embarrassed wave.

"Sorry," he said. "Jayce and her boys picked us up before we had a chance to get anything and brought us here. They were going to come looking for you guys, but when we told them where you were headed, they knew they just had to wait for you to fetch up here."

Jayce smiled and crashed her bulk down on one of the sofas. "Well, aren't we all a happy family? So, you're the guys who've been keeping us locked down in this city with a bunch of crazies—shooting at us whenever we try to get out. Give me a really good reason why we shouldn't just shoot you ourselves?"

Josh stood his ground. "I guess if you'd wanted us to be dead, you wouldn't have saved us at the barricade."

"Good point," Jayce said, her face becoming grave. "Crane here told me the story. Luckily for you, we found him first, or we really would have left you to the crazies."

The mood settled into one of exchanging information and introductions. Elvis and Jayce had met up on the night when the effects of the Barnard's Star supernova had come down on everyone. She'd been a detective in the Savannah PD and Elvis had worked in Ballantine's. They'd taken refuge here, as the city had turned to chaos, and collected a number of sane compatriots to do what they could to survive the initial mayhem. When things had seemed hopeless, and it had become clear that the government or the National Guard weren't going to turn up to bring order, they'd tried to leave the city. But at every turn, they'd met resistance from Parker's teams of killers. They hadn't really known who was behind stopping people leaving Savannah, or why they were doing it, but had sure enough understood that no one was meant to get out. "We thought it might be a plague? That maybe we were all infected? But Crane tells us it's all because some headbanger named Trace Parker is working for a bigger headbanger called the Harbormaster. And we're basically just crossfire fodder. That about the size of it?"

"If only it was," Timothy said. He looked at Crane. "Did you tell them about the kids?"

Crane nodded. "But I don't think they believed me."

"Sounds like something out of a horror movie. I'm really having trouble getting my head around it," Jayce said, looking like she thought someone wasn't totally on the level.

So, Josh and Timothy put the jaws of Jayce and her buddies on the floor as they corroborated Crane's information about their children, the cage, and what would happen to them if they didn't return with armfuls of gold and diamonds.

In a world where everything had already fallen off the hinges, hearing about the plight of the children sucked the air out of the room. When Josh and Timothy had finished, all that could be heard was the ticking of a carriage clock on the marble mantle above the fireplace.

The only thing Jayce could think to do, it appeared, was to change the subject. To focus on something, she *could* fit into her head.

"Salvage jewelry? That's insane," Jayce said.

"Not as insane as putting these guys' kids in cages," Josh spat. "But there's no talking to Parker. Believe me, I tried, and I have the bruises to prove it."

"I'm sorry." Jayce gave a small shake of her head and puffed out her cheeks. Elvis was looking at his shoes, and the others were expressing their sympathies through their eyes.

"Thanks," said Timothy. "But because of that, we can't stay here. We have to get back. Soon."

Josh filled in some gaps. "I think Parker's hoping that driving you all back into the city to do all the killing for him will sanitize the place. He figures guys like you will wipe out the crazies, and then he can come in and mop up after you. But it was taking too long, and there's pressure on him from above. So, he's been sending people like us in to salvage what we can. But it's inefficient and costly."

"We've got a pretty good thing going here right now. Plenty of food, more ammo than we can use, and if we can get that vault open, we'll have enough firepower to break us out of the city past Parker's men," Jayce said.

Josh raised an eyebrow. "Firepower?"

"RPGs and grenade launchers," Elvis said, and the huddle of Jayce's guys smiled and nodded. "Ballantine's did a little... arms dealing on the side."

Elvis looked at Jayce. "But don't tell the cops."

Jayce held up her hand in mock surrender. "Elvis, I swear on your grave at Graceland that your corporate secrets are safe with me."

Elvis smiled and Jayce playfully punched his shoulder—and silence, save the ticking of the clock, came back to the room. As the slanting rays of the horizon-bound sun painted the walls a deep orange, Josh thought it could not be lost on any of them how stuck they all were in an impossible situation.

And then something shifted within his thoughts. Shifted them from the dark towards the light.

He filled the vacuum. “As Timothy said, we need to get back to Thunderbolt soon with the loot, but I think I have an idea how we can work something out for all of us.”



They made it back to Thunderbolt largely unmolested—what roaming threats there were kept themselves to themselves. The real threat to Josh and the others was from Timothy.

“It’s not going to work,” he kept telling Josh as they walked. Crane and the others were theoretically onboard, but Timothy, the dentist, was becoming a toothache in the middle of Josh’s plan.

“It will if you hold your nerve and keep your mouth shut.”

“You’re playing with our children’s lives! You’ve got no skin in this game.”

Josh thought of the skin he did have in the game. His missing, possibly dead, daughter. His son, who knew where and on the cusp of cancer’s damnation, and a wife who—based on their last conversation—might never want him back in her or his children’s lives again, supernova or no supernova. And here he was staying with these guys, coming up with a plan that might release all of them and save their children, when by all rights he should have been miles away from here, looking after his own... As he thought of this, there was a black gall rising in him. As Timothy whined on, and yammered his

concerns to anyone who would hear, Josh found himself reaching for his MP5...

No.

NO.

That was not the way. "Timothy, please, you have to understand that, yes, there is a risk, but I'm telling you now, the risk of not doing anything and just letting Parker and the others treat us like coalmine canaries while he threatens to kill your children is much worse. What happens if, the next time Parker sends you into Savannah, there's no one like Jayce to come out and rescue you? What if you go down? What's going to happen to your kid then? When she's just a hungry mouth to feed and no longer has any value as a hostage? You think Parker's going to leave her alive?"

Timothy's face showed maximum conflict. He couldn't refute Josh's logic, but the plan, such as it was, would require him, Crane, and the others to put their lives on the line. However much Josh thought that Jayce would come through, that wasn't everything; the weakest link were these men beside him. Timothy and the others. Perhaps the dentist was just articulating what the others were feeling inside.

That the scheme was crazy, and they were all heading for their doom.

"It's got to be worth a shot," Crane said, joining Timothy and Josh. "I'm scared, man. More scared than I've ever been in my life. But if I don't do this... like Josh says, it could all be so much worse."

Josh thanked Crane, and they walked on towards Thunderbolt with his guts hollow, but his head full of possibilities.



"What?"

Harve sat at the table in the room where they'd been briefed before the trip into Savannah. Lacy was nowhere to be seen. Just Jackdaw and Steve in attendance. The others had been sent back to their tents when the group had gotten back to Parkopolis, whereas Josh had been taken in to see Harve and report back with the bounty from the jewelry stores.

Harve had been looking through the bags of rings, bracelets, high-end watches, and pearls when Josh had told him what they'd found in Savannah. Harve stopped putting a thick gold timepiece on his arm and stared at Josh.

"Say that again."

Josh knew that he was taking an enormous risk, but it was the only roll of the dice he felt he had left. Harve was smarting from several humiliations prosecuted on him by Trace. He'd seen the way Harve had reacted to Trace's anger at him, the bruises under his shirt from Trace's cane. This was worth a shot. As long as that shot didn't lead to one through his own forehead, or the bodies of the children in the cage.

Josh dropped his head, and spoke conspiratorially. "In the jewelry store on Bull Street. We found a deep vault. Locked up, but with a door of design and quality you wouldn't expect to find in a store of that size. It's the kind of door you put on a vault that absolutely must not ever be opened by the wrong people. I have no idea what they had in there. We tried to get it open, but... well, that's why I want explosives. C4. Dynamite. God, even some black powder. We can get that in there, open the door, and bring back what's inside."

Harve was thinking about biting, so Josh threw more fuel on the fire of his humiliation—or, he hoped, of his ambition.

"I reckon Trace... or *whoever*... might be pretty happy with the guy who authorized the mission to get in the vault. I reckon someone like that might be looked upon very favorably..."

“What’s in it for you? Why are you even offering?”

Harve had bitten, but the hook still might come loose. When you’re lying, Josh knew, you’ve got to stuff that lie with as much truth as you could to make it plausible. Men like Harve would expect most people to think like them. To be driven in the same way. They didn’t consider themselves to be bad guys. They saw themselves as survival pragmatists, not evil. So, Josh told the best pragmatic lie he could. “I ain’t got no real skin in this game. I just want to be allowed to go and find my daughter. I’ll do this for you. You do that for me. Deal?”

Harve didn’t give anything away with his words, but his eyes, bright and wide, were doing all his real communicating. He paused. Thought. Then... “And if there’s nothing in there?”

“If there isn’t anything in there, then I’d suggest we just keep this between you and me for now. Well, and Steve and Jackdaw, of course... I’m sure they can be trusted...”

Harve licked his lips.

“You didn’t have to tell me this. You could have gone straight to Trace...”

Josh began reeling in his fish. “I can see the way the wind is blowing, Harve. I’m not stupid. I can see how much Trace is out of control... you’re not the kind of guy who would have thought up a scheme to put kids in a hole and threaten to set them on fire...”

Jackdaw was looking at his shoes, Steve shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

“You could get in the good books of someone higher up the food chain, Harve. You could... fix everything that’s wrong with Parkopolis.”

Harve slid the watch fully onto his wrist and stared at it for a full five seconds. Then he fixed Josh with a stare so hard, Josh felt it

might just pop the back of his head off.

“Okay. I’ll get you the explosives, but if you cross me, Josh Standing... I’ll eat your heart.”

Weeks before Gabe and Maxine had had the fight in the parking lot where Josh had intervened, when she'd ended it with the charismatic jock and all-round popular guy, back home in West Virginia her mother had been badly crushed by a bull.

Maria had been caught between the huge animal and a fence when it had become ornery at her presence in the field; she'd been trying to bring a calf around that had been near-suffocated by its umbilicus during birth. Maria had suffered a fractured pelvis, Donald had shot the bull, and the calf had lived.

At the time, Maxine had been a few months into her nursing training and enjoying the freedom of being so far from home, as well as developing her relationship with Gabe. Sure, he'd been the brightest light in any room, and sometimes she'd felt more than a little in the shade, but she'd been growing ever closer to him. She'd known he felt frustrated that she wasn't ready to take the physical side of their relationship to the level of fumbling on the back seat of his beat-up Toyota, but she'd felt that saving herself for her marriage night was the right thing to do. She'd figured any man willing to wait would be the one to marry. A little old-fashioned, she'd told herself at the time, but sometimes being a little old-fashioned didn't do any harm.

In the end, the frustration Gabe felt had fully spilled over into rancorous fighting, and the relationship had died in a parking lot out-

side a roadhouse in Raleigh, NC, where Maxine had gone to study at the technical community college. It had been as far away from the damn farm, the animals, and her controlling father as she could countenance going, and yet still near enough for her to travel back to see her mom.

But before all that, when the relationship had still been golden, Maxine had asked Gabe to drive her home to be with her mother after that accident.

"Isn't it a bit early to be meeting your parents?"

"No, you doofus. I need to go home. Mom's in the hospital and... and..."

"And you don't want to let on to your dad that you don't have the fare for the bus."

She'd looked up at him sheepishly. "No. I don't want him to know that. It was hard enough for him to accept I was leaving home when I did, but if he knew how much of a struggle things are..."

"He'd come down here and drag you back over his shoulder, and probably give you a tanned rear for the trouble?"

"Yes."

"I like him already."

Maxine had playfully punched Gabe on the shoulder and the arrangements had been made. She'd begged a few days away from college and her job bussing tables in a Raleigh diner—which didn't just not make ends meet, but actively kept them apart—and with that they'd made the journey in Gabe's Toyota, keeping themselves fed on 7UPs and candy.

They'd met Donald at the ranch and, before Maxine had been able to get her words out, Gabe had pulled a plastic bag from the trunk of his car and handed it to Donald. "I know from Maxine that you're none too pleased about her coming to Raleigh, and you're probably

none too pleased to have her turn up with her beau, so seeing as I thought it might be a good idea to get on the good side of the man who owns the guns on this property, I thought I'd bring you something of a peace offering."

Maxine had looked at Gabe with some astonishment—not just because of the present, a brand-new Stetson that would replace the grubby farmer's one on her father's head—but because he had obviously rehearsed his speech quite a bit. It had been the most words she'd heard coming out of Gabe's mouth all at once since she'd known him, and to think that he'd done that all for her had lit a fire for him under her heart.

Donald had been disarmed and impressed. He'd tried the hat on, it had fit perfectly, and once he'd dropped Maxine off at the hospital in his truck, he'd gone back to the farm to, as he'd put it, "get to know the boy better."

And that had been a million years ago. Before the fight. Before Josh had beaten Gabe into submission, and before... before what had happened the next time Gabe had come into Maxine's life.

Now Maxine was back at the M-Bar, and her mother was up in the woods, chained up in the lodge to keep her away from Dale Creggan and his men from the Pickford Regional Government.

Maxine was trying to keep her mind focused on the difficult discussions to come, but she couldn't help the flashes of memory that cycled between Maria picking up the Stetson in the lodge and saying Gabe's name, and those coming back to her relationship with Gabe, how it had ended, and how it had nearly started again. She almost physically shook her head to bring herself back to the here and now. She didn't need her mind clogged up with all that at any time, let alone now that Creggan, Laurent, Black Hat, and White Hat were trotting into the yard on their horses.

Bobby was standing his ground, barking as the horses approached. Storm had his rifle over his shoulder as he leaned against the dead

truck, and Donald was standing over the fake grave, his shotgun leaned against the oak.

"Can it be?" Creggan asked, getting down from his horse. He'd changed from his suit into 501s, blue tooled boots, and a work shirt that had never seen any work that was covered by a leather waistcoat that looked like it could have been cannibalized from a cowboy fancy-dress party in the Grand Ol' Opry. "Have you suffered a recent bereavement? Let me first offer my deepest condolences."

"Last night," Maxine said. "It happened last night."

Creggan went over to the grave and studied the words on the wooden cross. He placed a hand on his heart, dropping his head in silent prayer, and when he looked up, his face was a mask of earnestness that could have fooled a saint.

"I cannot tell you how unhappy this makes me. I traveled here especially, to speak to Maria, and now I find this. I am beside myself, Mr. Jefferson, and to you, Ms. Standing. May one enquire..."

"She took her own life," Maxine said simply, hoping there would be no need for detailed discussion. "Out in the barn."

"She didn't like the things that were happening in the world," Donald said pointedly. Creggan would have to be the least self-aware person on the planet not to pick up the subtext, Maxine thought.

"I understand your concerns, Mr. Jefferson. Did she leave a note?"

"No," Donald said, and with a finality that sounded like a door closing on an abandoned steelworks.

"Then I'm sure we can only guess at what her reasons were, Mr. Jefferson."

A response that Maxine could understand the subtext in all too readily. Before things could get out of hand, she indicated to Laurent, "If you want to start your inventory, we're not going to stop you, Mr.

Laurent—we're not happy with it due to the concerns I've outlined to Mr. Creggan—"

"Dale, please..." Creggan cut in.

"In his office in Pickford," she kept going. "But we'd ask you to be as swift as you can, because we have much to do here, and due to the unfortunate circumstances, we're already a hand down."

Creggan nodded to Laurent and the Hats. "Do your thing, boys. Let's get out of these people's hair as soon as possible."

Creggan turned to Donald. "Tell me, Mr. Jefferson. Do you still use that old hunting lodge up in the hills? For a complete inventory, Mr. Laurent and his men will want to see that, too."



They moved swiftly with Greene in the party, despite his bulk. He was happy to split the contents of the equipment packs with Henry and Tally, and lightening the load for all of them sure made things a little easier. But as with everything good right now, there had to be a downside, and the downside was that Greene couldn't shut up from talking about himself.

At first Tally hadn't minded hearing the near stream of consciousness that spilled from Greene's mouth as he talked about growing up in Atlanta, his school, his friends, setting up his business while still in college, how he'd made his first million, how he'd lost his first million, about his dogs, his cars, his girls and his houses, his clothes, his vinyl collection, his home theater system, his books, his websites, his plans, the kind of girls he liked, and how being single and rich was cooler than a snowball fight in the Arctic with a polar bear, and... and... and...

After a while, Tally found, as they continued walking north, that she could begin to switch Greene off and focus on other things, like her worries about getting to the M-Bar and what she might find there.

Would her father have made the same assessment as her and headed there, too? Greene's words became a background hum, like when she would stream music to her headphones while studying, almost an aid to focusing rather than a hindrance.

That worked for many miles, until it became clear that Greene was possibly wise to the fact Tally, and for all she knew Henry, too, were just sliding over his words like well-waxed canoes across a slightly rippling lake.

"So, tell me about you..."

Questions were another matter. The prompt brought her immediately out of her focus, and Tally was surprised to find that Greene, who up until now had been walking two or three paces behind her, was suddenly right at her shoulder. Henry was still a good eight paces ahead, walking mechanically and exuding a "don't even think of talking to me" attitude. Chin on his chest, elbows tucked in as his feet ticked and tocked over the blacktop. And so, Greene had come to Tally.

Oh, great.

"Not a lot to tell. I'm in college, I climb, I free-run... well, I used to do those things. Now I stay alive." She'd kept her answer clipped and precise, hoping that it would send Greene back to his hum.

"Studying what?" he asked.

"Social science and humanities."

"That's not going to get you very far in business."

"Perhaps I don't want to be a businessperson."

"Who wouldn't want to be one?"

Tally waved her arm expansively to the trees and beyond. "I don't think the prevailing conditions of the world right now are going to make setting up a software company much of a priority. And seeing

as all the cars are fritzed, I reckon the bottom is going to drop out of the Ferrari market, don't you?"

"No, no, that's where you're wrong."

Whoever attacked Greene's party definitely slit the wrong throats. Tally immediately regretted this thought. Perhaps the supernova-stirred aggression she'd seen in others was working on her, too. She remembered being ready to fight first and ask questions later on the *Sea-Hawk* when her dad had been threatened. Maybe there was a resurfacing flavor of that here now. So, she batted down the hatches on her aggression and went with sarcasm instead.

"I am?" Tally put her hand to her brow and stared along the highway to the horizon. "I don't see a lot of traffic, Greene."

"Okay, you're right about the cars, but you're wrong about business. This is a golden opportunity for men like me."

"Men like you."

"Yes! Entrepreneurs! People who can see the prevailing conditions; those able to exploit those conditions will be the new kings."

"Greene, no offense, but you were living day to day out of cans and had no idea where you were going." Henry had stopped in the road and turned around. The color was high in his cheeks, and he'd obviously had enough of Greene's pure boasting. "We had to rescue you from a bunch of crazies who'd have gutted you like a fish if I hadn't come along. You have all the business acumen you want, but it won't stop a knife across your throat."

It was the most animated Tally had seen Henry, and she agreed with every word—she did, however, hold back from joining in.

For now.

"Dude..." Greene began, but Henry raised a hand like a crossing guard ordering a car to stop.

“Do not, under any circumstances, call me *dude*. You’re twenty-five, not a child of the sixties. I don’t care what goes on in your *open-plan, softly furnished, vegan safe-space of a workplace*, but on the road, where we could get killed at any moment, I want to know that if I’m going to save your ass again, it’s not going to be the ass of someone who uses the word ‘dude’ in anything other than a completely ironic way. Are we clear?”

Tally could see that Greene had been taken aback by Henry’s words. He wasn’t used to being talked to in that way, it seemed. His eyes wavered, and his bottom lip behind his straggly beard totally looked like it was going to tremble.

Tally gently admonished herself to keep from using the word *totally* like some west coast valley girl. She was from North Carolina, and around there, *totally* was almost tantamount to *dude*.

“So, we walk on. We only speak when necessary. We have no idea who is listening, and we don’t really want to alert anyone of our presence. Especially those who might want to steal our stuff. I’m fine with you coming with us, Greene, and it’s great that you’re helping out with carrying the gear, even with your painful shoulder and all, but please, for the love of God, stop talking.”

Greene nodded, and Tally had to stifle a giggle.

Greene dropped back again and they walked on, through midday, at which point they decided to carry on through the afternoon. There were cities nearby, so there was the potential of more people in the area who might come across them. Tally suggested they make camp a little earlier that night since they had made good progress, and the miles had breezed by without the accompaniment of Greene’s rattle.

They came off the road as the sun started to drop, and made camp near a stream that ran through a small forest of loblolly trees. They hadn’t spied anyone all day, and again it seemed they weren’t being followed. Tally made a small fire to boil water from the stream, and Henry set off to see what he could hunt down for dinner.

Greene sat quietly, cross-legged beneath a tree, and meditated.

Tally felt the black hump of anger rising in her, but knew it was the changes inside her caused by the supernova that were causing it. There was no way that before all this she would have given a thought to anyone meditating like that. But now, especially after the punishment her ears had endured already today.... He could at least have helped with collecting the firewood. She resolved to have it out with him later and give him a good telling-off. She didn't see why Henry should have all the fun.

Henry returned with two fresh king rail he'd shot half a mile away on a marshy area near a lake. He plucked and gutted the chicken-sized birds while Greene practiced his tai chi.

Tally sautéed the bird meat in a small pan and added a can of beans from Greene's stock. Greene went back to meditating as the meal hissed in the pan.

Henry and Tally had exchanged about a million exasperated glances before Tally poked Greene in the shoulder.

He opened his eyes, and asked with an innocent smile, "Is dinner ready? I'm starving..."

Tally felt the clockwork and springs in her shoulder prepare to unwind and send a punch right into Greene's smug face, but the shot was never realized because a huge and dirty German Shepard, its foam-flecked muzzle snarling, leapt at the pan of king rail and beans—and a whole pack of snarling dogs followed, barking and yipping.

The explosion shook the walls in Berkovich Jewelry and Couture Pieces. Jayce and Elvis exchanged happy glances and Crane punched the air. Only Timothy, who Josh had insisted should come along—because he hadn't trusted him to not crack and run to Trace or Lacy—showed no emotion, other than to say, "Well, I supposed that's that, then."

"Yes, it is," Josh affirmed. "Let's get this show on the road."

Next door in Ballantine's, the vault door was half in and half out of the wall. The C4 along with the detonators, which Harve had passed to Josh well away from Parkopolis on the road to Thunderbolt, three days after he'd first suggested it to him, had blown the concrete around all three hinges away. The explosion had also knocked half of two stairs away on the flight up to the office suite. It took some grunting and heft to get the vault door away from the frame, to where it clanged down on the concrete steps, but when they did, the treasure trove inside was worth it.

"Old man Ballantine sure knew how to pick his product," Elvis said as they moved into the dark space beyond the ripped-out door. They'd taken oil lamps from Parkopolis to light the inside of the vault, and what they illuminated now showed Josh a collection of fire power that would not only allow him to fight a small war, but several others along the way.

Fireboxes of RPG launchers and crates of grenades were stacked against the far wall of the fifteen-by-fifteen vault. There were AK-47s by the score, with boxes of ammo. There was plenty of stuff in there that was useless, that relied on powered telescopic targeting systems, night vision goggles, and fingerprint-activated technology for rifles and sidearms, but what low-tech weaponry there was in the room would absolutely meet the needs of what Josh had planned.

“I take it old man Ballantine didn’t care who he sold to above or below the counter,” Josh said, picking up one of the shoulder-mounted anti-tank weapons and looking along the wide green barrel.

Elvis shrugged. “He always said politics shouldn’t get in the way of good business.”

“And the feds knew nothing about this?”

“That, I don’t know. But he certainly greased a lot of palms over the years. This sorta stuff was never in the vault more’n a few days. It would come in from the sea, up-river. Be brought in here like a regular delivery and then sent out again.”

Josh shook his head at the reams of legal and moral codes being broken here. “Where to?”

Elvis shrugged. “No idea. There’s always a war on somewhere. The real trick is to sell to both sides. Double your money and double the fun.”

The gall in Josh’s belly at the notion of soldiers or law enforcement officers coming up against this in some dirty little war or a savage defense of cartel concerns was tempered only by one fact... that it was going to be used to bring down Trace and put an end to his madness.

“Okay. Let’s do this.”



“What do you mean we have to escape from the mansion again? Don’t you remember what happened the last time?”

Poppet stood next to Joshua in the room they’d been locked in. Her withdrawal symptoms had all but gone now, and during the day, Lacy had had her working in the mansion’s kitchens, preparing the meals served to Trace and his cronies in the evening. Her hands, which had never really been used to physical work as the pampered wife of a Mafia Don, were now raw and cracked. Her thumbnail was black from where one of the other kitchen workers had accidentally dropped a catering can of pineapple chunks on it, and her hair was greasy, tied back in a bundle.

“Keep your voice down. We don’t know who’s listening in the corridor.” Josh was glad that Poppet had come out the other side of her addiction—for now—but she still had to be reminded that walls had ears.

“You’re insane,” she whispered in his ear.

“That may well be true,” he whispered back.

As Josh explained to Poppet exactly what he wanted her to do, and when, her eyes widened with shock and awe. The audacity of the plan awed her, but the very fact that it was going to happen, and happen in the next hour, put her in a high state of anxiety.

“Just when I’ve kicked the booze. I can’t even self-medicate. You’re an evil man, Josh Standing.”

Twenty minutes later, they were ready.

There’d been no point in trying to smuggle a weapon back into the mansion, so he’d hidden a book of matches in his shoe as he’d approached Thunderbolt and the waiting Jackdaw. He’d spun a story about how, when they’d opened the vault, it had been empty, but they’d managed to come back with thirty more watches and ten pounds of Krugerrands anyway. He’d expected a beating for not coming back with more, but he hadn’t been touched. Harve had in

some respects looked relieved when he'd told him. At least it meant that he wouldn't have reason for going up against Trace in a pitch to replace the other man in the Harbormaster's affection.

The one thing Josh and Poppet had been allowed to keep in their room were books. Even Trace recognized that his prisoners should be allowed some mental stimulation for the long hours they were cooped up, and so both Josh and Poppet had been allowed to choose a volume from the mansion's musty library. It seemed a shame to set the leather-bound volume of *Great Expectations* on fire, but under the circumstances, he didn't think Charles Dickens would mind.

As Josh prepared to strike the first match, after tearing out a handful of pages and rolling them into a tight wad, Poppet asked, "We do this... you sure they're going to let us out? They might just leave us to burn."

"If they don't let us out," Josh said, as the match sparked and sputtered against the pages, "then this is going to be the shortest jail-break in history."

He struck the match, lit the pages, and passed his great expectations to Poppet.

Josh got into position, crouched sprinter-style just off the arc the door would make as it swung open. Poppet, with her hand over her mouth, stood slightly to the right side of Josh, holding the roll of burning pages out in front of her like a cross to a vampire.

If the routine in the mansion was anything to judge by, there would be one guard on duty in the hallway, who Josh had often heard snoring at his little chair and table in the night. Josh knew that the guard was out there, because they'd heard him getting his orders from Jackdaw after Josh had been taken back to the room after seeing Harve.

Josh lit more pages and left them to burn at the bottom of the door. He hoped that enough smoke was going to seep under the door to

convince the guard to open it.

One minute.

Josh began finding it difficult to breathe at *one minute ten seconds*.

He could hear Poppet saying, "Come on, come on," quietly to herself.

One minute twenty.

"What's going on in there?" The voice of the guard, wavering—unsure.

They waited.

One minute forty.

Waited.

Until at last...the door opened.

By that time, the bed was on fire, the drapes by the window were going up, and the room was filling rapidly with black smoke.

As Josh had correctly guessed, the guard had his weapon drawn, and he'd also guessed that it would be pointing at chest height. The burning flames Poppet was holding would give the guard enough of a pause for Josh to explode from his knees, fitting his shoulder under the guard's arm as Poppet spun out of the way, and then Josh would be under any bullets that were loosed off—with enough momentum to carry him and the guard across the corridor to crash into the opposite wall.

The guard managed to bring the butt of his weapon down onto the back of Josh's skull, but it was a glancing blow only. The wind was knocked out of the guard as they connected with the wall and then dropped in a rolling wrestle, Josh isolating the gun arm against the carpet and crashing his elbow down into the guard's jaw. Josh felt the bone shift and detach as the guard tried a slack-mouthed scream, like that of a man who hadn't realized all his teeth had been re-

moved, and then Josh pulled the Colt from his hand, turned it to the guard's temple, and pulled the trigger.

The guard went slack and a puddle of blood began to seep from beneath his head. There was no way Josh could have left the guard alive—he was too much of a complication—but that didn't make the killing any less hateful.

Josh wasn't a man of last resorts, but sometimes the moral mountain had to move.

Poppet was out of the room, and she'd taken the keys from the dead guard's belt. There were three other doors along the corridor which might hold prisoners.

"We have to go!" Josh hissed. "They're going to be here soon. Everyone would have heard the shot."

"Well, shoot them then. I'm not leaving the kitchen girls to burn."

Poppet ran down the corridor opening the doors, telling her friends from the kitchen and service areas to move down the corridor as far from the flames as they could, but not to run or resist Trace's men when they arrived. They didn't need to be getting themselves shot.

While this was going on, Josh moved beyond the billowing smoke to the head of the stairs running into the main hallway. It would be from there that Trace's men were bound to come—indeed, the next phase of his plan depended on it.

"Fire! Fire!" he hollered over the banister down into the hallway. "Bring water! The roof is on fire!"

The corridor was now nearly smoke-filled, and anyone looking up from below might not immediately recognize Josh as the person raising the alarm. As the first of Trace's men appeared with buckets and wet towels, he shouted, "Quickly! They're burning! They're burning!"

Three men had charged up the stairs with their buckets sloshing. So intent were they on fighting the fire, they didn't take a second look at Josh. If Harve, Jackdaw, or Steve—or worst of all Trace—came into the hallway, it would certainly be another matter.

Two more men raced up the stairs with the buckets as Josh screamed for more help. That was six men taken care of. One dead, five fighting the fire. In his time in the mansion, Josh had never counted more than seven different men on duty. Often, men would be called in from outside to get their briefings, and plus, there'd be the parents of the hostage children who were out in tents under cursory guard who would be brought in as necessary, but that was it. Josh and Poppet were being kept in the mansion only because they had no children there at Parkopolis to use for leveraging their cooperation, though Poppet might have been there anyway as one of the kitchen girls.

Harve, at this time of the night, would be out in the garden in his tent, and that left just Trace, Lacy, and perhaps a couple of stragglers.

"I think that's far enough, don't you, Mr. Standing?"

From a door behind him, Lacy stood with the thick, evil-looking Colt Cobra in her fist. She came onto the landing and pressed the gun into Josh's spine.

"Ever resourceful, I see."

"I'm just raising the alarm, that's all. The guard let us out. I didn't want to see the place burn."

"He let you out and gave you his gun? I must say that's very trusting of him. His next performance review is going to be quite the hoot. What are you planning on doing with said firearm? Shooting the flames out?"

She pressed the barrel into his back so hard that Josh bent at the knees.

“Drop the gun over the banister.” Josh did as he was told, and the Colt clattered onto the marble below. “Now, start walking. Down.”

As Josh took the first step, he doubled over in a coughing fit as the smoke thickened around him. It wasn’t all faked—his lungs were rasping, his throat burning. Lacy was taken by surprise as he doubled, and bumped into the back of her legs as she stepped onto the stairs. Josh reached back, still coughing, and caught her gun arm and lifted it. Lacy fired off two shots before Josh had the gun from her hand. Before he could use it, she pushed him in the back and he began to topple forward; still hanging onto her arm, Josh dragged Lacy with him and, in a second, they were in a flat spin down the staircase. A rolling mess of limbs and gunshots as the Cobra bounced and blasted around them.

They came to rest in a heap at the bottom of the last stair landing, sprawled onto the cool marble aching, both of them still struggling. Lacy was a wildcat, scratching and biting, her bony knees thudding into Josh from all angles. She spat and cursed, and her nightgown was of a silk that made her slippery like an eel. Josh had dropped the gun, and it had bounced six feet away. He had both of her wrists now, but she was three times as strong as she looked. Her feet pummeling his midriff, he tried to block her with his body, but she was fast and determined.

In the end, Poppet shot Lacy in the side of the head.

She’d come down the stairs as the pair had fought, nonchalantly picked up the Cobra, and used it. The last expression on Lacy’s face wasn’t one of surprise, but of annoyance.

Josh got to his feet feeling like he’d broken a rib and turned his ankle. There was the taste of blood in his mouth, and as he explored his cheek with his tongue, he found that in the tumble down the stairs he’d bitten a sizeable chunk out of the lining of his mouth.

He spat a bloody gobbet of smoky phlegm onto the floor and led Poppet towards the main door.

If everything had gone to plan, once Jayce had seen the smoke, then Josh had fifteen minutes to get clear of the mansion before hell would be visited upon it by way of a rocket-propelled grenade.

The main entrance was free of guards—they were on the upper floor, desperately fighting the fires Josh had started. No one seemed to have noticed or cared about the crumpled body of Lacy on the floor in a widening puddle of blood and brains, or they had seen there was nothing they could do and gone on to fight the fire. Their first concern was with the burning house.

On the veranda now, Josh, chest still raw, took Poppet's hand and they hurried down the steps two at a time as other people came up carrying buckets slopping water. They jogged into the blissfully cooler night, but the feeling of heat at Josh's back from the burning building almost canceled that out.

Josh looked back at the house, seeing that his attempt at arson had been so much more successful than he could have hoped. The flames were licking across the roof now and dancing around the chimney. Flames guttered behind several windows, and glass was smashing and tinkling down in the heat. There was a full-scale panic on. A tide of people were coming from the tents outside the mansion's gardens. There were screams and hollers, and as he dragged Poppet to where they had to be next—for the most important part of the plan—Josh was certain he could hear a few laughs and snickers from the assembled throng.

In the crowd now, they would be more inconspicuous, but it slowed them down. If they were going to make it to the cage in the ground to release the children, they couldn't be held up in any way at all.

Josh felt panic rising as he shouldered through the bodies, dragging Poppet along with him. The sight of the burning mansion was keeping inquisitive eyes off him, but that didn't make his desperation to make it to the children any less.

Then, for a glorious second, they were through the crowd and back into the air. Josh went into a flat sprint as he saw the trees and the raised platform which held the cage beneath.

He was a good fifty yards away when he saw Trace stalking towards the platform from out of the trees. As one of his men lifted the cover and swung it back to open up the space beneath, Trace stood on the lip. He said something into the cage below him that Josh could not hear—not over the sound of the crowd watching the burning mansion or the rapid thudding of his feet on the grass.

Josh was still twenty yards away when Trace lifted the MP5, aimed down into the darkness, and began to fire, the muzzle flash of his gun lighting up his face like the crazy carnival light of the burning mansion.

The German Shepard howled as its paws dipped into the fire in its eagerness to get to the king rail. The pan went over and the mastiff barreling in behind it diverted to picking up a mouthful of the hot flesh before it bounded into the bushes. The other dogs, filthy and harsh-ribbed, a mixture of purebreds and mongrels, turned their attention to Tally and the others.

Henry's forearm went into the mouth of the German Shepard as it lunged for him, snarling. Greene was rolling in the dirt with a Labrador mix, black and mangy, trying to go for his throat while he covered up his face like a boxer protecting himself from an onslaught.

Tally's ankle was hot with pain, as a dog that might have had Collie in it at some point kept going for the leg she was kicking out with.

Greene rolled and screamed as Henry shoved down with his forearm, widening the dog's jaws and punching it hard in the chest. The dog sprung away long enough for Henry to draw his SIG and loose a couple of shots. The Shepard howled as one of the bullets took it in the haunches, but it still managed to scabble away, leaving a trail of crimson on the ground and the leaves. At the sound of the shots, the dogs attacking Tally and Henry were startled into letting go and running into the undergrowth.

Henry fired shots after them, but it seemed he wasn't willing to kill the animals outright when self-defense wasn't required.

"They're just doing what we're doing," he said later as he put a cold compress on Tally's swelling ankle. "Just trying to survive. Did you see their ribs? They were starving."

The skin over Tally's ankle hadn't been broken, but the force the dog had applied to it would make walking a pain for the next couple of days. A couple of days they couldn't afford to lose.

What they had also lost were the beans and king rail. It was too dark now for Henry to go back to the marsh and see if he could zero in some more, but he'd said he would go in the morning so at least they would have something inside them when they set off again—something other than what came out of a can.

Greene had been uninjured by the dog trying to get at his throat, but his jacket was torn down one arm, and he'd dug a gouge into his cheek on a sharp stone when he'd rolled on the ground.

"Damn dogs," he said to himself several times as Henry saw to Tally's ankle. "Damn, damn dogs."

Tally could hear the hiss of cold murder in Greene's breath, as if the spiritual hipster who'd spent the late afternoon and evening meditating, and getting his biorhythms in touch with his inner chi—or whatever he'd been doing—had now been internally replaced by a killer android dog hunter, who was working on his kill-plan just behind his eyes.

It was quite the change.

"You'd do the same, Greene," Henry told him as the other man whispered "damn dogs" one more time.

Greene's eyes flicked towards Henry in response, and Tally could believe that the murderous thoughts he was expressing about the dogs could easily be transferred to a human.

It poured ice water all the way down her spine.

Later, when Greene went away to deal with his bodily needs, Tally whispered to Henry.

“Did you see the way he looked at you?”

Henry was checking over his rifle before settling down.

“I don’t suppose I’m on his Christmas card list after what I said to him yesterday. He’s a dork and a nerd. You know what they’re like. They sit in their parents’ basement going to war on the internet and anti-social media. Put them in a real situation and they don’t fare so well.”

“But so many people have been pushed over the edge since the supernova. I saw it on the *Sea-Hawk* with some of the probationers, and the crew—they turned into maniacs at the click of a finger. I think we need to keep a closer eye on Greene. I’m kinda regretting telling him it was okay for him to come along...”

Henry shrugged. “He carries good pack. But if it makes you feel better, I’ll keep an extra close eye on him.”

“So will I.”

“Then I guess we’ll be fine,” he said, though not in a way that convinced Tally, that was for sure.



Five days after the dog attack and three miles outside of Grange-town, they came across a pitched battle between two groups of fighters that had spilled onto the road.

From an off-ramp onto the forecourt of a half-burned Shell gas station some fifty yards ahead, they watched as a battle erupted, boiled, and then did something completely unexpected. Henry had motioned the three of them to get off the road quickly as the fighting

groups had exploded from behind the gas pumps and out of the mini store.

But Greene froze.

There were about twenty people to each side of various ages and genders. They were hitting each other with whatever had come to hand. Chair legs were being used as clubs, bike chains as whips. There were knives and hammers. It was a fight to the death.

That was until Greene, who was still rooted to the spot above Tally and Henry, was seen.

It was as if all the heat had suddenly been taken out of the fight, and the combatants had forgotten not only that they were fighting, but what they were in a fight about in the first place. There was blood dripping from wounds, great tears in their clothes, and their hair sat matted with dirt and grease. But they were also frozen in a moment in time, as if a switch had been thrown which caused them to stop their individual attacks and focus on Greene as Tally yanked him by the jacket into the dirt.

“Hey!” Greene protested, but Tally pulled him flat to the earth.

“Do as you’re damn-well told!” she hissed as she looked back over to the group of fighters, now stock still and looking directly at them.

There was a three-count when it could have gone either way. They could have returned to hacking lumps out of each other, and Tally and the others could have snuck into the forest and skirted around the strange gas station skirmish. But as Tally could have predicted, given their luck, their three-count had only been the precursor to a headlong rush towards the group crouched by the side of the road.

Even if they drew their weapons now and began firing, the fighters would be upon them before they’d dropped a quarter of them.

As the fighters set off in ungainly sprints towards Tally, Henry, and Greene, the young woman screamed “Run”—and this time, Greene

did as he was told. He was up first and leaping over the crash barrier at the side of the road to plunge into the trees. Henry pulled Tally up and, vaulting the barrier, they both followed Greene into the spaces between the trees.

There was a steep slope leading away from the road, and the beech were growing with random spacing. This wasn't a managed forest where you could expect trails and avenues. This was old forest that had been left to do its own thing for far too long. Although the ground they were running over was loamy and springy, they had to dodge sideways at every other step.

The crash through the trees behind her told Tally the story of a number of the fighters giving chase. This was not a pursuit they were going to give up easily. What had motivated them to attack not just each other, but people they randomly saw on the road in that moment, couldn't be guessed at in all the crazy madness Barnard's Star had visited upon the world. Escape was now the only option; analysis could come later. *If* they survived.

The hill became steeper and Tally found her strides becoming longer, but she was landing with less precision every time.

Several times as she crashed downwards, she thudded her arm into a beech trunk, sending stunning shocks through her body. Just as her ankle was getting back to normal after days of limping on it, she was threatening to turn it again at almost every step. All it would take was to come across a gnarled root and she'd be looking at so much more than a swollen ankle. She could be presented with a fracture that could end her life here and now—because the attackers would be on her in moments.

Henry bobbed into view a dozen yards ahead, threading himself through the trees like a slalom skier. Greene then appeared to Henry's right, his arms and legs pumping, his pack thumping against his back as he crashed on down.

Tally's days of free-running hadn't prepared her for running for her life through obstacles such as this. Give her a thin wall to flip over, a rail to slide, or two roofs to jump between until she hit a thrilling shoulder-roll on the other side and she would be in her element. But there was no run allowing her to *be* free here. The trees milled together like a flock of angry birds, whipping her with the wings of their branches.

Henry and Greene were now elusive, and her ankle was starting to ache again. It had been too much for her. Damn Greene and his unwillingness to follow orders.

Damn Greene.

Damn dog.

Damn...

With a crackle and a crash, the ground gave way beneath Tally and suddenly she was free-falling into the black earth, with no sense of when she might land.

Damn Greene.



"I don't think we need to keep her upstairs in the room. Let's see how it works out down here."

"Donald," Maria said, but she wasn't talking to Donald. She was sitting at the kitchen table, looking through the window out into the yard. Towards her grave. "Donald," she said again, and sighed.

Donald himself was pacing near the stove, hands deep in his pockets, his face longer than ever. Storm was outside throwing sticks for Bobby, but Maxine had been able to pick up the tension in the boy's manner. She knew there was a world of hurt and pain in him—some of it about the current color of things, for sure, but much more about

the separation with Josh and the breakdown of his parents' relationship. Storm had stopped mentioning Josh entirely now, and Maxine believed it was because the boy didn't want to dump his stuff on her plate.

He was a good, young man. He deserved so much better than this—his parents splitting up, his sister lost, and his grandma so changed—so much more than Maxine could give him right now.

Dale Creggan, Laurent, and the Hats had finished their inventory and were long gone.

The heart-stopping moment when Creggan had asked about the lodge where Maria had been hidden from them had passed. It had quickly become apparent that he wasn't asking about the lodge because he thought that Maria would be hiding there, but because he thought there might be supplies there that ought to be listed on the inventory.

"You might want to haul crates of corned beef five miles up the side of a mountain by hand, but I don't," Donald had told him. "I'm not as young as I was, my grandson is recovering from cancer, my daughter isn't a packhorse, and, anyway, you've seen what we have here. Our real valuable resources are out in the paddock or penned in the yard. No hiding them in a fifteen-by-fifteen shack deep in the woods. But, guys, you're free to go up and look. I'm not going to stop you."

That had seemed to be enough for Creggan, and as he and his men had left the M-Bar, Maxine had watched from an upstairs window as they'd made their way at a lazy speed along the road back towards Pickford, and not in the opposite direction, across country to Alleghany Mountain.

All the same, as soon as they'd been out of sight, she'd nearly run to the lodge to release Maria and bring her back to the ranch as quickly as she could.

Her mother had been sitting pretty much where she'd left her, resting in one of the chairs but chained to the stove. Maria had actually smiled as she'd looked up when Maxine had opened the door. She hadn't returned the hug that Maxine had given her in any meaningful way, but the fact that she'd allowed it without trying to bite out her daughter's throat had been a definite improvement.

The walk back down to the M-Bar had been brisk, but had been conducted hand in hand rather than with them tied together at the waist. Back at the M-Bar, Maxine had sat her mother in the kitchen, and when Donald had returned with Storm from feeding the animals, he'd been astonished to see his wife sitting in the kitchen while Maxine sat beside her, cleaning her mother's nails and combing the knots out of her hair.

Maria had been passively allowing the kind of attention Maxine could only have dreamed of since her return to the M-Bar. She was still racked by the swirling emotions around her mother mentioning Gabe Angel, and the hat, not to mention her mother seemingly being on the road to recovery from the effects of the supernova. Perhaps there was hope for all of the world if someone who'd been so adversely affected by Barnard's Star could begin to come out on the other side.

But Donald's face was creasing in and out of confusion and shame.

"Dad, you didn't know what else to do. I don't blame you at all..."

Donald rested his hands on the kitchen counter and shook his head. "It's not just locking her up. I nearly... with the gun..."

Maxine got up from the table and tentatively put a hand on his shoulder. "You didn't know, Dad. You didn't know she might recover. I understand. Truly, I do."

Donald turned and looked down on his wife. She was back to staring out of the window, at the grave that so easily could have been her real resting place if Donald's moment of murderous mercy had

been followed through to its savage conclusion. Maxine could sense that the tectonic plates that had kept his emotions rammed down inside him all these years were shifting. Maybe there was a crack appearing in his defense, and maybe there was change and hope for all of them, if Maria could let go of her madness, and Donald could open up the crammed store of hurt inside him to scrutiny.

“She can sleep in my room with me for the next few nights. We’ll see how she gets on. I’ve done a few long night shifts in the hospital watching over a patient. I doze light. I’ll sit by the door in the chair and I’ll not let her get out. I promise, Dad. But we can’t go on chaining her up.”

Maxine stopped short of telling him that she thought Maria being locked in a room 24/7 and chained to the wall might have been the cause of much of her aggressive reactions. If the primal feelings that had been unleashed by the supernova were in any way analogous to those of a wild animal, the worst thing you could do would be to lock such a person in a room day and night to show them how scared you were of them. But Donald didn’t need to hear that right now.

He was moving towards Maria and reaching out for her hair. He picked up a few strands of it gently in between his fingers and gently moved it between his thumb and forefinger.

Maria didn’t pull away. If anything, she smiled wider and continued to look out the window over the farm. There were cattle in the new enclosure, and the sky above them was endless blue. Bobby and Storm were playing fetch in the yard with a ball, and in the purple distance, the world seemed freshly minted and remade.

Maria sighed, said “Donald” again, and rested her head on his hip where he stood beside her.

There were at least two tears falling then—one, chill on Maxine’s cheek, and another, the first she had ever seen sparkling on her father’s.

Trace Parker, King of Parkopolis, intelligent thug, and urbane southern psychotic, disappeared in an expanding welter of bone, blood, and holy fire.

The RPG had hit him full in the back and exploded.

The blast wave tore Josh from his feet and barreled him back in a wild somersault, taking Poppet down with him in a tangle of limbs that was accompanied by a deafening sound. A sound which could have in itself been the stone coffin lid closing on the body of a giant.

Josh's ears rang; his breath had been punched out of him, and his eyes were full of grit. Another RPG burst open the trunk of the tree against which Trace's man, the one who had opened the cover on the children's cage, was cowering. He was transfixed by arm-thick splinters of wood which sliced into him on trails of fresh fire. The tree—an oak—thick and mighty, simply toppled over. It fell away from the cage with a tearing of heartwood, its branches pulsating crazily and shaking off leaves to fall through the billows of smoke.

Chunks of wood, thrown into the air by the enormous blast, were raining down amid clumps of torn earth and ripped sods of grass.

In the near distance, the echoed rattle of machine gun fire was underscored by a hundred screams as the crowd around the mansion

scattered, panic spreading through them like the sharp lengths of oak that had speared the man ahead of them.

Poppet got to her feet first, her face a mask of horror. She reached down, offering Josh a hand. He took it and winced as the muscles around his broken rib stretched while he got to his feet.

“The children...” Poppet said, the one doing the pulling now. Josh couldn’t find the words. All they had done, all they had planned in their desire to save the children from Trace, had been for nothing. Trace had filled the cage below the platform with two bursts of machine gun fire before the grenade had turned him to atoms.

Poppet reached the cage first, and Josh watched as she clasped her hand to her mouth. For a second, Josh wondered how many of the children had survived the gunfire and the explosion. He hesitated before joining Poppet at the side of the hole. He knew that there was a small chance some of the children had been shielded from the explosion and the onslaught by the bodies of others hit first by gunfire. He would have to check. He would have to not just look over the lip of the hole, but in all likelihood jump down and check the pulses of the kids who were lying there, apart and beneath others.

Josh looked over the edge.

The cage was empty.

The children were gone.



It's difficult to think logically when there's an all-out battle going on around you, Josh thought as he hunkered down and the bullets flew around him, and the seemingly endless blasts from the RPG exploded in the sides of the burning mansion; they kept coming, too, fired at the groups of Trace's men who obviously didn't know their boss and benefactor was now so much slime, and thus tried to fight off the attack by Jayce, Elvis, and her men.

Josh had already pulled Poppet away from the empty cage, and they crouched down in a ditch about three hundred yards from the burning mansion.

Combatants ran in all directions, their black silhouettes etched starkly against the flames. Knots of men were engaged in a vicious fire-fight with Jayce's men, who hadn't come from the direction of Thunderbolt, but had circled the whole of Parkopolis and come from the seawards side, as planned. If they had encountered any resistance to their movements, then no word of it had reached Parkopolis, so far as Josh could tell. The chaotic battle that was being played out around them was evidence enough that Trace's men hadn't been in the least prepared for what was coming at them.

An RPG exploded amongst a group of six men still loyal to Parkopolis and its leader. Limbs flew up on jagged splashes of blood as the grenade reduced the men to their constituent parts.

Two men who'd been sheltered from the blast tried to run, but were cut down by withering fire from behind them, jagged dots running up their backs like stitches from a sewing machine, and then they were sent spinning to the ground to twitch and die.

"What's happened to the kids?" Like Josh, Poppet was concerned with the core part of the plan.

"If they're not there, then there's a good chance they're alive. But where? I dunno. And, more to the point, who moved them?"

Poppet ducked as an RPG exploded not thirty yards away, throwing up a spray of dirt with a concussion that rattled Josh's teeth.

"It had to be Harve," Josh said. He'd told Poppet how Harve had been willing to get the jump on Trace by allowing Josh to take the explosives into Savannah. Harve had been beaten and humiliated by Trace enough times, Josh thought, to perhaps have taken matters into his own hands. Perhaps Josh coming back empty-handed had put a plan to move the children into action—maybe it was some-

thing he'd been contemplating for a while. If he took away Trace's power over the people he forced to work for him, maybe they would rise up and overthrow him. What Harve hadn't counted on was Josh burning down the mansion and organizing this attack.

The difficulty now wasn't just in finding the children, but making sure Jayce's attack didn't kill them by accident. "We need to find the kids now," Josh said, getting onto his knees and racking the Colt. "If they're being hidden somewhere in the line of fire, then they're almost in worse danger than they were in the cage. At least there they had some protection from stray fire."

Then it hit him, what he should have noticed before.

"There were no guards on the cage. There should have been four, at least. There always have been. But Trace had run there with his guy. The kids had to have been taken recently, or Trace would have found out sooner. Maybe in the last hour. And who else haven't we seen apart from Harve?"

"Steve and Jackdaw..."

"Yeah. And you know what else we didn't see when we came out of the mansion?"

"I was a little busy, I'm afraid. You know. Trying not to get killed."

"What's usually parked up outside the mansion?"

"The cart?"

"Yes, and it wasn't there. Look!" Josh pointed back to the burning building as a grenade burst against its wall and collapsed a whole section of roof.

The space where the cart would usually be was empty. "That means Jackdaw, Steve, and Harve must have the cart and kids, and there are only two directions by road that they can use to get out of here. Back towards the sea, or the road to Thunderbolt. They can't be going back to the sea because Jayce's people skirted that way and

would have found them. So, my guess is they're on the road to Thunderbolt. Come on. We need horses."



They galloped away from Parkopolis as the mansion and tents burned, even as the explosions boomed and the battle raged.

The horses had been skittering and whinnying in the mansion's stable block some hundred yards from the main house. Whoever had owned the house in the past had kept horses—perhaps even trained them to show, based on the look of the grounds. So, Trace's men had maintained the brick-built stables and kept fifty or so animals there in the boxes and in the corral. The stables had been deserted, as whoever had been working there had gone first to see the mansion burning and then to fight.

Two palominos had already been saddled, maybe to go out on patrol before the battle had started. They were nervous and unhappy about the explosions, but their training had been strong enough for them to calm as Poppet soothed them with her voice, and then more than willing to ride the road away from the mansion towards Thunderbolt.

Josh knew they had to reach the cart and its precious cargo before Harve and the others reached the streets of Thunderbolt. Out in the open, Josh knew they had a chance, but once the children had been stored in an easily defensible building, extracting them wasn't going to be at all easy.

As the explosions diminished and the road to the bridge began to rise a little, Josh saw what he'd hoped he would. The cart—hitched to two horses, with Steve driving and Jackdaw in the back with the children—and Harve on his horse.

Harve turned in the saddle even as Josh drew his gun and trotted the horse up to the cart and its attendants.

In the back, the fifteen children huddled, their faces white with fear as they clung to each other, eyes shiny with tears.

Harve pulled his Colt, and Jackdaw reached down and pulled up a Mossberg 590 pump-action shotgun.

Neither Jackdaw nor Harve pointed their guns at Josh and Poppet. They pointed them at the children.

"Well, look at the big brain on you, Josh. Not even Trace had figured out what we were pulling here."

"Trace is dead."

Harve cursed hard. "Don't lie to me. Because I can get this done with fourteen kids instead of fifteen."

"I saw him killed. Blown to smithereens, Harve. Why would I lie to you?"

"Because you wanna take my bargaining chips away from me."

The distant crump of the explosions from Parkopolis were still on the warm night air.

"Hear that, Harve? That's Parkopolis going up in flames. You don't have a kingdom to take over. By the time the battle is over, my guys will have wiped out yours through superior firepower. Now, you let these kids go, and I'll let all three of you ride off into the sunset. I don't care what you do or where you go, but these kids are not going any further."

Harve smiled and moved his gun over the heads of the children. "Wanna pick which one I end first, Josh? Boy or girl. Blonde or dark. There's a redhead there. Shall we take him out first?"

Josh's pistol was pointed directly at Harve's head, but even if he fired, there was still a chance Harve would get his shot off, and Jackdaw certainly would. These guys knew what a risk they were taking and had known there was a good chance that crossing Trace would

put them in mortal danger anyway. It didn't matter whether he was dead or if they believed it. Right now, they had less to lose than Josh and Poppet.

"Go ahead, Josh. Pull the trigger. I dare you."

Josh lowered the gun and Harve's face lit up in the moonlight, his eyes all aglitter. "That's better."

Jackdaw raised his shotgun so that it was off the children and pointing directly at Josh. Harve kept the kids covered, and Steve turned around in the cart; he was resting the reins on his lap and had a .44 Magnum in his huge fist that didn't appear to be pointed in any direction, but Josh knew the big African American was fast enough and skilled enough to bring his weapon to bear the moment he needed to.

"I'm telling you, Harve, you don't need to take the kids to Thunderbolt. Trace is dead. If you don't believe me, go back and look. You're already free."

"Thunderbolt? What makes you think we're going to Thunderbolt?"

"Because it's the obvious choice."

Harve threw back his head and guffawed. "You're such a fool, Josh. You think you have everything worked out. Did you really believe you could manipulate me to get me to go against Trace just for a piece of his action? No, Josh, that's not where we're going at all. We're going to the Harbormaster..."

"And, where is he?"

Harve laughed again. "You think I'm going to tell you that? You really are a fool. Trace was just small fry compared to where we're going. And this payment will be just the beginning. America as you knew it so gone, Josh. You and your kind, you bleeding-heart heroes, you're nothing. You're bugs on the Harbormaster's windshield. You're crushed and you don't even realize it yet."

“Why does the Harbormaster want these kids?” The horror was rising in Josh again now. He hadn’t thought any of this could be what Harve would be doing. But he’d been thinking too small, too parochial, too contained. There was a bigger game being played above his head, and he didn’t have an inkling what the pieces were, where the board was, or what the strategy might be to counteract it. If Harve would risk everything he had to take these children to God knew where, just to lay tribute at the feet of this Harbormaster, what else were the people following him capable of? Look at what Trace had done to the people of Savannah and the parents of the kids—Josh felt that he’d just picked back the scab on a wound he hadn’t known he had. A wound that ran all the way from his heart to his guts.

And here was the evidence before his own eyes.

“So, are you both ready to say goodbye?” Harve moved his gun between Josh and Poppet. “Who wants to go first? I’m an equal opportunities murderer, ya know, so I’m happy not to show any discrimination.”

“You don’t have to kill anyone, Harve. You don’t have to give these kids away.” Josh left his gun by his side; if he raised it, they would either shoot him or shoot the kids. He couldn’t let that happen.

And so here he was again, caught between what he would have called his duty to act for the greater good—that idea of service he’d always cherished: to protect and serve—and the very real need to be selfish, to look after his own. To find his children and his wife and make sure they were safe.

Duty to his family or duty to others. Two sides of the same coin, and to be on the cusp of both was the most painful place to stand.

He couldn’t let the children die.

Jackdaw’s chest burst open, and then Harve’s head was smacked sideways by the impact of a bullet that ripped his cheek open and

busted a flap of skull out on the opposite side of his head.

Both men had gone down fast, Jackdaw falling out of the cart to crunch down as the children screamed, and Harve falling back in his saddle and rolling off his horse. Crunching down face-first onto the road.

Steve put down the .38 and shrugged. "I guess you made some sense, Josh. I guess you made some sense."

Tally clung to a root, her feet dangling over a drop that went down who knew how far into the side of the limestone hill. The walls around her were rough-hewn and looked naturally created. She'd dropped into some sort of sinkhole—one that had probably been there for hundreds of years, cut by a subterranean stream through the limestone, and that, over time, had become overgrown with brush and covered by fallen branches.

If she hadn't been running so fast and wildly from the gas station attackers, she'd probably have seen it as she approached and avoided it. But now she was a good twenty feet below the surface of the hill, and hanging onto a wrist-thick root she had dislodged from the surface layers of the soil as she'd fallen.

Above her, the hole she'd created in the natural cover showed a bright patch of sky.

She tried to get purchase on the wall with the toes of her boots, but there was nothing to grip. Maybe if she'd been prepared for a day's climbing and had been in her lightest gear, with a belt full of carabiners, quick-draws, chalk, and rope, and wearing her beloved Black Diamond climbing shoes, she might have been up and out of the sinkhole in a matter of seconds. But weighed down by all her gear, wearing the thick-soled walking boots and with a throbbing ankle's aggravated injury, she was not in the best of situations.

The root in her hands shifted above her and a small clump of dirt falling right down onto her face told her all she needed to know. The root was strong, but it wasn't going to keep her there forever. And there was no way she could risk using the root to pull herself out of the sinkhole. There was a good chance it would unravel from the soil above like a line from a fishing reel, giving her a moment of free fall before snapping and sending her to the bottom far below.

Realistically, she had only two choices. Try to climb up the wall, or go down and try to find a way up on another section of the rock.

One of the counter-intuitive lessons she'd discovered early on, while learning how to climb, was that sometimes in order to go up, you needed to go down first.

She'd first trained as a young girl on the rock-face simulator in her local community sports and athletics center. She'd been taken along on weekends by Maxine, ostensibly to support Storm in his athletics and track training. But watching the boys running around their circles had never been her thing. The rock-face simulator, however, had been a revelation. Within a few weeks of discovering it, she'd been begging her mom to take her to the center so she could climb, even when Storm was at track meets or feeling happy to train at the local gym. That had started a ten-year love affair with climbing which had quickly moved on to her experiencing the real thing, and then, when she hadn't been able to get out to the mountains, it had morphed into her secondary love—free-running.

A horizontal rush created by a vertical one.

A sudden scream above snapped her head up, and suddenly a black shape was falling towards her. One of the fighters running down the hill had managed to find the same hole she had. The screaming woman crashed into the rock above Tally, rebounded in a spin, and then banged against the root Tally clung to, causing another foot of dirt to rip from the soil and all but jolt Tally's arms out of her shoulder sockets.

The woman fell past her, brushing against Tally's pack and then continuing to scream on her way down.

The noise from the woman cut off after two more seconds, and was followed by an almighty thump that stilled any further sounds she might have made in her dead throat.

Tally tried not to think of the woman's fate, but to concentrate on how far the drop might be. In the less PC corners of the climbing world, the number of seconds it took to fall a certain distance was known as the *Splat Calculation*. A body accelerates at 9.8 meters per second. So, in one second, you'd fall 9.8 meters—around thirty feet; fall another second, and you'd have fallen another 19.6 meters—another sixty feet, loosely. This crude calculation told Tally that there was a very strong possibility she was dangling over a near one-hundred-foot drop. There was no chance of just letting go of the root, finding the bottom of the crevice, and then getting herself back up. She was going to have to free-climb down and then find a route back up, all the while in the wrong gear and carrying her pack on her back.

Much as she didn't want to lose the gear in the rucksack, she wasn't going to be able to climb effectively with it. So, holding on with one hand, she shucked off the pack and attached it to the root with a strap, tying the knot with a hand and her teeth. Once the pack was off her back, she felt immediately lighter. The root hadn't moved again, either, and she now found it more than easy to hold onto it with one hand while her dominant hand, the right, reached down to meet her upraised foot and began to take off her boots.

Once the boots were in the pack and her toes were free to locate purchase on the wall that her boots hadn't been sensitive enough to find, Tally leaned into the wall, discovering two toe-holds and a handhold which allowed her to let go of the root completely.

The limestone was generous to her touch in giving her several opportunities to go down, but not any to go up. So, she started to feel her way down. Free-climbing—without ropes and with minimal

equipment—was an aspect of sports which had at once fascinated and appalled Tally, but the rush felt from completing a climb under such conditions gave a real sense of achievement that could rarely be matched in other ways. As she snaked down a further twenty feet from the dangling pack and the root, her confidence grew.

Crabbing around the ten-foot-diameter sinkhole, she soon found enough finger- and toe tip-sized micro-ledges to allow her to start moving up to the surface. Free of the boots and the pack, she was able to dance with the rock face. In a quick ballet of lithe arms and powerful legs, Tally soon got moving swiftly towards the light. Above the limestone, the loam and soil of the forest floor presented a near seven-foot stretch of friable, rooty heaven for any climber or spelunker.

Tally reached the lip of the hole but held back. She didn't know who was around—if the gas station fighters had moved on or not. She hauled herself to the top ledge and peered around as best she could, like a rock-climbing periscope. All she could see were beetles moving through the mulch, and all she heard was the susurrating breath of the wind moving through the branches of the trees above her.

With a sigh that was one part relief and three parts exhaustion, she rolled herself out of the sinkhole and gratefully filled her lungs with cool air while her limbs vibrated and sang their release from exertion. It was always like this after a climb. A feeling of joyous euphoria, wholly addictive and desirable. For these few moments of triumph, there was a sense that all the problems and issues with the world could be pushed to one side. There was just Tally, the climb, and the achievement.

When she was sufficiently ready to get going, she rolled onto her knees, used a broken branch to hook out the root which had saved her life, and then hauled up the pack and the boots.

Now the hard part.

Finding Henry and Greene.



They had to have a plan. Both Maxine and Donald agreed on that. A plan about what to do if Creggan's men turned up unannounced and found Maria miraculously resurrected from the grave. There was no doubt that, even in a present state, Maria could pass for someone uninfected. Although she was no longer fighting or screaming, and she was eating—with her fingers if not cutlery—as well as allowing Maxine to care for her washing and dressing needs, Maria was not speaking. Other than to say *Donald* at random intervals.

So, it was decided that they'd keep Maria in the ranch house during the day, where she couldn't be seen by anyone overlooking the property, and then they'd take her for recreational walks only after sundown.

Someone was assigned to have Maria in sight at all times of the day within the house, which again made the work for those tending to the business of the farm all the more difficult. An alarm system was decided upon, too—that if anyone was seen approaching the house, a cowbell hanging from the veranda roof would be rung, as if signaling to the cattle to come in for feeding. In reality, it would alert whoever was with Maria to take her up to Maxine's room and sit with her until the danger had passed.

It wasn't a perfect system, but it would work for now, because Creggan and his men hadn't been to the ranch since the inventory visit. In fact, no one had been seen in the vicinity of the farm now for several days, and that lack of contact was making Maxine antsy.

"I don't know how long I can live like this, Dad."

They were in the paddock pouring feed into the troughs set out for the cattle to come eat from. It was a hard, two-person job now that there was no tractor to drive the feed out to the pasture. It all had to be carried by hand in plastic panniers and poured into the galvanized troughs. The one time they'd tried to utilize the buggy and Tal-

ly-Two, the buggy had almost keeled over on the uneven ground. This would have to be done by human, not horse power. It was a backbreaking task, and with autumn approaching, and maybe a harsh winter to follow, Maxine was wondering how sustainable life on the M-Bar was going to be.

Tinkerman's plow had allowed the ground of the fallow pasture to be turned, but it was generally the wrong time of year to sow the seeds to grow for next year's feed. Sure, the cattle could eat the grass that grew naturally, but that wouldn't sustain them through the next winter, and how would they even begin to harvest it without a tractor?

Donald finished shaking the last of the nuggets of feed from the pannier into the trough before he looked up and fixed Maxine with his hardest stare.

"There's only one way I'm leaving the M-Bar, Maxine. And that's in a box. I'm not giving this up because it's hard. I've been working hard since the day I was born, and this is my home. It will stay that way."

"All I'm saying is that we're okay now because we have enough feed to get us through the winter, but what about next year? What about when Creggan and his men come to requisition what little we have stored in cans and sacks to feed ourselves? They're going to come, Dad. They can't live in Pickford, in the numbers they are, without using up what they've salvaged from the Wal-Mart. They are going to come for us and what we have sooner or later. And they will come with guns, and they will take what they want from us. We won't be able to stop them. You have to see that."

"What I see is a daughter not wanting to stand by her parent, not wanting to help protect their property, and ready to roll over because she's too chicken to fight."

The breath was sucked out of Maxine's chest, and her head buzzed with the insult. On the tip of her tongue was the notion that her fa-

ther had been ready to slay her mother because he hadn't known how to cope with her, but she bit back the bitterness. This was not the time to get into a fight with her father, which his stubbornness wouldn't allow her to win anyway—even if he did believe what she was saying to be true.

“How long do you think we can keep Mom hidden from them, Dad? How long before we screw up and she's found? You know what they'll do to her? And us, for lying to them? Creggan is too smart. He's not going to let it rest. He knows it was too convenient to find Mom's grave just two days after saying he was going to come up here to talk to her. Maybe they already knew how you were coping with her. Maybe that's why he brought her up when I went to see him. We're living on borrowed time, Dad.”

Donald pushed back his Stetson with his finger and looked at the dirt, chewing on his lip. There was a world of thoughts going on behind his eyes that Maxine knew she would never be able to fathom. Yes, the tectonic plates had shifted, and he'd let some of it go when it had become apparent that Maria was in a different, calmer phase of her mental health crisis, but he still had a lifetime of practice when it came to keeping things behind his curtain of stoicism.

“Maxine, I don't want to hear no more talk of leaving the M-Bar. I'm not prepared to even think about it. If you want to leave and take your boy with you, then I won't stop you, but I will not leave my land because of a few jumped-up, local self-appointed officials and the notion of hard work. This is my final word on the matter, and I'll thank you not to mention it again.”

The doors closed behind his eyes, and Maxine knew that really would be the final word. She had tried, and she had failed.

“Donald.”

They both spun, and Maxine gasped as she saw that her mother was out of the ranch and standing next to them behind the fence. Her

face still held that beatific smile, and her hands were clasped demurely in front of her.

"Mom, what are you doing out of the house?"

"Donald," Maria replied flatly.

Donald was taking the direct route; he was already climbing over the fence to get to his wife.

The realization what Maria being out of the house might mean banged like a thunderclap through Maxine. Storm was supposed to be watching Maria. He was diligent, and he could be trusted to carry out a task like that without fouling it up. If Maria was out of the house, then it followed that...

"Storm..." Maxine hissed, and she almost vaulted the fence to run towards the ranch.

Please let him have just nodded off at the table. Please let him be asleep, and I can wake him and give him a good talking-to for not telling me he was too tired to look after Mom while I helped Dad. Please let him be okay. Please... please...

She crashed up the steps to the veranda and burst through the door into the kitchen.

Storm was on the floor, a sheen of sweat across his face and his eyes screwed up with pain. He was holding his hands across his belly and pressing in. For a terrible moment, Maxine thought his hands might be covering a wound. Perhaps Maria had found a knife and...

Maxine fell to her knees beside Storm, but there was no blood, no wound.

His eyes flickered open as he saw her. A hand came away from his belly and hooked onto her wrist, squeezing fit to break it. "Mom... I'm sorry... I can't... Grandma... the pain... I..."

And with that he fainted dead away.

Jayce insisted Josh and Poppet take three horses. Two to ride and one to carry whatever supplies they could pack onto it. Steve rolled and packed a tent for them before helping them find what they needed from the remains of Parkopolis, which some people were now jokingly referring to as *Joshtown*.

Truth be told, after the initial euphoria of reuniting the hostage children with their parents, there hadn't been a lot to joke about. The camp was a smoking ruin, and many people had died in the pitched battle—Elvis among them, when he'd been shot while attempting to reload the launcher that had atomized Trace Parker at the cage.

Steve was helping Jayce organize the burial of the dead, and a deathly pall of mourning hung in the air over the ravaged battleground. The stench of death was everywhere, and those men of Trace's who hadn't surrendered when they'd found out he was dead had fled the field with what they could carry, leaving a rag-tag band of Jayce's people, the children, the parents who had survived, and the men Steve had said were okay not to shoot where they stood.

Before Josh had explained to Jayce that he needed to go, to find his own children and his wife, Jayce had hoped that he would stay. Help her find a safe place for the survivors, and help relieve and save the people in Savannah who hadn't been overtaken by the madness.

Josh had hugged Jayce when she'd asked, more because right now he badly needed a hug than to thank her for her part in the overrunning of Parkopolis, but then he'd explained about Tally, Storm, and Maxine, and Jayce immediately understood.

"Please take what you need. Whatever you want, with our blessing. You've done enough for these people, now it's time to look after your own."

"Thank you. I needed to hear that."

"And I'd be happy to repeat it."

They left two days later once they'd helped with as much as they could. As Josh climbed onto his horse, a figure in a red-checked shirt with his arm in a sling approached from the direction of a new food store Jayce was organizing. A small girl walked beside the figure, and as they approached, Josh recognized Timothy.

It was clear that Timothy had been avoiding him since the battle and the return of his daughter, Gillian. They stopped close to the horse now, though, and Timothy held out his good hand for Josh to take.

Josh and Timothy shook. And then, without a word, Timothy turned and went back towards the crowd of workers. Before Josh returned to the matter in hand, he saw Gillian turn her head around, give a small wave, and mouth *thank you* at him.

They had to swing around Savannah rather than go through it before they could go north and take the highway up through Georgia, through the Carolinas on their way to West Virginia and the M-Bar Ranch. Steve had insisted that none of the men on the patrols had had a run-in with any young women matching Tally's description, and he would have heard if they had. If Tally was smart—and Josh knew she was—she'd have done the same thing that Josh was doing now. She'd headed to one node point where all of the family would know to make for. The towns and cities were too dangerous, and there was no point in risking their safety going back to the house in

Morehead City. They would head to the ranch. Josh was convinced as he'd ever be that this was the right choice.

Poppet had had the option to stay with Jayce's set-up or move on with Josh, but the ex-gangster's moll was sanguine and pragmatic to the maximum. Her reply had been simple. "You've helped keep me alive this amount of time, Josh. I think you're my lucky charm. Either that or I'm your punishment."

And so, they took a day to swing around Savannah and then start the journey north. Savannah's fires could still be seen burning, and Josh felt that almost every city in the U.S., or indeed the world, would need to breed more people like Jayce and Elvis if they were to survive. He'd played his own small part in the liberation of one city from the tyranny of people like Trace, and beyond him the shadowy figure of the Harbormaster—who no one, as of yet, who knew the information had been willing to speak about, either in relation to who they really were or where they were located, let alone what they wanted. Even Steve only knew the barest of details. All Harve had told him and Jackdaw before setting off with the cart of children had been that they were going south, and that they would be met by the Harbormaster's men along the way.

That already in America there was someone like the Harbormaster set up, ready to go, willing to take over and with the structures around him to achieve that goal by the fear of threat, violence, and torture suggested that there would have been a network in place which had easily been moved over from, say, organized crime, to the ability to control resources and men like Harve and Trace.

Just mention of the Harbormaster's name had drained the color from the people who knew of his existence. Jayce hadn't heard the term before, but recognized that unless they'd gotten organized themselves, they would have been under threat as soon as the flow of booty, looted goods, food, and potential slaves had dried up, at which point he would have been sending his forces to investigate. She figured that, as soon as they could, they would rescue who they

could from Savannah, and perhaps head north in Josh's wake. The further they got from the malign influence of the burgeoning power in the south, the better.

With Savannah well behind them, the sense that he was abandoning Jayce in some way—albeit with her blessing—when she needed him most, began to diminish, and he felt he could look forward with some hope to being reunited with his family.

He had no real idea if that fantasy would ever come true, but believing in it at least made him feel they were traveling in the right direction.

"I do believe we'll find Tally again," Poppet said as they made their way along another deserted road. Neither of them had spoken for the last couple of miles. They were both still coming to terms with the consequences of everything that had happened to them since Barnard's Star had spread its spectacular internal and external influence over the people and technology of the Earth. Getting heads around that took a lot of processing. And as Poppet hadn't spoken of Tally or indeed her own family to Josh since they'd gotten back to U.S. soil, it seemed out of place—a real non sequitur, as Maxine would have said. In all reality, it sounded like Poppet was trying to convince herself more than give succor to Josh. Josh eyed Poppet in her saddle. Her brows were tight, and she was sitting stiffly.

"Are you okay?"

Poppet snorted. "Oh, Josh, I am far from okay. But finding Tally and the others is something that makes this whole thing bearable. Losing Joey on that damned boat, coming back home to this nightmare, and suffering like I did coming off the sauce has been the very worst time of my life. Navigating all that is something I wouldn't have planned to do, even if at the end it made me a better person. But helping you find Tally.... That's a good thing to try to do in all this badness. I figure I owe you that, and I believe we will find her."

"After we make it to the M-Bar, do you want me to come with you to New York? Find your family?"

Poppet smiled weakly. "There's nothing and no one waiting for me in New York, you sweet, crazy man. When you marry someone like Joey Langolini, you leave all of your real life, and the people in it, behind. My parents are dead, my friends are long gone, and..."

"Your children?"

"Joey and I couldn't have kids. That's why we behaved like them. Holidays, parties, lavish and obscene spending—I dunno if you know, Mr. Ex-Policeman—but there's an awful lot of money to be made from the vices of others. Sex. Gambling. Drugs. I'm not proud of what I got mixed up in with the mob, Josh, and in another time, another world, people like you would have eventually tracked my Joey down and put him away for a million years."

"I guess..."

"The funny thing is, the trip on that liner was to be our farewell to the life. One last luxury extravagance before fading into the background, unhooking from the crime and the killing, and just living our lives. Sure, Joey would probably have still wanted a gold toilet, but hey, some treasures it's hard to let go of. And the irony is, he was okay with it. He was okay with the idea of a quiet retirement somewhere nice, away from the hustle... and look what happened."

Poppet was looking up at the sky now. Through the clouds, up to where maybe the smudge of the new Barnard's Star might be tonight when the sun went down. "Never make plans, Josh. Never live outside the moment, and make sure you live that moment to the very edge, because life really does pull the rug from underneath you at the most unexpected moments."

Josh didn't answer. There was nothing he could say to argue because, right now, Poppet was right.

Maybe when Storm, Tally, and Maxine were in his arms again, he would feel differently.

But not right now.

They made camp in a secluded picnic area off the highway. Josh pitched the tent while Poppet saw to the horses, taking them down to the stream to drink.

Josh cooked up some coffee, and they ate soup cold from cans—both because it was quicker and because they were both half-starved. Josh had never been much of a hunter, but he'd taken a selection of weapons from Ballantine's and Jayce's store that might make the process of shooting something to eat a little easier, but for now the cans would do. The chicken soup was rich and filling anyway.

They could see down into a shallow valley, where a ranch was situated at the intersection of two dirt roads. The land around it looked a little dry, and the grass in the pastures was taking on the brownish tinge of hay. No one had watered the land of the farm for some time now, and as Josh looked down the half mile of slope, he saw a solitary goat walking around on its own, chewing on the grass and minding its own business.

There was no activity from the ranch house... no smoke from the chimney and no one who he could see moving about in the yard outside. Of course, that didn't mean there was no one down there, but a goat was not a prize it would be easy to give up. He'd never shot anything that big before—other than a human, that is—and the sense of it being something he was going to have to get around to sooner or later in this new nightmare existence propelled him down the slope, after calling to Poppet to tell her what he was up to. He carried his Remington Model 700, firing .308 Winchester magnum cartridges. He'd been assured by the reading matter that came with the new gun and its ammunition that it would happily drop a deer. So, it shouldn't be too much of a problem to deal with one goat.

Josh decided to check over the ranch house for signs of habitation before he stole the owner's goat, and found the place to be in a considerable state of disarray. As he approached, he could see that the windows at the front of the property were broken, the drapes behind them fluttering in the breeze. He could hear nothing as he came into the yard. There was a barn with the door hanging open. Inside, there was an ancient beige Chrysler sedan resting on bricks which looked like it hadn't seen service since Nixon had been President. There was a bunch of rusted farm machinery that had seen better days, and a line had been strung across the yard from which shirts and jeans were hung as if just put out to dry. But when Josh felt the material, it was stiff and wind-dried. The clothes had been there for a long time.

A pile of rusting car parts inhabited another corner of the yard, there were oil drums on their side, and a telegraph pole leaned sideways like the Tower of Pisa, no phone or electricity lines attached. The yard had a bleakness of not so much abandonment as that of a life lived by trying to scratch a living out of the dirt.

It had been poor people who'd lived there, whoever they'd been. They'd had very little, and it showed.

Inside, the ranch house was dark and gloomily furnished. Threadbare carpets, stained walls, and furniture a thrift store would have turned away. Josh called out several times, but got no answer. There did come a rustle of rats from beneath the floorboards as he moved about, and the drapes moved lazily in the wind.

Josh found the note before he found the body. It was dated the day of the supernova, and it was brief and written by a man who'd had just one more tether to get to the end of. Charles Grover Pattison had not been an educated man, but in broken English, he'd said his goodbyes to the world before the world had said goodbye to everyone else. The banks were foreclosing on his mortgage, the farm was going to be taken away, and he would be turned out of it with nowhere to go, and so he had decided that he would end it all there

and then, before the bank sent the men to take his stuff and board up his windows.

The irony was that no one had ever come to take the farm away from Charles Grover Pattison. The world had ended just after he'd thrown a rope over a bannister and taken himself away from the humiliation, the pain, and the injustices as he saw them.

Poppet may have had a point about not making plans and living in the moment, but here Josh had found the body of a man who had been overtaken by the moment and unable to see beyond it. There was no way this man could have predicted what was going to happen the night after he took his own life, but if he'd looked beyond the moment of despair, it might have stayed his hand just long enough for the world to end and for there to be no banks or bailiffs or mortgages to be foreclosed on. The thing that had killed the world for everyone else may have saved the life of this dirt-poor man who'd had the weight of a dozen worlds on his shoulders. Josh didn't know if he was making sense even to himself, thinking all this, but now he knew that he had the basis of an argument to counter Poppet's largely pessimistic one.

Make plans. And carry them through because you don't know what's coming around the next bend.

Josh cut the body down, found a shovel, and buried the body in the pasture with a view down the valley where there was a southern aspect that would keep it bright all day.

And then he left the farm to make his way back up to the tent, the horses, and Poppet.

He left the goat to the pasture. It would do fine there, tidily nibbling the grass around the grave of Charles Grover Pattison.

They got Storm into his bed, and thankfully Maria just followed them around the house, not straying out of the sight of either Donald or Maxine.

Storm woke sporadically. A thermometer said his temperature was just over one hundred degrees, and as the pain came in waves, he vomited copiously over the side of the bed into a bowl Maxine held for him.

Maxine's examination revealed a swollen and tender belly on the right side above the pelvis.

"What do you think it is?" Donald asked. The quaver in his voice told Maxine what she could hear him loudly *not* saying. "Is it the cancer?"

"I can't be sure, but all the symptoms are pointing me right now towards appendicitis."

Donald thumped down in a chair, and Maria put a hand on his shoulder and patted it, saying "Donald."

Storm writhed, but managed to say, "I think the pain isn't getting any worse... I—" But before he could continue, he again vomited noisily into the bowl.

Maxine went to the bathroom, emptied the bowl, and came back into the room, thoughts racing through her head. If Storm didn't have bad luck, he'd not have any luck at all. When was the universe going to cut him a break?

"Appendicitis is a medical emergency. If the pain subsides and the swelling goes down, it just might be a grumbling appendix, but that will still need attention—if it doesn't burst and cause full-scale peritonitis."

Donald puffed out his cheeks and squeezed his wife's hand. "Nearest hospital was in Lewisburg, and that's not going to be working at any level now. Not with everything else going on."

"I'll have to go to Pickford, see if I can get anywhere with Creggan." Maxine ran her hand through her hair. This would certainly bring more of Creggan's cronies to the M-Bar, and the chances of keeping Maria hidden from them, without Storm to help, were significantly reduced. It was a wholly desperate situation. In some ways, Maxine was glad her previous insistence to her father—namely, on staying here at the M-Bar—had become untenable, now it had been superseded by Storm's illness. It would have been a million times worse if they had already been on the road with Storm in agony. How they would have coped out in the open, unable to move on, and at the mercy of anyone of Creggan's ilk who might come across them, did not hold up under any kind of scrutiny. It was best they were at the ranch, and she felt a pang of guilt for even suggesting moving out to her father.

"Wait!" Donald suddenly slapped his hand down on the top of his thigh. The sound startled Maria, who took a step back and mouthed his name a couple of times before Maxine took her by the hand and sat her down in a chair, making appropriately soothing noises. Donald waited until Maxine had settled her mother before continuing.

"I don't know why I didn't mention it already. How about Lawrence Banks?"

Maxine drew a blank as she wracked her brain. "I don't know him."

"Doctor... an old geezer. He retired fifteen years ago, by my reckoning. Last time I saw him in town, about two years ago, he was getting ready to move to a place he had in the mountains about sixty miles from here. On the way out to Cumberland. You'd have passed it on the way here. You said you'd been into Cumberland."

Yes, she had. And had almost gotten herself executed there by a rogue general and his kill-happy lieutenant. They'd been holed up in a hospital of all places, stockpiling drugs and whatever else they could loot. Maxine had gone there to see if she could get antibiotics and painkillers to help alleviate the side effects from Storm's chemotherapy. She'd gotten away from there with the drugs they'd needed, but had very nearly been taken out and shot for looting. The highways they'd taken from Cumberland into West Virginia had taken them through the Monongahela National Forest and through the Blue Ridge Mountains to the M-Bar, which sat here nestled beyond the foothills of Alleghany Mountain on the outskirts of Pickford. The road back that way would take her at least three days in the carriage, with no guarantee that Lawrence Banks would be there anyway. Pickford was still the best bet, even with the risk of her mother's discovery—especially since the idea of going anywhere near Cumberland again didn't fill her with any enthusiasm.

"Hold on. When I saw him in town that last time, he gave me his address and said if I was ever in the vicinity I was to drop in and have a beer." Donald got up and told Maxine to follow him downstairs into the kitchen. Storm was rested and no longer screwed up with pain. The appendix was indeed beginning to behave itself again, and so Maxine followed her father out. Maria followed behind them, repeating her favorite word under her breath.

Back in the kitchen, Donald opened a drawer below the counter and rifled around inside it. "Darn it..." The next drawer provided the same result, but with the third, he began moving papers and then, with a yell of triumph, he pulled a postcard from the depths of the

drawer like a happy fisherman landing a prize trout. "Here it is." He handed the postcard to Maxine. "There. His address. Lawrence Banks. I'll leave right now."

"Dad. Wait. Stop. It's three days away. That's nearly a week's trip!"

Donald shook his head. "No, that's if you take the I-250 and go slower than a snail on valium. But if I go via Route 51, onto Route 28, I reckon I can make it there in two days. Have Lawrence back here by Friday. Maybe even Thursday night."

"No, you need to stay here and keep the farm running to all intents and purposes in case anyone shows up to snoop. I wouldn't know the first thing to tell anyone, and we'd be busted straight away. Show me the route on the map," Maxine told him. "I'll take the buggy and Tally-Two. One horse isn't going to bring you and Lawrence back. And I'm good with the buggy. I got us all the way here, didn't I?"

Donald looked crestfallen, but nodded his agreement with Maxine's logic. "Okay, we'll do it your way. But I'd still get there quicker. I can still ride hard and leave no shadow."

Maxine kissed his cheek and went out to hook up Tally-Two to the buggy. If she could really get to Lawrence Banks in two days and he was there to be found, then if Storm's appendicitis held out until the weekend without bursting, there was a good chance they might be able to get through this. She had no idea where the doctor would perform his operation, or how they would keep the area sterile, but those would be problems for later. Packing enough food for five days, plus a pistol and a shotgun with ammo for both, and leaving instructions for Donald on how and when to give antibiotics and painkillers to Storm, she reined in Tally-Two and took the road away from the M-Bar towards the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The route she took, the one indicated by Donald as the fastest to the mountain home of Doctor Lawrence Banks, would take her north-east from the M-Bar and along well-maintained forestry roads that

stayed away from the towns and any chances of running into Creggan's men.



Tally, Henry, and Greene walked the road which would eventually lead them to the M-Bar Ranch even as Maxine headed away from it.

They'd had to go further north than they would have liked in order to avoid routes that would have taken them through large cities, but they entered the Monongahela National Forest continuing to make good progress. In the days that had come and gone since the gas station attack, and Tally's drop into the sinkhole, an uneasy truce had existed between Tally, Henry, and Greene.

Tally had found Henry in the forest first. He'd led the attackers away, gotten behind them, and killed four of the six people who'd followed them into the trees. Once he'd accomplished that, he'd tracked back up the slope, found the sinkhole, and then tracked Tally through the brush—which he'd said had been easy because: *Let's face it, you don't exactly travel through the forest like a Ninja*—and he'd caught up with her half an hour later. Tally had been relieved to see Henry coming through the trees and had hugged him tight before telling him what had happened to her. The shock and the euphoria of the fall and then the free-climb out of the hole had dissipated, and all she'd been left with was a white-hot wire of anger sizzling through her thoughts.

She'd been all for leaving Greene to fend for himself and just cutting their losses. Henry had been more pragmatic. Those losses would include a third of their gear and a substantial amount of their ammunition. It was worth finding out what had happened to Greene if for no other reason than to recover their stuff.

They'd found him an hour later, when Henry had picked up his trail near the road, and they'd followed it back down through the trees until they'd discovered him up one.

He'd been twenty feet up in the air with one of the attackers throwing rocks at him in an attempt to get him down from the tree. The attacker had been a large fat woman whose eyes blazed with a deep and unknowable hatred. There'd been blood and spittle around her chops, and her mouth had hissed like a cornered snake. Too hefty and unskilled to climb the tree, she'd still been determined to dislodge Greene; and it had looked like she felt ready to tear off his limbs and wear them as a necklace.

Henry had shot her. She'd been so focused on Greene that she hadn't even noticed him approaching from behind. She'd gone down with a thud, and Tally had been disconcerted to see the smile that had grown on her dying lips as she fell.

Greene had immediately thrown down his pack and jumped down from the tree.

"What took you so...?"

Tally had floored Greene with one punch and laid him out flat next to the woman who moments before had been throwing rocks at him.

"Henry should shoot you, too, you moron."

Greene had been blinking and feeling his bruised chin. In a cartoon, he would have had birds and stars whirling around his head, Tally had thought as she examined his crossed eyes and surprised expression.

"What was that for?" he'd managed when the shock of the punch drained away from his mouth.

Tally hadn't said anything, and it had been left to Henry to haul Greene to his feet and help him dust himself down. "If I say *get down* in the future, what are you to do to avoid Tally punching you out like that again?"

"I should get down?"

“Yes. And believe me, if Tally doesn’t punch you if you don’t, I might just shoot you. You put all our lives in danger, especially Tally, who fell down a sinkhole and very nearly died there.”

The shock had come back into Greene’s eyes. “I’m sorry... I didn’t think...”

Tally had raised a swift hand to cut off his words—Greene flinching away, thinking it was the precursor to another blow. “That’s just the thing, Greene. You don’t think,” she’d said, picking up Greene’s pack and throwing it at him. “Now let’s get going,” Tally had breathed out. “We’ve lost enough time as it is.”



The pain in her ankle wore off again over a couple of days walking. They kept their eyes peeled for any horses they might be able to appropriate, but it was clear that whoever had the wherewithal to try to survive the collapse of everything would have taken any such horses long ago and jealously guarded them. They skirted towns and farmsteads—and, of course, cities—and only saw a handful of people. Some of these ran away from them without making contact and others gave them a wide berth on the other side of the highway, resisting any call to communicate. Those they saw on horseback galloped off. Probably because they knew how valuable their horse was, and that people without horses were more likely to start a battle to wrest them from their grasp.

They camped and ate what Henry could kill—mainly fowl, though he got a small deer one day that provided good eating—and when they came across well-stocked lakes and ponds, there were walleye to be taken with Henry’s telescopic fishing gear, and leeches could easily be used to charge the lure when dug from beneath rocks and weeds at the water’s edge.

Henry was a godsend. Without him, Tally knew she might have had to go into more towns and properties to loot food and fluids. He was

adept with a rod as well as a gun, and he told her that if only they would choose to stay in some place for a few days, he'd be able to snare rabbits which would be good eating, too.

But Tally hadn't wanted to spend any more time on the road than she needed to. As her ankle had gotten better and her pace picked up, the three young travelers found themselves walking into Pickford County on the edge of Alleghany Mountain.

Just knowing how close they were to their destination made Tally want to walk longer during the day and sleep less at night. She got the impression that Greene would have bitched and moaned about her driving them so fast if he'd had the spine to back it up, but he didn't, and so every day Tally waited an extra hour before they made camp, and knocked a similar amount of time off in the morning. The weather was holding and they didn't need to make shelters between the trees at night, so they slept between the trees and looked up at the stars.

The stark smudge of the new Barnard's Nebula would crawl slowly up the night sky and loop overhead as the hours progressed. Tally couldn't help being caught between wonder and hate when she saw it. It had changed so much about her life and those she loved. Perhaps tomorrow—would it really be tomorrow?—they would be at the M-Bar. There would be Grandpa and Grandma, and there—she prayed hard—would be her brother and her mom, and maybe, just maybe, her dad.

Their breakfast in the morning was a brace of snipe Henry had shot the night before, which tasted smoky and rich, cooked on the fire with wild onions and the ubiquitous beans. It would sustain them for the half day of hard walking that lay ahead.

Greene was even more silent than Tally had experienced in the past days as they headed across the plain towards the M-Bar. His face was flushed, his eyes on his boots as he walked with his head down and his counsel kept to himself.

Henry marched with renewed vigor now that they were very nearly at their destination. He kept looking back at Tally with a smile as the road signs pointed towards the M-Bar, and proclaimed the distance between them was just two miles.

Two miles.

Tally wondered if her dreams would come true, or if they would turn again to nightmares.

Whatever the outcome, she could no longer just walk.

Tally began to run.

Progress was swift on the horses, and Josh figured they were averaging around thirty miles a day as they climbed the states from Georgia to West Virginia and approached their final destination, the M-Bar Ranch. The ashes of the memory of what he'd found at the farmhouse of Charles Grover Pattison glowed in his mind as they traveled. He hadn't discussed what he'd found at the farm, and simply told Poppet that he'd been a wuss and just couldn't bring himself to kill the goat with the Remington.

Poppet had found the notion hilarious and told him that she would have had no such qualms. She was heartily sick of canned soup, boiled rice, and bland pasta.

Josh only remained glad that Poppet had been able to rediscover her sense of humor without resorting to alcohol. Not that they had any, or had found any in the deserted homesteads they'd looked in—those few which hadn't yet been burned out in the orgy of violence that was sweeping across the country.

They traveled on roads where they could, and would, get off them if the map suggested they'd go through even the smallest of towns. Traveling cross-country was a different kind of risk from going through the towns, but it was a risk, nonetheless. There might not be people around to attack or steal from them, but a river without a

convenient bridge was just as much an obstacle to be thought around as any group of threatening locals.

One of the positives to the journey, if such a thing could be found, was that his admiration for Poppet was growing by the day. Not in any kind of potentially romantic way, although even at ten years Josh's senior, Poppet was a fine-looking woman, but he admired her more and more as a person.

She may have come out of a violent and deeply corrupt life, but she'd been equipped with many skills that made the journey they were making now safer and quicker. Poppet had an almost preternatural sense of direction to go along with her quick-witted sense of humor. She could read the landscape when they were off-road, and invariably took them to where they needed to be on the other side of a town or city without having to consult a map.

Back on the *Sea-Hawk*, she'd used a smart trick to work out which direction to sail the ship because the Barnard's event had destroyed the capacity of the ship's compass to give a true heading. She'd used the shadows cast by an iron bar fifteen minutes apart to help them find true south, so that they could sail west and back to the coast of the U.S. That they'd ended up in the clutches of Trace Parker hadn't been her fault. At least they'd been on the *right continent*.

She could shoot well—she and Joey had enjoyed many weekends of skeet shooting over the years at their summer home in upstate New York. When they disturbed game in their travels, she could usually bring it down and enjoy helping Josh prepare and cook it. One day a grouse flew into her sights, and although she complained they didn't have time to hang it until it was high, the meat of the bird was rich and full of flavor.

Poppet was also wise in a way that Josh hadn't been previously aware of. She could read him well, and as they rode on, she said something to him that turned his thinking inside out.

"You know," she said, as if she were going to ask him what he wanted for dinner, "there are, in my experience, three types of married men."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, and I've been working on which kind you are. I can tell you if you're interested."

"How could I not be after that setup?"

She laughed and continued. "In my experience, there are the ones who can't stop talking about their wives. They want you to know how not available they are, about how there's this barrier around them that is sometimes fear and sometimes pride, but they're putting it out there constantly that they're off limits. Man, I've met so many men like that. I'd never have to open my mouth before they were telling me what her favorite color was, who her stylist was, where she bought her shoes, and what she'd bought him for his birthday and Christmas. All so I knew, no touchy-touchy. They were on the outset of the bounds. You, Josh, are not one of those men."

"The way you describe them, I'm glad about that."

"You should be. They're very faithful, but *gahd*, they're dull. Just because I want to be your friend doesn't mean I want to dance the horizontal tango with you."

Josh smiled. Poppet, when she wanted to be, was great fun.

"Then there's the second kind of married man. The shark. He wants to swim in other oceans. He has the confidence that if he crashes and burns, he has the little woman to go back to and lick his wounds, so he hunts in the shallows and the depths, with his little ring of white skin where his wedding ring should be shining like a lighthouse. And what do lighthouses signify?"

"Sharks and lighthouses. My wife would call that a mixed metaphor..."

"Did I go to college? Bite me. So, Mr. Smarty Pants, what do lighthouses signify?"

"Danger."

"Precisely. Stay clear of sharks, I tell my girlfriends. If they don't eat you, the missus might."

"And am I one of those?"

"No, Josh, you're not."

"So, I'm the third kind?"

"I guess so."

"And he is....?"

"The clam."

"We're back in the ocean."

"Kinda. You can find freshwater clams donchaknow. Anyway, back to the clam. He doesn't ever mention his wife, never talks about her, never gives anything away when he's talking to me or when he's talking to anyone."

"I just said she'd pick up on your mixed metaphor."

"But, curiously, that's the first time you've mentioned her to me in any meaningful way since we met. Sure, you've said that you want to find her, but I know about Tally's hobbies, I know about Storm's illness, and Christ, I even know the names of your wife's parents, but what do I know about Maxine?"

Josh said nothing.

"See? The *clam*. Look, Josh, there are men who don't give anything away. Nothing at all. They have no *tell*, as guys around my Friday night poker game might say. But you're not that guy. You've not clammed up about anyone else in your life—except Maxine." Poppet

raised her eyebrows and cocked her head. "So, Josh, are you gonna tell me what the hell is wrong with your marriage?"

Josh looked away.

In the months before the supernova, he and Maxine had barely spoken outside of talking about the welfare of their children. Although he had never articulated it to Maxine, he felt that she'd resented the work he did in the probation department with the young offenders, feeling it was taking up too much of his extracurricular time—especially when Storm's initial diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma had been confirmed, and he'd begun traveling from North Carolina to Boston for treatment.

When he'd told Maxine that he would be away on the *Sea-Hawk* with ten probationers on a team-working and trust trip out into the Atlantic, she'd not so much hit the roof as frozen over. Considering there had been so much passion when their relationship had started in Raleigh, the years after that had pretty much been plain sailing. That was, until Josh had left the police force when a young man he'd been mentoring in an outreach program had been stabbed to death in an alley. The hit he'd taken then had sent him into a spiral out of the police force and into the probation service, and put him to running his yearly trip out with the kids on his caseload who he thought would benefit the most from the experience. Maxine's chill had extended to Tally and Storm's treatment of him in some respects, but he'd been able to get some kind of thaw going with his daughter with the situation on the *Sea-Hawk*, and he was hoping he'd be able to do the same with Storm and Maxine when they got to the M-Bar.

But to Poppet, he said nothing.

"It's okay, Mr. Clam, you don't need to answer. I can see it all in your eyes." Poppet paused and then smiled. "Look, we're in hell's hand-basket here, and we have very little chance of getting out of it. You've been there for me, and I wanna be there for you. And you can take that look off your face, Mr. Clam, I don't mean it like that. You're definitely not my type. You're not a gangster for a start, and

you don't own half of Atlantic City. What I'm saying is, Josh, right now we're all each of us has got. If you need an ear, I got one for ya."

Josh couldn't say anything right then, as the memories of the weeks leading up to the supernova rushed through his head like spring floodwater. He hadn't spoken to anyone about his marriage—and least of all spoken to the woman who should be at the head of the queue for that conversation, Maxine.

"When I'm ready, maybe I will. But I think there's someone I need to talk to first."

"The pearl inside the clam," Poppet said as they rode on into the hot afternoon. "And before you say a word. *Oysters Schmoisters*, Mr. Smarty Pants!"



Some days later, as they traversed Route 84 to the border with West Virginia on the road that would eventually lead to Pickford County and the M-Bar, they tied up the horses in the parking lot of a burned-out motel. They'd gotten into the habit in recent days of opening up abandoned cars. Josh had suggested the vehicles could hold a wealth of useful items. And so, it proved. There were no end of lighters and lighter fuel containers, and some cars had even been traveling from stores when the supernova had hit. Their drivers, perhaps in the grip of the madness, had abandoned their cars and their shopping. Josh and Poppet had scored cans of meat and fruit as well as a myriad makes of soda. There was plenty of boxed food that could be carried on the third horse's pack. A couple of oil lamps had been a good find, as they'd neglected to take any from Parkopolis and thus had to rely on the light from their fire at night. The oil lamps could be used to go to and from their designated area for the production of human waste. That certainly beat stumbling blindly through the brush to find a decent place to relive oneself.

They'd found that cars which had been unmolested were the best and would bear the best results, and although the motel was burned out, there were a dozen or so cars in the front lot which, apart from a few smashed windows, were enticing in their potential.

Poppet took a crowbar they'd found three days before and used it to systematically pop all of the trunks she could as Josh went around using the butt of his rifle to smash side windows to see what he could salvage from inside. The other good thing about salvaging from abandoned cars like this was that you weren't in an enclosed space, so you'd be able to see all around you as you worked.

Josh felt a strange and vicarious thrill breaking into the cars like this. Doing the one thing that the probationers on his caseload would have done as a matter of course several times a day before they'd gotten themselves into the justice system and into Josh's orbit; it was indeed a weird one-eighty in his life. He squared the feeling with himself by pointing out the exceptional circumstances, and knowing that he would never take from a car that someone was living in.

They'd found enough evidence of that along the way, too. People without shelter had taken refuge overnight in cars. They'd passed several where someone was still asleep inside their vehicle in the early mornings on the road. Both he and Poppet elected not to wake such occupants as they trotted by on the other side of the road, because you could never be sure what state of mind the person in the car would be in. Even those in the grip of the Barnard's Star madness had to sleep sometimes, and you wouldn't know what mood they'd be waking up in. Josh figured the best thing to do out on the road was wait for anyone else to talk to him and Poppet first. It seemed that was now a common way of dealing with the situation of meeting others. From what he'd seen of the crew and probationers on the *Sea-Hawk*, and what he had experienced himself, there appeared to be no rhyme or reason to the change in anyone's mental states. It seemed to be nothing less than random, and all the more dangerous because of it.

Poppet cursed as she sprang the trunk on an old Ford, and Josh saw her falling backwards away from something he couldn't see. He racked his pistol and jogged around to where Poppet was laid out on the concrete. Her face had taken on a green pallor, and she looked like she was about to throw up.

Then the unmistakable smell of rotting meat hit his nostrils. When Josh had helped Poppet to her feet, he warily looked inside the trunk, expecting to find something that on balance he wouldn't have wanted to look at. He held his hand in front of his nose because the smell was making his eyes water, but it wasn't a body that they'd discovered—it was what remained of what had once been a young black bear.

Some hunter had wanted to take his trophy home for mounting and had stuffed the corpse inside his trunk before driving home for the night. Perhaps he'd left his hunting grounds late in the day, knowing that he wouldn't make it home, and so had booked into the motel for the night on the evening that the supernova had hit. Who knew? But whatever had happened, the bear was now in a very advanced state of decomposition.

Josh pulled the trunk down on the rotting bear, and that was when he saw the eyes.

There was a dark face pressed into the window at the back of the Ford. The eyes were quick and bright. Josh could see that the kid, who could have been anywhere up to the age of nineteen or twenty, was figuring out whether he should break out of the car left or right, depending on which way Josh went.

Josh holstered his pistol and held up both his hands. "It's okay, we're not going to hurt you. We're sorry about breaking into your car. We didn't know you were in there."

The eyes blinked, the face on the kid unsure. Josh couldn't make out if it was a male or female child. The hair was in short dreads, and the

dark brown skin below it was giving away nothing behind the sheen on the glass.

“Hey, we don’t want to give you any trouble,” he continued. “Look, we’ll just go back over here, out of your way. If you want to get out of the car and run, that’s fine, but if you want to stay and have something to eat with us, that’s fine, too. All up to you. I’m Josh, and this is Poppet.”

Poppet gave a little wave. “Hey, kid.”

They moved back a good thirty yards and weren’t pointing any weapons at the car. Doing their best to present the least amount of threat that they could.

The kid in the car thought about what he or she would do for a long time. And then he or she nodded and opened the car door. A brown leg appeared from out of the car below the door, and another foot followed. There were sneakers and calf-length pants which were a dirty blue. As the kid emerged, Josh could see that it was a female. Maybe fifteen, maybe sixteen. Her features sharp and her eyes bright. Her lips were full and were fitted around a wide smile.

“That’s it,” Josh said. “You can trust us. We’re not going to hurt you. I promise.”

The girl nodded again. And then she lifted her Colt Detective Special and shot Josh where he stood.

The first thing Tally saw as she ran into the yard was her grandma's grave. The drying mound of earth and the crude cross with Maria's name on it hit her like a trip hammer and sucked all the breath from her body.

The ranch itself had looked fine from the road as they'd approached. There'd been none of the usual destruction they'd seen in so many buildings along the way, either, which had filled her heart with the brightest optimism, but to be confronted with the grave as the first thing she encountered as she sprinted up from the road washed all feelings of joy from her.

Which was why, when her grandmother and grandfather appeared in the doorway to the ranch house, she assumed that she'd fainted and was now in the grip of some feverish dream.

Donald came over with Maria on his arm as Henry and Greene appeared at the entrance to the farm. "Are they with you?" he asked, pointing at the boys.

It was all Tally could do to nod.

"Why don't you all come inside and I can give you some coffee, some food, and explain everything, including the grave."

All Tally could look at was Maria, as if it was the first time she'd ever seen her, and she reacted to her grandmother's constant smile by smiling back just as hard.

"Where's Mom? Is she here? Did she come here from Boston with Storm?"

Donald sighed. "Yes, but the details are going to take a lot of explaining. Come on, let's get you inside. We don't know who's watching the M-Bar right now."



Tally sat on the end of the bed and looked down at Storm. He'd lost weight since she'd last seen him, but his hair was growing back after the chemo. The first thing he'd whispered to her as she'd come into the room was, "Hey. No hugs. You might pop me."

So, she'd kissed his forehead and squeezed his hand instead.

"Is it painful?"

"What? Having to look at your ugly face close up again? Agony."

Tally grinned. "No, you moron, the appendicitis..."

"I'd rather have the cancer back."

"Ouch."

"The antibiotics and painkillers Gramps are feeding me are helping, but I sure wish Mom was back with that doctor."

"I'm glad you made it here, though, brother mine. I was worried sick about all of you."

Tally filled Storm in briefly on what had happened on the *Sea-Hawk* and subsequently after reaching the shore.

"Man, you have been through the wringer."

"I still wouldn't swap places with you. It looks like we both have suffered a little."

"And Dad?"

"I just don't know. He could be anywhere, for all I know. If he's able, I guess he'll be making for here, but... who knows?"

A silence descended that served to underscore how desperate the whole situation was to Tally. Her brother was seriously ill, her mom was out there on her own, her grandma was one of the crazies, and she had no idea if her dad was dead or alive.

"I think I'll leave you to get some rest. I think Gramps is organizing Henry and Greene downstairs, and if I know Greene, pretty soon I think Gramps is going to want to hang him from the nearest tree."

Storm kissed her hand as a wave of pain washed over his face. Tally paused. "You need anything?"

"Other than a new digestive system? No, I've just had more painkillers. Waiting for them to kick in."

With a smile that was more to convince herself that everything was going to be okay than transmit that idea to Storm, she went downstairs to the kitchen, where she found Henry with his head in his hands, Donald and Greene already squaring up for an argument, and Maria still smiling and saying "Donald" under her breath at regular intervals. It was like a scene from a really bad play.

"I'll thank you not to criticize this country in front of me, young man."

"All I'm saying is that the government should have seen this coming; they should have prepared. Have you seen anyone in authority since this all happened? Nope. Neither have I. They've let us down."

"You think they could have made contingency plans for this? Then you're more foolish than you look, boy."

Henry looked up and mouthed “I’m sorry” as he noticed Tally standing in the doorway.

“I just think there should be people out there helping us. Helping us get back on our feet.”

Donald looked pointedly down at Greene’s boots. “You got feet of your own, boy, and it’s about time you learned to stand on them yourself. It’s not the end of the world because the government hasn’t preserved your *first amendment* right to a mocha latte, a croissant, and free Wi-Fi!”

“Guys, please. Gramps.” Tally held up her hand. “Let’s not get off on the wrong foot.”

“He’s the one who brought up feet!” Greene said. Since getting to the M-Bar, Greene’s repentant aspect appeared to have dissipated, and without Tally around to keep him in his place, he’d let his mouth run ahead of his brain. Tally’s experience of Greene—who would probably lead her grandfather to describe him as *the slush left over by the snowflake generation*—had been mostly bearable. But Gramps was going to be another matter altogether. He was going to walk his snowshoes all over Greene if she didn’t intervene.

“Greene, while you’re in my grandfather’s house, you will not get into arguments with him. I don’t care how much your sensibilities are provoked, but that’s a clear red line with me. We can easily ask you to leave if that’s how you want it. The deal here is zip it or lose it. Am I clear?”

Greene’s face reddened behind his beard, but he nodded. Donald put his thumbs in his belt and rocked back on his heels, puffing out his cheeks, but he didn’t continue with the argument.

He couldn’t anyway because, at that second, there was a furious knocking on the door. Greene, standing next to it, simply just opened it, even though Donald was raising his hands in alarm and hissing, “No...”

Greene had opened the door on a thick-set guy wearing a white Stetson, with a long rifle over his shoulder on a strap.

“Mr. Creggan sent me over to see if you folks were okay. One of our spotter teams said you had some visitors from out of the county and...”

The words dried in his throat as Maria giggled and said, “Donald.”

“Oh my,” the man in the white hat said, his eyes looking up and down Maria as if he’d seen a ghost.

The shotgun, which had been on the kitchen countertop just a moment before, was now in Donald’s hands. He pointed it at the man in the doorway’s belly. “Come inside now, Laurent, and shut the door.”

Tally instinctively went to her grandmother and pulled her back to stand well away from the gun and the man called Laurent it was pointed at.

Laurent raised his hands and walked in, closing the door behind him.

“Henry,” Donald said, “take his rifle and that pea-shooter in the holster.”

Henry got up from the table, unhooked the Winchester from the man’s shoulder, and lifted the Beretta from his side, taking them across the room and putting them on the counter—well out of their owner’s reach.

“She’s supposed to be dead. That means you lied. That means there’s a good chance you’re all infected, and now I am, too,” Laurent said levelly.

“The only infection you got, son, is stupidity. Now sit down at the table while I try to work out what to do with you.”



Bank's cabin was exactly where Maxine had expected it to be, but what she didn't expect was to see its front porch full of bullet holes from automatic weapons fire, the door kicked in, and a sixty-five-year-old woman laid out on her back behind it, coughing up blood and vainly pressing her hands down on a bullet wound in her belly.

Maxine unhooked her pack, put down her shotgun, and knelt by the woman, her nurse training kicking in. "I'm Maxine. I'm a nurse and I'm going to try to help. Can I look at the wound?"

The woman gave the slightest of nods, and so Maxine gingerly lifted the woman's fingers from the puddle of dark blood they'd been pressing down on. She moved aside the flowery material of the woman's dress and looked at the wreckage of skin, muscle, and intestine below. She could immediately see that without access to an emergency room, a gaggle of ER doctors, and the best equipment money could buy, this woman was going to die, and she was going to die soon. Maxine pressed the woman's hands back down on the wound. "That's fine, thank you. Try to keep the pressure on it while I make you comfortable."

The lies we tell.

The door to the cabin led into an open-plan living space, with a door through which Maxine could see a kitchen and two further doors which she guessed led off to a bathroom and bedroom. The walls were lined with books; she could see a *Grey's Anatomy* and a bunch of other medical textbooks, as well as a whole shelf dedicated to bound copies of *The American Journal of Surgery*.

There was a comfortable couch within arm's reach on which there lay well-plumped cushions. Maxine took one and gently lifted the woman's head to place it on the cushion. "Are you Mrs. Banks?"

The woman nodded, and managed to whisper "Cynthia" before a fresh trickle of blood ran down the side of her mouth.

Maxine pulled tissues from her pack and wiped the side of Cynthia's face, cleaning away the blood as best she could. Practically, it was all she could do for the woman.

"You're Doctor Banks' wife?"

Again, the tiniest of nods. Maxine felt terrible trying to get the information she needed out of Cynthia, as the woman was dying, but she needed to know where Lawrence Banks was if she was going to get him back to the M-Bar to help Storm.

As if sensing the conflict in Maxine, Cynthia said in a gurgling whisper, "You... can... spare me the... platitudes, darling... I'm not... just a surgeon's wife... I'm a surgeon, too. I've known... for some hours... this is my last day on Earth..."

Maxine lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You've... come here for... Lawrence... you're not the first..."

Maxine nodded, hoping the next thing Cynthia said wouldn't confirm that her husband was lying dead in one of the other rooms in the cabin.

"Lawrence... would... help anyone... anyone..."

"Is he...?" Maxine pointed to the back of the cabin.

"No... the general's men came three days ago... to tell him he was being... requisitioned to... their facility in Cumberland... ha!" Cynthia coughed up more blood, which Maxine mopped up. "As if... anyone... who knew *anything* about... Lawrence... thought they could... enlist him like that."

The thoughts were crashing in Maxine's mind. *Cumberland. General.* That could only mean Cynthia was talking about General Carron, whose men were headquartered in the Western Maryland Regional Medical Center. The general who had ordered her execution as a looter without a second thought. Maxine's heart sank into her boots.

"Lawrence... told them... where to go... of course... you don't get to his age... without learning how to deal with... jumped-up tin-pot men who've been promoted... to the level... of their own self-importance..."

"Did they take Lawrence to Cumberland?"

Cynthia had to cough some more before she could answer, and the pain in her eyes was awful to behold. Maxine wished there was something, anything she could do, but other than hold the woman's hand, there was nothing. It didn't help that Cynthia knew she was dying, and the normal nursing platitudes were a waste of both their times, because without those platitudes to hide behind, the whole grinding misery of slow death was exposed and open to scrutiny. No shield to hold up or palliative etiquette to dance around. Maxine had to hold back a small sob as Cynthia continued.

"Yes... not at first... he sent them away... but they came back... at four this morning... read out some... pointless legal document... they'd made up about emergency... powers. Then they started... firing. Lawrence did... what he could, firing back but... there were too many of them... I was hit... Lawrence stopped firing so he could tend to me... and they just came in... ...pulled him off me... left me here... to..."

Her voice trailed off. She was still conscious, but her breathing was ragged and her face too pale in the bright morning light coming in through the door. Cynthia's eyes looked dry, and her lips, where they weren't spotted with blood, were turning blue.

"I know... there's... nothing you... can do... but I would like you... to hold my hand... until..."

Maxine nodded and squeezed the hand she was already holding. The fact that Cynthia didn't know she had it already showed Maxine how close to the end Cynthia was, so she lifted her hand up a little so that the dying woman could see it.

Cynthia smiled, and Maxine's heart broke.



By the time she got to the outskirts of Cumberland, Maxine had lost the better part of two days.

Cynthia had died holding Maxine's hand. Before Maxine had left the cabin, she'd covered Cynthia with a blanket and slopped around the contents of a can of kerosene to set the place on fire.

She'd urged Tally-Two on as the cabin roof had caught light and the building had been engulfed by flames. The column of smoke that had risen between the spruces had still been visible behind the buggy when she'd stopped to look nearly an hour later.

Maxine had driven on as fast as she could without exhausting Tally-Two, and had only reluctantly stopped to feed and water the horse as needed. All Maxine could do was drink a little. The idea of eating revolted her. She was too focused on getting to Cumberland, and what she would do then.

The only thing driving her now was that she knew the set-up as it had been at the medical center, and knew that she had gotten in and out of it with her life once—just, yes—but she'd gotten what she'd come for and gotten away. She didn't know if any of that knowledge would help her now, but there was one thing she did know. She had to try. To not go in and try to remove Lawrence Banks would probably be condemning her son to a painful death from peritonitis. She had weapons, she had ammunition, and she had the element of surprise on her side.

Whether any of that mattered, she didn't know, but right now she was willing to put all of her doubts to one side. Being willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for your child was something that, under normal circumstances, she knew she would have done without a second thought. In many ways, it was the wedge that had been driven be-

tween Maxine and Josh in the middle of their marriage. He'd been willing to put his life on the line for so many others, when the focus should have been on his children and nothing else.

Maxine jumped down from the buggy, from where she'd stopped it on a dirt road well back from the highway, and tied Tally-Two to a tree with plenty of grass to graze on nearby and, hopefully, no one around to come steal her while Maxine went into Cumberland.

She stroked the horse and kissed the side of her head before shouldering her rifle, holstering her pistol, and striking out towards the city.

Josh stared up at the sky. There were clouds scudding across the blue. There was a thumping in his ears that could have been footsteps, gunshots, or his heart.

There was also a hideous pain in his thigh that felt as if someone was twisting a corkscrew deep into his flesh. The sharpness of that helped him to resolve what was happening in his ears, and he rapidly came to the conclusion that the sound wasn't running footsteps or the concussion of gunshots or his heart beating hard... it was a combination of all three.

A shadow fell across his face as Poppet moved into view; her shotgun was at her shoulder, and she was pumping shells over his body.

The running footsteps had receded into the distance, and as Poppet stopped firing, all that remained was the hammering of his heart and the pain in his leg.

Poppet knelt down and, without saying anything, pushed at Josh's pelvis, raising his body to one side so that she could look under his leg. Poppet, for her size, was stronger than she looked, and that was another reason for Josh to admire her; she packed a lot of punch into that small frame.

"Entry and exit. You're gonna be okay. But we need to stop the bleeding."

Poppet pulled Josh's belt from his jeans and began threading it around his thigh. "Don't get the wrong idea, buddy. This doesn't mean we're engaged or anything."

She pulled the belt tight as a tourniquet and looked around the motel parking lot. "Scumbag got away. Luckily, she didn't have any more bullets or she'd have taken me out, too. How does it feel?"

"Like I've been shot?"

"The exit wound isn't so bad. Do you think you can walk? We need to get off the road and under cover in case she comes back with her bigger, meaner brothers."

"You're the queen of optimism," Josh said, testing what it was like being up on one elbow. It wasn't fun, but it was bearable.

"And you're my subject, baby, so come on, you can't lie down there all day. We got work to do."



In the trees, well off the road and with the horses tied up, Poppet broke open a wound pad and stitch kit from the pack of medical supplies they'd been gifted by Jayce back at Parkopolis.

"You know how to stitch a wound?"

"You think Joey's boys could go to a doctor? Were you the most naïve cop on the force, Josh? Yes. I couldn't work the rackets, or provide protection, but I could work my way around a gunshot. Occupational hazard in Joey's line of work. It won't be tapestry quality, but it's going to fix the leaking. But one thing you do need to know..."

"It's going to hurt?"

"Yeah. Local anesthetic, we don't have, and I'm not letting you break into my store of Jim Beam."

Poppet unbridled one of the horses and gave Josh a leather strap to bite down on as she cleaned the wound with sterile water, covered her hand in alcohol gel, and put on the gloves provided in the pack. "Okay, I'm going to take down your pants and I want you to turn over. Damn, it's a long time since I've said that to anyone who wasn't my husband."

Josh did as he was told, and Poppet got to work. Fifteen minutes later, she was turning him over again to close the wound on the top of his thigh. Josh had to bite down so hard on the strap that he thought he was going to grind all the way through it. The hot pain from the wound and the sharp points as the needle went in were blinding surges of agony in his head. Once it was over, and Poppet could feed him a handful of painkillers and antibiotics, the hot throb slowly became a dull, continuous ache, and he could stop chomping down on the leather.

"You're lucky."

"I don't feel very lucky."

"No, you were stupid, not unlucky. You shouldn't have relaxed your guard on the kid. We should have kept our guns on her. I hope you learn this valuable lesson, Josh, as I really don't want to hafta look at your grubby underwear more than twice in one lifetime."

"So, how am I lucky?"

"Just a meat wound. In and out clean. You're lucky she was such a lousy shot. She was aiming at your heart."



The kid didn't come back, alone or with anyone else, and because the wound was in his left leg rather than his dominant right, after four hours or so, he was able to climb back on the horse and follow Poppet back out onto the highway, putting as much distance as they

could between themselves and the motel parking lot—and doing it as quickly as possible.

With the pain now just a stiff ache, Josh could go on to kicking himself in the backside for being such an idiot. Poppet had been right. He'd treated the kid like this was just a normal day in paradise, not a world turned on its head and kicked in the teeth. A world where it was okay to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, setting aside his own safety and the safety of those around him because making sure the kid was okay was his paramount concern. He had to stop trying to save everybody. His hands weren't big enough, even if he might have argued in the past that his heart might be.

As they journeyed towards Pickford County, which sat nestled in the southeast quadrant of the Monongahela National Forest, Josh became stronger, and his leg lost the deep tingle of pain within the muscle. Poppet had done a good job plying him with prophylactic antibiotics to guard against an infection that never came. The painkillers were doing their thing, too, and Poppet was making a fair go at bringing them down dinner from the trees to eat as they went.

They didn't have any run-ins with anyone else, and Josh was glad of it. Although he felt he had a better handle on what might have gone wrong with his family, he wanted to get it right in his head how he'd explain and apologize to his kids and his wife—if she still wanted to be his wife that was.

The road gave Josh the time and the space to think, and so that's what he did, and as they crested the rise that led down onto the plain where the M-Bar Ranch sat, he felt that at last he could find the words he needed to say to Maxine, and the pain in his leg became the reminder of why he knew he would need to change.

They clip-clopped the horses into the yard, and Bobby the Collie ran around excitedly, barking happily and turning circles. "Oh man," Josh said with a heavy heart as he saw the grave, and with that he dismounted stiffly from the horse.

"I'm sorry," Poppet said, jumping down beside him.

"Leave the horses and come into the house," a voice said from the ranch. Josh looked at the building. The windows were all closed and it was a hot day. The drapes were also drawn. The only sign of movement was Bobby, and he'd calmed down to the point that he was lying panting on the veranda. "Donald?" Josh called. "Is that you?"

"Yes," the voice called. "Just come in slowly. They're watching us, and we don't know what they're going to do next."

"Who?"

"Josh, just come to the door and we'll let you in! But be prepared for trouble. We can't come out to you."

Poppet looked at Josh. He spun and shielded his eyes against the sun. The plain looked empty, all the way to the foothills. There were no other horses on the road, and they hadn't seen anyone for a day and a half.

"Donald, I don't understand—"

"For God's sakes, man, there's nothing to understand! We can't come out. They might have a sniper up on the ridge. We can't come out to you, but you can come in to us. Please. Just get inside. The door is unlocked. Once you're in, we can tell you what's what."

"Okay," Josh said, drawing his SIG and racking it just in case. "I'm coming in with my weapon out. Okay?"

"Yes!" Donald hissed from behind one of the windows.

"Are you sure about this?" Poppet whispered as she tied the horses to a fence and Josh limped forward.

"No, I'm anything but sure, but that *is* Donald. I'll go in first, but you hang back a couple of steps; if there's a problem, I'll say 'come in,

Mrs. Langolini'—you hear that, and you get the hell away from the windows, yeah?"

Poppet nodded and took her pistol from the saddlebag on the horse.

Josh limped up the steps to the front door, and Poppet wasn't yet on the first step when Josh opened the door. It took him a second to make out Tally and Donald, two boys he didn't know, and a fat man tied to a chair. He walked inside.

"Tally," he said, his voice cracking with emotion at the rush of seeing the daughter he'd thought he might never see again.

Tally came quickly across the room and hugged her father. Poppet came in behind them, and the red-haired boy kicked the door shut behind her.

"Don't matter how many people you got now, Jefferson," the fat man tied to the chair said, "you'll be dead. Every goddamned one of you."

"Well, I dunno about you guys," Poppet said behind Josh, "but chunky here needs to work on his chat-up lines, because I for one am not going home with that."



Josh and Tally stood in Storm's bedroom as the events they had all lived through were shared. Josh's heart was full of his children. To see them again, even though Storm was so ill, was the best feeling he could remember—he held Tally, and squeezed Storm's hand. "Tic-tac," Josh said, starting their ritual greeting that had grown up because four-year-old Storm couldn't get the words *tic-tac-toe* in the correct order. It seemed a billion years since Josh had heard the requisite response—all those months ago out of the *Sea-Hawk's* satellite radio apparatus.

Storm didn't reply.

At least Tally had not rejected him—the supernova had wiped some slates clean, it seemed, but not all of them. But maybe Tic-tac wasn't fully ready to forgive Josh for his part in the Standing family's difficulties pre-supernova. Or maybe it was just his present condition. Storm was too ill to tell him his inner thoughts, but at least he didn't stop Josh from holding his hand. Josh knew that both his children had found the difficulties between him and Maxine a challenge—how could they not? Tally had thrown herself into her free-running and climbing, and Storm into his athletics and studies, and then poured all his concentration into fighting his cancer while their parents' marriage had just gone on disintegrating around them. There was no space in anything right now to fix any of it, especially with Maxine away from the M-Bar. But seeing his kids at last made Josh all the more determined to make the reparations he'd planned with Maxine and his kids once he knew everyone was safe.

Back downstairs in the living area, the fat guy, Laurent, had been moved to the couch. Tally, who'd stayed a little longer with Storm after Josh had come downstairs, perched on the arm of the couch next to where Josh was sitting. Poppet, Greene, and Henry had turned dining room chairs around and sat on them. Donald thumbed his belt as he paced slowly, and Maria said his name every minute or so, the smile never once leaving her lips. It had been good to know the grave outside was just a decoy, but to find Maxine's mother so changed and different from how he remembered her was a bitter pill to swallow. But there was no time to dwell on even the wonderful feeling of knowing his two children had managed to stay alive in all the chaos; all emotion was tempered by the fact that they were once again in mortal danger from the men working for Dale Creggan.

The name was vaguely familiar to Josh, but he couldn't place it until Donald explained about the bigshot bloodstock agent who was from Pickford. Josh had seen him interviewed a couple of times during coverage of the Kentucky Derby, his once a year chance to watch a

horse race and put on a speculative bet. He'd never won, but half the fun came in trying.

"If we give this guy back to them, you don't think they'll leave it at that?" Josh asked Donald.

"No. They think Maria is infected by a disease, and by association, we are, too. They've killed everyone in Pickford who was sent crazy by the supernova, and this jumped-up kangaroo government Creggan has set up already knows about fatso being held here. I guess they're just biding their time before Creggan gives the go-ahead to come for us."

Josh shook his head. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. "And Maxine is two days late already, coming back from fetching the doctor?"

Donald nodded.

"This is just perfect," Josh muttered.

"I tried to go in her place, Josh, but she wanted to do it for Storm all on her own. You know what she's like with these kids."

"Why do you think they have a sniper up there? What have they shot?"

"I was out yesterday morning feeding the cattle. They could have taken me easy, but they shot a calf through the head as it ate the grain from my hand. I guess that's what they call a warning shot."

"You think they're holding off because of this infection they think's in the air here?"

"That's our guess," Tally said. "Maybe Creggan's having trouble drumming up enough men to come to the farm and expose themselves to what they think we have."

"We believe," Henry continued, "that what they'd really prefer is for us to make like we're leaving, pack up and move off... and that..."

“Will make us easier to kill on the road,” Josh finished.

Henry and the others nodded.

Josh turned to Laurent. “So, now you know there’s no infection here, how do you feel about going back to your guys and telling them the truth?”

Laurent laughed. “Wouldn’t do any good. Your father-in-law overstepped the actual law in these parts. Creggan will not stand for it. You’re all dead, infected or not. The only way to keep order is to ensure all disorder is dealt with fast and hard.”

Josh had seen this kind of thing before on the outskirts of Savannah with Trace Parker. Rule with an iron fist and brook no dissent. Kill those with a different opinion.

Was the malignant influence of the Harbormaster, whoever he was, extending this far? Was that mindset spread across America now? The whole world? Could it be that the proponents of it had also had their minds changed by the supernova, in a similar way as those who’d descended into a different kind of madness? Could those with a propensity for sociopathy have had the last of their social software reprogramed to act in this way? Not just becoming the killers they’d had the potential to be... but having their hunger for power set to maximum force, as well?

Had the Barnard’s Star supernova set a fire beneath all forms of mental illness and desire for cruelty?

Josh shook his head. “Well, there’s one thing we can’t do now...”

“And that is?” Donald asked.

“Wait for them to come kill us.”

It seemed that the people of Cumberland weren't willing to be taken over by Carron and his men. On approach of the medical center, she saw the smoke billowing from barricades of burned-out cars that had been circled around the hospital to stop Carron and his men from escaping. Shots were being fired to and from the hospital. And she'd heard the shouting and the screams from the battle long before she saw any of the combatants on any side.

There were fresh bodies bleeding in the street beside the burned-out Denny's she'd passed on her last trip to the medical center to get drugs for Storm. It had been a fresh skirmish. All the guys who were dead were in uniform. They'd tried to get away from the road, but the small craters in the sidewalk showed that whoever they'd come up against had been armed with grenades and some pretty hefty machine guns. The twelve soldiers had been cut down before the first one had made it across the sidewalk.

It had been a massacre.

Before Maxine could survey the scene any further, something smashed into her back and a voice hissed at her as she was propelled forwards, "Do you want to get your head blown off? They've got sharp shooters on the roof, and they're zeroing in on anyone they can pick off!"

Rough hands pushed her into the wrecked door of the Denny's. As Maxine turned, she saw a woman in black tactical gear, goggles, and helmet looking around the edge of the wall to scan the road approaching the medical center. "Weren't you told to hang back until we finished the first assault? Why didn't you guys come in on our signal and mop up anyone who got through the barricades? Just what we need, another hero who can't follow orders..."

The woman had black gloves and an MP5 cocked and ready to go. "I was just coming back to see if that lot over there," she flicked a thumb towards the massacred troops, "had any more mags. You don't have any, do you?"

Maxine shook her head, not yet ready to form any words to find out what the hell was going on.

"Darn it. I'll have to get back to Clitheroe and his team; he's got plenty of ammo to go around."

"Are you... are you the government?" Maxine asked, having at last found her voice.

The woman laughed. "Hardly. Those cowards are all down in their shelters while we have to fend for ourselves... hey, wait, you really don't know who we are or what we're doing?"

Maxine shook her head. "I'm new here myself."

"Krzysztof, Karel Krzysztof," the woman said, holding out her hand. "Third Maryland Defenders. They call me captain—not because it's my real rank, but because it's easier to say or spell than Krzysztof."

"Defenders?"

"Yeah. We're the militia, baby, and we've come to liberate your town from the forces of evil." Her face split in a wide grin. "That might be a bit of the Polish romantic in me, so take it with a pinch of salt, but we are here to liberate the city. Carron and the scum that follow him need to be dealt with. And me and the boys are here to do some

dealing. Now, I don't have all battle to stand here yakking, so either go back to the park where the other civilians are waiting or come with me to Clitheroe. Either way, you can't stay here without getting full of holes."

"I don't know where the park is, so I guess I'm coming with you."

"Suits me, lady. Two targets are more difficult to shoot than one. You just doubled my chances of getting back to the command post alive."



The command post was a block away from the hospital, situated in a school. The building was square, concrete, utilitarian... and coming under heavy fire from the roof of the medical center. Through the haze of smoke from the burning cars around the hospital, machine gun fire spat down from on high, chewing up the tarmac, cutting through trees, and slamming into the wall and front windows of the school.

Karel led Maxine low and fast along a hedge, onto a covered walkway which ran to the back entrance of the Lincoln Memorial Elementary School. The front of the school looked like an amateur sculptor was trying to cut enough of the concrete away to leave a copy of the bust on Mount Rushmore. Whoever was firing wasn't much of an artist, but he wasn't letting that stop him.

They ran along the walkway, heads kept down in case their shadows could be seen through the gray-scarred Plexiglas, and burst through a broken fire escape door that took them inside and down two corridors of students' lockers to where the main school offices were situated. This far back in the school, all that could be heard was the occasional chatter of machine gun fire, and occasionally chunks of falling masonry.

Clitheroe was a walrus of a man with a mustache and lamb chops that had fallen through a time warp from the 19th century. His fin-

gers were pudgy as sausages, and his tactical vest was held in place by armored extender-straps. He was studying a schematic. The rest of the people in the room were a motley collection of shapes and sizes, men and women, all in black and armed to the teeth they had left in their head—some of them didn't have very many. All were hanging on Clitheroe's word like their lives depended on it. Perhaps they did. The one thing that screamed from the room, as far as Maxine was concerned, was that these guys were part-timers and preppers who'd taken it upon themselves to do something crazy. Take on an army unit holed up in a hospital.

Clitheroe looked up. "What are you doing here, Captain? You're supposed to be down on barricade four."

Karel held up her gun. "A group of Carron's men came out of the medical center. Tried to break through. We got them all, but I saw this one." She pointed at Maxine. "She looked like she was lost, and it turns out she was. I sent the men back to the barricade while I get her to safety."

"All very noble, Captain, but safety is the park. Not command and control. Are you sure she's not a spy?"

"Well, I'm sure I'm not a spy, Mr. Clitheroe, if that helps."

Clitheroe looked hard at Maxine, and after three or four seconds he broke out into a wide smile. "Give this woman a bigger gun. I like the cut of her J-I-B."

When Clitheroe had finished briefing his militia, Maxine asked to take him aside for just a moment, promising not to keep him long.

"The main assault is about to begin, Mrs. Standing, I really don't have the..."

"Please. I have to get inside the hospital first..."

"No."

“Please, listen. From what you said in your briefing, your guys are going to go in mob-handed and kill everything that moves... Carron, Jonstone, the lot of them.”

“Yes, that would be about the size of it. Strength through superior firepower. We think there’s only about thirty or so of the deserters and mutineers in there. Carron is no general in the accepted sense; any army man who would use his own forces to feather his own nest, subjugating the people of Cumberland and stealing the food and medication from their mouths, doesn’t deserve to live in my book. We’re going to take him and his men out in a way that goes beyond extreme prejudice.”

“Don’t you want to give them a chance to surrender?”

“You think I haven’t? You think I want to risk my people like this? Of course, I offered them the opportunity to surrender. I could give you a pair of field glasses now and point you to the trees where he hung the bodies of the people I sent in there to broker the deal with him! Every man in there knows that if they come out here, they’re going to face the justice of the people of Cumberland, and that justice is going to be swift and final. And I don’t blame them for that. I didn’t set up and train this militia to sit on our backsides while Carron and his like are left to do what they want. No, ma’am.”

Maxine smiled. “I get all that, really I do, but I think there’s at least one person in that hospital who would be glad of a rescue.”

Clitheroe listened impatiently while Maxine explained the reason for her journey, what had happened to Cynthia Banks, and her knowledge of where Doctor Lawrence Banks might be now.

When she’d finished, Clitheroe sighed and smoothed both sides of his tobacco-stained mustache with his thumbs.

He turned to the room. “Okay. Listen up, boys. We got a problem.”



"I really don't like the idea of you coming in there with us," Karel said as they hunkered down fifty yards from the rear service entrance to the medical center.

"You got any idea what Banks looks like?" Maxine replied.

"Nope."

"Well, I had plenty of time to study a picture of him on the mantle of his cabin while his wife died at my side."

"You want to be careful around here, honey. Death is a communicable disease."

Karel, fifteen of her men, and Maxine were shielded from the windows at the back of the hospital by a five-foot-high concrete wall which, as the sun went down over Cumberland, provided cover as they approached from between the houses behind it.

Gunfire could be heard from the front of the hospital as Clitheroe's forces, instead of mounting a full assault, offered a distraction raid to draw what fire there was from the building. The thinking was that, as darkness fell, if they could make things very interesting at the front of the building, that would give Karel's team a relatively clear run at the back.

"I still don't see why we couldn't have gone with the original plan."

Maxine shook her head. "I've seen Carron in action. He's not a logical actor. If he thinks he's going to be overrun, surrender isn't an option—like your guys found out—he'll kill Banks and anyone else he can. He won't want a surgeon as useful as him to fall into your hands. He'll kill him out of spite. He sentenced me to death for breathing in the wrong direction."

Karel shrugged. "Let's hope we're all still breathing at the end of this." She looked at her watch. "Three. Two. One."

Four explosions in unison signaled the start of the decoy operation.

Karel made her MP5 ready and her team did the same, pulling their goggles down over their eyes.

Each member of the ten-person team, Maxine had been told proudly by Clitheroe, had bought and paid for their own equipment, and had spent their weekends training and getting into shape—some shape-liner than others, Clitheroe had laughed, patting his stomach. Every woman and every man in the group were ready for this, and they were ready to help Maxine get her man out of the medical center. The Third Maryland Defenders were ready to do their duty.

“Go! Go! Go!” Karel hissed, and as one they began swarming over the wall.

Inside, the medical center was dark and smelled bad. It had been under siege by Clitheroe and his Defenders for nearly three days, Maxine had been told. There was no sanitation, and no one had been able to leave the building to get water or get rid of waste. The smoke from the fires outside insinuated itself throughout the building as they moved down the corridor beyond the service entrance and into the main bulk of the building.

Only two of Carron’s men had been in the vicinity of the service door as the Defenders had approached it. They’d been shot where they stood. The crack from Karel and the others’ weapons had been almost totally covered by Clitheroe’s actions out front. Once inside, they secured the space, easily finding the access way into the building. Leaving two Defenders to keep the service area clean of Carron’s men, Maxine and the rest followed Karel.

A shadow in the shape of a uniformed soldier appeared up ahead. Karel took him cleanly in the flak jacket, knocking him over backwards. The soldier—a black-haired, musclebound specimen with bad teeth—tried to return fire with his sidearm, but two more bullets from Karel, sent into his legs, put his aim awry. By the time Karel got to the bleeding soldier, her team had taken up defensive positions covering all points of access to the corridor, and covering the angles up an exposed stairwell.

Crashes and flashes from outside flickered along the halls. The hefty stutter of heavy machine gun fire from the roof echoed through the building. Karel knelt by the soldier who was writhing in pain, trying to stop the flow of blood from his shattered knees. His nametape read *JACKSON*.

"We have medics waiting to come in, Jackson. When we have finished here, all I have to do is tell them where you are and you'll get treatment. Now, you don't want me to forget where you are and what's wrong with you, do you?"

Jackson's face was white with shock, his mouth trembling and his eyes wet with tears. "Carron's not going to surrender... I was coming out to give myself up."

"Don't lie to me, Jackson; it does nothing to help my memory. If you were going to give yourself up, you would have by now."

Jackson clammed his mouth shut.

"Where is Doctor Banks?" Maxine hissed, joining Karel by Jackson. She began taping a wound pad from her pack over one of his wounds and Karel flashed her a look. Maxine ignored her; Karel rolled her eyes.

"We need to move out of here, Karel," Zimmerman, one of Karel's men, said. "Anyone comes down the corridor, we'll be caught like rats under a bucket."

Karel nodded and turned back to Jackson. "Answer the lady's question, soldier. And answer it now."

"I don't know. Upstairs, I guess. They brought him in two days ago. They don't tell us squat. Just expect us to die like dogs."

Neither Karel nor Maxine were convinced by Jackson's sudden conversion to the good side, but right now he was all they had. "Floor?"

"Top. The fifth."

"Why does it always have to be at the top when there are no elevators?" Maxine muttered.

Karel smiled grimly. "One day, doing this will be easy." Then Karel shook her head and shot Jackson through the forehead.

"You can't..." Maxine began, but Karel put a hand over her mouth. "Did you believe him when he said he was ready to switch sides?"

Maxine shook her head.

Karel gestured at him and explained, "He was just telling us what we wanted to hear. Any of us would do the same in a similar situation. If we left him here while we went up, you can guarantee he'd have tried to raise the alarm. Anyone who had stayed in here this long while we were pounding them was ready to stay and die. Let's go. Move out."

Maxine took one last look at Jackson's twisted body and wide-open eyes, picked up her pack, and followed the Defenders to the stairs. She knew in her mind that what Karel said was true, but it didn't stop it hurting her nursing sensibilities. She knew she had to focus on Doctor Banks, though, and through him, Storm.

They moved quickly up through the floors. What was left of Carron's men—perhaps thirty or so by Clitheroe's estimate—were up on the roof, firing from their positions over towards Lincoln Elementary. They passed windows where Maxine saw the Morse code of white-hot tracer fire helping Carron's men find their targets in the dark, smoke-filled air.

They came under fire two floors below their destination, as three of Carron's men shot from behind overturned tables on a landing between flights. They opened fire with their M164As, chewing up the stairs and sending bursts of plaster over Karel's team. Zimmerman took a round in the shoulder as he pushed Maxine facedown onto the concrete and shot upwards. Karel threw up a stun grenade which blasted the stairwell magnesium white and drove nails of intense

sound into Maxine's ears. The soldiers behind the tables were disorientated—one ran back up the stairs and was cut down by Karel leading from the front, and another tried to climb over the railing and drop down the middle of the stairwell, but misjudged his grip in his panic. He fell, smashing into the concrete below like a combat-uniformed pinball.

The last soldier raised his weapon and began to fire. His eyes had been so blinded by the flash that he couldn't have hit an eighteen-wheeler from ten yards. Zimmerman, dropping his MP5 and pulling out his Glock G45, took the soldier out of the brief exchange with a bullet to the chin that sent him down in a spray of blood and bone.

They climbed over the tables and continued up.

On the fifth floor, there were still sharp sounds of battle echoing around the medical center. Karel told her team to search the wards and the offices while Maxine helped Zimmerman with his wound. He was in a little pain, but still buzzing on the adrenaline of battle, his eyes bright and showing he wanted to be with his team. The bullet had drilled deep into Zimmerman but hadn't smashed his collarbone. "There's no exit wound, so someone will have to dig the bullet out."

Zimmerman smiled. "When we find your doc, I can be his first house call."

Maxine put kaolin-infused WoundStat Combat Gauze into the wound and thumbed it in to pack the hole. The kaolin would staunch the bleeding, and the gauze would cover it until they could get him to the doctor or a medic.

"Pressure," she said, hauling Zimmerman's other arm across his body and putting it in place over the gauze. Zimmerman looked unhappy that he wasn't immediately able to return to the fray, but complied with Maxine's order.

"Maxine?"

It was Karel, calling from the other end of the room. She was standing next to a pair of double doors that had been pulled open by two of her team. All three were pointing their weapons through the doors. "I guess we've found your doctor."

Maxine ran to Karel, but skidded to a halt.

Looking through the door was like coming upon a secret magical door which looked right into the past. Through the doors, illuminated by yellow oil lamps, was a room that may have once been a modern operating theater. But the lights were dead, and the faces of the electronic equipment were blank and black. There were five people in the room.

Two were soldiers. Hands high, weapons at their feet. On an operating table, General Carron lay back with a stick between his teeth and a half-drunk bottle of whiskey in his hand. He was covered in theater sheets all the way down his body to his knees. His left leg below that was black and swollen with infection. The skin was broken and discharging pus. The stench from the wound was wafting from the room and clogging Maxine's throat with its rich, bitter-sweet debasement. Holding Carron's hand was the pinch-faced Major Johnstone, the officer Maxine had managed to escape from when she'd been on her way to be executed. Johnstone's face was a mask of shock. Next to Johnstone, poised with a bone saw to begin a traumatic amputation of Carron's leg, was Doctor Banks.

The distance collapsing between this tableaux of barbaric, two-hundred-year-old battlefield medical practices and what might have been humane and safe now banged like a thunderclap in Maxine's skull.

This horror was exactly what was going to happen to Storm...

"So," Doctor Banks said, adjusting his grip on the bone saw, "shall I continue... or not?"

Josh, Tally, Poppet, Henry, and Greene left the ranch at three a.m., through the cellar door that led out from under the building on the aspect directly in opposition to the tree line. Tally had had to argue with her father hard to get him to allow her to come along, but in the end, he'd relented; she was fit, she was fast, and she would be an asset to the attack if things went to plan.

They skirted the pasture without lights, their clothing dark and their faces blackened with combat face paint from Henry's bag. They were armed with sidearms, shotguns, MP5s, and from the pack on the horse Josh had brought, an RPG and three rockets gifted to him by Jayce. Henry carried them in his pack. They were to be used, Josh said, as a last resort. This was not a kill-mission, and he'd made that very clear, which Tally herself had been glad of. Running these guys off the land was more than fine, and threatening and roughing them up a bit would hopefully suffice to get their meaning across.

Her dad's plan was to capture the guys—however many there were—up on the ridge, making it clear to them that the Jefferson and Standing families were not willing to compromise on their position, and that they would defend the farm to the last if that's what Creggan and his men wanted.

Josh had explained that this, of course, wasn't what they really were going to do—if worse came to worst, they would have to acquiesce

until the group was fit to travel. But giving Creggan's men a good show of force, and maybe even exploding one of the RPGs nearby... well, maybe that might give Creggan pause and allow a dialogue between the two sides which would explain the deception over Maria and form the basis of a negotiated settlement. There was no way, Josh had argued with Donald, that those at the M-Bar could stand up to Creggan's forces if they came en masse. So, this show of force and giving the watchers sight of the 'RPG deterrent' might just bring them to the table. Donald had argued that he'd rather die than give up the M-Bar. Meanwhile, Josh had said that it was his children in the firing line, and so it wasn't Donald's decision to make anymore. That had hit home for Donald, and he had nodded, but Tally had been able to see how unhappy her grandfather was. He wasn't ready to negotiate a settlement—he was ready to shoot and kill, whatever the consequences.

She admired his grit, but her dad had been right. They needed to buy time. Storm couldn't be moved yet. It would probably kill him if they tried. Storm's condition was stable, yes, but he was still in a lot of pain and would need the surgery Maxine had gone to organize. Until that facet of the conundrum was dealt with, they had to try to prolong the time before fighting at the ranch, or avoid a full-scale battle entirely.

Tally had been incredibly relieved to see her dad again, though; it had been such a difficult decision to leave the coast and travel north, but the fact that it had worked out so well—more by luck than judgement, it had to be said—made the wrench of making it worthwhile. Her dad had told her a little of what he'd encountered in Savannah, and she had told him the twists and turns of her own journey. Both of them had been through the wringer, but perhaps felt stronger because of it. This was another reason she wanted to go with her dad and the others to confront Creggan's men on the ridge. She wasn't letting her dad out of her sight again. That Henry had supported her pitch to her father—that she should come along, that she could handle herself, and that she would be an asset rather than

any hindrance—had helped, too, and made her admiration of him even greater. There was something resilient and sound about Henry that, in safer times, might have made her feel slightly stronger things for him. She still might, she'd told herself a few times. She hadn't decided yet.

The party, single file, with Henry leading and Josh bringing up the rear, made its way across the blackened plain swiftly in the cool night. Only the rustle of the grass and the lowing of the cattle in the pasture in the distance complemented their soft footfalls. Grandpa, who'd struggled with the role he'd been given to stay back and keep watch on Laurent, Storm, and Maria, had given them the best idea he could about where the shot had come from on the ridge, and the cover there. Tally knew her father had insisted that her grandpa stay back because he couldn't trust him not to shoot first and ask questions later, thus wrecking his plan. He'd been smart not to say anything like that to him directly, just couching it in the terms that his father-in-law would be more accepting of—that he'd be better at defending the property with all the others gone.

The Barnard's Nebula was bright and high in the sky. Its jagged edges were more pronounced, its smudge becoming a broad smear of light. A badge of desecration worn on the breast of heaven. Every time Tally caught sight of it, she immediately wanted to avert her eyes from the very symbol of the world's realignment as a post-technological planet in the grip of a myriad of madnesses. She thought that she'd never again be able to look up to the stars with anything like a feeling of awe. And that was a sharp, vinegar-in-a-paper cut pain on top of all the others. How much more would the phenomenon take away from those survivors left to pick up the pieces?

The black tree line of spruce where the plain became the steady foothills of Alleghany Mountain came up as a ragged tear against the dark blue of the night. They made the trees without raising an alarm and began to move more slowly than their race over the grass had gone, slinking up to where Donald expected Creggan's spotters to be.

Henry raised his fist and the line came to a halt. Tally was behind him as her dad came up. Henry pointed ahead. It was difficult to pick sights out clearly in the gloom, but fifteen yards ahead, she could see four figures, three of them sitting and one prone, this last one holding a rifle pointed down the valley towards the M-Bar.

"I'm sick of these sandwiches, Ray. The bread's stale, and a rat would turn his nose up at the cheese. I need a hot meal."

"Shut up, Spencer. Your mewling is sticking in my gullet. If you want to go back to Creggan and tell him you're not happy with the culinary arrangements, then be my guest. I'll tell your sister you died well."

"Ray, all I'm saying..."

There was a fast rustle of clothing, a thud, and a yelp. "There was no need..."

"Shut up, or the next time I'll smash your nose so hard you'll be able to sniff the back of your neck!"

While this exchange had been going on, the M-Bar team had been taking up their positions in the prearranged fashion.

Henry, Tally, and Greene to the right; Josh and Poppet to the left.

Tally finished her count of fifteen in her head and tore the cap off the road flare she was holding, exposing the striking pad; she pulled the cover off and lit the flare. The sudden flash of red light illumined the tableaux of Creggan's men, and she tossed the red, fizzing tube into the middle of them.

The four men dived away, scrambling for their guns.

Josh, Henry, and Poppet moved forward, their weapons ready.

Josh fired over Creggan's men's heads. "Don't make me shoot you, boys. Let's keep this friendly. Get on your knees and put your hands up."

Creggan's men did as they were told. "You kill us and Creggan will bring fifty men here." The voice had come from the guy who'd been identified as Ray by the so-called Spencer. He had a black Stetson jammed on his thin-faced head. Next to him was a chubby guy in a white hat. The man who had been prone on the ground with the rifle hadn't had a chance to get up, and so he'd simply rolled over, sticking his hands comically into the air all the same. He got up and joined the others on their knees.

The fourth—a drooping, mustached, pock-faced man with hooded eyes that were made ever more so by the guttering red light from the flare—still hadn't put up his hands.

There was a gun in a holster on his thigh, but at the moment he wasn't reaching for it. Neither was he complying with Josh's instructions.

"Don't just take Ray's word for it," Mustache said, flicking his eyes to Ray. "Gee, if you don't hand over your weapons, I'll just kill you all myself."

Tally looked at her dad. His machine gun was pointed squarely at the man who was speaking with such confidence and disdain.

"Trust me," the man continued, "you are in a world of trouble; up until now, Dale has been more than patient with you. He was even prepared to let Laurent be collateral damage in the process since he seems to be enjoying more of your hospitality than expected. Dale said that if Laurent was stupid enough to get himself taken by a bunch of amateurs, he didn't care about getting him back. But you hafta understand, there's a natural order of things around here now. What you might call a pecking order. We peck down. So... you gonna shoot me and start a war?"

"Now, Greene," Josh said.

There was a hiss and an ignition, then a *shoosh*, and a tree twenty yards away blew apart in a gout of flame and flying splinters.

Greene giggled, and Josh gave him a look that made the giggle freeze in his throat. Tally could tell her dad's glance said, *Not the time and place*. Back at the ranch, Greene had told Josh while they'd been planning that he was keen to be on RPG duty. He'd told them he "*couldn't shoot pistols for taffy*" and had argued that, as they didn't know how much resistance they were going to get from Creggan's men, that him "*standing at the back with just the one job make sense, yeah? While you all handle the bad guys.*" Josh hadn't had time to argue, and Tally had thought Greene sounded reasonable—he had settled down, after all—so she hadn't even argued against it. Henry had just shrugged when she'd looked at him questioningly.

Now, Josh turned to the men on their knees. "You want a war, mister, you got yourself a war. Now you tell your Mr. Creggan that there's plenty more where that came from. If he wants to talk, we'll talk, but there is no way your pecking order, as you call it, applies to us. You want a share in the animal produce of the M-Bar, you're going to have to play nice. Or... bye bye, boom boom."

The three men looked at Mustache. Their faces in the red flare light were full of concern, and they weren't drawing any confidence from Mustache. "Come on, Daniel. There's no need to bring matters to a head now. They're being reasonable," said Spencer.

Daniel spat on the ground and then smoothed his mustache with his fingers. "Spencer, you're a damn coward. We walk away from here and Dale is not going to be happy."

"Let me worry about that," Josh said. "Just get up. Leave your weapons and take yourself back to town. We'll release Laurent in the morning. Your guy is right. All we want to do is get along, but we won't play nice if you try to lord it over us. We have the firepower and the determination to resist you, as well as the weaponry, and we will resist. So, let's all be reasonable, yes?"

Spencer and Ray got to their feet, hands still in the air. After a few seconds, the sniper joined them. Daniel hadn't moved, and his black eyes were brittle, black quartz in his face. This was a man Tally

would rather have on her side than against it. Her dad was dealing with the situation well, using what her mom called his *cop skills*—the conflict resolution strategies employed in these situations to make sure things didn't get out of hand.

After what seemed like an age, Daniel nodded and, using his thumb and forefinger, lifted his Glock from his hip holster and dropped it to the ground.

"You can have all the hardware back once we've talked to Creggan, okay?" Josh commented as Poppet and Tally went forward to pick up the guns and rifles and search them for hidden weapons. The sputtering flare was still throwing off a bright bubble of red light over them all. As Tally and Poppet withdrew to a safe distance with the weapons, her father spoke again to Daniel. "You'll have horses up in the trees, I'm sure, hidden from sight. Where?"

Daniel boiled, but pointed up the trail into the trees. Josh said, "Henry?"

Henry nodded and jogged away from the group in the direction Daniel had pointed.

"You're going to have to leave those, too," Josh continued. "We'll look after them, but I want to see you walking away down the slope and taking the road back to Pickford. Am I clear?"

"As crystal," Daniel said, and the bubbling rage beneath his voice came through clearly. His eyes were boring into Tally's father's, but Josh was staring right back at him. In the end, it was Daniel who broke the stare first. The man turned on his heel and began to stalk away from the fizzing flare.

The other three followed him. Tally and the others watched them for forty seconds as they went down. Soon, the dark would engulf them and they'd be out of sight.

Then, for the second time that night, there came a hiss, an ignition, a *shoosh*... and a rocket tore away from the group, lancing through the

night. The four men from Pickford didn't stand a chance. The exploding RPG blew them apart in a splash of fire, a heave of earth, and billowing smoke.

"Liars," said Greene, dropping the launcher before anyone could take it out of his hand. "They were gonna come back and kill us anyway. But I showed them. I damn well showed them."

Six days late, Maxine and Doctor Banks—“*For God’s sake, call me Larry, young lady*”—sighted the M-Bar from the road through the tree line.

Since leaving Cumberland with fresh supplies, ammunition, and clothing, all at Clitheroe’s insistence, they’d made good time from Maryland into West Virginia, stopping just long enough to give Tally-Two the rest she needed to freshen up and be on her way again.

Larry’s traumatic amputation of General Carron’s leg had been allowed to go ahead in the dimly lit operating theater, and the general’s screams as the stump of his leg had been cauterized—“*It’s the only way, I’m afraid,*” Larry had said—had haunted Maxine’s thoughts from the second she’d turned away, covering her ears. Not so much because she felt any sympathy for Carron, but because those would be the same conditions under which her son would be operated on.

Larry had been quiet as the buggy had passed the intersection that led up to his property in the woods. Maxine had told him what she’d found there and what she’d done when his wife had died. Larry had been tight-lipped, pale-faced as a few wandering tears wound their way down his cheek. He’d thanked Maxine for staying with his wife until the end, grateful for what she’d done afterwards. It was that, more than anything, that had convinced him he should come with

her to the M-Bar rather than stay and help the people of Cumberland.

Clitheroe had given his blessing, too, on the understanding that Larry Banks would return to the city as soon as he was finished with Maxine's son. A doctor of Larry's experience and ability was not someone they could do without for long. Maxine had agreed that she'd get Larry back as soon as she could, and with Larry's agreement, the deal had been struck.

The sight of the M-Bar down the Alleghany slope, across the plain, was a sight that made Maxine's heart leap and hurt in equal measure, but when the man dressed all in black—and with a gas mask over his face, no less—stepped from the shadow of a spruce and pointed a sub-machine gun at them in the road, her heart almost stopped.

Maxine reined Tally-Two to a stuttering halt as the ant-faced man came towards them.

"Mrs. Standing?" the muffled voice from inside the mask asked. "And Lawrence Banks?"

"Yes," answered Maxine. "Who's asking?"

The man pulled off the mask, exposing red hair and the fact that he wasn't so much a man as not much past being a boy. He came forward and patted Tally-Two gently on the rump. His eyes were bright, fast, and his tongue worked anxiously at his lips. He seemed worried about the trees, as if he were expecting someone to burst out of them at any time.

"I'm Henry. We need to get you off the road, right now. Creggan's men are coming. If you come with me, I'll take you to your family."



"You need me to fight with you. I'm an asset, not a hindrance!"

Greene's eyes blazed, Josh thumped the table, and Donald ground his teeth.

"Killing those men has started a war, Greene. You're a fool and a liability," Josh said, his bitterness hissing out of him like he was a cobra threatening to strike.

"I say we shoot him now and be done with it," Donald suggested.

Greene raised his hands. "You know they were lying! There were going to be no negotiations. They were going to come back here and wipe us all out anyway. It's what people like Creggan do. How stupid are you?"

Josh rubbed his eyes. In the last four days, there had been no contact with Creggan's men or Creggan himself. But they had seen activity up on the ridge where Greene had exploded the RPG, and two nights ago, they'd seen shadows moving in the paddock, which Donald had fired at, though he'd hit nothing. Josh guessed Creggan had sent a couple of guys to see what they could find out about their strengths and armaments, and what preparations they were making on the farm to defend it.

The windows in the house had been boarded up by Donald and Josh while Poppet, Henry, and Tally had done what they could to keep an eye on the roads approaching the farm. Josh reckoned that if Maxine was going to come back in without getting attacked, they would need to get to her first before she drove her buggy out into the open and exposed herself to Creggan's men.

Laurent was still tied up in the lounge, Josh figuring that he might still be useful as a bargaining chip if Creggan and his men made an attack, but he understood that was a longshot. Especially after Greene had blown up his men.

It was a desperate situation. If they could have moved Storm, they could maybe have hightailed it out of the vicinity south, but that just wasn't an option. In the last few days, Storm's abdominal pains and

vomiting had returned—going beyond the capacity of the antibiotics and the painkillers to bring him respite.

If his appendix hadn't burst yet, it was getting ready to.

And what to do with Greene?

Josh had to concede, if only to himself, that Greene had a point; when Creggan's men came at them, they would need all hands at the pumps to defend the M-Bar and get to a position where they might be able to negotiate a settlement. But the hollow ache in Josh's guts suggested to the ex-cop that he was clutching at the last straws in the wind.

"I should be out there with the others, defending the place." Greene's voice was a whine, and Donald was doing that thing where he stuck his thumbs in his jeans and rocked on his heels with his chin in his chest, as if he was struggling with himself to not just shake Greene by the throat and dash his body to the ground.

They could hear Laurent, too, tied up and laughing from the other room. That probably meant that Maria was in there with him, smiling and saying "Donald" every three seconds. This seemed to amused Laurent to the point of hysterics.

Josh sighed. "Greene, if you want to do anything, get in there and keep an eye on Laurent. Make sure he doesn't get free. He's the last chip we have in the game."

Greene got up from the table, turning as he got to the door. "I'll need a gun."

Donald spat in the sink.

"I'll think about it," said Josh. "Now, go."



The post next to Tally's head exploded. She ducked back down and brushed the splinters from her hair. "Dammit. Dammit. Dammit!"

She'd seen Henry leading her mom and the white-haired doctor down on foot from the tree line, along the cattle fences and the dotted trees of the plain, which meant Creggan's men could have been able to see them also. The sniper who'd replaced the ones Greene had turned into so much mincemeat didn't appear to be as skilled as the first, but he obviously had a tad more optimism. He'd already loosed off a few shots which had whanged overhead, and one which had split the fencepost by Tally as she'd looked up to check on the progress of those coming down from the hills.

Creggan's men weren't ready to come down as a group yet. Obviously, her dad had said, because they didn't know how many grenades, with the means to fire them, there might be left at the M-Bar. If they knew there was only one, they might not still be skulking on the ridge and taking potshots. So, they had to be thankful for small mercies. It was clear they weren't going to wait forever, and Tally got the distinct idea they were planning some sort of assault in the next couple of days. How could they not? How could Creggan save face with his people if he let the killing of his men and the taking of Laurent pass?

The simple answer, as her dad and grandfather had agreed, was that Creggan could not. It was a boil he was going to have to burst.

Henry, Tally's mom, and the doctor—tall, lanky, and carrying a black doctor's Gladstone bag from another century—were crouched low and running. The shots rang out from the ridge, but they didn't seem to be in danger of hitting their target except by accident.

As the three reached Tally, she upped and crashed into Maxine. She felt like she would have wrapped her legs around her as well as her arms if she could have.

"Oh, Mom! I thought I might never...." her words broke off in sobs that were deep and hard.

"It's okay. It's okay," her mother said, hugging back. Her tears wet on Tally's forehead. "I'm here now. Henry said Dad made it back, too..."

"Yeah, got here just after us with Poppet."

"Poppet?"

"Gangster's wife. You'll love her." Tally smiled through the tears.

"All these hugs and kisses are all very well, young lady, but if I'm going to prevent your brother from developing peritonitis, then time is of the absolute essence," the white-haired doctor commented, tapping Tally on the shoulder. "Lead on. Lead on."



Neither Maxine nor Donald could bring themselves to take Maria back to the room where she'd been chained before, so Josh simply led her up the stairs.

She clung to his arm and smiled and said, "Donald" as she squeezed it. So much of the woman he'd known peripherally, all his married life, had drained away to leave this compliant, smiling husk who he just couldn't match up with the description Maxine and Donald had imparted. How she'd been in the weeks leading up to Creggan's first visit to the M-Bar—insanely violent and violently insane—now there was a child-like tone in her being. A blissful innocence which calmed the heart and unfurrowed the brow whenever she was near. Everyone seemed to respond to her differently. Donald would have a mist in his eyes, Tally a lump in her throat. Henry and Poppet thought she was the sweetest thing in the world, and Greene seemed to be nothing less than uncomfortable in her presence, as if she were the very negative image of him. He wouldn't acknowledge her in a room even if she sat by him and reached for his hand. Laurent, tied up on the couch, thought she was hilarious. Josh, feeling the pull of Donald's loss and the ache the older man was experiencing, felt

more akin to the older man than he ever had before. It was like seeing his own feelings of loss about his own marriage made flesh.

Seeing Maxine again had brought a rush of regret and bubbling hope. Not, frankly, the combinations of emotions he'd have expected to feel at the moment when he saw his wife again after so much time. They'd embraced, of course, but even in the middle of that, he'd still felt the distance between them. There was a wealth of unresolved arguments and recriminations that they just didn't have the time to deal with right now, such was the situation with Creggan and the M-Bar.

So, he'd kissed her cheek, said, "We get through this, and then we'll get through that," and let her take Doctor Banks to see Storm in the downstairs room they'd converted for him now that he was unable to get up and down stairs, such was the pain.

If the M-Bar was about to be attacked, Maria would be safest in her room, and so Josh led her into it and set her on the bed. A chain with a cuff at one end was still attached to the wall, and as Josh gently took Maria's hand to clip the cuff into place, Maria's demeanor changed as if he'd just flicked a switch.

A full-throated yell of rage escaped her throat and her nails clawed at Josh's eyes. There was spittle spraying from her mouth, and he managed to just deflect her hands upward, though her fingers became tangled in his hair, pulling it at the roots and sending bolts of pain through the skin on his skull. Her feet kicked and her knees crunched into him. There was so much sudden momentum in the attack that Josh was rolled over backwards, crashing to the floor.

"It's me, Maria! Me! Josh! Stop!" he cried out as her knees landed on his chest, feeling like it was re-cracking his injured rib. Then her fingers yanked at his hair.

Josh gave himself one chance to get her off as gently as he could. He couldn't bring himself to hit Maria to stop her attack, so he began by trying to peel her fingers from out of his hair.

She leaned forward in a screaming rush and bit into his wrist. The pain bloomed hot along his arm, and he felt the skin break open to bleed.

“Maria! Stop! Please! Stop!”

And she did.

Not because of anything Josh did, but because a bullet tore through the window of the room and the board covering it. First one, then a second, a third, and a fourth and a fifth.

The battle over the M-Bar had begun.

Maria slumped forward onto Josh.

For a second, he thought she’d fainted, and then a groan left her mouth that was accompanied by a warm wetness spreading between them. Maria’s fingers had released from his hair. Her body didn’t have the total limpness and lack of muscle tension of a dead body, but she was very still.

He rolled her off and saw that the front of her blouse was a blossoming flower of blood, filled with air bubbles. There was a rattle at the back of her throat that spoke of the start of labored breathing. Her eyelids flickered.

“Maxine...” she said. “Maxine...”

Josh saw the tear in her blouse was spilling blood hard. It was rising like water from a spring, running down and pooling on the floorboard.

Two more shots slammed into the board at the window, and he heard someone from within the M-Bar returning fire from downstairs.

Josh could see that Maria was dying. If he left her to get Maxine, there was a good chance she’d die before they came back.

“It’s okay, Maria... Mom... hold my hand. I’m here.”

“Maxine...” Maria repeated. “You need to tell him. You really need to tell him...”

It was the most lucid sentence Josh had heard from Maria since he’d gotten to the M-Bar. Perhaps the shot of the bullet, the blood loss, the closeness to death... perhaps it was overriding the influence of the damned star—like with the person he had shot in the Savannah Home Depot, the one who had thanked Josh as he’d died—was there a moment just before death when the influence of the supernova was relinquished and clarity of thought returned?

“Maxine... you have to tell Josh...”

Whatever Maria wanted to get across in her last moments was occupying all the capacity she had left. There was blood streaming from the side of her mouth, her face was creased with pain, and the rising and falling of her chest was ticking down to zero.

Josh had seen enough people die to know the end wasn’t minutes away, but more likely seconds. Maria’s eyes were milky and dull. Her hand in his had lost all its reciprocal grip. If Josh let it go, it would fall to the floor without any will from Maria to stop it.

Josh leaned down to Maria’s mouth. “I’m here, Mom. What do you want me to know? I’m here... if you need to tell me, I’m listening... it’s me, Josh.”

Maria’s eyes fluttered and the pulse in her neck became a tiny vibration beneath the skin. Her mouth breathed a long sigh, and on the sigh came Maria’s last words.

“You have to tell him, Maxine... about Gabe... You have to tell him... who Storm’s father really is...”



Tally stumbled out of the kitchen and back into the living-room. Donald, Poppet, and Henry were firing out of the windows on Creg-

gan's men as they advanced and dodged. But they were running low on ammo, even though they'd brought much of their store into the kitchen.

Tally had told them she would go and get what they needed from the store in the utility room at the back of the ranch, but as the bullets thudded into the ranch house, smashing glass, cracking into the walls, and tearing through the roof, Tally, keeping her head down as the wall spat plaster and splinters of wood, came to a stop in a moment of utter shock.

There was blood all over the floor of the living room as if a pig had been stuck and hung to bleed in a slaughterhouse. Where she would have expected to see Laurent on the couch was now a drained, dead thing. Skin white and empty. A red, bloody bib of scarlet painting his shirt the color of death.

Behind him, bowie knife still in his hand, was Greene. He was smiling at another triumph, his eyes twisting darkly and his mouth open with excited expectation.

"Ooops," Greene said, like a kid who'd accidentally trod on a snail after a rainstorm.

Tally was struck dumb. All she could think of were the bodies she and Henry had found after Greene had run into them in the forest.

Their throats had all been cut in exactly the same way.



Larry had given Storm a local anesthetic from a syringe, sinking it into the area where he was going to perform the operation on the boy's abdomen. He and Maxine had washed up as best they could, then spread the contents of sterile packs and linen over where the operation was to take place. Maxine had laid out the roll of scalpels, forceps, retractors, stitch kit, and cotton wool, all ready for the first incision.

Storm was sweating from fever as much as from fear. Maxine wanted to hold his hand, but now she was gloved up and observing all the rituals of aseptic technique that she could.

"I'll hold your hand when we're done, Storm, and then I reckon I'm never going to let go of it."

There hadn't been time for any real meaningful words of reunion when Maxine had come to Storm's room with Larry. The doctor had wanted to get down to business as soon as he could. The sooner he got the appendix out and cut away the infection, the sooner Storm would be on the road to recovery, he'd argued.

Storm looked away as Larry picked up the scalpel and brought it down to the boy's exposed belly.

Maxine had assisted at countless surgical procedures in her many years as a nurse, and she had been calm, professional, and centered throughout all of them. But as the edge of the blade pressed down and opened a white-lipped wound, which soon began to well with blood, she promised that she would trade anything she possessed to make sure her son came out okay on the other side.

The firing from outside started as the surgeon lifted the scalpel from the wound. Maxine reached in with a swab to wipe the blood from the iodine-smeared wound.

Maxine's eyes met Larry's, which were dancing above his mask as the bullets slammed into the building and plaster sifted down from the ceiling.

"What are we gonna do?" she asked, unable to keep the rising panic from her voice.

"Nothing we can do," Larry said, picking up a retractor. "He's open. We're going to have to finish what we started."

Two bullets thumped through the board over the window and zinged across the room. Maxine ducked as the wall behind her

cracked open, spitting dust.

She looked at Storm. His face was smattered with a spray of misted blood.

“Oh God! Storm! Are you hit? Storm...!”

Storm’s eyes were wide, his face dotted with crimson, but he gently shook his head. “No,” he said gently. “I’m not hit.”

“But unfortunately,” Larry said, a gasp of pain preceding his words, “I can’t say the same about me.”

Larry was holding up his hand. The blue nitrile glove on his right hand was destroyed, the fingers uncovered beneath it suddenly a Chinese puzzle of flesh and bone.

As the blood from Larry’s wounded hand dripped down onto the bed in thick, slow droplets, Maxine’s world closed down around her to a cold tunnel of pitch-black fear.

END OF DEEP END

SUPERNOVA EMP SERIES BOOK TWO

Dark End, 11 March 2020

Deep End, 8 April 2020

Bitter End, 13 May 2020

Final End, 10 June 2020

PS: Do you love EMP fiction? Then keep reading for exclusive extracts from ***Bitter End*** and ***Surviving the Swamp***.

THANK YOU!

Thank you for purchasing 'Deep End'
(Supernova EMP Series Book Two)

**Get prepared and sign-up to Grace's [mailing list](#)
to be notified of the next release at
www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com.**

Leave a review at:



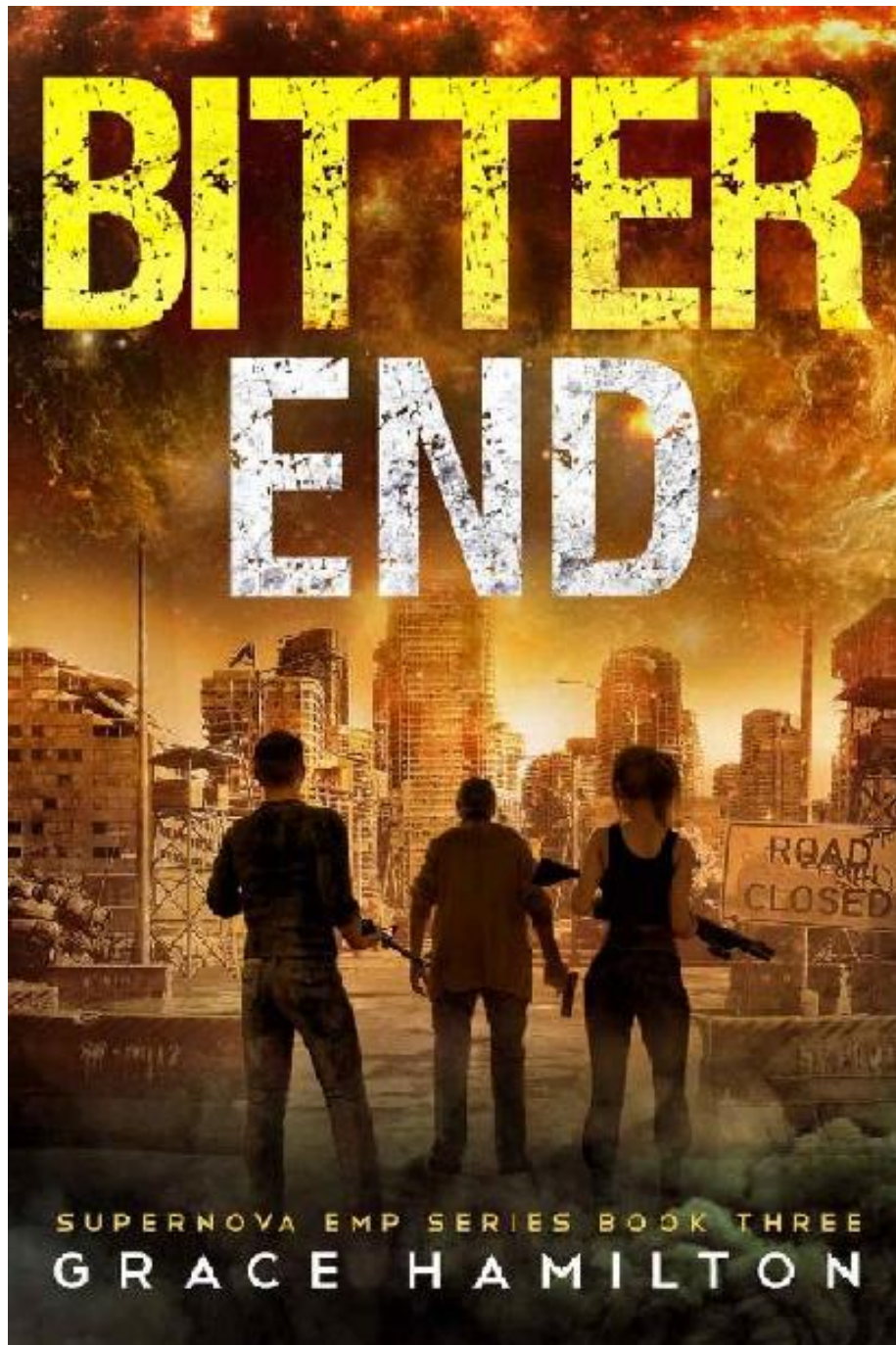
ABOUT GRACE HAMILTON

Grace Hamilton is the prepper pen-name for a bad-ass, survivalist momma-bear of four kids, and wife to a wonderful husband. After being stuck in a mountain cabin for six days following a flash flood, she decided she never wanted to feel so powerless or have to send her kids to bed hungry again. Now she lives the prepper lifestyle and knows that if SHTF or TEOTWAWKI happens, she'll be ready to help protect and provide for her family.

Combine this survivalist mentality with a vivid imagination (as well as a slightly unhealthy day dreaming habit) and you get a prepper fiction author. Grace spends her days thinking about the worst possible survival situations that a person could be thrown into, then throwing her characters into these nightmares while trying to figure out "What SHOULD you do in this situation?"

You will find Grace on:





BLURB

The truth will be revealed, whether they're ready or not.

The firefight for the M-Bar's valuable resources rages on in the post-apocalyptic madness, but the Standings are finally standing togeth-

er... until secrets that Maxine has tried to keep buried come to light. And when they do, they threaten to sever the last tenuous strands holding the family together.

Reeling from betrayals that cut deeper than flying bullets, Josh Standing follows after his revenge-seeking father-in-law. He doesn't seem to have much choice, as it seems the Standings are collapsing from within and there isn't anything that can keep them together.

And then they hear of a new horror: People are being rounded up and systematically slaughtered or enslaved by a single man leading a train of carnage. He's ruthless, he's cunning—and now he has Storm Standing, too.

To save her family, Maxine will have to come face-to-face with her past and stand down her worst fears if she has any hope of stopping the man threatening her family.

Before her final secrets become the death of them all.

Get your copy of *Bitter End*
Available May 13, 2020
www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com



EXCERPT

Chapter One

Josh Standing, who had lost his family and then found them again, no longer felt sure of who they were or how he fit in to their lives. But, for now, he had a more pressing concern to attend to.

He had a dead woman in his arms, and there were bullets smashing through the windows of the bedroom where he knelt.

The M-Bar Ranch was under attack. If Josh didn't defend the property right *now*, the notion that had been placed in his head by the dying woman—that he was not the father of his son—would be moot. Moot because they'd all be dead anyway.

Maria, who was Josh's mother-in-law, had been attacking him when she'd been hit by one of the bullets slamming into the ranch. They were being fired on by Dale Creggan's men. As she'd died, a moment of seeming lucidity behind her blood-smeared lips had led her to implore her daughter to tell Josh the truth about who Storm's father really was.

Now, that rabidly screeching, murderous woman, smothered in the slaver of a rabid madness and the blood from her injuries, looked like the broken fossil of a small bird.

Josh laid the limp and now pathetic form of Maria Jefferson down onto the floorboards. Moments before, she had been attacking him with all the fury of psychotic insanity—an insanity that seemed to have been visited upon ninety percent of the world's population. The effects of a supernova that was something like six light-years from Earth had rushed over the planet in a welter of madness and technological destruction, causing savage insanity to well up in billions of minds since that moment.

Josh closed his eyes, ducking as another bullet spat through the second-floor window beside him, punched a hole through the ceiling and sent out puffs of white plaster and splinters from ceiling beams.

Josh got up and, keeping low, went to the wall at the side of the window and looked out through the bullet holes in the boards which covered it.

Creggan's men hadn't yet made it as far as the yard, but the pasture beyond the yard, where the cattle had been corralled, was a blood-bath of dead beef. Creggan's men, advancing, had shot thirty of the animals to use as cover. The rest of the herd had stampeded away from the gun battle. Josh could see the retreating forms of the ani-

imals as they ran along the road away from the ranch. From there, some of the terrified animals had broken for the plain that eventually led up to the foothills of Alleghany Mountain.

Puffs of smoke below told Josh the tale of those left downstairs—his father-in-law Donald Jefferson, his daughter Tally, and Poppet Langolini, Henry Grange, and Greene Davidson—who were defending the ranch with vigor at the moment. Keeping Creggan's men pinned down for now, too. But it wasn't a situation that could last forever. Ammunition was finite, and if the quick forms of the attackers dodging behind the dead carcasses and moving about on the hillside were anything to go by, Josh and the others were outnumbered ten to one.

Josh had a sidearm, a Glock in a holster on his hip, but it wasn't a gun that would be a useful defensive weapon from up here. Downstairs, he had a bolt action Remington Model 700 that fired hefty .300 Winchester magnum cartridges, which he'd liberated from an exclusive gun store in Savannah, Georgia. He'd placed it with his pack at the bottom of the house's front stairs. With that weapon, with its scope and range, he'd be better placed to pick off attackers as they made themselves available to him.

Josh ducked away from the window as the board before him rattled and warped—bullets tearing through it to smash into the far wall of the room.

He ran for the door, got out into the corridor, and made for the stairs.

The front range of the ranch house was mostly made up of the large and generous kitchen, a storage area, and a utility room. Donald and Henry had boarded the windows there, too, but left enough of a gap below the plywood to observe and shoot through. Josh came into the kitchen with the Remington already in hand, clicking the bolt and chambering a round.

Donald, in his early seventies, was tall as John Wayne and wide as the West Virginia sky. He and his shotgun remained focused outside as Josh came in. Henry, nineteen, red-haired, and keen as mustard,

kneeled below the windows with his MP5, taking the occasional shot through the gaps beneath the board in front of him.

Poppet Langolini, a self-described ex-gangster's moll in her early fifties, blonde and brassier than a vintage Italian espresso machine, was loading shells into weapons and changing magazines in others on the kitchen table. She was getting them ready to pass to Donald and Henry as they were needed. She was an excellent sports shot herself—a long-time skeet shooter and hunter—and Josh knew this would only be a temporary respite from her getting back into the fray.

When Josh came in, bullets were rattling the frame of the house, glass was falling with shattering crashes, and the air was full of dust. Josh couldn't help being glad the old man was concentrating on the attackers. He didn't want to meet Donald's eyes and have to tell him right now that his wife had been killed. This wasn't the best environment in which to receive the worst of news. Instead, Josh took the Remington to a window and began sighting through it.

"They're not going to stop until we've killed 'em all," Donald said as Josh fired his first shot. The head he'd been aiming at had already ducked out of sight behind a carcass in the paddock.

"They're tying us up here," Henry said, sending a burst from his MP5 out beneath the window board. "Best we can do is keep them down. But the ammo ain't gonna last forever. And I bet you they're circling the house already."

"I'll go and take a look out the back," Poppet said, hefting a shotgun and two boxes of shells under her arm. "I'll look in on Maxine and Storm, too. Hopefully, the operation's nearly done."

Storm was in a back room being operated on by Lawrence Banks, a surgeon Maxine had risked everything over in order to bring him back to the M-Bar to deal with her's son's appendicitis. Maxine, a nurse and wound care specialist, was assisting Banks, and as the

house came under fire, Josh couldn't imagine how difficult the operation had become with this new addition of stress.

"Thanks," Josh said as Poppet left the room; however desperately he wanted to know that Maxine and Storm were doing okay, he was needed here in the kitchen more.

Henry sent out another burst of bullets just as Josh saw a figure making an opportunistic break from behind cover to run towards the barn. The figure was caught by Henry's fire across the legs and pelvis. His arms flew wide, his Stetson spinning away and his body flailing. He wasn't dead, but he was out of the game.

"Where's Tally and Greene?" Josh asked, sending another shot into the paddock, though it didn't find his target.

"Covering the windows at the side of the house in the den," Donald said, sending a blast of shot towards the paddock.

Josh chambered another round with the bolt and took aim through the scope. He had no idea how this was going to end and who would be left at the end of it to pick up the pieces.



Maxine felt like she was going to fall into the open wound in Storm's abdomen. Doctor Banks—Mr. *Call-me-Larry*—was wrapping tape around the gauze he'd circled around his shot-up fingers, and he'd sat back on his backside to direct Maxine in continuing the operation.

"I can't," she'd said at first.

"You can," Larry had answered. "The wound is open. You can do this under my direction. Back in the mists of time when I learned how to do this, the maxim was '*See one, do one, teach one.*' I've done this a thousand times. You can do it."

A volley of shots had interrupted Maxine's answer, and Storm, sweating, covered in his own blood and in Larry's from his injured hand, had reached for his mom. "There's no one else, Mom. You gotta do this. Please."

So, as the shots had pummeled the side of the building, coming through the window boards with anxiety-spiking regularity, Maxine had followed Larry's instructions.

It wasn't a case of being squeamish. She'd seen plenty of open wounds in her time as a wound care specialist at Morehead Mercy, where she'd worked in their North Carolina hometown. It was just that this was her son. Opened up to the world, and in a room that was coming under sustained gunfire from attackers outside.

"Right, Maxine. We're nearly there. Hook your finger through the peritoneum and you should be able to feel the appendix there. It's thin like a green bean, and squashy but tough. Get your finger under it and bring it out."

Three bullets sang across the room from the window to bury themselves in the wall opposite. Maxine and Larry ducked instinctively. Plaster spat into Larry's silver-gray hair, and he used his free hand to dab at Storm's iodine- and blood-smeared abdomen to remove the flakes.

"The longer this goes on, the more garbage that's going to get into the wound. We can flush it out, but it's still a huge risk. Get the appendix now, Maxine. Now."

Maxine nodded and hooked her nitrile-gloved finger through the last layer muscle in her son's abdomen. Larry had managed to open everything he'd needed to before he'd been shot. That was something to be thankful for, at least. Now, the sweat was standing out on his wrinkled forehead like rivets on a battleship. Maxine knew he must be in terrible pain, but he was keeping a lid on it. He couldn't help her other than to direct her movements.

She closed her eyes to think herself into her finger. Feeling through the small hole to try to locate what Larry had described. Larry was swabbing around the retractors and forceps that were already in the wound in order to staunch as much of the blood as he could. Storm groaned as Maxine worked her finger in and she almost pulled back. But then the thin, hard ribbon of gut she was searching for moved against the pad of her index finger, and suddenly she was hooked beneath it.

She pulled up with her hand and the appendix—blue-red, swollen, and hot beneath her finger—came into view.

“That’s it, girl. Well done. Infected for sure and the thing that’s been causing all his pain. Homestretch now, son,” Larry said, a strained smile sketched across his face as the sounds of the battle intensified outside.

“Okay, hold it there, and I can use the forceps to clip the artery feeding its blood supply; then you can ligate... tie off... the vessels before we crush and cut out the appendix.”

Larry clipped the arteries and told Maxine how to prepare the surgical thread to tie them off.

The door opened breaking her concentration as Maxine spun her head. For a moment, she expected to see one of Creggan’s men in the doorway about to shoot them down. But it was Poppet. She came in with her face determined and her shotgun in hand, kicking the door closed with her heel behind her. “They’re moving up behind us and to the side. I’m gonna see if I can pin some of them down from here. Okay?”

Maxine nodded. She hadn’t had time to get to know Poppet yet, but she hoped she would on the other side of this if any of them got out alive.

Poppet knelt at the window and fired both barrels of the shotgun through it. “Nailed one. They’ll think twice about just walking up

here now.”

She ducked as a line of machine-gun bullets studded the board.

“Or maybe not.”

The operation continued as best it could under the circumstances. Larry explained how to tie off the arteries and Maxine followed his instructions with shaking fingers. Then she was directed to crush the base of the appendix with another set of forceps and tie off below the crushed area. Larry reached in with forceps-scissors at that point, and the appendix was free. Maxine pulled it away and dropped it on a plate by the side of the bed.

“Now to close up. First, we need a purse stitch around the stump of the appendix, and...”

Larry’s head dropped forward, his face pale and his mouth lolling.

Poppet fired two more shots from the window and tracked back to look at Maxine, who felt like her heart was about to burst out of her chest. Her hands were still in the wound, and as Larry’s voice had trailed off, he’d slid back. His chest was rising and falling softly.

Poppet felt for a pulse in his neck. “He’s alive. Fainted from the pain or blood loss, I guess.”

“But what are we going to do?” Maxine asked as the firing intensified outside again.

Poppet pushed Maxine backward and her hands plopped from the wound in Storm’s tummy.

“Improvise,” Poppet said. She passed the shotgun to Maxine’s bloody hands and started pulling on a pair of sterile gloves.

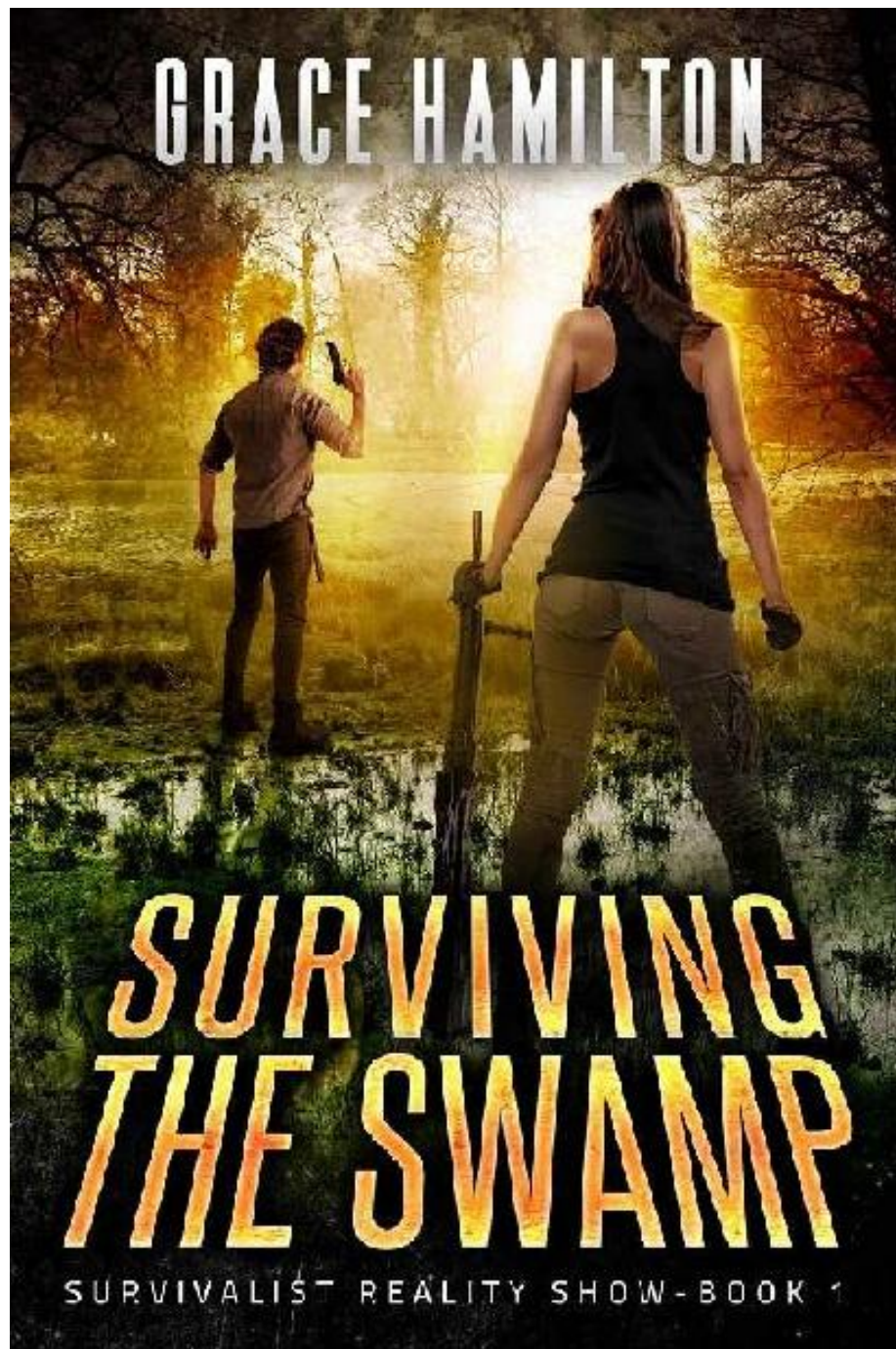
“You take the window, and I’ll do what I can here.”

“You know how to stitch up wounds?”

“Some. Ask Josh if you ever get the chance. He’s living proof.”

Maxine nodded and went to the window.

Get your copy of *Bitter End*
Available May 13, 2020
www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com



BLURB

Skin of Your Teeth Survival is a reality show made famous for pairing part-time survivalists with a real-life survival situation. Always carefully planned out by world-famous Prepper and Survivalist Wolf

Henderson, season ten promises to be different This time none of the contestants are survivalists. They've all been picked to fail.

But when an EMP hits, the cast scatters and Wolf is left to care for a husband and wife team, a quietly scrappy chick, and a bumbling scientist. At the spur of the moment, Wolf offers them safety at his island bug-out location and takes off with his ragtag team to move through the wild and dangerous swampland of Florida.

The loner of the group, Regan, isn't sure what to do. She can't survive on her own, but she also doesn't work well in a group. She believes she has a better shot in one of the major cities on the coast than in the swamp, so she joins the team with every intent of striking out on her own once the opportunity arises. But with the world around them growing more dangerous every day, she has to figure out whether she's better off with the group or alone in the post-EMP world.

And whether Regan or Wolf realize it, the dangerous journey through swampland will soon become a literal fight for survival once they reach the chaos of 'civilized' South Florida.

Grab your copy of Surviving the Swamp.

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com



EXCERPT

Chapter One

Regan Goodfellow wasn't a quitter. This last week had tested her strength and her will to survive, but she'd taken on every challenge willingly. More than anything, she wanted to prove to herself how tough she really was. Facing off against a dangerous swamp with deadly animals was a great way to do that. Maybe not the most prac-

tical or conventional method, but exciting, nonetheless. If only it wasn't so damn wet. Of course it was wet; it was a *swamp*, complete with endlessly boggy ground, damp hand-holds, and humidity like she'd never imagined.

Moving through it was brutal, and easily the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life. She stopped yet again, to drag in several deep breaths, her lungs sorely lacking oxygen after the breakneck pace she'd set for herself through the dense foliage that kept slapping her face. Thankfully, she had worn a lightweight, long-sleeved shirt. It was certainly coming in handy now, even if it was snagged and torn in places.

With her feet sinking into the muck that counted as ground in this area, three inches below water and settling into mud, her legs felt like they had a million pins pricking her flesh, tingling as they did from overexertion. She was so close to making it to dry ground. Or, drier ground. There was no way she was going to stop now. She had to get her feet out of the water.

Most people would have been terrified to be alone in the Everglades, and she knew that might be the rational mindset, but it wasn't hers. She had something to prove to herself and all the people who had tried to keep her down over the years. No Florida swamp was going to beat her. People thought that because she was a bit on the small side, and didn't look like one of those badass chicks from any of the movies, she would fail. They were wrong.

"Keep moving," she whispered to herself, willing her legs to carry her through the swampy bog.

She had once thought running on sand was tough, but this marsh was a completely different challenge. Every step was a battle. Her hiking boots sank into the mud, making a sucking sound as she pulled each boot out and took another step. So much of the land was muddy ground, much of it covered by at least a few inches of water—and every bit of it fought her forward momentum. Thankfully, it wasn't overly hot. Although, the humidity made it uncomfortable

even in the shade. Florida humidity had turned her skin into a sticky glue that bugs and debris clung to. It was gross, and the first thing she was going to do when she got out of this swamp was take a long, hot shower. Maybe the weather wasn't bad when you could lay out on beaches and then jump in the ocean, but this journey she was on was a long way from any beachside vacation.

"Focus," she reminded herself when her mind started to acknowledge her physical discomfort yet again.

Shifting her weight, she took in another deep breath and grimaced as the sucking sound of the mud beneath her feet responded to her renewed attempts to move forward. She had to get to dry land. She'd never make it through another week if she had to stay in the thick swamp with its millions of mosquitoes and other bugs feasting on her body. Every sting reminded her that she had used the last of her bug repellant earlier that morning when things had gone from bad to worse.

The worst of it all was, her feet were wet, something she knew was bad. Wolf Henderson would lecture her for days when he found out she had lost her spare socks somewhere along the way. When they'd first set out on this little adventure, he had warned them all about foot rot. Human skin was not meant to be wet; he'd told them more than once. And now she knew why. Running was rubbing her toes and heels raw despite the fancy socks she had on. If she ever managed to find him and the others, she was fully prepared to be called out. He could complain and lecture all he wanted so long as he had some dry socks for her.

A small clearing ahead greeted her when she glanced up from the boggy ground to take new stock of her surroundings, and she pushed her body more upon seeing it. The clearing would provide options. At the very least, she wouldn't be smacked in the head with the branches that came from every direction, creating the dense canopy of the swamp. The shade was great—the bugs that came with it, not so much.

"Stop it!" she scolded herself aloud. "I can do this. And someone will come looking for me if I don't check in. Right?"

Her sinister laughter in the quiet swamp sounded funny to her ears. Everything about this situation was so wrong. Why had she ever thought a reality survival show would be a good time? It wasn't supposed to be like this. She'd been ditched by her partner earlier, and now she was alone. And yeah, of course, that's what she'd *said* she wanted, but now....

Reaching the sandy ground of the clearing, Regan gave herself a moment to enjoy the solid footing and take in her surroundings, weighing her options and calculating what path made the most sense. There was a wide pond in front of her, and going through it would be the quickest, shortest route to where she was trying to get to. Heading left would lead her deeper into the swamp, and she was not going back the way she'd come. Her eyes drifted to her right, where a steep hill of a rock stood ominously above her, stretching a good twenty feet into the sky. Going that route would take her a little out of her way, but she could circle back and get to her rendezvous point. It didn't look insurmountable, but it was steep. Especially considering her soggy footwear.

She let out a long sigh. None of her options promised she would make it to safety. The pond covered with floating green algae actually looked like the easiest choice, but Regan knew simplest was not best, especially in her case. Who knew what was under that algae, creature-wise? The tree that stretched out over part of the pond, keeping it in the shade, was also a problem. There was a wasp nest hanging over the area. That was a major deterrent. Even being in the vicinity of the nest was freaking her out. One sting and she would go into anaphylactic shock, and she couldn't exactly pull out an EpiPen while swimming. Her allergy was no joke. That had been a hard lesson learned when she'd been a little girl, and the single EpiPen she carried wouldn't be enough to save her if she was stung by more than a few of those horrible wasps.

Standing around and debating what to do could get her killed, too. She had to keep moving. She looked at the murky water, knowing it would likely be a safer option in some ways, but there was always a chance there'd be a deadly snake waiting to clamp down on her leg. Snakes were one of her least favorite animals on earth. The swamplands of Florida were rife with snakes; a fact she should have thought more about before signing up to do this stupid survival show. Sure, only a fifth or so of Florida snakes were venomous, but in her mind, snakes were snakes.

She stared at the water, shaking her head and cursing the rain they had been dealing with all week. It had made the swamp extra treacherous, which was never a good thing when survival was the goal. Staying upright had been her main goal as she'd traversed slippery rocks made deadly by the layers of moss and slime covering them, and remaining on her feet hadn't even been easy on what counted for solid ground around here, given the mud and the water.

"Relax, Regan. You've been in worse situations," she said aloud, trying to calm herself down.

She had to stay calm and think rationally. It was how she had stayed alive as long as she had. She couldn't lose her head now at the thought of a snake brushing by her.

Finding herself staring up at the slippery hill of rock that could lead to safety, she groaned. It was her best option. She knew it. The risk of being stung was too great. She had to avoid the wasps at all costs. Could she climb the rock wall alone? Having a partner would have made this path an easier prospect, but it was too late for that.

Besides, depending on other people always ended badly. Another hard life lesson she had learned over her twenty-seven years. People sucked. They were unreliable, and they always promised to help and be there for support, and then when you actually needed them, they screwed you over. Regan was done with all that. Being on her own had been a lot easier. She never had to worry about people letting her down or inserting their drama into her life, like her first partner

on the show had done. Little Miss Sunny had been a nightmare. Regan had wanted to kill the producers for pairing her up with the school teacher. Thankfully, Sunny had been booted off, leaving Regan with a new partner. And while anyone was better than Sunny, her so-called partner was now nowhere to be found. *Typical.*

“You can do this. You don’t need anybody. This is all you. Get your butt up that slope!”

The rock-covered hill was a slippery mess and her boots were coated with mud, making it even more difficult for her to get a strong foothold. Having clambered five feet above the base, she closed her eyes and focused on the goal. Getting to the top. It wasn’t all that high. A couple stories, if she’d been trying to scale a building. Not something she had actually done, but she easily imagined jumping out of a second-story window and the height involved there—*that*, she had done.

With renewed strength, she stretched an arm up, felt around, and found the smallest hint of a ledge. It would have to do. With all the power she could muster in her five-foot, five-inch frame, she used her leg muscles to propel herself up the hill several inches. When she got a good foothold, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“You can do this,” she repeated to herself.

Then Regan made the mistake of looking up. She had barely made it half way up, and there was nothing to hold onto.

“Come on!”

She was only a few yards off the ground, which wasn’t a big deal, but if she did jump off the hill, she risked twisting an ankle or falling into the nasty, bug-infested pond. There was also the chance that she would hit her head on the way down, given the slick slope involved. It wasn’t like she could run to the hospital to get patched up or take a couple Advil to relieve the pain of a head or ankle injury. The swamp wasn’t exactly the best place to take risks.

“Well, this sucks,” she muttered, holding onto the side of the hill and not knowing whether to keep trying to climb up or admit defeat and jump down.

Grab your copy of Surviving the Swamp.

www.GraceHamiltonBooks.com