

# A PATH TO UTOPIA



Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

Cover Art by Teresa Tunaley



A Path to Utopia

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## DEDICATION

To my friend, Terri Smith for inspiring this one.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was almost as long of a journey as the one taken by the characters in this book. But it wasn't without pain, thrills, and the occasional frustration. This book needed the right place and time for its writing, and when it was found, it whipped from me.

A special thanks to 'Rob' for giving me the path to take. For 'W', and your patience with me while I wrote this. Terri, your feedback is amazing. T, my right hand 'man/woman' your talents are truly astounding and you never let me down. Thanks so much for the cover and all your unforgettable help. And finally, as always, to 'F', you inspired this one more than you ever would realize. I'm home with you.

Jake

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CHAPTER ONE

*April 7<sup>b</sup>*

*Buffalo, New York*

“Dude, you suck.”

Not exactly the phrasing one would expect to hear from a successful, twenty-nine year old pharmaceutical salesman. But Bishop Dean wasn’t selling at that moment ... at least not pharmaceuticals.

Bishop’s dark hair was messy, tossed about. All because the Manager of Casey’s Sports bar made him remove his baseball cap. Bishop didn’t mind if he looked out of order. He wasn’t at Casey’s to meet women. It was the guys’ Thursday night out. Beer, baseball on the big screens, and all you could play video games until ten PM.

Casey’s had two main rooms. The arcade, and the restaurant. Bishop would float between them to watch the action in both.

But at this particular moment, Bishop was planted firm behind the player of the new video game ‘Green Berets’. One arm crossed over his smaller frame body, he’d chuckle and taunt the player, all while keeping his eye on the high score to beat—his.

“Aw, man, how’d you miss him?” Bishop laughed and took a swig of his beer. “Whoops. Missed him too. Ha. Ha.”

Dirk Reynolds, a friend of Bishop’s, inched to him whispering, “How’s it going?”

Bishop shook his head, keeping his voice low. “He may do it. I’m telling you, this is the guy who knocked my high score out last week.”

“He’s good,” Dirk said.

“Yeah, I know. But ...” Bishop pointed to his temple as he nodded once at the player “I’m on him.” He winked. “I’ve got my score covered this time.”

Dirk chuckled with a swat to Bishop’s back. “Keep it up. I’m gonna be with Leo on ‘Alien Rush’. You checked the baseball score lately?”

“Uh ...” Bishop jolted and winced as he watched the player move to the next level. “No, soon. I’ll let you know.”



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"Thanks. We're over there."

"Yeah." Bishop nodded, not paying attention to Dirk's departure. Nervously, he brought his beer to his lips, then clenched his fist with a mighty 'yes!' when the player messed up. "Dude, man, you really ... suck."

The player huffed. "Ok. Enough." The boy no older than ten, looked up at Bishop. "Mister, can I just play the game?"

"You are." Bishop replied.

"Yeah, but you're bothering me," the boy said.

"If you can't take the pressure." Bishop shrugged.

Sighing out, the boy continued to play.

"Ha!" Bishop jeered. "Too bad. You should have seen that one coming."

The boy's hand slammed to the flat edge of the game. "Mom! Mom! Some man is bothering me."

"Shh!" Hunching with a wince, Bishop held up his hands, shifted his eyes, and then hurriedly backed away. He thought about watching Dirk and Leo, but then opted for checking out the game. After all, it was the opener, and Bishop had money on it.

Casey's was packed, as it always seemed to be on Thursday 'free play' night. The eruption of cheers told Bishop the home team did something, and he stepped further into the room closer to the television view and sound.

A family was near by. They were somewhat distracting since they were preparing to sing happy birthday.

"What's the score? What's the score?" Bishop mumbled to himself, and then caught it on the screen. "Yes." He grinned. Bottom of the ninth, the home team was down by one. It didn't look good for the home team, for Bishop, it did ... financially.

*"Green on second. One out. O'Connell is up at bat ..."* the announcer spoke.

"Come on," Bishop beckoned quietly. "Just strike out."

*"He swings ... it's high, far ..."*

"Shit." Bishop winced.

*"Caught by Rodriguez and Green advances to third. We have Helms at the plate"*

"Happy Birthday to you ..." The family sang loud and in unison.

Bishop nodded, trying to block out the family.. "Helms sucks. Helms sucks."

"Happy Birthday to you ..."

*"Helms at bat, he's 0 for three tonight. Here's the wind up..."*

"Happy Birthday, Dear Amanda ..."

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*"... the pitch ... Helms swings ..."*

"Happy Birthday to ..."

*"Holy, cow, talk about connection, that ball is ..."*

Static.

A rush of static, all of the televisions turned to snow, and a wave of brief, very brief disappointment moans swept through the room. Then there was silence, all but for the hissing of the televisions.

"What the hell?" Bishop commented.

In the eerie silence, it rang out loud.

'Thump'

A single sound as if something fell to the table. No sooner did Bishop slowly turn his head, another rang out.

'Thump'

A second later, another accompanied by the rattling of breaking glass. Before Bishop could comprehend what was happening, the few 'thumps' and rattles, turned into multitudes, fast furiously, one right after another.

The beer bottle dropped from Bishop's hand as he stepped backwards taking in the horror of what transpired around him.

People dropped.

Men. Women. Children.

Heads plopping lifeless to the tables, directly into their food. If they were standing, they fell to the floor.

"Oh, my God." Bishop ran toward the arcade. "Dirk!"

The games still sang out, bleeps, and buzzes. Sounds of life amongst a dead room.

"Dirk, Le ..." Bishop shrieked. Dirk and Leo overlapped each other on the floor by the Alien game. A quick shift of his eyes, and Bishop saw the ten-year-old boy. His little arm still holding on to the controls, as his body slumped at the foot of the game.

Panicked, Bishop pivoted right and bolted. Only three steps into his run, he tripped over a body. He careened nose first to the floor, falling face to face with a woman. Her eyes were wide, face white, a small dribble of blood came from her mouth. One more scream and a rush of horrified energy motivated Bishop to his feet.

Was it a gas leak? Chemical weapon attack? Bishop didn't have those answers because he hadn't time to think. All he knew was that he remained the only one standing. Mortified, he ran as fast as he could from Casey's.

Breathing heavily, he reached the silent outdoors. "Help!" he cried out.

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“Some body!” His voice echoed. “Help!”

He didn’t take in anything around, any sights or sounds, only a vision of the grocery store located in the same shopping complex.

In the quiet night, Bishop’s feet smacked in an echo against the pavement. Four stores down, that’s all it was. The automatic doors opened, and Bishop ran in.

He knew the second he stepped inside, that getting help was useless. Like Casey’s everyone in that store, checkers and shoppers, were all ... dead.

### ***Mt. Lebanon, PA***

Roberta Pierce, or ‘Robi’ as everyone called her, preferred the night shift. A trauma unit nurse at an inner city hospital kept her on her toes. Plus, working the nightshift afforded her the opportunity to not deal with the bureaucrats.

The car radio played as she drove down the four-lane road decorated with houses and businesses.

“Believe it is some sort of satellite disruption,” the disc jockey said, “Interference, a glitch. That’s what they’re saying. So if you’re trying to reach overseas, it may take a while before everything is up. Communications cut ..”

A hiss emerged from her radio.

“Oh, ha. Really funny.” Robi shook her head. “I get it. No communications.” She decided to switch to another station.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Robi pressed button, after button. “What the fuck?” She glanced down to make sure her radio was lit, and when she raised her eyes, she was nearly blinded by the bright, large, close headlights of the truck careening at her.

Quickly, she jerked the wheel to the right, and hit the gas, aiming for a yard, but she wasn’t fast enough. The truck slammed into the rear of her car, sending her in a spin to her left.

Gripping the wheel, Robi tried to stop the car, and managed to do so on the other side of the road. Heart racing, she looked in the rearview mirror to see if anything was coming, then forward only to see another car veer from the other side of the road in an angle her way. She couldn’t go forward, she

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ripped the car in reverse, hit the gas, sped back, and rammed into a large hedge. The car inched by her, sharing the same property hedges a few feet away. It was hung up, the wheels spinning.

Robi could barely breathe. She was fine, though, no matter how shaken. She could see the truck that had hit her; it had demolished the front of a house. Robi stepped from her car.

No sirens. No other sounds. Only the spinning tires of the car stuck in the hedges.

She began her walk to that car to see if the driver needed help. Even in the dark, she could see the driver had slumped over. Just as she neared the car, she heard it.

Diesel engines. Fast, whistling, close. Louder, louder ...

She raised her head to she sky. With a warm rush of blasting air, her hair blew back as the belly of a plane seemed close enough to touch. It sailed by on a tilt, and disappeared into view.

“Shit, it’s going down” Robi turned, and started to run the opposite way. She lost her balance and tumbled to the ground, when an explosion rocked the earth. Covering her head, and rolling out of the roll, Robi looked up to see a huge fireball in the distance.

Every ounce of air escaped her, she couldn’t move. “Oh, my God.” she whispered in her shock. “What’s happening?”

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Buffalo, New York*

There was absolutely nothing on the radio. Bishop checked. No movement on the street.

Nothing.

He found his car in the parking lot, and fled home to search out his parents. Fleming Drive, the main road that ran in front of shopping complex was congested with cars smashed into one another. Flames burned out of control between a few of them, and as if it were a video game, Bishop weaved with precision in and out.

After the automobile junkyard that had formed on Fleming, Bishop picked up speed, and took the back roads home. Not that he expected traffic; in fact, Bishop had it in his mindset that he wouldn't see another car. He drove carelessly and fast, cruising through traffic lights, and blowing off stop signs. If by chance a cop did pull him over, at least Bishop would find out what had happened.

Six blocks from his parents' home, Bishop made a wide right turn, missing yet another stop sign. No sooner did he turn, his car jolted with a crash and careened violently to the right. Out of control, his car bumped over the curb, and straight across a well maintained yard. Bishop slammed both feet to the brakes before hitting the porch of a house.

He heaved breaths fast and panting. Utter spurts of shock noise emanated from him as he held for dear life to that wheel.

He shrieked when his car door opened.

"You all right?" a man asked him as he shone flashlight into the car. "Son?"

Bishop blinked. He shielded his eyes and nodded.

"Let's get you out of there." The man reached in and took hold of Bishop's arm.

Bishop followed the lead, shaken.

"Son?" the man shook his gently.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Bishop stuttered. "Did I hit you or did you hit me?"

"Does it matter?" The man asked. He was older, maybe sixty. He looked

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at Bishop's car. "You probably can still drive this."

"I ... I watched about two hundred people drop dead." Bishop blurted out. "Tell me it was a dream."

The man shook his head. "I wish I could tell you that. I was at the Walmart and everyone just ..."

"Dropped?"

The man nodded. "I was hurrying home to check on my wife. I didn't see any cars on the way here. Of course, I took the back roads after I saw all the cars crashed on the road."

"Me too," Bishop said. "Cars everywhere. I'm going to my parents."

"Well, maybe we should part ways. I really want to check on my wife."

"I understand."

"You're fine?" The man asked as he backed up. "Right? You're not hurt."

Bishop shook his head. "No, go on. I'm fine."

"Good luck finding your family."

Before Bishop could say anything else, the man was gone. Alone, grabbing his bearings, Bishop prepared to go to his parents' home a bit more carefully.

In his determination to find his family, confusion over the accident, and excitement of all that occurred, Bishop never thought twice about the man he just met. It didn't dawn on him to join forces, to make plans to meet up. That would be making Bishop think too far ahead, and for Bishop, the furthest he wanted to think was getting to his parents.

### ***Mt. Lebanon, PA***

Halfway between home and hospital everything went awry for Robi. The medical professional in her contemplated continuing to the hospital.

Two planes and a helicopter.

Within five minutes, Robi witnessed two planes and a helicopter go down. Common sense steered her into realizing medically, it was probably too big for her to handle, and then the mother in her, steered her home.

Aware, alert, and on the defensive, Robi hightailed it to her home not two miles from where she wrecked into that hedge.

She saw not a single soul, or car. Her hand constantly pressed the tuner on the radio, but received no signal.

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It was just a little after ten PM, and she hadn't even been gone from her home forty-five minutes.

It couldn't be everywhere, she thought. It had to be that area. She survived a terrorist attack, and wanted to rush home to tell her husband and children she was fine. They probably were worried, watching the news, trying her cell phone that she lost in the crash, and wondering if 'Mommy was OK.'

No sooner did Robi pull into her little neighborhood, she knew it spread further out. On Main, cars strewn the street, crashed and burning. A telephone pole blocked the road with dancing electrical wires.

She had to back up and go down a one-way street to get to her home. A sense of 'eerie' hit her as she pulled into the parking spot. Not that anything looked that different on her quiet street, it was an internal sense.

Car door left open, Robi raced to the front steps of her home. The sound of a smoke alarm flowed from her house and this fueled her to move even faster.

The second she opened the door, smoke billowed out. The annoying alarm squealed loudly. The smoke was thick, making it nearly impossible for her to see. It carried a smell of food, and that told Robi where the source came from.

She remembered, her husband James was getting ready to fry burgers when she left. The lights of the house illuminated the smoke, but Robi had to rely on knowledge and extended hands to make her way to the kitchen.

The stove was immediately to her right upon entrance of her kitchen, and she saw the amber of the flaming pan. Grabbing a towel that hung from the oven door, she turned off the burner, removed the pan, and smothered the flames with the towel.

The smoke alarm still rang out.

"James!" Robi called. "James! Maggie! Linda! Nick!"

Had they left in a hurry?

The broom set near the stove, Robi grabbed it, raised it, and without caring if she destroyed the alarm, she hit it.

One silenced.

She moved to the living room, and to the alarm located in the stairwell.

After silencing that one as well, the volume level of the house decreased. The alarm from the second floor still rang, and the television was on. Voices broken and mixed with static, but Robi didn't pay attention to what the television announced. She only wanted to call out again for her family.

"James! Girls!"

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They had to have heard her now. Thinking, maybe they had warning and went to the basement, Robi headed back to the kitchen.

Even though the smoke started to clear a little, it was still thick and visually hindered her. Focus on the cellar door, Robi walked by the stove.

‘Thud’

Her foot hit.

She closed her eyes as her heart sunk to her stomach. She was afraid to look. Slowly she lowered down and an ache seeped from her throat.

James.

Extending her hand, she felt for a pulse. The moment she felt nothing, her head cocked and she sprang to her feet.

“Oh, my God, my kids.”

When Robi had left, the girls were in bed, and Nick, her seventeen-year-old son was due home. She raced from the kitchen, across the living room and to the second floor as fast as she could go.

Turning the bend, the first room was Nick’s. It was dark, she peeked inside. Nick wasn’t there. Scared, heart beating from her chest, Robi ran into her daughters’ room.

The words trapped in her throat. “Girls?” She swallowed and walked in. The hall light allowed her to see her twelve-year-old daughter’s figure in bed. “Maggie?” She rushed to the first bed. “Maggie?”

Hands to her daughter’s body, Robi cried out, ‘No!’ She shook Maggie, but Robi knew. The child’s skin was cool. The heartbreak was overbearing, and Robi was frightened beyond believe to check her other daughter’s bed.

Then she heard it. A rustling noise.

A quick pivot, and Robi quickly turned on the night stand light when she saw movement in the bed.

The seven year old trembled in minor convulsions. Her head went back and forth, eyes wide, and a brownish fluid trickled from her nose and mouth. Robi grabbed her; Linda was hot to the touch. “You’re still alive. You’re still alive. Linda? Linda,” Robi grabbed her face. “It’s Mommy.”

Linda didn’t respond, her convulsions continued.

“I have to get you help,” Robi swooped up her youngest child blanket and all, cradled her to her chest, and raced with her from the bedroom, downstairs.

Child in arms, Robi grabbed the living room phone and dialed 911.

It rang and rang.

No answer.



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She threw down the phone, and ran from the house.

There was no other choice. She couldn't stay. She had to find Linda the help she needed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Buffalo, New York*

They portrayed themselves to Bishop as being a very boring couple. A little television and off to bed early. Bishop lived in the apartment below his parents and mentally concurred their picture of themselves. He never even heard them walking about. He always invited his father out for the Thursday guy's thing. However 'Dad' refused, he liked to watch that Law show, and he had to work Fridays.

The mid income apartment complex—which consisted of three buildings—was silent when bishop arrived. The electricity was running, and Bishop took the elevator to his parents' second floor home.

Bishop had hit a wall of reality. The 'dead' feel to buffalo made him prepare for the fact that his parents, like everyone lese, were no longer alive.

Promising that he wouldn't get hysterical, Bishop entered his parents' apartment. He often wondered what exactly they did with all their time, and found that answer. The last vision of his parents was not one he wanted forever mentally photographed. It was horrid enough that they passed away instantly in the midst of what they did, but it was even worse that they died in the middle of what appeared to be intense love making.

Bishops' father boasted that was the way he always wanted to go.

He did.

He was lost. Bishop hadn't a clue what to do. Was there help out there? Was it only Buffalo? Ready to go to his own apartment, Bishop heard the woman's cry.

It came from outside.

"Anyone! Is anyone alive! What's going on! Anyone!" She called from what sounded like the complex courtyard, and Bishop sought her out.

Her thin face was tear streaked and red; her hair strewn everywhere. Tanya stood frazzled in the courtyard screaming at the tops of her lungs.

"Hey!" Bishop called out as he emerged from his building.

She growled a relief filled scream and rushed Bishop's way. She panted breaths and gripped on to him. "Help. Everyone's dead. How ...how?"

Bishop shook his head. "I don't know."

The woman near forty, buried within Bishop's hold, sobbed, "My husband, my baby. I tied to call for help. No one answered. What do we do?"

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Bishop was just as scared and confused as Tanya, but he said very little. Cupping her head close to him to try to calm her, Bishop muttered the only response he could give, "I don't know."

### ***Mt. Lebanon, PA***

There were a few who weren't dead. A fireman, one cop, three patients at the hospital and a nurse.

But all of them were like Robi's daughter. Non-responsive and slightly convulsive.

Waiting around at the hospital was not an option. Linda was not getting better, nor had she worsened. Robi, being a medical professional, called upon her knowledge, and used a fever reducer. That seemed to stop the convulsions of her daughter, and a mild sedative helped her rest.

Before taking Linda and more medication home, Robi medicated those who remained alive, and left them.

She couldn't stay to help, it wasn't her responsibility. Linda was. Plus, she had one more child to find ... Nick.

Hating to give into it, Robi had a lock down feeling that Nick was fine. Her only heartache came from knowing that if he survived, he had to witness everyone else's demise.

Robi was a realist.

She couldn't pause to morn or worry, or get hysterical, those would come, at that moment, things had to be done. After settling Linda to the couch, Robi pulled Bill's body to the back covered patio and engulfed him with a blanket. Hating to do so, she handled her other daughter's body the same way. What disease brought their fatality was unknown and Robi couldn't chance it lingering in the home. Not with Linda still alive and the possibility of Nick returning.

The questioned still remained, was it only her hometown, or was it everywhere. Having come from a military family, Robi wagered on a chemical or biological attack as an answer. Communications were down, but for how long? If it were a localized attack, it wouldn't be long before help arrived.

She had been so engrossed in cleaning up and caring for Linda, the television became second nature. How many times had she heard it in her home? So many, that it wasn't even noticed. Had it not been for the long beep of the emergency broadcasting system, Robi probably would have



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"I don't know." Robi answered. "Maybe help will come. Maybe it's just our area. Maybe ..." She saw Nick shake his head. "Why are you saying 'no'?"

"We stopped at the police station. We were able to pick up stuff on the radio."

"I was just about to try to the television. See?" Robi walked over to the set. "We have some signal coming through. That's why I thought it was localized."

"From what they've said on the radio," Nick said. "There is no help. It's not just here. It's everywhere."

### ***Buffalo, New York***

Oliver Tibbs was an eccentric middle age man who boasted he lived in the penthouse suite, when actually he lived on the top floor. Oliver was also the only person Bishop knew that had a satellite dish. So Bishop and Tanya went to the empty apartment to see if they could pick up a news signal. They did.

The newswoman defined distressed. No make up, eyes puffy, the camera angle was sloppy but she explained that she was the only one in the studio. If she were alive, someone else had to be and it was her duty to reach people. Then she stated she hoped that someone would reach her.

She started to explain that she didn't know what was happening. That whatever it was hit fast and furious, she herself was on her way home. Ten minutes into her broadcast a man showed up, with five more minutes two more people. Soon her phones began to ring and slowly but surely, the four of them were piecing information. It wasn't long after, a few more showed up. The television studio was a 'live' place.

A map was hung on the wall behind her I looked like something from a classroom but it worked. Her name was Annette and she was sense of hope for a lot of people who were able to pick up her signal—from California.

There was a brief pause while Annette spoke to someone off camera, she returned, took a marker and placed an 'X' over Florida.

"OK," She faced the camera. "We received a call from Florida. They were hit at 9.40 EST. It seems this thing hit at the same time everywhere. I'm thinking that the longer we stay on the air the more people that will pick us up. The woman who called is from Miami. She said she has seen two other people alive, but reports she has seen numerous infected."

Bishop snapped his finger and turned to Tanya who sat in a daze.

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"These infected. I haven't seen any. You think we should look through the apartments."

Tanya just shrugged.

"Maybe not."

Annette spoke, this time upbeat. "Seems...seems we have a doctor from Illinois on the line. I'm going to plug him through. Doctor? Are you there?"

"I'm here, Annette."

"We heard from Illinois earlier, maybe you can state where you're at so someone can find you." Annette suggested.

"I'm at Cook Country Hospital. You can't miss me."

"What's going on there, Doctor?"

"Well we're sitting about five hours now post hit, same as you. And in the last hour, we've been getting more coming in."

"Are they sick?" she asked.

"No, but they are bringing infected in."

"How many are we talking?"

"Alive and well, about fifteen. Sick, hundreds."

"Have you been able to learn anything about this?" Annette questioned. "We've not heard from a single medical professional."

"That's why I'm calling. Aside myself, there is a lab tech here and we've been doing some raw testing. We're not epidemiologist, so what we have a lot of guess work involved."

"Go on," Annette beckoned. "We're looking for anything right now."

"We've taken samples from those who have died and those infected with symptoms. Seems as if we're dealing with a virus. Totally destroy all cell life, almost coagulates it."

"Which mean?" Annette asked.

"Clots it." The doctor said. "Internal organs are mush. Blood won't flow, can't pump through the heart or to the brain, the person dies. Instantly."

"Do you think this was a biological attack?"

"Nothing like I've ever seen, Annette, but it's hard to say what's out there. I can tell you this. It hit overseas about two hours before we got it."

Annette went silent. "That would explain the downed communications."

"I suppose."

"What about our infected. Is there any way to help?"

"At this point no. From what we've seen, this virus is attacking the infected at a slower rate. Our guess is they will reach total infection in about

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five hours.”

“So those sick right now will ...”

“More than likely pass on.”

Bishop raised his head when Tanya stood. “Where are you going? This is important.”

“Why?” She asked. “It’s over.”

“Don’t you wanna know what happened? Maybe where we can find some help?”

“No.” She shook her head and walked away.

Not paying too much attention, Bishop returned to the television. He turned up the volume when he heard the words ‘good news’, “Tanya?” he called her. “They’re saying some good news.”

Tanya didn’t respond.

“Linked.” The doctor said. “My own daughter is alive. And we’ve seen six other people related. So, we’re thinking there is a genetic link. If you’re alive, you stand a good chance someone in your family being alive as well.”

“What do you think the parentages are.”

“Annette is hard to say. Ninety-plus percent are dead here. More are dying. But the other good news is, we introduced the virus to a blood sample of a person who wasn’t ill. The blood combated it.”

“So if we aren’t sick with this ...”

The doctor finished Annette’s sentence. “You won’t get sick with it.”

Bishop mumbled as he stood up. “How good is that. Less than ten percent of the world is alive in a dead world. Swell, someone call in with where we can go for help.” He looked around. “Tanya?”

No response.

“Hey ...” He headed down the small hallway toward the bedrooms. “Are you still here?” he felt a chill hit him and saw the slightly open door of the far bedroom. “Tanya?” he knocked once and walked inside. “You all right?”

No one was there.

“Where the hell did you go?” Bishop spoke to himself. Thinking, the window needed to be closed before it got too cold, he walked over. Just as he reached to shut the window, he received an answer on where Tanya had gone.

He could see her on the sidewalk, and the sight sickened him.

From the sixth floor back bedroom window. ... Tanya had jumped.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*April 8<sup>th</sup>*

*Mt. Lebanon, PA*

Well into the afternoon, Robi cried.

She found her sanctuary on the back patio, staring out into the yard where she and Nick had buried their family. She supposed she would have to find her parents, and brothers and sisters...eventually. However, at that moment, Robi was consumed with the loss of her children and husband.

Two things made the situation bearable. One, it was everywhere. It wasn't just her. Her family. It was the entire world. Secondly, she still had Nick.

Nick shed his tears, but put his emotions into woodwork. He raided a nearby hardware store, cut the wood, and was etching it to make grave markers.

Robi on the other hand marked the day as useless, the only day she'd allow herself to wallow.

The night before, Nick and Robi were able to pick up a station out of California. The picture was fuzzy, but the sound was near clear.

They followed the ongoing reports of some doctor in Illinois who gave hourly updates on the patients he had with the infection. Sure enough, right after he started announcing their demise, Linda passed away.

Robi was grateful she had sedated her daughter, because the doctor explained a violent ending. Linda didn't experience that. She never spoke again, opened her eyes, it was as if she fell asleep and didn't wake.

The Illinois doctor made his last phone call about noon, claiming he had nothing more to report. God Speed to everyone.

By three in the afternoon, the newswoman who identified herself as Annette said she needed to rest and would return. The post was taken over by some tired sounding man who allowed a lot of dead air time.

He did say something of value. How long the station would be up and running remained to be seen. Even the phones. With no one around to man the stations, electricity and communications could go without warnings. With that, he urged all those listening to find a short-wave radio and batteries.

It was funny, because Nick had beaten the man to the punch. When he



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returned home with the wood for the crosses, he returned home with the radio and other things.

Robi scanned the airwaves twice to find nothing but dead air. But common sense told her as long as there were telephones and electricity, no one would use the radios. Not yet.

The television broadcasts became boring. Those calling in were doing so because they were alone.

How many times did Nick walk in the house for a break, here someone crying, and comment, "Why don't they just go out and look for someone. Hello."

Robi only nodded her agreement.

The crosses were beautiful, such a tribute Nick had made, and Robi was proud. She wondered how many people would not only actually take the time to bury those they love, but to make markers and add flowers.

Out of decent respect and love. The graves of James, Maggie, and Linda were a symbolization of all those who had died.

Surely, Robi, Nick, and anyone else who remained couldn't bury all the bodies in the world.

Nick made soup and handed his mother a cup. "I'm using the bottled water. I figure what is still pumping through the lines should be OK, for washing hands. Unless you don't think."

Robi accepted the food. "For washing it should be fine. Follow up with sanitizer." She spoke dazed.

"I did."

"Then we're good."

"For now." Nick sat next to her on the couch. "Eat."

"I will."

"Anything new?" he asked.

"He's a twit." Robi nodded upward. "This is doing us no good."

"It's our source of information."

Frustrated, Robi sighed out, "Yeah, but they're giving us information we basically have right outside our door."

"All we have to do is look. I really don't care to yet. Do you?"

Robi shook her head. "No." She then glanced at him. "I'll be better tomorrow. I promise."

"I know you will."

"I just need today," Robi said. "Then tomorrow will be different. I'll

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kick back into gear. Tomorrow will be different.” She lowered her head and lifted her spoon while mumbling, “I hope.”

### ***Buffalo, New York***

Her name was Juanita. At least that was the name Bishop gave her. When he was nine, his mother found Juanita at a flea market. There was something strange about the find. His mother loved it so. An eight-inch, ceramic head of a woman. Her face was Spanish, complexion dark, hair plastered and flowing. Proudly she set it on the shelf that greeted those who entered Bishop’s parent’s home.

It sat there for years.

It wasn’t that Bishop was particularly fond of Juanita; he had grown accustomed to her. The unemotional beautiful face. The eyes that stared blankly. It was she waits there when Bishop walked in, he would miss her. What started as a practical joke when he was a teen, turned into an adult habit—the practice of not only saying hello to the bust, but also answering for her in a high, fake, female, accented voice.

Bishop started doing it to irritate his father who would simply raise his eyes above his newspaper, grumble, ‘you’re an asshole’, before continuing in his reading.

The joke became fifteen-year habit.

Bishop looked forward to the site of the bust after he conjured up enough courage to return to his parents’ apartment.

He spent the entire day in his own... alone. Often he’d look to the ceiling, debating on whether he should go up there.

After most of the day had passed, Bishop decided it was the right thing to do. He not only had to say goodbye to his parents, out of respect for them he had to do something with their bodies...a burial of sorts.

First, he had to separate them, and that probably was the reason for his hesitation.

Deciding that he would simply go to their apartment, bid them a loving farewell, lay them peacefully in bed, and cover them, Bishop walked the stairs to the floor.

The door was still ajar from the night before and Bishop walked in.

Juanita stared out from her shelf.

“Hey ya’, Juanita.” Bishop said, paused, and cleared his throat.

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“Hey Bee-sheep,” he answered in his ‘Juanita’ voice.

“Pretty dreary, huh?”

“Every body dead.”

“Yeah.” Bishop nodded. “Thanks.” Hands in pockets, he found his way to his parents’ bedroom. With a deep cleansing breath, and a ‘here it goes’, Bishop opened their door.

Bishop shuddered. The figures of his parents were beneath the blue sheet, the exact same way he had found them the night before.

“I’m sorry, Mom and Dad.” He said as he walked closer. “I know you probably didn’t want me to find you like this. But ... Dad, died happy, huh?” he tried not to look as he stopped at the bed. “How am I going to do this? Should I do this?” He thought for a moment. “Yes. Yes. I should. What if sometime in the future, someone comes in here? No.” He spoke out loud to himself. “For their dignity. I have too.” With almost a shudder, Bishop reached out. His plan was to grab hold of his father’s shoulder, and hopefully with a shove and push, ‘Dad’, would roll from his mother.

Bishop gripped his father’s shoulder and ... screamed.

His hand did not grab flesh. Instead, Bishop’s fingers sunk into his father. As if he were hollow and his skin was a pastry. Eyes, shifting down Bishop backed up in horror. The night before, his mother’s body lay beneath his dad. Now, only broken remains, chalky and dust like remained.

Bishop’s parents didn’t just die; they now started to disintegrate as well.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*June 1<sup>st</sup>*

*Mt. Lebanon, PA*

*Dear Journal ...*

Has it really been eight weeks? When I reached the marker for the calendar this morning, I noticed it was Thursday. Not that I don't notice the days, I do. But today I flipped the page.

Eight weeks.

This is the first time I've written since it happened. Although Nick diligently keeps a log—not journal as he corrected me—a log.

Eight weeks.

Eight weeks ago my life changed. My son's life changed. The world changed.

Today we stood by the graves before sun up, saying a prayer over James and the girls. Funny, before this madness, we rarely prayed as a family. Now, it is something Nick and I do everyday. Prayer, faith in God has made its way into our lives via a madness that would leave others angry with our Creator. Maybe it's just our surroundings. Whatever the reason, it has given me a reason to continue. Nick has life as his reason. His loss is great, his father and sisters. But I lost my children, my husband.

James. I suppose he is the reason I decided to write down my thoughts finally. I was going through a box last night of his things. James was the writer. What a poet. He had been published in a few outlets, nothing that paid, but we were proud. His words flowed and conveyed emotions like none other. His diary of pieces was indeed a journal of his life.

We fought over his mother once, and her demeaning way with me when it came to my cooking. He wrote a poem called Split Pea. A metaphoric writing that compared his mother and me.

I loved James. Still do. I swear I hear him, see him, sense him. I curl up at night with my pillow missing him horribly. Really, if he heard me say that, he'd laugh. Me, Robi Pierce, a sensitive person. He claimed he was the sensitive one, not me. I agreed. He was the 'feeler' I was the 'thinker'. He stated on numerous occasions that I must have cried a lot as a child, because

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as a woman I ran out of tears.

James should have seen me the night he and the girls left.

Granted, it is tough to get me to show emotions, and I suppose now it will be even more difficult. If I wasn't out of tears before, I am now.

Losing them took everything from me. My reserve emotions are for Nick. I pray to Almighty God, that I will never have to use my tears on him.

Nick is a pillar, a genius in a realistic manner I that makes any sense. These past eight weeks have been a learning experience. I believe we are doing well at it.

We sat the other night to plan our life. For the immediate, we will stay put. Who knows what's out there beyond our circle of living. We don't. Eventually we will.

But for now, we live for the moment, and plan for tomorrow.

That's the best we can do.

In His name ...

Robi

### ***Erie, Pennsylvania***

He had not seen that particular brand of Beef Stew in a can before, and Bishop had seen many. Perhaps it was a local brand, he didn't know. He ate it nonetheless, with a plastic spoon as he sat on the beach staring out into Lake Erie.

He work was done there, but not for the day. Another town, another name crossed off the list he had compiled. The news stayed on the air for one week. During that time, Bishop listened and wrote down every name, every town, every location, of every person that called in. He figured it would be important when he ventured out. He had accumulated one hundred and fifty places to stop and check for survivors.

He was late getting started. He stayed in Buffalo hoping that someone would come to him. After all, he called the television. Then after weeks of waiting, he went north. Hoping against all hope that Canada wasn't hit.

It was.

So he started his journey of search and find.

So far nothing.

It didn't surprise Bishop.

Everyone wasn't dead, he knew where they were. He was headed to the same place—at least in the vicinity. Bishop didn't have an exact location.

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Two weeks after the world dropped, the electricity fluttered and faltered. Having followed the television's advice, Bishop acquired a radio.

He monitored that until it died. For some reason he was unable to get another car battery hooked up. He tried it was useless. But he didn't need the radio anymore. It gave him all the information he needed.

The last transmission he picked up was an invitation sent to all those listening. In southern California, near the coast and close to Mexico a community formed. Civilization was going to begin again there. A band of people had water-running, electricity going, and were setting a course for long-term community survival.

Bishop's goal.

He would get there ... eventually. He supposed he could have just headed straight there, but what if, like him, someone's radio died and they didn't hear the invitation. Aside from informing someone of this valuable information, Bishop was looking for people to travel with him.

He referred to his list, set his course, and began.

He wasn't having luck.

That didn't bother him. The virus that hit everyone had this distinct ability to keep going even after the body had succumbed. It ravished until there was no more body to ravish.

Literally, those who died turned to dust.

Visually, it made it easier when Bishop went into towns. No bodies lying about. Only wrecked cars, and occasional white particles that didn't sweep away with the weather. Barren, quiet cities.

Bishop was fine. Food was plentiful, and he had Juanita. He brought her, amongst other things from his parents' home. The once annoying, inanimate object became his companion.

On the beach, Bishop finished his meal. The plastic spoon clicked against the empty can.

"You missed out," he said, showing the can to Juanita who was perched in the sand beside him. "Pretty tasty. You sure? I have more. Guess not. Sorry, I won't push." He exhaled and set down the can. "I was here before, you know. You remember, don't you? No? Sure you do." Bishop smiled. "Six years ago, spring break. I couldn't afford to go to Florida so I came here. I figured it had a beach. I didn't count on it being so cold. But, yep, Erie can be a party town. I got drunk and hooked up with this married broad. I know. I know. You don't need to hear. But I'm gonna share anyhow. You do this all the time." He chuckled. "Stop me mid good story. So, continuing. I hooked

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up with her. We went back to her room. She told me she was married. I was fine with that because I was a kid. We started undressing, having fun. She said she was married but failed to tell me her husband was right there in town. Wouldn't you know it, he came in. Man, I flew out of that room bare ass naked and kept going."

Bishop paused.

"Speaking of going. We better get a move on. It's still early and I want to hit New Castle before we move toward Pittsburgh." He stood up. "I'm sure we won't have a problem finding a new car with gas, do you?" he laughed. "Oh, you just like to be difficult, don't you?" after brushing off the sand, Bishop placed on his backpack, lifted a duffle bag, then Juanita.

With the bags and bust in tow, he headed off that beach. His path would go as it had. He moved from town to town, exhausting his traveling resources, and replenishing in each new location. He could have planned things to be easier and take less time. But what difference did it make? What else did Bishop have to do with his time?

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CHAPTER SIX

*June 6<sup>b</sup>*

*Mt. Lebanon, PA*

The sun peeked in through a long line of windows, and Robi crouched to the row of planters on the floor. She touched the soil and examined the growth. Yeah,” She spoke to the plant. “Another week, you’ll be ready to venture into the world.”

She stood up, brushed off her hands, and cocked her head to the left when she heard a scuffling of feet.

“Hey, Mom,” Nick walked in. “How are they?”

“Better than could be expected,” Robi replied. “I thought for sure the cloudy weather would hinder them.”

“Did the ultra violet light work, then?”

Robi shrugged. “Seems to.”

“Good thinking on Doc’s part, huh?” Nick asked.

“Surprising thinking on Doc’s part,” Robi said sarcastically.

“What? He’s smart.”

“Medically,” Robi replied as she walked over to what looked like a wall of fishing tanks.

“He said since he’s been with us a little over a month now, that I can start calling him by his name.”

Robi stared for a second, then returned to examining the growth contents of the tank. “What is his name?”

Nick shook his head. “I thought you knew.”

“Tell him you’re sticking to Doc, it’s cooler.”

“That’s what Ray said,” Nick stated. “Everyone calls him Doc anyhow. So ... did you get the signal.”

Turning from the tanks, Robi faced him. “The signal went through. How about the arm?”

“Swung really fast.”

“How far out were you?” Robi asked.

“We had it set for fifty feet.”

Robi nodded. “Gives enough time to get the signal and get out there.”



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“Hopefully.”

“I heard gunshots.”

“Ah ....” Nick smiled. “Which brings me to another point in my visit.”

“And what is that?” Robi started to walk from the room.

“I ran into the dogs.”

“How many?”

“Lots.”

“They the same?” Robi questioned.

Nick chuckled. “Yeah, but I took them down really fast.”

“Good. Good. Take Manny out next time, I don’t want you going alone.”

“Mom,” Nick scoffed. “I can handle the dogs.”

“That’s what Ed said too. You saw what happened to him.” After stepping from their plant room, Robi reached into her tee shirt pocket, pulled out her cigarettes, and prepared to open a door that led outside.

Nick stopped her. “I have to tell you what I came to tell you.”

“You did.”

“No, I didn’t. There’s more. There’s this Yorky.”

“Yorky as in Yorkshire Terrier?”

“Yeah.”

Shaking her head, Robi opened the outer door. “Tell me outside, I need ...” She froze as she stepped into the smaller yard.

“That’s what I wanted to tell you.” Nick said.

“What in God’s name, Nick.” Robi stepped further into the yard “You brought it back with you.”

“It was so cute.”

“Oh, yeah, real cute.”

The Yorkshire was in a cage, smaller but with room to move. The second Robi drew closer, the mini dog started to react.

It didn’t ‘yap’ like most smaller dogs. Its growl was deep, bark demonic. From a distance, it was clear that it was a terrier, but up close, it held the symptoms. Its fur was splotchy from the small tumors that seem to form. Its head swung back and forth violently as it tried to eat at the cage. Thick white drool oozed from its mouth.

“Put it out of its misery,” Robi ordered. “You or me.”

“But, mom, Doc said we can’t catch it from the dogs. And really ...” Nick snickered. “You think she can kill me.”

“No, but she can make you awful sick again. Ask Manny how sick you

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get form a bite.”

“Not everyone gets. Ray got bit.” Nick defended. “He didn’t get sick.”

“But Doc said he can’t tell if the effects are ethnically biased. Ray’s a very big black man, you’re a petite white boy.”

“Petite?” Nick laughed. “I’m average. Actually, I’m big for my age considering I’m the only seventeen year old I know alive.”

“Get rid of the dog, Nick.”

“But, Mom, look, he can be trained. Watch.” Nick walked to the cage where the dog went wild. “Hey!” Nick sapped. “Enough. Quiet.”

The dog yelped once, and sat down.

“Good boy.” Nick spoke in a high pitch. “Good boy. Here.” He dropped something in the cage.

“What did you give him.”

“A piece of meat. Look.” Nick said. “I’m not saying we can train all dogs. But what if we feed him and just see. Maybe he just needs food. Maybe that’s why all the dogs went cannibalistic, because no one fed them.”

“Nick ...”

“Mom, please.”

Robi paused in thought. “Fine. A few days. If there’s no improvement the dog goes.”

“Thanks.”

Grumbling, Robi turned to go back in. She grunted again when she realized she didn’t smoke her cigarette. Placing it in her pocket and saving it for later, she turned down the hall. As she walked, she could see Ray approaching. No one could miss Ray. Actually, Robi and Nick literally saw Ray approaching long before he joined up with them. A very tall black man towered over most. He was as gentle as he was big, and from the roof, Robi and Nick had spotted him three blocks over. That was about fifteen minutes before he knocked on their door.

“Hey, Robi, did you get lunch?” Ray asked. “Doc says he’s claiming yours if you didn’t eat.”

“I’m on my way there.”

“Do you know Doc’s real name?”

“Haven’t a clue. Did you know we have a dog.”

“Yeah.” Ray chuckled. “He’s a cute little guy, isn’t he?”

“Cute?” Robi snipped. “Cute?”

“We named him Sparky.”

“Sparky!” Robi shook her head.

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“What’s the matter with Sparky. Greek wanted to call him Spot.”

Robi just stared.

“Spot.” Ray touched his head. “You know because of all the bumps and ...and ... you don’t get it.”

“I get it.”

“You don’t like it.”

Robi started to walk.

“What?” Ray asked with laugh.

“There’s something wrong with all of you.” Robi said as she moved on.  
“I hate to see what’s next.”

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The compact Toyota sputtered with its last bit of gas and diminished to a turtles crawl. It did so for about a half a block and stopped.

“Well,” Bishop placed the car in park. He sat back and took in his surroundings. A main street, cars spewed about—a usual scene—businesses and churches decorated the streets. From between the seats, he lifted a map. “Says here if we stay on this main road, it’ll take us straight out of Pittsburgh, this road will turn into some sort of highway and we can pick up seventy-nine. I wish we didn’t have to get off the highway.” A pause. “True, the crashed tractor trailer convention prevented that. You’re witty.” He exhaled. “OK, let’s find another means of transportation.”

He reached to the back seat and grabbed his backpack. “YOU know I have to do it. No arguments. It’s easier this way. No, it’s cushioned.” After opening the knapsack, he undid the buckle on the passenger’s seat that secured the bust of the Latino woman. “Just until we find another car.” He lifted the ceramic head, smiled, and then placed it in the knapsack within the cushion of clothes.

Tossing it over his shoulder, he grabbed his duffle bag and exited the car. “Looks like some cars ahead aren’t wrecked,” Bishop said. “We’ll just...” he stopped a few steps into his walk. “Do you smell that?”

He sniffed.

“Sorry, that’s right. You can’t. It smells like a barbeque.” Wandering a few more feet from the car, Bishop turned left and right. “There. See. Look. Smoke.” He grinned. He could see a church, high and bright. The smoke seemed to emerge from below it, as if there was a backyard or a whole entire bottom building. “It’s a barbeque all right. That means there’s people.” No

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sooner did he move forward to the church about a block up the street, he heard the growl.

Bishop stopped.

Another growl.

He peered over his shoulder.

The dog was large, a husky, its fur sporadic and small grotesque bumps graced its body.

"Hey, pooch." Bishop said calmly. "I'm only heading the church. See, I think there are people there."

The dog began to bark fanatically. It's horrifying bark, rang into Bishop's ears, and sent warning signs off to him. So as not to cause the dog to attack, Bishop slowly moved.

"Easy," he said as he stepped backwards very slow.

The dog pursued at the same pace.

Nodding, and keeping his eyes on the animal, along with hand on knapsack. Bishop eased backwards. He erred in looking to see how far he was from the church. Not far. A block maybe. All he had to do was make it to the gate at the bottom of the hill and he was home free.

The second he peered back to the dog, it lunged with a mighty growl.

Bishop turned to run, as he did, the dog's jaws latched on to his left thigh and his teeth sunk deep into Bishop's flesh.

He cried out in pain. Then with a swing of the knapsack, he clocked the dog on the head.

The dog released him and Bishop ran. After shaking off the hit, the dog sped for him.

He didn't have time to notice his injury, or let it hinder him. Still holding his things, Bishop neared the back portion of the church. Two large hedges were an inviting entrance.

The dog was close, he could hear the barking, and the growling, and Bishop began to holler. "Help! Someone!"

He flew through the hedges; a large courtyard separated him from the safety of the buildings. Bishop didn't stop running.

He didn't see it. Even if he did, Bishop was in far too much of a hurry to notice the huge homemade wheel that sat in that courtyard. It had two arms made of partial telephone poles. Racing toward it, a shifting sound rang out followed by ...

Whoosh!

The wheel turned, and one of the partial telephone poles swung outward

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into the back of Bishop's legs.

His body flew up and he careened hard onto his back on the concrete. He grunted, opened his eyes, and saw as the beast lunged from behind.

He leapt with great speed height. When he was right above Bishop, ready to lunge down, a shot rang out. The dog yelped, and flew back. It happened that fast. Before Bishop could get up, a foot sailed down, pinning him to the ground at the same time, a shift, and pump brought a rifle directly to his face.

"Nick, check to see if there are anymore following him," Robi ordered, holding her foot to Bishop's body while aiming.

"Got it." Nick stepped back, stopped, and returned. "Uh, Mom, he's injured." He took of.

"Shit." Robi said almost annoyed, and removed her foot from Bishop. She scoped for an injury. Using the tip of her boot, she nudged into his thigh and lifted it, blood seeped to the ground. "You're hurt."

"No ..." Bishop grunted and lifted his head. "Kidding." His head fell back, and Bishop passed out.

"Hey." Robi nudged him with her foot. "Hey. Great. He's out."

"Mom," Nick returned. "I didn't see anymore. Is he dead?"

"No, out," Robi replied. "Go get Ray."

"How did he find us?"

Robi shook her head. "I don't know. Just go get Ray. He needs help."

Nick hurried away, and Robi stood there, staring at the stranger.

At one time, it had been the nurse's office, in the old school portion of the church. And they hadn't used it since a man named Ed was bit by a dog, got sick and passed away. That was a month earlier. He wasn't with Robi and Nick long, a week.

Now they used the nurse's office for the same reason. Another dog bite. Bishop lay on his side, and Robi checked the intravenous. It dripped at a steady pace.

Ray knocked at the door. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, please." Robi said.

"How is he?" Ray asked.

"Um, physically, better." Robi said. "We'll know in a few hours if the antibiotics will stop any infection from the bite."

"I didn't need them."

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"That's you."

"What did Doc say?"

"Doc said, 'Oh',"

"Where did he come from?" Ray asked.

"I thought you would have checked his stuff by now," Robi said.

"Not yet. It's hopeful, another person."

"I know," Robi nodded. "If he doesn't die."

Bishop moaned.

Robi winced. "Sorry."

Bishop tried to roll over and grunted. He opened his eyes and spoke groggily. "Juanita. Juanita."

Robi looked at Ray with question. She knelt by Bishop. "What?"

"Juanita," Bishop repeated. "Tell me she's all right. Tell me she's fine. Juan ..." his eyes closed.

"Damn it," Robi stood up. "There was someone with him."

"That poor woman."

"Ray, get Manny, Nick and take a truck. He didn't foot it here, he had to have driven. We have to find this Juanita. She may need help. Look for a new vehicle, anything."

"Got it," Ray backed up. "I'm on it."

Robi exhaled and stared down to Bishop. "We'll find her. Don't you worry, we'll find her."

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"We couldn't find her," Nick tossed the keys down on the table before Robi.

"You're kidding me. What about remains?" From her paperwork, Robi looked up.

"Nothing," Nick said. "We found the car he drove. At least we think we did. We found a stuffed duffle bag."

"Probably is his. That poor Juanita."

"You think she's hiding somewhere?"

Robi shrugged. "Could be."

"Has he said anything?" Nick asked.

"Strangest thing. He mumbled something about a barbeque."

Nick snickered. "Maybe he's hungry."

"Probably is. He isn't showing signs of starvation. In fact he's pretty fit."

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He's in good shape."

"You checked him out?" Nick raised his eyebrows a few times.

"Oh, yeah." Robi said sarcastically.

"What are you working on?"

"Rations and Left wing." Robi said. "Manny wants to get working on that right away."

"Hell of a stock room when he knocks out the alls."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"Hey, mom?" Nick reached behind him. "You know how we plan to scout a new place?"

"Yeah, after the bad die and the good remain."

"Stranger guy had something."

"What's that?"

Nick placed the notebook on the table. "Check that out."

Robi opened the cover. "They're names and cities."

"Pages and pages of them. You know what that is, don't you?"

Robi shook her head.

"Thinking cap." Nick said. "Think back. Look at the fits name."

"Annette." Robi shrugged.

"Think, Mom."

Robi red out loud some of the names, "Annette. Lewis, Felicia, Greg ..." her eyes raised. "Why do these name sand cities sound familiar."

"They were the people that called into the television? Remember."

"He wrote them all down to look for survivors."

"He was heading to Wheeling next. He put numbers next to them. And we found a map in the car."

Robi examined the crossed names. "He hasn't made much progress."

Nick shook his head. "You know, we should go down to Wheeling."

Robi shook her head "No one's gonna be thee. Two months later. Nick, people are doing what he's doing. Wandering around looking for others. It's a potluck shot. Staying put is our best option. People will find us. We burn a smoke signal every day for ..." Robi started to laugh.

"What? What's so funny?"

"Stranger Guy said Barbecue. What were we burning today?"

"Dogs."

Robi smiled "He may like that little irony when he wakes."

"He may. Well, I'm gonna go play with Sparky. I'll let you get back to your work."

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“Thanks, Sweetie. Be careful.” Robi accepted a kiss to her cheek and returned to her papers. She took a moment to look out the window. There she was working on a stock plan for the left wing of the old church school. A building previously used for Boy scouts, alcoholic’s Anonymous meets, and so forth was now being used as a temporary housing for survivors.

Robi and Nick went to the church for several reasons. When they did so, they didn’t plan on being a starting post—so to speak.

They went because it was close, and the thick walls around the courtyard afforded them protection. The lay out allowed them to booby trap the place. The Pastor of the Parish boasted the best garden, and mostly, the generator. They knew the church had its own generator. They would stockpile food, and other items and buckle themselves down for a spell. Then came Manny.

It was called ‘The Drop’, that fateful day in April when most of the world just dropped. Robi and Nick had moved to the church within a week, and Manny showed up another week later.

It was Manny who told them about the smoke signals for survivors, because he had followed Robi’s inadvertent signal when she was grilling for her and Nick.

Manny was a blessing in more ways than one. The cop that originally helped Nick never returned and Manny was the only other person they had seen.

He was bright, clean cut. A lanky younger man, that usually as quiet and only spoke too much when he was stoned, drunk, or speaking technically. An electronics whiz, three days before ‘The Drop’ Manny lost his job with the electric company when he failed a drug test.

The generator was a good idea, Manny told them, but getting gas was going to end up being a pain in the ass. Use it as a back up was his suggestion, and then Manny went to the main station, shut down all current, and channeled power to the transformer by the church.

They had lights.

Nick had his game unit back as well. A video activity that all the men loved.

Manny had never been married, but he had a girlfriend and a newborn. Neither of them survived. He was just wandering when he saw the smoke.

He was quiet most of the time until Ed arrived. Perhaps it was the male bonding thing. Ed brought news of the dogs.

Robi, Nick, or Many had encountered them. Ed hadn’t either until the day before. Something had happened with the dogs. They were vicious, they



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sounded demonic, and visually revolting. Ed arrived a few days after Manny, the quickly bonded, and then in an irony of it all, Ed died from a dog bite.

The dogs followed the smoke more than the people.

The next one to follow the way of the smoke was Ray. Actually, in an attempt to look for another pack of dogs, Robi and Nick spotted Ray. Ray was next. He showed up, claimed to see the smoke, and asked for assistance with a man he found ... Doc.

Doc was an older man, probably hitting eighty. Wise, and great with medical advice. He acquired the name Doc by Ray, because 'Doc' stitched Ray's dog bite.

But Doc had bad legs and feared leaving the house where they had holed up. Robi and Manny went for him while Ray rested.

Doc played the doctor part well. In fact, he told Robi he was a general practitioner for many years. But his mind was going and often he wasn't as clear as he'd like to be. Robi made most of the medical decisions and so forth, but no one knew. They all thought it was Doc, and she was fine with that.

Greek was the final man in the church crew. He showed up like Bishop, chased by dogs. He was so frightened, that for two days he spoke only gibberish. Earning him the nickname Greek, because everything he said at first was Greek to them.

Greek had some good assets. He was book smart and loaded up four rooms with books that he thought they'd need. He was research and development. Any questions they had, they asked him and he'd look it up. Greek was in his fifties, lost a wife and six children to the 'drop'. He and Robi related on a different level.

Once determining the dogs were the biggest threat, Ray and Manny helped tweak the security that Robi had already implemented. Granted, they went far beyond what they needed. A hobby of sorts to them all. The church ended up being so well protected, they called it Fort Pierce.

Fort Pierce.

Robi chuckled as that thought crossed her mind. Her pencil had stopped moving in useless circles. She was caught up in thought and a window daze.

Realizing how far she drifted from her intentions, she snapped her self out of it and returned to work.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*June 10<sup>b</sup>*

He ran in slow motion, as do most people in dreams. But in the dream itself, Bishop attributed it to the sand. His arms were extended out in a welcoming manner as he dashed down the pacific beach. The ocean breeze hit against him, the roar of the waves loud.

She was headed toward him clad in a white, skimpy bathing suit. Her skin was sweet brown. Her hair, long and luscious, swayed left to right in her run, while her breasts bounced high and mighty.

“Hey.” she called out. Her voice deep and raspy, yet sexy in a way. “Come back.”

“I am,” Bishop said. “Here.”

“Ranger Spy. Ranger Spy.”

“Huh?” he asked.

“Ranger spy, fan to tall bright?”

“What heck?” Bishop was confused. She was beautiful and made no sense. Bishop just wanted to grab on to her. “Juanita.”

“Ranger Spy. Hey Ranger spy. Fake pup. Fake pup. Hit. Fees fought ass pawn ding.”

At this point, Bishop was confused. Perhaps she was speaking dream code. “Juanita?”

She drew closer. This time she screamed. “Hey! Ranger Spy!”

Just as Bishop reached to her, a bright flash of white light blinded him. He shielded his eyes, and in a jolt, woke up calling, “Juanita.”

Where was he?

He felt as if he were back in high school, the nurses office maybe. His surroundings were clinical white, the walls old and in need of paint. At the foot of his small cot, bed was a partition curtain. He sat up and looked to his right. A large black man stood by a window; the blinds were pulled all the way up.

Bishop cleared his throat.

Ray turned around. “Thought that’d do it.”

“I’m sorry. Excuse me?” Bishop asked groggy.

“Need water?” Ray asked.

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Bishop nodded.

Ray placed a glass on the small nightstand next to Bishop's bed. "I said, I thought that would do it. The sun. It's a heck of a day out there. Plus, you showed signs of reviving. I was calling you."

"Were ..." Bishop paused to take a drink of his water. His mouth was dry, throat sore. "Were you calling me Ranger Spy?"

Ray laughed. "No, Stranger guy."

Bishop nodded "It was in my dream. Where am I?"

"Where do you think you are? What do you remember?" Ray asked as he stood by the bed.

"I think I'm in Pittsburgh or just outside of it. I was on my way to look for survivors."

"Survivors," Ray repeated serious.

"Yeah, you know, since the world all dropped dead."

"And this is in your dream?" Ray asked.

"No, reality."

"Did you hit your head?"

Bishop shook his head.

"Then you dreamt it."

"NO, everyone in the world was affected. Almost."

"Well, that's true," Ray said. "It's probably the shock that got to you?"

"I'm sure. I was attacked by a dog."

"Mob."

"Excuse me?"

"You were attacked by a mob. Are you sure you didn't hit your head?" Ray asked.

"Why are you asking me that?"

"Because you said you were in Pittsburgh and everyone in the world dropped dead."

"Yeah."

"Well," Ray pulled up a chair. "You're in Dallas. And the only thing that hit the world was the shock of Kennedy being killed yesterday."

"Wh ... what?" Bishop sat up more.

"Yes. You were trampled in the hysteria."

"It's ... it's not 1965."

"What?" Ray asked. "Why would you say 1965?"

"That's when Kennedy was killed."

"Get the fuck out of here. Man, don't you pay attention. The

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assassination happened in 1963.”

“And you’re saying I’m in 1963.”

“Yep.”

“Did I time travel?” Bishop asked.

“Not that I know of. You may have air traveled, or drove here.”

“I’m in Dallas in 1963.” Bishop said in shock. “How did that happen?”

Robi’s voice answered, “It didn’t.” with a chuckle and shake of her head she walked in the room. “Ray’s messing with you. He said he was going to, I told him not to. You’re so bad, Ray.” Robi smiled and extend her hand to Bishop. “Robi Pierce. You are?”

“Bishop Dean.”

“Nice to meet you, Bishop. Glad we don’t have to refer to you as Stranger Guy.”

Ray added, “Or Ranger Spy.”

“Huh?” Robi chuckled. “Anyhow, Bishop, how are you feeling?”

“Just a little sore.” Bishop answered. “That’d be it.”

“The bite wasn’t bad,” Robi said. “It was the infection we had to try to beat. You had a really high fever, and we were able to combat it.”

“The dog bite?” Bishop asked.

Robi nodded. “The dogs were infected with the virus differently. It made them rabid, and slightly mutated. You haven’t run into any dogs at all?”

“No.” Bishop shook his head. “Then again, I really just started venturing out. Where am I?”

Ray answered, “Fort Pierce.”

“I’m at an Army base?”

Ray shook his head. “No, that’s what we call this place. Because we have it locked down and tight. Dogs. Cats are freaky when they hit. Plus there were the few infected that didn’t die with the drop. They’re kind of like the dogs.”

“Oh, my God. Maybe it was just big cities. I’m from Buffalo, but I locked myself up for a while. I mean the apartments in my building gave me the food ...” he sat up. “There are people that got sick and didn’t die. Is it like the movie Omega Man.”

Robi snickered. “That’s good. Sort of. They look sick, act normal until provoked then they snap.”

“Droll too,” Ray added. “They remind me of zombies, but they aren’t dead.”

“We’ve tried to help a few.” Robi said.

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Bishop asked. "Did it help?"

Robi shook her head.

"No," Ray intervened. "In a way it did. When we introduced the anti viral, they died."

Bishop whispered, "They didn't go mad."

"Exactly," Ray said. "So we did help them."

"Are you feeling strong enough to get up? Maybe eat something?" Robi asked.

"Yes, I'd like that." Bishop replied "But there's something need to know."

Both Robi and Ray knew what was coming.

"I had a ..."

Robi interrupted his sentence with a shake of her head. "Juanita?"

"Yes. Yes." Bishop answered. "Juanita."

"You called her name," Robi said.

Solemn, Ray laid a hand on Bishop's shoulder. "We couldn't find her. We looked."

"Then she's out there. If you knew what she meant to me. We have to find her."

Robi nodded. "Maybe once you're strong enough ... but we went out twice. And Bishop, I'm sorry, the chances of her being in one piece after ..."

"Robi." Ray softly scolded. "Come on, be sensitive."

"I'm sorry." Robi said.

Bishop shook his head. "No, you're right. I know what the dog did to me. There's no way she would make it. Let alone be in one piece."

Robi shifted her eyes to Ray, "And you told me to be what?"

Ray waved out a hand to her. "Why don't you head down to the kitchen, I'll help Bishop here getting dressed, and we'll meet you."

"Sounds good" Robi patted Bishop's knee. "Glad you're fine, and are with us. Everyone is anxious to meet you."

"Everyone?" Bishop asked. "How many?"

Robi answered, "There are six of us. We'll see you in the kitchen." She left.

After she was gone, Bishop looked up to Ray, "She seems nice."

"At times." Ray handed him some clothes. "Manny sent these. You're about the same size."

"Thank you," Bishop received them and stood. "God, you're tall. Did you play basketball?"

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“Why would you ask that?”

“You’re tall.”

“I sucked at it Get dressed. Because, Basketball is too violent. I’m passive.” Ray, with folded arms gave an intimidating smile to Bishop.

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“So this was a church.” Bishop said as he walked down the hall with Ray.

“Still is.” Ray replied. “We hold services too. Tomorrow’s Sunday, you’ll see.”

Bishop nodded.

“You’ll have your own room. I think Greek was preparing it. Not sure.”

“Greek, is that his first name. Last name?”

“Nick name. Long story. Nice older guy. Our brainiac. If we were Gilligan’s Island, he’d be the professor, OF course, Robi’s pretty smart, but she doesn’t like it to show. Gives all the credit to Doc.”

“The guy who took care of me?” Bishop asked.

“That’s what Robi will tell you, we all know better. So will you once you meet Doc.”

“I’m excited. And I can smell food.”

“We eat all right.”

“Barbecue?”

“Excuse me?” Ray asked.

“The smell of barbecue is what brought me in your direction.”

“Oh, we were burning dogs. Manny made rice. He makes good rice.”

“I look forward to it, I am hungry.”

“I bet, and Stranger guy.” Ray stopped him. “I really am sorry about Juanita man. I know what you’re going through. I’ll help you search when you’re feeling up to it.”

“I appreciate it.”

After a firm squeeze of support to Bishop’s shoulder, Ray turned him into the kitchen.

It was a large cafeteria-style kitchen with a huge metal table set up.

All but Nick were present.

“Everyone,” Ray called their attention. “This is Bishop. Though he got injured he found us via our dog burn fest.”

Robi, seated at the head of the table, stood and pulled out a chair for

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Bishop. "Manny made his English Rice."

Bishop paused in sitting. "English Rice?"

Robi shrugged. "That's what he named it. It's what he calls any rice dish that has stuff thrown in it. Very good."

The thinner younger man set a huge pot on the table, "I made extra. I'm, Manny." He wiped off his hand and shook with Bishop.

From across the table, Greek leaned. "Jim, but everyone calls me Greek."

"Nice to meet you." Bishop shook hands.

Silence.

Bishop sat, then looked at the much older man seated diagonal from him. He had to be at least eighty-five. His hair silver and tossed. "And you must be Doc." Bishop said.

No answer.

Greek gave Doc a nudge. "The Stranger Guy is talking to you."

"Oh." Doc turned around.

"You must be Doc." Bishop repeated.

"Birch trees don't bloom in June," Doc replied. "At least I don't think. Early spring. Who ever told you that was off their rocker."

Bishop just stared.

Doc slammed his hand to the table. "Why you looking at me like I'm a moron."

"I' confused."

"Figures." Doc huffed. "Isn't that what you asked me?"

Greek intervened. "Um, I asked that."

Doc huffed again, "Then dag nag it, why'd you tell me Stranger Guy was talking to me?"

Bishop spoke, "I was. I asked if you were Doc."

"No!" Doc barked. "Ain't my name. All these Ninnies call me that cause they can't recall my name. It's Alfred."

Everyone sang out, 'Oh' at the same time.

Ray snapped his finger. "I knew it was something like tat."

Robi nodded. "Alfred."

Doc looked perturbed. "See what I mean?" He fluttered his lips, and salvia sprayed everywhere.

Bishop tired a not-to-be-rude-inconspicuous swipe across his own face. "Yes."

"Just call me Doc. Everyone else does."

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“Thank you,” Bishop said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Well, can’t say that I do know him.” Doc said. “But let me think on that one.”

Robi leaned into Bishop with a whisper, “Just nod.”

Bishop nodded.

“Hey,” Nick entered the kitchen. “Am I late?”

Suddenly, Doc sprang up from the table with a heavy point at Nick. “How many times have I told you? Don’t bring that backstabber in here with you, Boy! He’s lying to you.”

“Sorry,” Nick hunched and turned left, speaking to no one. “Sorry, Dude, you have to go. You know Doc’s rules.” Nick nodded. “Bye.”

Doc sat down. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” Nick pulled up a chair on the other side of Bishop. “Nick.” He extended his hand, and then sat down. “Sorry I’m late. For you. I wanted to find this.” He handed the backpack to Bishop. “I saw it out on the street, and thought maybe it was yours.”

“Damn it, Nick.” Robi scolded. “I told you not to go by yourself out there.”

Ray lifted his hand. “I was with him.”

Before Robi could say anymore, Bishop gasped loudly with happiness.

“Oh my God.” He grinned. “It’s my bag.” He hugged it. “Oh my God. Thank you.”

“Not a problem.” Nick said and adjusted his seat.

Immediately following the unzipping of his bag, Bishop shrieked. “You found her.”

Silence hit the table.

He pulled the ceramic head from the bag. “She’s in one piece. Juanita.”

Forks dropped, eating ceased, and everyone stared.

Finally, Robi spoke up, “That’s Juanita?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, my God” She sat back. “We were looking for a person.”

“Duded,” Nick said. “You spazzed out over a head.”

“Not just any head,” Bishop replied. “Juanita She’s belonged to my parents. You can say she’s been an icon in my family forever.”

Ray nodded with an exhale. “Whew. Here I thought, you were you know ...Gone.”

“No.” Bishop shook his head. “I’m sane. Aren’t I, Juanita? Yes, si very much.” Bishop looked up, he didn’t quite fully understand why everyone



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stared at him so oddly, but they did.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Utopia,” Bishop said. He had their attention. The large rectangular room served as a recreation room slash living room, and they sat around in a circle on the furniture. Bishop center of the attention when they asked if he was staying.

“Yeah,” Bishop continued. “That’s where I’m heading. Utopia. But thanks for the offer to stay. I appreciate it.”

Quiet Manny had to ask, “Utopia?” he watched as Robi stood, and without saying anything left the room.

“That’s where everyone went you know. To Utopia.”

Manny shook his head. “I never heard of a city called Utopia.”

“It’s not named Utopia,” Ray intervened. “I think that’s what Bishop is calling it. A utopia is a perfect world where everything works the way you want, and you have everything that you need.”

Manny chuckled. “Utopia doesn’t exist.”

Robi entered the room with her comment. “IT does, or rather did. We don’t know.” She walked to the coffee table set in the middle of the circle. “Here. So-Cal. Remember. We named it that.” She showed Bishop a map “Here’s where we think it is.”

Bishop took the map. “That’s like where I pinpointed it too.”

Ray smirked. “Well, man, if you were listening that gave latitude and longitude.”

Doc called out, “The big mistake.”

Giving a look of ‘ignore him’ Robi spoke. “We had it marked and mapped too. Not that I was really keen on joining up.”

Ray laughed. “I think it’s because Robi likes to say what goes.”

Bishop asked, “Is that why you’re still here? Is that why you didn’t go?”

“No,” Robi said and rolled the map. “We didn’t go because the signal stopped.”

“Maybe your radio died like mine.”

“Your radio didn’t die.” Robi said. “They stopped sending messages.”

Doc cried out, “They stopped sending messages because they’re all dead. Goddamn aliens.”

Robi waved out her hand.

Bishop asked. “Did you try to contact them?”

Robi shook her head.

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Doc commented. "No! Why we gonna make the same mistake. Give the goddamn aliens a signal to lock on to."

Robi shrugged. "Doc destroyed all microphone capabilities. We could have replenished, but, out of respect ..."

"And," Ray added. "On the outside chance his hair brain theory was right. We were cautious."

Doc slammed his hand. "It isn't hair brain." He stood up. "You know I'm right. I seen that virus under the microscope. It's like nothing I've ever seen. Or the effects. Ask Robo Cop, she'll tell you."

Robi was calm, "It was a no virus. We don't know ..."

"Came from outer space, I tell you." Doc said. "We have a lush and fertile planet. What if we were faced with total environment breakdown Huh? Well, if we had the technology we might go look elsewhere. Another planet maybe. So, what's to say another planet didn't scope us out. We have all the resources, except they're tied up and being used by people. If you wanted to move into a house and it was infested with rats, you'd call an exterminator to wipe them out initially then hit the ones as they trail in. Well, they goddamn aliens did just that. That virus was their exterminator, now they picking us off one by one. They picked that signal up from So Cal. And now they're all dead."

Everyone moaned.

"No, I'm telling you. Think about it."

Ray said. "We did."

"Then ya' didn't think hard enough." Doc said. "No edible animals died. And those who could take the animal resource are disappearing completely. Clean house."

In shock, and wonder, Bishop wisped out, "Dude. Whoa. That is the most plausible explanation I have heard yet for this whole mess. Whoa." Bishop slowly stood up. "Now this whole thing makes sense."

"Christ," Ray laughed. "Him and Doc will be good friends. He talks to a head, Doc talks to air."

"Aliens." Doc corrected. "They astral project."

Robi stood. "I'm making coffee. Anyone want any?"

"What?" Bishop asked looking around. "None of you believe doc? It sounds plausible."

Doc replied, "No, they don't believe me. Pretend they do. Hey, you wanna head to my room and I'll show you the evidence I gathered up."

"Doc," Ray interjected. "I'm sure the man has better ..."

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"Love to." Bishop answered Doc. "Please."

"Good," Doc wave his hand in a 'follow me' fashion. "Let's go. Bring your girl fiend, she'll probably want to hear it too."

"Right behind you." Bishop lifted Juanita from the table, then clutched her in his arms he followed Doc.

In the after moment of their departure, Ray waved his finger. "Oh, we got a good one."

Manny suggested, "Maybe he's open minded."

"I like that he talks to the head." Nick said.

With a close of a book, Greek caught their attention. "In thinking of this ..."

"Oh, he speaks." Ray commented

"I was reading," Greek defended. "So-Cal, whether there is a base community or not, would be the ideal place for us to go. Ocean, fish, better weather, fertile land."

Robi nodded. "And we plan on going there eventually, right. After we gather enough stock."

"So why wait?" Greek asked.

Robi chuckled. "Because you suggested we wait. You said we'd be like the pioneers again. Crossing a deserted land."

"Yeah, but I wasn't thinking," Geek said. "We have al the resources at our disposal. We could gather what we needed on the ay. We should go. Before winter hits. Before the weather gets bad."

Ray asked, "Why now? Why the change of heart?"

"Because that boy has a map. A map of every single living person that called that television. I say we take that map, chart a better course cause he was going round and round in circles, and we head to So Cal, find survivors and what we need along the way."

"So you're saying," Robi said, "Move the plan along. Set a course pack up and all seven of us head across the country in hopes of finding survivors and Utopia?"

Greek shook his head. "Eight of us. Can't forget Juanita." He winked. "Think about it."

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A boy and his dog.  
How delightful.

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In the darkness of the evening, the moon at an odd bright, Robi watched through the door window as Nick played with Sparky.

The tiny semi mutilated Yorkshire terrier was on a thick metal leash and pounced semi normally when Nick would toss a stick. Sparky would grab it, and with a violent twitch of its head, toss the stick.

Nick would retrieve it.

"Ah, Nick," Robi said to herself. "The germs." She opened the door. "Nick, make sure you are ..."

Suddenly, the tame terrier turned terrifying, its entire look changed and it growled and barked frantically at Robi, leaping on his chain as if trying to attack.

"Fuck," Robi said. "I was impressed at first. Make sure you don't touch anything until you wash those hands."

"I have gloves." Nick showed her. Sparky! Stop!"

The dog went silent.

"See?" Nick smiled. "I think some one trained this dog."

"Oh, sure," Robi said sarcastically. "It shows."

"Can we take her?" Nick asked.

"Take her where."

"With us to So Cal?"

Robi exhaled and unfolded one of the lawn chairs. "Can we sit? That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Sure," Nick walked over to join her.

"What makes you so sure we're going?"

"Greek." Nick replied. "Not that he said we are, but we listen to his suggestions. He studies and learns before he suggests. That's why."

"Have you talked to Ray?"

Nick shook his head. "Not yet. You?"

"Not yet." Robi said. "I wanted to talk to you, because really, you're the only whose opinion matters."

Nick scoffed. "That's not true."

"Nick, if you didn't want to go, and wanted to stay put, I'd be happy to do so. Whether or not the others do."

"And the others will be happy to do whatever you decide." Nick told her. "Why don't you want to go, Mom?"

In a nervous pace, Robi stood and exhaled. "This is home. And ..." she turned and faced Nick. "You know my theory on everything. I just don't

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want to be out there, in this world, open and vulnerable when the Chinese or Russians land on our soil.”

“So we stay put and be sitting ducks. Like ... So Cal.”

“They’d have to find us.”

“We’re in a major city. They’ll find us.”

Robi folded her arms. “You know that’s what I think happened to So Cal.”

Nick nodded. “A signal sent. They knew there’s a lot of people joining there.”

“Resistance. They picked up the radio signal,” Robi said. “I’m sure of it. Like Doc, only my aliens are the illegal kind. They’re waiting for time to pass, for us to die out, then they have the good and plentiful USA.” She paused, and then snickered. “So funny, because my theory and Docs are so similar.”

“Yours is just a tad more realistic.” He walked to his mother. “Do you really think President McGreen’s Fortress American policy caused it?”

“Oh, my God, yes.” Robi gasped out. “Nick, you don’t remember the shit that went down when McGreen initiated it. We feed most of the world. We cut off the hand that fed them and they wanted it back.”

“To this extreme?”

“We’re a mere fraction of the world, Nick.” Robi shrugged. “Anyhow, maybe you have a point. Maybe staying in a big city isn’t the thing to do. But is going to So-Cal?”

“I don’t think it’s our final destination that counts as much as the trip.”

“What do you mean?”

“If your theory is right, don’t we want to find people? Don’t we want to cross this country while it’s still ours.”

“Correction,” Robi said. “This country will always be ours. We just may have to fight to keep it.”

## CHAPTER NINE

*June 11<sup>th</sup>*

Robi had an office.

She could have picked a larger one, but she preferred the view from the smaller office. The desk was placed before a window that stared to the front of the courtyard and sat as high as the flagpole that waved the American Flag.

Her perfect view.

She was leafing through pages when Ray knocked on the door.

"You wanted to see me, boss?" he asked.

"Stop that," Robi said with a chuckle and swiveled her chair. "Come in. Yes, I did."

"What are you reading?" He took a seat next to her.

"Greek is obsessive. Last night I asked him what he thought about heading to So-Cal, I mean what he really thought. He said let me get back to you ... this morning ..." She handed Ray the papers. "He gives me this."

Ray whistled, and then started lifting sheets. "This is a complete breakdown."

Robi nodded. "Positives. Negatives. What we need to watch out for. The route we should take, everything we'd need ... you name it."

"Did you skip to the last page to see what his final thoughts were?"

Robi smiled "Of course. But read the last line."

Ray lifted to the last page and read out loud, "Because I know you cheat and skip to the end, I didn't put my conclusion here. Find it. It's embedded within his report." He laughed. "Greek."

"I haven't found it, but I know what it is."

"He wants to go."

Robi nodded.

"Manny told me you asked him."

"Nick too."

"What about Doc?" Ray asked.

Robi waved out her hand, "Doc will go where we go."

Ray handed the papers back to Robi. "Can I ask why I was spoken to last."

"Absolutely, because you and I can't make a decision on going until we

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know what the others want to do.”

“You really want me to have a say-so in this?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Robi said. “I count on you a lot. So, knowing that ... what do you say?”

“You mean, do I want to pack up trek three thousand miles across a God forsaken barren country. Perhaps run into nut cases, crazed and killer animals, all to arrive and possibly have to rebuild al the shit we did here?” Ray asked.

“Yes.”

Ray shrugged. “Sure, why not? What else do we have to do? What about you, what do you want to do.”

“Honestly?” Robi peered up with innocent eyes. “I don’t know yet.”

Ray stood. “Well, I do what you do. You stay. I’ll stay. You go. I go. You just let me know. Right now ... I’m heading down to eavesdrop on Doc and Stranger guy, the conversations are wild.”

“You do that.”

Ray nodded with a smile and walked out.

Alone in her office, Robi stared at the document Greek had prepared. Greek was through and she was certain that it contained pretty much all she needed to make up her mind. She would read the document too, cover to cover; Because Robi just didn’t know what was the best thing to do.



## CHAPTER TEN

*June 12<sup>b</sup>*

It had twelve legs, the tiniest of hands extended from it and it gnawed slowly at its meal. Bishop saw what appeared to be two eyes, but Doc said they weren't. They were sensors.

"See what I mean?" Doc asked.

"Yeah. Yeah I do." Bishop stepped back from the microscope. "Did you show this to anyone else?"

Doc shook his head. "No. Sparky just got here a week ago, that's the first live specimen I had."

"So these guys should be pretty easy to beat," Bishop said. "As long as they don't get into our blood stream."

"These aren't our enemies."

"They look it."

"Remember how I said the virus was the initial wipe out?" Doc asked.

"I do."

"These little guys are part of that first wave," Doc explained. "That's my theory. Where the virus didn't work, they moved in to the weakened body."

"Then the real aliens come."

"Once the planet is clean, meaning, we're gone," Doc said. "I believe there are more than just these little guys."

"Like what?" Bishop asked.

"Well, I don't think Earth's pending residents have arrived yet. They know they aren't gonna be able to wipe us all out, so they'll send a killer squad down. Bet me. They're probably already here. Picking up radio signals, taking out the survivors."

"Whoa. Dude. That is frightening. So who do we have to fight and beat?"

"That wave. Then again, if we beat them, the aliens are on their way. We'll eventually have to kick their asses too."

Bishop shook his head. "Are there enough of us?"

"I hope so."

"So, you think they'll look like this microscope invader?"

"Nah." Doc replied. "I think they'll have a lot of our traits. Maybe even looks somewhat like us. They'll have the same make up, they have to live here."

## A Path to Utopia

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

Bishop snapped his finger. "Which means they can die as easy as us."

"You got it." He winked. "Now, the second invaders, I worry about."

"But you're working on that invention weapon. Is that for them?"

"Yep. Gosh, I'm thirsty, you?" When he got a nod from Bishop, Doc reached under the counter, and pulled out two bottles of soda. "Does she want one?" he asked as he opened a bottle and handed it to bishop. "It's a warm day."

"Juanita's fine, thanks." Bishop accepted the beverage.

"She's a good girl." Doc said with a wink.

"I like her." Bishop said. "Although she's not my type." He snickered.

"What is your type?" Doc asked.

"Female, right now. With arms, legs, and all body parts."

Doc laughed. "Ain't had many. Well, we have one." He cleared his throat.

"She's Ray's girlfriend, huh?"

Doc laughed. "Ray. Big black Ray? Nah. She's nobody's." Doc replied. "She's not too male friendly. I think it's cause her husband died. I don't think no man will ever have her now."

"Who? Robi?" Bishop asked. "Why not? Man, she's beautiful."

"You're saying that because there's no one to compare her too."

"No, I'm saying that because she is. She doesn't need make up, nothing. If she just smiled ... man, Robi would be really beautiful."

Her clearing throat caught their attention.

Bishop jolted and nearly knocked over his beverage. "Sorry."

"I'll be," Doc turned around. "The venomous seedling has arrived."

Robi exhaled. "Thank you for that, Doc."

"Welcome." Doc walked across the room.

Bishop looked at her with question. "Why doesn't he like you?"

"I'm in this room!" Doc yelled. "Ask her. She makes Attila the Hun look saintly. One time there were eight of them astral projecting aliens in the rec room. What did she do? Blew me off."

Robi, with slightly rolled eyes, nodded.

"Like that." Doc pointed. "She don't care much about nothing. Nothing. Except that boy of hers and that's her most endearing quality."

Robi faced Bishop. "I don't know why he hates me."

Doc yelled, "I'm in this room!"

Robi rolled her eyes. "It's my care less attitude."

"You do have that," Bishop said.

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“Why are you here?” Doc asked.

“If you’d give me a moment, I’d tell you,” Robi said. “You two have been buried down in this basement for two days. I’ve been speaking to everyone. And everyone decided ... we’re gonna pack up and head to So-Cal. Or Utopia as you call it.”

“Yes!” Bishop clapped his hands. “All of you? Are we taking a van?”

Robi snickered. “More than that. Greek is laying out the paperwork and he, Ray, and I will go over it. We’re taking twp special vehicles, which we have to get. Supplies and we plan on picking up stuff along the way.”

“Like survivors?” Bishop asked.

“If we find any. We’re not gonna look for them according to your list.”

“Halleluiah,” Doc called out. “That’s the brightest thing. We don’t need to go to spots that the aliens hit.”

“What he said,” Robi commented. “So, that’s it. We hope to have it all together to leave in two weeks.”

Doc said, “Doesn’t give me much tie to work on my weapon.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Robi replied. “Well, I’ll let you two be. Thought I’d inform you.”

“Wait.” Bishop called as she was leaving. “Did Doc tell you about his specimen?”

“What specimen?” Robi asked.

“Hush!” Doc hollered.

“What specimen?” Robi repeated. “You aren’t bringing viruses in here.”

Mocking, and whining, Doc responded. “No, I’m not bringing viruses in here.”

“It’s alien,” Bishop said. “Microscopic, but alien.”

With a disbelieving tone, Robi said, “You guys have a microscopic alien. Where did you get it from?”

Doc replied, “Sparky.”

“Sparky the mutated dog?” Robi asked.

Bishop answered, “Doc said it’s the first live victim. All other samples were take from the deceased and the virus or invader was gone. Sparky’s alive. He got a sample. Come see.” He waved her to the microscope.

“Is it a skin sample?” Robi questioned.

“You can say that,” Doc responded. “I got it out of a tumor from his butt.”

“This is a sample from Sparky’s butt?” Rob asked and leaned over the microscope. “Now what exactly am I looking for in this ...”

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She paused.

Her head slowly lifted. "What is it?"

Doc slammed his hand on the counter. "Second wave attack of our alien intruders."

Bishop extended that answer, "A micro organism like Doc has never seen. Have you?"

"I can't say I spent much time looking in a microscope." Robi said. "But this is weird. It looks like a metabolic creature." She started to look again.

Doc stopped her. "That's enough my high and mighty. This is my work."

Robi stepped away. "Then by all means, go back to your work."

Bishop saw it. A strange look in Robi's eye as she left. Plus, her behavior was altered. As if she were in shock, she kept glancing back to that microscope even as she walked away. She may not have been averse in microscopic beings, but like Bishop, she knew that whatever she viewed under that microscope wasn't normal.

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Some time, the day before, Greek dropped off 'Part Two' of his expedition to So-Cal manuscript. Robi knew there was no way she was going to get through the entire thing. But the decision was made and the information manual was now a guide of sorts.

One thing about living in a dead world was there was plenty of time.

Time to do whatever was needed. If one didn't keep busy, then insanity was an undeniable option.

The second Ray and Manny found out they were going, they spoke to Greek and went out for the transportation.

It didn't take long to return. The new car lot not far away provided them with reliable new transportation.

"About five thousand miles," Ray said as he walked around the Humvee, showing it off to Robi. "We got two. I don't expect this to get the best of mileage, but if it breaks down, we can stop and get another. I think." He scratched his head. "Yeah, we can. Anyhow. Spare parts. Hoses, breaks, so forth, oil, we carry."

"Gas?" Robi asked.

"We'll make a portable pump to suck it out of the wells," Ray replied. "Strap it on top."

"Three in each?"

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Ray nodded. "Gives enough room for us to take stuff. Of course, you ...you are the only one with a lot of stuff."

"I had a pretty full life." Robi ran her hand over the vehicle. "Radios?"

Ray shook his head. "Doc won't allow for that. I'll try."

"We shouldn't have a problem going back and forth between vehicles."

"Nor should we have a problem, sticking our arm out the window to say we're pulling over."

Robi chuckled. "True. Greek's plan calls for stopping at certain times in certain times. I guess finding accommodations won't be difficult."

"Shouldn't be," Ray said. "The only thing I want to make sure we have is a small water tank on top of each vehicle."

"Makes sense. So ..." She exhaled. "Transportation ready. "Now all we have to do is pack it up."

"Learn our route."

Robi nodded and then stared out.

"What do you want to ask me?"

"Huh?" Robi's head cocked.

"You wanted to talk to me about something," Ray said.

"I didn't tell you that."

"Don't need to. You came out here for a reason, and we started talking about the trucks."

"I ...I uh came out to see the trucks."

"Liar."

Robi's head lowered and she gave a blushing smile. "Ok, hear me out." She held up her hand.

Ray groaned out. His head went back. "You don't want to go."

"Ray ..."

"That's fine. But don't be pulling a female ..."

"Ray ..."

"On me and change your mind after Bishop and Doc leave."

"Ray. God." Robi interrupted. "It has nothing to do with leaving. Ok, it does. But not in the way you think?"

"What is it?"

"I stopped to tell Bishop and Doc about us leaving."

"And they were what?"

"Glad." Robi shrugged. "But that's not it. Ray ... Ray I was in Doc's lab. ... What do you make of his alien theory?"

Ray laughed. Heartedly and bodily he laughed. With a shake of his head,

## A Path to Utopia

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he let out a breath and lit a cigarette. "You have a tone of seriousness to your voice that is making me think ..." He waved his cigarette with a smile. "That you might be starting to think about his theory."

Robi shrugged.

"You are?"

"Listen ..."

"No, you listen. Doc ...no matter how much you try to cover for him ..." Ray swirled his finger around his temple. "Gone. His valid points are one in ten. Maybe."

"But he has a point."

Ray nodded. "That a race is wiping us out to make room for them, take over our land?"

"Yes."

"Gee, Robi, it sounds good. It also sounds like your theory."

Robi tilted her head in wonder. "What do you mean?"

"You think a bio weapon was used to wipe out most of the population. So does Doc. You think our invaders want our soil. So does Doc. You think our invaders want to live here. Doc does, too. You think there is a second wave of invaders here to get what the virus didn't, making room for those moving in. Doc does too. See the similarities? The only difference is you think it's North America, Doc thinks it's the world. Your invaders are the Chinese. His are aliens from ..." Ray paused to chuckle. "Outer space."

"Ray ..."

"Come on, Robi." Ray made fun. "Your theory is the best one. Doc's is ..."

"He has one."

Ray stopped.

Silence.

"Repeat that." Ray said. "Cause I swear you said that Doc has one."

Slowly, Ray's eyes met Robi's. A certain seriousness hit his face.

"I saw it. In his lab. Today," Robi said.

Attention was caught.

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Ray lifted his head from looking in the microscope. "This is the alien you're talking about?"

"Yes," Robi nodded.

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Bishop and Doc looked on.

Ray laughed. "You gotta be shitting me?"

"Ray." Robi questioned. "Didn't you see?"

"I saw. You think that's our alien? Well ... if that's our enemy." Ray fluttered his lips and pulled out his revolver. He shifted the chamber and turned. "Watch me take it out. Watch how easy I beat the bastard." He walked to the door. "You got that from Sparky?"

"Whoa!" Robi leapt forward to him "Wait."

"Dude," Bishop spoke up. "You can't kill a boy's pet. That's just wrong."

Ray turned around. "So is this believing it's an alien. If you people actually think there's an alien living in a sick Yorkshire terrier then ..."

"Did you look?" Robi interrupted. "Did you. Look at it."

"I did." Ray said. "And I may be a low level educated man, but I know enough that anything under a microscope looks monstrous."

"This thing is different," Robi argued. "It has eyes. Gills. Like a fish, it is taking oxygen from the blood cells. That's not normal, Ray."

"Neither was the weapon that wiped us out." Ray defended. "You want to know what it is? If it's any foreign invader. It's Chinese. The Chinese, Russians, Israel, all them create this bug. It's running its course. If we have an enemy waiting to invade our soil, it's not in some sick puppy. It's across the oceans waiting to get here. And instead of worrying about kicking the butt of some microscopic bug, we need to worry about getting enough people together to beat the son of a bitches that sent it here." Ray gave a single nod. "Understand. Now I have work." He turned and walked out.

After a beat, Robi exhaled and walked to the door. "Excuse me."

"He's right," Bishop said. "Anyway you look at it, he's right."

Robi paused by the door to listen.

Bishop continued, "Someone wants our land. No matter who or what they are, we have to prepare to take them."

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The room was mostly dark, and Bishop would have opted to knock had he not caught the voices.

Faint, muffled with a speaker sounding over mask.

They told him Robi was in her room.

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The door ajar, Bishop raised his hand to knock.

"Mommy, come on." The girl's voice said.

"I can't," responded Robi. "I'm filming. You go on. Daddy will do it."

The male voice said, "Mommy's afraid."

"Mommy's not afraid," Robi said.

Bishop didn't knock, especially when he caught glimpse of Robi.

She sat at a desk holding a video camera, watching the little screen. Her mouth moved with the words spoken. It wasn't time to bother her. Bishop lowered his hand, and turned.

The voices stopped.

"Did you want something?" Robi called out.

"Uh ... I ..." Bishop stammered. "Sort of."

"Come in."

Bishop opened the door. "I didn't want to disturb you."

Robi reached up and turned on the desk lamp. "I was saying goodnight to my family." She gave a sad smile.

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

"At least you have that." Bishop said. "I didn't think to grab the videos."

"You grabbed Juanita. Which ..." Robi shrugged "Hold hits own sentimental value."

"True." Bishop walked to the desk.

"Of course I don't know how talking to the doll and responding for her holds sentimental value, but to each his own."

"Thanks."

"Sit."

Bishop did.

"What did you need?" Robi asked.

"A couple of things." Bishop seemed nervous. "You know ..." he gave a fake chuckle. "I've been here a couple days and I don't even know you."

"Ray's been here a couple of months and he still doesn't know me."

"No, Ray knows you."

"Are you here to discuss me?" Robi quipped. "I don't do that."

"Sorry." Bishop lowered his head. "I wanted to thank you. Thank you for taking care of me when I was sick, for going to Utopia, even though I don't think you want to."

"I don't."



## A Path to Utopia

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"Can I ask why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes." Bishop answered. "Because, really, if you have a good reason for not wanting to go, maybe it is worth looking at and ..."

"It's my own reason. Not good enough. My son is the main reason I am going."

"Nick's a great kid."

"Yeah, he is and he deserves more of a life." With a disbelieving huff, Robi stood and walked to her dresser. "What kind of life we can give him in a world so fucked up, I don't know. But I can try."

"Did you ever stop to think, what if you, Doc, what if the invasion theories are wrong?"

"You mean, what if no one did this on purpose, Nature decided it was time to clean house?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to think that. Because that would mean we're it. This is what is left of the world, or at least not much more."

"So you stick to the invasion theory?"

Robi only looked at him.

"I like the invasion theory much better. At least if there's an invasion coming there's some hope for the future, right? I thought I was the Omega man for a while ... and ... and you don't want to hear me ramble"

Robi shook her head. "You thanked me. Anything else?"

"Yes," Bishop stood. "I just wanted to know if you needed anything."

"Me? Why would you ask that?"

"Because you stick to your self. You have a lot of things to pack up, I didn't know if you needed help, or ..."

"I'll handle it. Thanks."

Bishop nodded. "The offer stands."

"Thank you."

Bishop started to leave. "You know, Robi ... like I said, I haven't been here long. I don't know you. But I know this. The world's an empty, lonely, place. To isolate yourself from ..."

"If you are about to attempt to psychoanalyze me and give me advice ... don't."

"Ok," Bishop lifted his hand. "I'll save it. Just thought I'd try."

"Others have, and others failed."

"I see why. Good night, Robi."

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“Night Bishop.” Robi waited until he had gone, and in the silent, loneliness of her own room. Cigarette in hand, Robi grabbed the video camera, and returned to saying good night to her family in private.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*June 28<sup>b</sup>*

### *I-79 South, West Virginia*

The slightest bump caused a creak from the roof of the vehicle and Robi lifted her head, hands firm to the steering wheel. "Are you sure that thing's secure?"

"Yes," Ray answered, staring at the map. "It's not going anywhere. That's the fourth time you asked in the last two hours."

"I could just see us losing it."

"Then we'll get another." Ray turned over the map. "Any idea why we're going this route south?"

From the back seat, Nick answered. "Greek said only two callers called that radio station according to Bishop's list. It's a good place to start for survivors."

Robi shrugged. "Probably because people don't have television."

Ray gave her a quirky look. "I guess it's more because they're all dead."

"In West Virginia?" Robi asked.

"Yes."

"No, way."

"I'm telling you ..." Ray paused. He sniffed. "Man, Nick, what is up with that dog today?"

"She can't help it." Nick defended. "Just open your window."

"Did you feed him something bad?" Ray asked.

"Nope. Probably car sick."

Ray grumbled. "A dog car sick. It's sick all right, you should let me put that dog out of its misery."

"Uh!" Nick shrieked. "Dude, have a heart."

"I do." Ray turned in his seat. "That's why I think we should kill it."

"You are so wrong," Nick said. "You encouraged me to have him as a pet."

"That was before I knew we were taking a road trip."

"Guys." Robi called out. "We're six hours into our trip and you two can't stop bickering. Keep it up and you'll ride with them." Robi pointed backwards with her thumb.

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“Speaking of them,” Ray said.

After glancing in her rearview mirror, Robi whined when the second vehicle, driven by Manny passed them. “What now?”

“I saw a sign for a service station,” Ray said.

“They can’t possibly need gas again,” Robi replied.

Nick said, “Probably Doc again, he said his bladder’s acting up.”

“Swell.” Robi shook her head. “Can’t he piss in a bottle or off the side of the road?”

Ray shrugged. “He probably has to do a sit down.”

Huffing out, Robi followed as Manny pulled off the highway and turned down a minor road. They drove about a mile before hitting a hole-in-the-wall gas station, which was located down a slight grade.

“Great.” Robi put the car in gear. “See anything?”

“Looks clear. But can’t take a chance.” Ray grabbed his weapon. “Nick, you have to go?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Stay put. OK?”

Nick nodded.

Ray got out of the car, and walked around to Robi’s side.

Robi, too, disembarked from the car weapon in hand. She aimed her voice to the vehicle in front. “What’s wrong?”

Manny pointed to Doc who hustled to the building.

“Figures,” She said in a whisper as Manny and Bishop walked toward her and Ray.

“Why don’t you get back in the hummer?” Ray suggested.

“Nah, might as well get some fresh air.” Robi said. “With Sparky and his butt problem.”

“Tell me about it.” Ray replied. Quickly his eyes shifted to the soft sound of a growl. “Was that Sparky?”

“No,” Robi replied.

Holding his weapon, Ray’s eyes lifted fast from the car to Bishop’s warning to Robi.

The words, “Robi, watch out!” followed by the pumping of a shotgun, caused Ray to pivot his body.

A dog.

A huge mutated husky was high in the air, jaws open and lunging for Robi.

Too close. Too fast.

## A Path to Utopia

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One step brought Ray in front of Robi, but before he could even fire off a shot, the beast, mouth wide, sailed into Ray full force. The weight of the hit knocked Ray back into Robi, she slammed against the vehicle.

The dog, growling and snarling, held tight to Ray's throat. He fumbled with the dog and his gun.

One shot fired and the dog released Ray and flew back. Ray dropped to the ground, and so did Robi.

Bishop lowered his shotgun and ran with Manny over to Robi and Ray.

"Mom!" Nick raced around the car and knelt to his mother.

Barking. Multitudes of it.

Nick looked up. A pack of eight dogs barreled their way.

"Get her in the car!" Manny ordered. "Get her in the car!"

Robi was out cold. Blood gushed from Ray.

The barking grew louder. The dogs were closing in.

Bishop fumbled with the Humvee door. "Shit." He turned. Reaching down with a swoop of his arm, he snatched Robi by her shirt. "Get Ray!" he yelled to Manny and Nick. Bracing Robi to him, he opened the door wider. "No time!" Bishop released Robi half bodied onto the drivers seat. He spun, raised his weapon, and fired.

Yelp!

One down.

He shot again. Another hit. Then again. Shift-pump-fire.

Just as Manny took out his first dog, Bishop finished the last.

He breathed out his exhaustion and exasperation, and turned. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he saw Robi. She had awakened was staring dazed.

"Is everyone all right?" Bishop asked. He looked to Manny and was by Ray's body. "Nick?"

Nick nodded.

"Manny?" Bishop asked.

Manny, hands on Ray, shook his head.

"Robi?"

Robi closed her eyes.

Greek had stayed in the car. Doc had emerged from the bathroom after the fact. Together and quickly, they carried Ray into the service station and Robi whipped out the emergency medical bag.

There was nothing in there that could help, but she tried.

## A Path to Utopia

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Ray had lost too much blood.

She asked to be alone while she operated and gave it all she had. But the truth remained; she worked on Ray after the fact ... he died rather quickly.

Robi cried. She stayed behind with Ray's body for a few moments of solitude and cried. No one knew and no one would. She said goodbye to a man that had become her friend and sense of security for her.

Robi didn't want to convey it, but a part of her was frightened. Scared to travel the roads of a beaten America without the likes of Ray by her side. He was strength they needed, and a person that would be sorely missed.

The others knew it would be a vain attempt at saving Ray. Manny especially, he never felt a pulse, and there was nothing left of Ray's neck. Robi took an exuberant amount of time, and they all waited outside the service station. Silent, but watching for another wave of trouble.

When Robi finally emerged from the station, she did so with a sad shake of her head and an immediate embrace to her son.

They didn't leave that area until they had buried Ray. They held a small prayer service around his grave and headed back to the vehicles.

Silently, Robi reached for her driver's door. She paused to look at the pool of blood on the pavement.

"I'm sorry," Bishop said. "We should have moved the ...."

"No," Robi shook her head, opened the door and stopped. "Bishop, thank you. Thank you for taking the reigns out here."

Bishop nodded with a long blink.

"In a sense you saved mine and Nick's life."

"Ray ... he ... he's the one that saved you."

"Yeah," Robi said softly. "I know." She exhaled, gave a sad smile to Nick who was in the car and prepared to slide in her seat. Again, she hesitated. "Bishop?"

Bishop stopped as he was walking away. "Yeah?"

"Will you ride with us?"

"I'd like that." After giving a signal to Manny that he was riding with Robi and Nick, Bishop walked around to the passenger's door and got in.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The speedometer read only forty-five miles per hour, Robi couldn't go faster, and even at that speed, she feared Bishop falling off the roof of the Humvee.

"What the hell is he doing up there?" Robi griped.

"He said he saw a place," Nick replied from the back seat.

"If wish he'd get down. He's gonna fly off and get hurt." Robi tried peering out of the windshield; it was useless. "Bishop!" she yelled. "Get in here!"

In came his feet first, and then Bishop slid through the open window. "Hey."

Robi looked cross at him.

"I signaled Manny that we'll turn," Bishop said. "So you can pick up speed. We got another good five miles. Bet me there's a turn beyond those trees."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Robi asked.

"The farm."

"What farm?"

"Ferber's."

Robi's mouth dropped open, "Pretend I don't know what you're talking about."

"We saw a sign about twenty miles ago. It said, Ferber Farm," Bishop explained. "Then when we were coming down that big hill, I thought I saw it. At first I thought it was one of those farmer market places, but after seeing through the binoculars, I don't think so." He turned his body and faced the back seat. "Nick, I saw an apple tree. Apples, Dude."

"You want to stop and pick apples?" Robi asked.

"And why not?" Bishop questioned. "I also saw corn stalk and ... get this, I think I saw a cow."

Nick said, "Milk."

"Dude." Bishop gave a high five to Nick. "Milk."

"Assholes," Robi snipped. "Milk from a cow is different than the milk you get in the stores."

Bishop stared at her for a moment, and then snickered. "Uh, Robi, Milk comes from a cow. How can it be different?"

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"It's processed afterward." She shook her head. "And how did you signal Manny that we would stop?"

"Like this." Bishop pointed out, and then pretended to run a steering wheel.

"And you think he understood?" Robi asked.

"Sure." Bishop shrugged.

"It didn't dawn on you to say to me to turn up ahead, and then when they saw my turn signal, they'd follow?"

"Sure." Another shrug from Bishop. "But I wanted to see if it was really there. Plus, I got to car surf. It's fun. I loved doing that growing up."

"Dude," Nick said. "That was cool. And you know what else is cool? The way you shot. I didn't tell you. Man, how'd you learn to shoot that good?"

Very smug, Bishop replied, "Green Berets."

Robi turned her head. "The Green Berets?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yeah," Bishop nodded. He reached down and lifted the shotgun as if he were going to play with it.

Robi extended her hand and lowered the weapon. "The green berets? You were in the Green Berets. I had no idea you were military. Especially military of that caliber."

"Hell, yeah." Bishop said. "Seven years. Decorated too."

"Why did you leave?" Robi asked. "Was your tour up, or were you dismissed?"

"I quit. My time was done and I opted not to rejoin."

"Can I ask why?"

"The hat." Bishop stated. "I hated the hat."

"The beret?" Robi asked.

"Yeah, hated it. I didn't think we'd have to wear them. And..." He cringed. "They were an awful shade."

"Green!" Robi barked. "It didn't dawn on you when you joined the Green Berets that you'd have to wear a green beret."

"Nope." Bishop snickered, and then nudged her. "I'm kidding. I wasn't in the service. I learned to shoot like that from the video game Green Berets. I was champ."

"Dude, I love that game," Nick said. "It's really old school, though."

"Yeah, I know but you youngsters can't hang with it." Bishop said. "I have yet to be knocked out of the top score. Well, the top three. Alien Nation, now that's a challenge."



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Robi rolled her eyes, and shook her head. "He learned to shoot from the video game."

"Up there." Bishop pointed. "See?"

Robi peered. "The turn sign?"

"Yeah, bet that's it. Turn signal."

"It's on."

"Slow down."

Robi barked. "I am! God!" she edged into her turn, then slowed down to a stop.

"What's wrong?"

"Dog check." She reached between the seats for her gun, "Plus, there's a gate."

"I got an idea," Bishop said. "Pull up as close as you can to the gate and stop."

"Why?"

"Just do it." He instructed, then hand signaled to Manny and the others, behind them.

Robi inched to the gate.

From the front seats of their vehicle, Manny and Greek both released the same 'oh' of discovery.

Manny hit his hand of the wheel as if he could smack himself in the forehead. "So that's what he was trying to tell us."

Greek chuckled with a shake of his head. "I was wondering what the hell he was saying to us from the roof of that car."

Doc leaned his head between the two seats. "I thought he was showing off his car surfing skills."

"Look at him," Manny said with an upward motion of his head.

Bishop had opened the gate, waved to both cars, and then, climbed from the hood of the Humvee to the roof, where crouched like a crow on watch, rifle perched in his hands.

Robi started to drive forward.

Manny kept shaking his head. "Is he on look out?"

"I think so," Greek replied.

"Aliens," Doc said.

Manny scoffed. "I'm thinking more like dogs."

Greek took in the tree-lined road. "I think he's trying to impress Robi."

Manny nodded. "Won't work."

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Greek shook his head. "Won't work?"

Manny started to laugh.

"What? What?" Greek wanted in on the joke.

"OK," Manny snorted a laugh. "Suppose ... suppose he is trying to impress her. What if he falls off?"

"Oh, man," Greek started to laugh.

"Or ... shit." Manny hit the breaks. "Fuck me. That."

It was a blur when it came in from the left. Fast, across the road, slamming into Bishop and sending him flying off the roof of the Humvee.

Manny and Greek didn't realize it was a man, until the rope swung back and he dropped onto the roof of Robi's vehicle.

"Christ, he's huge." Manny grabbed his rifle and opened the door.

"What the fuck is he doing?" Robi looked to the roof of the car when it shook. She put it in park. "Bishop!" she yelled annoyed, then reached for the door handle. Opening it, she extended down for her shotgun. Just as her fingers touched the handle, she jolted when a man was at her window, gun pointed at her.

Hard, Robi shot out her leg, kicked open the door and sent the man flying back. Weapon in hand, she scurried from the vehicle. Before she had a chance to aim her raised weapon, she felt the hardness to her head.

"Drop it." The deep voice ordered.

Robi didn't. She shifted her eyes to the left. She saw Manny with his hands raised in the air.

"Mom?" Nick called from the car.

"Stay put." Robi said.

"And I said ..." The man repeated, only this time he seemed to come from the sky. He dropped from the roof, and landed right by Robi, still holding aim. "Lower your weapon now ...please."

Robi shifted her eyes to the right.

A chest.

"Fuck," she whispered out and raised her head. Up ... way up. He looked military at first. His black hair buzzed, wearing a white tee shirt, green fatigue pants. He held a revolver on her and she slowly lowered her weapon.

"Good girl," he said, then moved his views from Robi. "You got her?"

"Yeah," Another male voice responded.

"Good." He looked at Robi once more, winked, smiled, and pivoted. He took off around the front of the Humvee.

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Robi looked at her 'holder', he wasn't as tall as the other man, but tall nonetheless. He had blonde hair, and more of a boyish look to him. "Can I put my hands down?" She asked. "This becomes painful and tedious."

"I don't know," He said, then pulled her from the way and shut her car door.

"Mom." Nick raced from around the car.

The man immediately put aim on Nick.

Upon seeing this, Robi realizing his distraction, and with protection of her son, doubled her hands and swung them into his gut.

With a grunt, he doubled forward.

Robi swept up her shotgun and swung it into the back of his knees. He buckled to the ground. She pumped the chamber and put it to his head.

"Man," he said. "You are kicking my ass today." He coughed and raised his hands. "Jeb!" he called.

From a distance the other man responded, "I'm looking for the lost boy."

"Jeb! We got problems."

"Fuck." Jeb blasted and within a second appeared. "Now what ... fuck, Tate." He said in disgust.

"Put your gun down," Robi ordered.

"No," Jeb returned and aimed at her. "You put your gun down."

"I have a gun to his head!" Robi yelled.

"And what?" Jeb blasted. "You gonna shoot my brother? Did I shoot you? No! Put the gun down!"

"You're aiming at me! I'm aiming at him. Choose. Put your gun down."

Calmly, Bishop's voice came through. "Put your gun down." He said as he approached Jeb from behind.

"Un-fuckin-believable," Jeb said with a twitch of his head, quickly turned and aimed at Bishop. "Stand down, little man, you're on my property. All of you are. Now..." As loud as he could he blasted. "Get your aim off my brother! Now!" he then pointed to Tate, "And you ... what the hell is the matter with you?" He grabbed Tate and lifted him to his feet.

Tate ... laughed. "This is pretty amusing, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think."

"I do." With a swipe of his hand, Tate straightened his hair and turned to a bewildered Robi with an extended hand. "Tate Hoyt."

"Roberta ... but, people call me Robi." She shook hands with him.

"Robi. Hey. Nice to meet you."

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“Wait. Stop.” Robi made a ‘T’ her hands. “What the hell is going on? First we get accosted then we get welcomed?”

Jeb stepped forward. “You trespassed, we couldn’t be sure who you were. Are you here to loot, or curious if anyone was here.”

Robi shifted her eyes to her crew, then to Jeb. “To be honest. We were here to get some of the food.”

“Loot.” Jeb said.

“Yes.” She nodded. “But now ... we’re curious.”

Jeb and Tate welcomed the honesty of their visit, and their attitude did seem to change; they were glad to be around others. The two Humvee followed Jeb and Tate in suit from the tree lined road to a dirt driveway that went up hill to an older, well kept, farmhouse.

They parked out front.

The long front porch took up the entire length of the house. Jeb stood on the top step. Robi was the first to approach. “This is very nice.”

“I think so,” Jeb said. “This way.”

Tate was already at the door, and Jeb opened it. A soon as he did, the shrill wail of a baby rang out.

This made Robi pause.

“Fuck,” Jeb shook his head in disgust and walked in the house. “She’s crying again. Tate.”

“What?” Tate followed Jeb inside. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“You have to give her something that will keep her from crying.” Jeb griped.

Robi, leading the others, just walked in despite the bickering of the brothers.

“I did,” Tate said, “I gave her a doll.”

A playpen set against the far wall of the living room. Jeb towered above it as he peered down to the contents.

Sitting up, face red, a little girl about nine months old screamed and cried.

“Hey!” Jeb scolded. “Quiet.”

The baby kept crying.

“Maybe you should hold her.” Tate suggested.

“I did yesterday, remember? For about ten minuets. Fuck.” Jeb winced. “You know what?” He reached down and lifted the child as if it were dead.

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Arms out, holding the girl far from him, Jeb turned and extended the child to Robi. "Let her deal with it."

"Me?" Robi asked. "Why? Because I'm a woman?"

"No, you're a mom," Jeb replied with a twitch of his head to Nick.

"Fine." Robi took the child into her arms and groaned. "She's soaking wet. God! No wonder she's screaming."

Tate looked at Jeb. "I thought you were gonna change her this morning."

Smug, Jeb replied. "I did. So there. It's not my fault she's wet. Maybe she spilled that cup of water we gave her." Jeb reached into the playpen. "She did."

Robi sighed out in annoyance and then spoke loudly over the child's cry. "You gave her a cup of water? Not a bottle? Let me ask you two something. Obviously, holding her is out; have you tried food?"

Tate pointed to Jeb. "He was in charge of that today."

"Why am I in charge of everything?" Jeb barked.

"Hey!" Robi yelled. "Where are the fuckin' diapers?"

Jeb lifted a bag. "There's only two left, so don't screw up when you put it on." He handed her one.

"I'll try not to." Rob snatched the diaper. "You two can't possibly be this helpless when it comes to a baby."

Tate and Jeb just looked at each other, then to Robi with a shrug.

Robi huffed. "The drop happened two months ago, how did you manage?"

Jeb fluttered his lips. "We've only had her a few days. Some guy dropped her here and took off. Which ... I don't blame him, she hasn't stopped crying since."

Grunting, Robi faced Nick. "Nick, will you go find their kitchen, get me a pan of warm soapy water." After Nick, agreed and walked out, she spun to Tate. "You. Find me a washcloth. And you." She turned to Jeb. "Clean up her playpen, find me fresh clothes for her."

"I don't think anything I have will fit," Jeb replied.

"What!" Robi screamed. "Fuck." Desperate she whined out, "Manny."

Manny held up a hand. "I'll handle it, go take her in another room. That crying ..."

"Yeah, I know." Robi soothed the baby. "It's OK," She whispered. "We'll take care of you."

Jeb leaned into his brother. "That's a relief." He muttered.

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Robi gave a cold stare and shifted her eyes to Bishop. "Can you give Nick a hand and see if there's anything to eat in there that we can mash up?"

"Sure, thing." Bishop agreed and walked out.

Jeb shook his head. "Look at her, coming in here, barking orders and taking over our ..."

"Hey!" Robi blasted.

Jeb and Tate innocently looked at her.

Calmer, Robi said. "Do what I asked, I am taking care of this situation."

Just as she started to leave the room, Jeb called out.

"Are you drowning her?"

Robi skid to a stop. "Excuse me?"

Tate snickered.

"The water," Jeb said. "Is that what ..."

"No! You asshole! God!" Robi stormed out.

Jeb shrugged and looked at his brother. "I thought it was a good question."

"I could have asked it," Tate said.

"Man, like a drill sergeant." With an exhale, Jeb noticed the smirk on Greek's face. "What?"

Greek chuckled. "Welcome to our Robi world."

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They found rolled oats, and a can of carrots. There were other items, but Robi opted for the oatmeal and carrots as the food she'd feed the little girl.

Using a belt, phonebooks, and towels, Robi strapped the child in a chair as she fed her.

"Whoa. That's amazing." Jeb said as he entered the dining room. "She's not crying."

"It's amazing how good a fed and dry baby will be."

Jeb leaned down to the child and sniffed. "She doesn't stink anymore."

"A bath will do that." Robi, focused on feeding the child said, "I thought I gave strict orders for everyone to leave me alone."

"Is it difficult?"

"What? Feeding her?" Robi said. "No, she needs to eat and not be distracted. Of course, she doesn't notice you. That's a good thing." Robi caught the food that dribbled from the baby's bottom lip and placed it in her

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mouth.

“Why did you do that? I saw you do that twice.”

“Do what?”

“Obviously, if she spit the food out, she doesn’t want it.” Jeb said. “Why do you keep forcing her to eat it.”

Robi huffed. “Is there something you wanted?”

“We’re back from the baby shopping trip. We got the items.”

“Any dogs?” Robi asked.

“As in?”

“Dogs. Killer Attack.”

“Where?”

“Forget it.” Robi lifted a spoon to the girl. “What’s her name?”

“Whose? Hers?”

“Yes.”

Jeb shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you bother giving her one?”

“No. We were too busy trying to figure out what we were gonna do with her. Now we know. You.”

“You think I’m taking responsibility for this baby?”

“Uh, yeah. You really want us to have it?”

“Uh ...yeah,” Robi answered the same way. “And as long as we are all together, we’ll all do it.”

Jeb waved out his hand. “That’s what you say, but the female in you will take over and you’ll ...”

“Hey!”

“What?”

“Don’t be such a male chauvinist.”

“Ok.” Jeb shrugged.

“And she’s done. I think...” Robi reached and lifted the child. “I’ll call her Martha.”

“Martha? Martha?” Jeb laughed. “You can’t call a baby Martha.”

“It’s better than Hey you.”

“True.”

“She’s needs a bottle,” Robi said. “Did you guys pickup bottles and the canned milk?” she asked as she carried the baby across the room.

“Yes. In the kitchen. I don’t know why you need that though. Don’t you breasts do that?”

Robi only glared, and kept on walking.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Do I look like a fuckin’ farmer to you?” Said a lot about Jeb Hoyt’s personality. Manny merely complimented about how nice his farm was and Jeb responded with that.

Brothers.

The Hoyt Bothers were complete opposite on one hand and identical on the other.

Robi had a hard time believing they were brothers, they both were so different. Tate was the younger of the two. His personality mild, looks were boyish and handsome. His age hard to tell. He smiled a lot. His hair blond, eyes blue. Tate was the type of man that took everything in stride ... at least what Robi thought.

Now, Jeb was a different story. He was darker in features, a large man in height and he had a slight bulk to him—not much. He’d have a hairstyle if it weren’t buzzed tight to his head. He looked forty-five, claimed he was thirty-five and acted eight.

Both brothers were a product of a military family and were in the service. Both were stationed in North Carolina when the drop occurred. They headed home to Ohio after to look for their father—no luck. It was then they decided to turn around and head back to that farm they saw on the way up.

It was luck.

They’d tend to it—which they hadn’t a clue.

Harvest it—something they’d have to learn.

Preserve and can—another task they had to guess.

And with a stocked truck, they too planned to eventually head to So-Cal. Or rather the other coast’ as they called it.

They heard the signal calls as well. Just when they agreed the farming task was just too much, and they’d head out, two things occurred that the Hoyt brothers didn’t plan on.

One, that the signal stopped. Two, a baby would be delivered like a UPS package. Dropped at their doorstep ... and left to cry.

Tate was the more experienced when it came to children, his resume included dating a woman with two sons.

Jeb on the other had could care less, never wanted children, and Robi swore even if he did, no one would bear them to him.



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There was something special though about baby Martha ...

"She smells," Jeb informed. "Always."

Rob scoffed as she sat on the porch that evening. "No, she doesn't. I bathed her."

"She smells." He repeated standing in the open screen door. "Take a whiff."

"She probably needs changed." Robi stood up. "Might as well take advantage and learned."

"Yeah, right." He held the door open for her. "And use those things sparingly."

"What? The diapers?"

"Shh." Jeb told her. "She's sleeping."

"And she smells in her sleep?"

"Shh."

"Oh," Robi waved out her hand. "Let her get used to noise. Did you tell one of the others?"

"They're in the back drinking beer. Since you're sober and a woman, I thought those were two bonus points to go to you."

"Gee thanks." Robi walked to the couch where Martha was barricaded in by pillows.

"Sniff."

Robi bent down and inhaled. "I don't smell anything."

"I do. I'm telling you. She smells."

Huffing, Robi removed a pillow, crouched down to the child. Martha lay on her stomach in only a diaper and tee shirt. She reached to the diaper, lifted the edging of the leg, and poked her finger in.

"Uh!" Jeb winced. "Stop that."

"She's dry and ..." Robi lifted it further and tried to peek. "I don't see anything."

Jeb grunted.

"Well, you said you smelled something." She stood up.

Immediately, Jeb handed her a bottle of liquid sanitizer. "Here."

Robi chuckled. "Thanks." She squirted some in her hand. "She doesn't need changed. You're imagining the smell."

"I'm not."

"Can I ask what you were doing smelling her any how?"

"She looked dead." Jeb answered.

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Robi laughed a 'what?'

"Yeah, I was coming through the living room to get you and see if you wanted to sit out back with us, have a beer, even though everyone said you're anti social ... is your kid allowed to drink? Tate gave him a beer."

Robi blinked. Her head spun from his sudden switch of subjects. "Excuse me?"

"You asked why I thought she was dead."

"You said my son is drinking."

"No, I said Tate gave him a beer. He's not drinking it yet. He was waiting for permission from you. And I was coming to get you, invite you, ask you, even though I was warned. Everyone says ..."

"I'm anti-social." She finished his sentence.

"Then they're right."

Robi tossed her hands out. "Yes."

"Ok, I'll tell him. I wasn't sure. Since there are no alcohol laws yet, but ..."

"Jeb." Robi halted his rambling. "Why did you think the baby was dead?"

"She wasn't breathing. Well, she didn't look like she was breathing. I walked by, and she was still. So I listened. I couldn't hear anything. I didn't see her moving either. So I poked her, she didn't move."

"You ... you poked her?"

"Yeah, like this." Jeb reached down and poked the baby. "And she didn't move again. Man is she a heavy sleeper. So, I bent down to listen or maybe feel or breath. I got real close to her face, and I felt her breath from her mouth."

"OK." Robi nodded.

"That's when I smelled her. Her breath. She smells."

IN disbelief, Robi said. "You are claiming the breath stinks."

"I didn't say she stinks. I said she smells. Get close. Take a whiff. See what you think."

"Will this get you to leave me alone?" she asked.

"Probably not. But try."

Sighing out, Robi did as instructed. She brought her face close to the baby. She paused when she noticed that Martha really didn't look like she was breathing. Leaning way close to the pouty baby's lips. A tiny breath escaped Martha and Robi jolted back.

"Oh wow." Robi inhaled again. "That is strange. She ..." after sniffing

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again, she looked up at Jeb. "Her breath smells like lilacs."

"I know. I fuckin' hate lilacs."

"That is weird." Robi stood up. "I don't remember using a lilac soap."

"You didn't," Jeb said. "I hate Lilacs. I wouldn't have lilac soap. But it's not her it's her breath. Are babies supposed to smell like lilacs?"

"If you use lilac soap. Otherwise they smell like babies." Robi shrugged. "Sour milk, vomit, food, poop ..."

Jeb winced. "Not Lilacs."

"I don't know what it is."

"Maybe I should ask that Doc person."

Robi chuckled. "Asking Doc is ..." her grinned widened with an orneriness. "I don't think asking Doc is a bad idea. Go on."

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Doc took a whiff of Baby Martha. Then as if it were some sort of religious ritual, everyone filed in line, bent to the baby, sniffed her breath, and shook their heads with a mumbling of 'weird'.

It wasn't Jeb's imagination, or Robi's. Martha had lilac smelling breath.

Robi really wanted to be alone, but she feared missing something good when Jeb asked Doc about what he thought would cause that.

Mostly everyone sat down. In the backyard, they encircled a tin can raging with fire. Robi watched. Jeb stood, appearing totally engrossed, arms crossed, nodding as he listened to an orange glowing Doc explain.

"Have a theory," Doc said.

"Go on."

"She's not human."

Ever so slightly, not heard to anyone but Robi, Jeb cleared his throat in shock. "Not human?"

"Nope." Doc shook his head. "Think she's one of the alien's. Maybe got lost from the pack. Or was sent early to see if she could survive." Doc spoke assuredly. "Could be a spy. And the astral projecting aliens know she can't eat and live off of what we feed her and there is some sort of special protein in Lilacs. Aliens sneaking in, astral wise, feed her lilacs and go."

Jeb nodded. "I see. You mentioned a spy."

"Could be robotic too. In a biological way. The aliens using her to watch what we do."

"A-huh. And is there anything we can do?"

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“Kill her.” Doc said. “If she is a spy, she’ll have to go.” He looked around the campfire. “Everyone knows this.”

Half hearted mumbles of agreement emerged.

Doc continued, “Then again, we could cut her open and see. She may not survive a live autopsy, but if she ends of being alien, no loss.”

“I see.” Jeb nodded again. “Thanks for that. I need another beer.” Not appearing phased at all, Jeb went directly to the house and inside.

Robi followed.

Once in the house, Jeb released a heavy exhale and his body flung drastically around. “Un fuckin believable.” He said out loud, thinking he was alone.

“We hear it all the time,” Robi said.

Jeb jolted. “I didn’t know you followed me.”

“I had to see your reaction.”

“You set me up.”

Robi shrugged. “You tried to shoot me today. But ... we hear the alien thing all the time. Kudos for keeping a straight face and not mocking him.”

“Nah,” Jeb shook his head. “He’s old. Whack job or not he deserves our respect. Aliens. Man.”

“Out of curiosity,” Robi said. “Do you think the virus was an accident, or done on purpose.”

“Definitely on purpose.” Jeb went to the cooler and retrieved a beer. “You?”

“Purpose. Any guesses who?”

Jeb fluttered his lips. “The whole fuckin’ world. I think ...” he opened his beer. “After fortress America, an united effort went underway to shut us down. They did. Now, they’re just sitting back, waiting for the air to be safe and they’re going to drop right in. Led by the multitudes of ... Chinese.”

“Whoa.” Robi blinked in surprise. “We have the same theory.”

“Great minds think alike.”

Robi snickered.

“What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. So ...” She sighed out. “You guys never said. And though it’s very masochistic of me to ask ... are you and Tate gonna join us?”

Jeb peered his dark eyes at her. “Go with all you guys? The old guy who believes in Aliens?” After snickering, he took a drink of his beer, gasped, and said, “Probably not.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*July 1<sup>st</sup>*

### *I-64 West, Kentucky State Border*

The song, 'Kentucky Rain' finished playing, and Robi shut off the player as she drove. She exhaled. "Well, Ray wanted us to do that."

"Yeah, he did," Nick said. "I bet he's laughing wherever he's at that we remembered."

"How could we not."

"Mom, you never said much about his death."

"It's hard," Robi replied. "I try to keep things in check. I don't want to break down. Ray knows I'll miss him. I do. Plus, I cried all the tears I'm gonna cry in a lifetime, so don't get hurt or anything."

"I'll try. But I do have to say, out of everyone, I didn't expect Ray to leave us first."

"Me either."

"He was really strong," Nick said. "There was just something about him."

"I know."

There was a silent moment.

Then Jeb spoke, "Can I say something?"

Robi looked at him. "No. This conversation is between me and my son."

"I'm in the front seat here, I'm in the car," Jeb defended.

"And why is that?" Robi asked.

"Why is what?"

"Why are you in the car with us? You just kicked poor Bishop out."

"Ha!" Jeb scoffed. "I merely moved him to another vehicle. One source of protection in each Humvee. I'm in this one, Tate is in the other one."

Robi snickered. "And you think that we need you?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You don't think me and Bishop could have handled it?"

"Nope. Not at all. You know, you should let me drive."

"No."

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“Why?”

“I drive. I! Drive!” Robi nearly screamed.

“Uh ...” Nick leaned forward. “Can we not start fighting again?”

Jeb shrugged. “I’m not. It’s her.”

“It’s him.”

“Me?” Jeb barked. “Babe, I’m being nice. You’ve been nothing but mean. Here I am, trying to protect this vehicle. Keeping an eye out, and you just pretend I’m not here.”

“Let me ask you a question,” Robi said. “If we need a Hoyt in each vehicle. Why didn’t you ride in that one and let Tate ride in here with us? Huh?”

“Easy.” Jeb stated. “Our baby is in here. We should be ...”

“Our baby?” Robi quipped. “Our? Our?”

“Yeah.”

“Where the fuck are you getting that. It’s not our baby.”

“It is too.” Jeb defended. “You’re the woman ...”

Robi gaped. “Here he goes again.”

“No, hear me out.” Jeb said. “You’ve been mothering this child for three days. Right?”

“That still doesn’t mean ...”

“Right?”

Robi groaned.

Jeb continued. “You’re the strong female role, I’m the strong male role. Parents. Mother. Father. Ours. There.”

Robi gurgled a scream of frustration.

“Mom.” Jeb smirked.

Nick laughed.

“You know ...” Jeb continued. “Parents fool around. You’ll have to put out eventually.”

Again, Robi growled a screamed. “I’m not dealing with you in the car.”

“Tough.” Jeb shrugged.

Huffing, Robi peered in the rearview mirror. “I’m willing to bet the conversation in their Humvee is much more mature.”

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“I’m telling you,” Tate spoke upbeat. “Underneath all those layers, the thick bulky sweaters ... Scooby Doo’s Velma has voluptuous breasts.”

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“Dude,” Bishop chuckled. “There is no way. Velma is like ... Velma. No one digs Velma’s chest.”

Tate shrugged. “Did you see the movie?”

Manny waved a finger while he drove. “We’re talking hot cartoon babes, the movie version doesn’t count.”

“When’s the last time you looked at Velma during the carton?” Tate asked. “The curves are there. They just didn’t want to show up Daphne.”

Greek kept his eyes on his notebook, and flipped a page. “Never in my life have I heard a bunch of grown men discussing the quality of a cartoon woman’s breasts.” He shook his head. “It’s not right.” He paused to lift Doc’s head from his shoulder.

With a grunt, and a snore, Doc’s head went against the window.

Bishop asked, “What’s so wrong about it?”

“They’re cartoon women. They aren’t real breasts.”

Tate turned around from his seat in the front. “And we have real ones now?”

Greek chuckled. “Nope. Not now. Maybe when we get to So-Cal.”

Tate gave a playful swat to Manny. “Hey, maybe that television chick will be there.”

“In about another month,” Manny said. “Velma could be there and I’d be happy.”

“How about you, Greek?” Tate questioned. “Hoping on anything.”

“A nice work space.” Greek answered. “If you think I want a woman. Nah.” He shook his head. “Had the finest. Can’t top that, so why try.”

In awe, Bishop wisped out. “Ah, Dude, that’s like great. Really nice.”

Tate asked Bishop, “What kind of woman are you hoping might be there?”

“I’m really not thinking about it. Honestly.”

Tate chuckled. “We haven’t seen a woman in two months. You’re kidding, right?”

Manny answered. “Bishop’s still stuck in the Florence nightingale phase over Robi.”

“No way?” Tate quipped shocked. “Robi?”

Bishop flung out his hand. “I like Robi. I think she’s a very sad person and I just want to be friends.”

Snickering, “Yeah Rights’ came from both Tate and Manny.

“Speaking of Robi,” Manny said. “Why are they swerving?”

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“Off! Off!” Robi smacked Jeb’s hand as it reached for the wheel. “I’m driving.”

“I have to take a leak, pull over.”

“Oh, wait. Hold it.”

“Why?”

“Because we just stopped not long ago.” Robi bitched. “Nick, do you have to go.”

In a daze of staring out the window, Nick only raised his eyes. “Leave me out of this, please.”

“No, do you?” Robi asked.

“No.” he said nonchalantly.

“See? See?” Robi said to Jeb.

“What does your son having to piss have to do with it?” Jeb asked.

“He doesn’t have to go. It’s been longer for him.” Robi replied.

Nick grumbled. “Can I ride in the other car?”

Robi pointed to the back “See? Now my son doesn’t want to ride with me.”

Jeb shook his head. “If he doesn’t, it’s only because ....” He raised his voice. “You’re nuts! Now pull, over so I can go.”

“No, be a big boy.”

Ornery, Jeb snickered.

“Grow up. And don’t be so foul.”

“Foul?” He laughed. “Now, I’m foul.”

“And demanding. God, you’re a control freak. You must have been a drill sergeant in the army.”

“I beg your pardon,” Jeb said offended. “I was not an enlisted man.”

Robi laughed. “You were an officer?”

“I was a Major, yes. Tate was a Captain.”

Again, Robi laughed. “Someone actually commissioned you? Could you read enough to do the paperwork?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Very funny. Now pull over because I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Fine.” Robi quickly jerked the wheel.

“Watch out.” Tate warned.

Manny swerved around Robi who pulled off to the side of the road.



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“What the hell is she doing?”

Tate looked back. “I don’t know.”

“This is ridiculous.” Manny turned the Humvee around.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Jeb slammed the car door as he got out. “Driving like this in the home of Elvis.”

“Asshole! Elvis was from Tennessee. And I’m supposed to believe you were a Major? How in the world did you pass college?”

“I’m going to the bathroom.” Jeb stormed off from the side of the road. Nick got out of the car. “Baby needs changed.”

“Tell her father.” Robi said sarcastically.

“Mom, don’t make me change her diaper. Her poop is weird.”

“It is not.” Robi argued.

“Yeah, it is. It smells.”

Open mouthed, baffled at the ridiculous comment, Robi faced her son.

Manny, Tate and Bishop approached.

“Everything all right?” Bishop asked.

Robi gave an up motion of her head. “He had to pee.”

“By the way you drove,” Bishop said. “I’m gonna guess he had to go pretty bad.”

“He’s a pain in the ass,” Robi quipped. “Can’t you guys take him.” She faced Tate. “Get your brother out of my car.”

Tate shook his head. “No can do. You’re stuck with him. We’re having fun in our vehicle.”

“Where’s Doc?” Robi asked.

Manny pointed back. “Sleeping.”

“Figures.” Robi shook her head.

“I’m back,” Jeb announced. “Was that all that bad?”

From the other vehicle, Greek called out, “Hey, guys.” He walked, holding a grouping of papers, eyes down not even watching where he went. “I was looking at my calculations ...”

It probably wouldn’t have made a difference if Greek did watch his steps.

Mid stride, mid sentence, Greek sank. As if the ground opened up enough to swallow him, his body sunk into the ground.

Part of the earth, Greek melted from the waste down with the ground. Papers flew from his hand, he screamed horrendously, as he tried to lift

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himself up.

Jeb flew over, ordering out. "Everyone stay back!" as his body slammed to the ground. His hands grabbed onto Greek.

With a grunt, Jeb pulled.

Nothing.

"He's stuck." Jeb called out.

"My legs." Greek moaned. "They're crushing. God, the pain."

"Hold on," Jeb's hands moved frantically around the dirt, "I need a shovel. Something. Rope!"

Robi climbed quick to the top of the Humvee where supplies were bound. She began to rummage for the needed items. While warning Nick to get in the car.

"Tate!" Jeb shouted. "Give me a hand."

Tate rushed over. He tried to lever Greek from the hole as Jeb's hands scuffled dirt. "Greek, what does it feel like? I need to know" He asked rushed. "Are you pinned? Wedged?"

"Grabbed." Greek answered painfully. "Grabbed."

Tate mouthed the word 'grabbed' to Jeb, then faced Greek.

Greek continued, "Something's pulling at me. Oh, God, Help!"

After a glance to his brother in bewilderment, Tate jumped up. I got an idea."

"What?" Jeb asked.

"I got an idea," Tate repeated, and then ran to the Humvee. "Everyone get far back. Robi! Back that up!"

From the roof, Robi replied, "I'm getting the rope."

"No time. Back it up." Tate order then jumped in the Humvee.

After a shrug, Robi climbed down from the roof and got back in the car.

With a quick turn on the ignition, a shift of gears, and a squeal of tires, Tate sped backward past Robi a good fifty feet, put it in park and raced from the Humvee. He carried a small green bag and in his run, he rummaged through it.

He didn't wait until Robi was backed up, his focus was forward. Grabbing something from the bag, he tossed it over his shoulder.

"What are doing?" Jeb asked.

"Get ready to yank him." Tate said.

"Yank him?"

"Yank him." He smiled and lifted ha grenade into Jeb's view. "If something's got him, the vibration should shake it lose."

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Jeb grinned as well. "Good thinking."

"God, they're gonna blow me up." Greek said.

Jeb mounted a hold on Greek. "Nah, we're getting you out. Tate do it!"

Tate ran a few feet forward, pulled the pin from the grandee, waited a few seconds, set it down, then, as if he did it on purpose for dramatic effect, leapt in the air as the explosion rocked the ground.

Dirt, leaves, gravel flew up. Tate lifted his head in time to see Jeb heave a screaming Greek from the hole.

"Got him!" Jeb cried out.

Tate gave a thumbs up. He watched his brother stand, and placed Greek across his shoulder. After the dirt had fallen, it was clear then that the legs of Greek's pants were tattered and bloody. Tate, too stood, and as Jeb turned face and moved toward the vehicle and hurried that way. He paused at the hole, the circumference of which was small. No sooner did Tate step over it, he stopped. His foot kicked up direct in the abruptness of his halt, and slowly he turned his head to peer over his shoulder to that hole.

"I saw a sign a few miles back." Jeb laid Greek in the back of the second Humvee. "A town ahead. We'll have to stop."

Robi nodded. "I have a medical bag, but we may need more when we get there."

"We'll check out the town for a doctor's office, something." He went to shut the rear door, when he saw his brother by the hole. "Tate!"

Tate didn't move.

Bishop approached Jeb, "What's wrong with your brother."

"I don't know," Jeb replied. "But can you go over and tell him to get a move on."

"Yeah, not a problem." Bishop said. "Robi, will Greek be all right?"

Robi shrugged. "I have to look at him. His vitals are good. He doesn't seem that bad."

"Good. Good." Bishop nodded as he backed up, "I'll go get Tate."

Jeb closed the rear door and looked at Robi. "Not that bad?"

"Lower your voice."

Jeb tied. "Not that bad. His legs are crushed."

"I know, I know."

"So why didn't you say anything?"

Robi chuckled in disbelief. "Because how in the world can we explain it?"

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Jeb, how did his legs get crushed by falling in a hole?"  
Jeb didn't have an answer.

Bishop obviously snapped Tate from a shocked stare of that hole. He laid a hand on Tate's back, arising the man to jolt a bit. "Your brother wants you to ..." he noticed how Tate focused on that hole. "You ... You OK?"

Tate exhaled. "Yeah."

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting."

"Waiting? For?"

"I thought ... I thought I saw something."

"What?" Bishop asked. "In the hole?"

"Yeah."

"What was it?"

Tate shook his head. "Nothing." He exhaled again. "It's crazy." He tuned. "Let's go." After a swat to Bishop's back, he walked off.

Bishop leaned forward toward the hole. He peeked apprehensively, and just on the chance Tate did see something strange in that hole, he did a quick look, and then followed Tate to the others.

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The town was small, not the quintessential small town, more of a community off set from a big city. It had its appeal though.

And like all the other towns, it was empty. Void of any life that wasn't plant.

After the initial 'dog check', they were able to find a doctor's office. It was located on the main strip of town, but lacked the essentials needed to fully take care of Greek.

He stopped feeling pain, the shock took care of that. An X-ray showed numerous breaks, Robi wasn't capable of surgically correcting. So, after knocking Greek out cold, with the help of Doc, they clutched the legs, shifting the bones back into places as best they could, and cast his legs from the thighs down.

The casts themselves were unique and different, probably weighing more than Greek himself. But since they couldn't find the cast items at the doctors office, Manny created metal braces and the plaster system to make casts.

Greek probably would never walk again ... if he survived at all.

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Would he survive? A few days would tell. His vital signs were good, but he needed to rest and not move.

'Buckle down and settle in', were the instructions given by Robi. They had to wait until Greek was strong enough to go forward. No one minded staying tight. Aside from the fact they weren't in a huge hurry, Greek's life was more important.

The July Kentucky heat, along with playing basketball, caused Manny to sweat more than he liked. On a court lit by the moon, and a few remaining battery streetlights he and Nick played.

The bouncing ball, and colorful Nick commentary carried out loudly like a dinner bell in an empty hall.

They filled the night air.

"Oh, yeah." Nick bounced, moved, shuffled. "Nick Pierce, Olympian Dream, knows the pressures on ..."

"Will you just play the game." Manny tried to stay on him.

Nick continued. "He has the skill, and speed ..."

"Just play the game."

"But the pressure of winning this one is all too much for the young hopeful to handle."

"Christ, Nick." Manny waved out his arms.

"Nick sees an opening ..."

"Thank God."

"He goes for it, slips through, shoots and .... Scores!" Nick proceeded to jump up and down. "The crowd goes wild." Just as he was about to do a mock crowd cheering, applause and cheers rang out courtesy of the Hoyt Bothers.

Nick looked at them with a smile. "Thanks, guys." He then passed the ball to Manny.

Tate and Jeb stepped forward.

"Can we play?" Tate asked.

Manny chuckled as he dribbled the ball. "No." he shook his head.

"What?" Jeb asked in a humored shock. "You're kidding, right?"

Manny stared for a second, then again, shook his head. "No."

Jab gasped out. "Why?"

Nick chuckled "Dude, you're like old. You may take a heart attack or something."

"I'm not old," Jeb defended. "I'm thirty five."

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Nick, smirked. "Yeah, right, so am I."

"No, you're not," Jeb said. "You're seventeen."

Nick laughed and gave a nod of his head to Manny. "You're turn."

"Wait." Tate held up his hand. "Seriously, we want to play. Why won't you guys let us?"

Manny held the ball against his hips. "Are you guys wanting to play us?"

Tate nodded. "Yes."

"Then no." Manny replied.

"Why?" Tate asked.

"For starters." Manny approached the pair that stood center of their playing area. "Look at you guys. Look at us. Hmm? Neither Nick or I are over five foot ten. You guys are large. There's a fear factor that comes in here."

Tate looked at Jeb. "They're scared."

Jeb nodded. "Intimidated."

Manny nickered. "No, shit. Second, and most importantly, me and Nick are having a good time. Something tells me that if we play you two, it would be a masochistic move."

Jeb looked dumfounded. "Why?"

"Because I just don't think you two would play normal, maturely, or fair. There." Manny nodded. "So if you don't mind ..." he shoed his hand. "We have a game to finish." He went back behind the foul line.

"Oh my God." Tate quipped. "You two suck."

Manny looked at Nick with a nod, "What I say, maturity."

"I mean it," Tate said. "Suck., You have a ball and won't share."

Manny smiled at Nick. "Again, maturity. Next thing you know, they'll threaten to knock out our street light." He watched Tate and Jeb look at each other with contemplation.

Jeb held up his hand. "Hold on. You two don't want to play us? Right? Because we're too big and you don't think we'll play fair. Then, what about this ... we'll split up. We'll join your teams. Huh?"

Manny gave it some thought, then peered to Nick. "Well?"

Nick shrugged. "It's better than them harassing us."

"Yes," Tate clenched his fist. "I'll be fair. I'll play on Manny's team."

Jeb gave a swat to Nick's back, sending him a foot forward. "Me and Nick we'll kick your asses." He extended a reach and grabbed the ball for Manny. "Let's jump for it."

Tate stood across from Jeb. "Toss it."

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With apprehension , Manny took his position. "Let's keep it clean guys. OK?"

Jeb nodded, and tossed up the ball. "Clean."

The ball came down between to the two brothers.

Crack!

Robi jolted from her porch reading when what sounded like a 'scream of pain' from Manny rang out in the distance. She glanced up and started to stand.

"I wouldn't worry," Bishop called out as he walked toward the porch. "They're playing basketball down the street."

Robi relaxed. "Why are they screaming?"

"The Hoyt Destroyers are playing with them."

"Christ," Robi shook her head. "They better not hurt my kid."

"Jeb and Tate are playing."

"I'll kill them."

Bishop chuckled and inched to the porch. "How's Greek?"

"Resting."

"He was resting a couple hours ago."

"I know," Robi closed her book when Bishop sat down. "You can go check on him."

"Nah. Will he make it?"

Robi went silent.

"Ah, you don't know."

She looked at him. "I hope he does."

Bishop nodded. "I understand. So ... how's Martha?"

"Strange. She's sleeping."

Bishop gave a quirky smile. "How is that strange?"

"She sleeps a lot." Robi shrugged. "I guess I'm used to my own children. None of them really slept all that much."

"Maybe they did, but you were younger and your patience was thinner, so it didn't seem like they did."

Robi stared at him.

"I'm ... I'm sorry. That wasn't for me to say."

"No," Robi shook her head "I was gonna comment on how profound that was. You may be right."

"What are you reading?" Bishop reached for her book. "May I?"

Robi shrugged.

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When he saw the title, he laughed. "Robi, this is gay erotica."

"Yeah, I know. The Pool Boy." She shrugged. "It was the only one in the house that caught my attention. I started reading it before I realized what it was."

"There's a naked man on front. How did you not know?"

"It was a hot naked man on front, Bishop. I didn't think about it."

"Oh. So ...What gave it away?" he asked.

Robi flipped back a couple pages, and handed the book to Bishop. "Second paragraph. First sentence."

Bishop read the words and coughed. "OK, that would do it." He handed it back. "Any good."

"Actually, yeah. The sex scenes are very well written."

"They're gay sex scenes."

"I'm getting educated."

Bishop laughed, then noticed as she lifted a bottle of beer and took a drink. "You're drinking? I've not seen you drink alcohol yet."

"I try not to in front of Nick too much. He says I'm an alcoholic."

"Nick has to deal with it. It's a tough world now. You can't possible drink that much."

"Did you want one?"

"Um, yeah, thanks." Bishop watched as she reached down to a small cooler bag. "You have a six pack out here?"

"I told you I can drink a lot." She handed one to him. "So, let me ask you a question."

"Oh my God." Bishop wisped out.

"What?"

"You never ask me anything."

"I'm curious about this."

"Shoot."

"When you first joined us, you were so concerned about Juanita. You talked to her, for her, now we barely see her. Did you lose her?"

"No." Bishop enjoyed his beer. "You have to understand, I'm not always normal. And I had no one to talk to. I expanded on a practice I did as a kid. You know, always answering for her. But now, I have all you guys. I really don't have to talk to her. I do pull her out once in a while. Have some conversation. Because you know ... once in a while .. everyone needs a little ..."

He lifted her book. "Head."

After a silent moment, Robi burst in laughter.



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“You laughed.”

“That was funny.”

“I have not seen you laugh. You just laughed. Wow. Pop a gold star on my head. I’m bragging about this one. And...” he exhaled. “On that note. I’ll let you be.” He started to stand.

“Wait.”

Bishop stopped.

“Did I say something? Offend you?”

“No, why?” he asked.

“Why are you leaving?”

“You always want to be alone.”

“Not always,” Robi answered. “People just get tired of asking me if I want company. I’d like ... I’d like for you to stay. Talk. I’m enjoying this.”

With a smile, Bishop sat. “Then I will. I’m enjoying this too. We’ll kick back, relax, talk and listen to the distant sounds of an innocent basketball game.”

At that moment, loud, Nick’s voice rang out, “Uh! I’m Telling! Mom!” Beer arriving at her mouth, Robi peered at Bishop. “I’m killing them.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*July 2<sup>nd</sup>*

*Grayson, Kentucky*

Robi literally put salt on Jeb's wound. Just before she stitched the one inch gash above his eyebrow, she dashed a few granules of salt.

Jeb jolted.

"I'm sorry, must be an infection."

"Fuckin' hurts."

"Poor baby." She wasn't gentle when she brought the sutures to him. "That's what you get when you play tackle basketball."

"It was all your sons idea to ...Ow!" Jeb shrieked. "What the hell? Were you always this rough with your patients?"

"No. Now, just be quiet before you say anything else that would make me want to hurt you."

"I knew it. You're being rough on purpose."

Robi only glared. She finished the job, quickly, precisely, without cosmetic worries, and less than gently.

"My head's throbbing."

"Serves you right."

"Oh, my God, you're so mean to me."

"Is it any wonder." Robi walked to the sink and washed up. "You needed sutures, my son has a black eye, Tate has a brush burn on his forearm like I've never seen."

"What's that tell you?" Jeb asked.

"You play rough basketball."

"No," Jeb said. "Fuckin Manny is a lunatic."

"Manny?" Robi laughed in ridicule. "Why are you blaming this on Manny now?"

"The one without the injuries." Jeb shrugged.

"Wait. Are you saying Manny did this to you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're fuckin whacked and a big liar, that's what I think."

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Jeb laughed. "Have to admit, it's odd though that Manny doesn't have any injuries."

"Why is that?"

"Why is it odd?" Jeb shrugged. "Because we all ..."

"No." Robi interrupted. "Why doesn't he have injuries?"

"He ran."

"He .... Ran?" Robi questioned.

"Tate was charging down the court full speed, Manny saw this, spun and took off ... hey..." Middle of his sentence, demeanor changed and Jeb, engrossed walked to the widow. "Why is Tate wheeling Greek down the street on a dolly?"

Head jerked, Robi caught glimpse, then flew from the small in-home doctor's office.

"Tate!" she cried out.

As if the injured man were cases of beer, Tate did a fast spin around.

Robi cringed.

Loudly, and near singing, Greek called out, "Morning, Robi!"

With a gasp, hand covering her mouth, and internal control over losing it on Tate, Robi approached the pair. Entire body—including arms—strapped to the dolly, Greek smiled.

"What is going on?" Robi asked.

Greek answered, "We're going for a walk. I would have waved but ..." He nodded his head to his restrained arms.

Jeb caught up. "What's up?"

"Morning, Jeb!" Greek said extremely cheerful. "We're taking a morning stroll. Wanna come?"

"Can I wheel ya?"

"Yep." Greek nodded.

"No!" Robi snapped.

Jeb ignored her. "Can I do it ... fast?"

"Yep." Greek answered.

"No!" Robi screamed. "What in God's name is the matter with you?" She spun to Tate. "And you!" she poked him hard in the chest.

"Ow."

"What are you thinking?" She asked.

Tate replied, "I went in to check on him, he said he felt fine, wanted to see the town. I thought this was a great idea. Since, you know, his legs can't bend."

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"He feels fine?" Robi asked. "He seems stoned. How many morphine tablets did you give him to make him feel fine?"

"None. I didn't give him anything. Maybe Doc did."

Greek nodded. "Doc gave me one. I told him how good I felt, he sniffed me, said 'fuckin Aliens' and gave me one."

"Sniffed you?" Robi reiterated. "For booze."

"Lilacs."

"Lilacs?" Robi asked then leaned into Greek and sniffed. Her head jolted as if she were offended by something. Her eyes widened..

Tate looked at her curiously, "Lilacs?"

"Um ... no. No." Robi shook her head.

"Liar." Tate said. "I sniffed him."

Jeb stepped forward. "He smells like the baby?"

Slowly Robi nodded. "Yeah and shit ... shit." She spun to Jeb. "Asshole. Thanks a lot. I forgot about the baby." She took off running down the street.

Jeb shrugged. "Why is she blaming me?"

Sloppily, and drugged, Greek winked. "She likes you."

Jeb grinned ornery. "Oh, yeah."

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"Sour grape gum," Bishop said to Nick. He lifted Martha from the table, and held her. "That's what I think."

"Dude, yeah." Nick snapped his finger. "You're right. I knew it was something."

"I have the nose." Bishop winked. "And speaking of nose, that's one hell of a bruise you have happening on yours."

"Jeb nailed me with the ball."

Bishop winced. "Ow. Rough game?"

"But fun. It was even better watching Sparky chase Jeb."

Bishop nearly choked. "You let Sparky out of her cage?"

"Yeah, to chase Jeb, He bet he could out run her."

"And I'm guessing he did."

"Yep. Sparky had him cornered though. Jeb climbed the basketball court fence. Man, was it funny. And while I'm on my dog, I better go check him."

"Yeah, you haven't been the boy with his dog lately." Bishop commented. "Lose interest?"

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"Can't do much with him on the road. And when we were at the Hoyt farm, they wouldn't let me let him out of the cage."

"With good reason. Go check on him."

"I'll be back," Nick turned.

Just as Bishop lifted Martha to eye level to say something, Frantic, Robi flew in the house.

"Oh." She wheezed out. "She's OK. I forgot I left her on the couch." Robi grabbed her chest.

"She's fine. Nick and I came in when you ran out after the dolly."

"I didn't see you."

"Apparently, not." Bishop said. "Martha's changed. She doesn't seem hungry though."

"You changed her?" Robi asked.

"Oh, yeah, I'm pretty good with babies. So, if you need help..."

"You know a lot about babies?"

"More than Jeb and Tate." Bishop replied. "Actually, anyone knows more about babies than them two."

"True." Robi balanced Martha on her hip. "I've been insensitive. Did you have children?"

"No." Bishop shook his head. "No nieces or nephews or that matter either. But, lots of friends with kids. I was the one they called to baby sit. Five God Children."

"Wow. Impressive. I may take you up on your offer of help."

"Any time."

Robi began to leave the room. "I'm gonna feed her. Wanna join me?"

"Can you feed me?"

"not physically, but if you're hungry ..."

"I'm joking." Bishop said as he followed. "I can feed her if you want."

"Actually that's be a great idea. I have to clean up the clinic portion of this house. I was stitching Jeb."

"Not a problem, I'll feed her. Hey, Robi." Bishop walked in the kitchen behind her. "I changed a lot of diapers in my time. Have you ... have you noticed how weird her poop smells?"

Robi stopped and tuned around.

"It smells like sour grape gum."

"Sour grape gum?" Robi laughed. "God, not you too."

"Who else thinks her poop smells weird?"

"Nick." Robi answered. "And it smells like baby poop. Gees. There,

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take her.” She handed the baby to Bishop. “I’ll make her some cereal.”

Just as the baby passed had to hand, the back door opened and Nick raced in.

“Mom,” he breathed heavily, worry upon his face. “Something’s wrong with my dog.”

“And you’re just realizing this?” Robi asked.

“No, seriously, something is wrong.” Nick raced back out of the house.

Curious and concerned with her son’s urgency, Robi followed. Bishop, too, with baby in tow.

Outside, the steel dog crate perched on a back wall. It didn’t strike Robi that perhaps something was amiss, until she neared the cage.

“See?” Nick pointed.

Sparky lay on his side. His breaths were labored, and wheezy. His eyes stared blankly.

“Have you fed him?” Robi asked and neared the cage. “I know he’s not been top priority lately.”

“I fed my dog. I think he’s dying.”

“Well ...” Robi was apprehensive in speaking. “Nick, you know ..” She approached the cage. “That might not be a bad thing. The dog had the mutated virus.”

“I know.” Nick said.

From a short distance, Bishop commented. “It may have just run it’s course. In fact, maybe all the dogs are about to have the virus run it’s course.”

“End of a species.” Robi muttered. She really did feel bad looking at Sparky, Pathetically laying there. She crouched close to the cage. “His breathing is slowing.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“Listen. There’s longer pauses between them. I’m sorry, Nick. I think he is going to die.”

“Is he suffering?” Nick asked.

“He may be.”

“Can we do something? At least to stop his suffering.”

Robi exhaled. “There might be something inside I can give him. Morphine, something.” She stood up. “I’ll go get it.”

Not even a step away, or a complete turn, and Sparky whimpered out, and then went silent.

Nick gasped. “Aw, man.”

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Bishop stepped closer. "Is he?"

Robi shook her head and returned to the cage. "He doesn't look like he's breathing. I think he is. Sparky?" She called him. "Sparky?"

No response.

"Check him," Nick requested.

"No, I'm ..."

"Please?" Nick beckoned.

"Fine, but if I get bit, I'll have one of the men kick your ass." Robi reached for the cage.

"Want me to check?" Bishop asked.

"Nah, I got it." She looked at Sparky for a moment. No moving, eyes closed. With a bit of trepidation, Robi unlatched the cage. Sparky didn't budge. Slowly she reached in, and with a cringe, touched her hand down upon Sparky.

Still, Sparky didn't move.

After feeling a few more times, with an exhale, she withdrew her hand. "He's not breathing, no pulse. He's dead."

"man," Nick lowered his head.

"Dude," Bishop said consoling. "Sorry about your pet."

Nick nodded.

"Sorry." Robi grabbed the edge of the cage and began to close it. "Maybe I'll get one of the Hoyt brothers to .." She screamed when Sparky's eyes popped open. With that scream, she slammed the cage.

"What?" Nick asked. "What?"

Robi looked at Sparky. "Nothing. But ... just to be sure." Hand shaking, she locked the latch. "It was nothing. Probably a post mortem muscle response."

"What was?" Nick questioned.

"His eyes opened," Robi answered. "But he's not moving. He's dead."

"You think he didn't die?" Nick questioned.

"No, he died." Robi answered. "No pulse. Dead. But when his eyes opened." She grumbled. "I thought ... oh, nothing."

Bishop snickered. "You thought he came back to life."

Nick chuckled as well. "Like a zombie?"

"Dude," Bishop joked. "Night of the Living Terrier."

"Ha, ha, ha," Robi said. "Funny. It just startled me that's all. But ... look at him." She folded her arms. "Dead."

Upon that word, in a snap of a finger, Sparky sprang to his feet. He let

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out a long demonic growl, then lunged with full strength at the cage. Not quite the dog he was a moment earlier. His lifelessness was replaced with a vicious vigor.

Robi jumped back. "Shit."

Sparky remained loud. Crazy. Unstoppable. His growls mixed with strained barks, as he continued to bite for and leap at the cage.

"Uh!" Nick shirked. "My dog!"

"Dude," Bishop pulled Nick back. "Run and get a Hoyt."

"What!" Robi screamed. "Don't call them. God, I can handle this." She reached behind her. "Shit. I left my gun in the house."

Bishop looked at Nick. "Go."

Nick nodded and took off.

Robi stepped back from the cage. "What the fuck just happened to his dog. He was never like this."

The cage net some, then with another vicious attempt, Sparky rattled the cage and it toppled from the wall. Like a hamster in a ball, Sparky's jumps, and pursuits moved that cage against the concrete patio.

"Holy shit.." Robi moved next to Bishop.

"Can he get out of that cage?"

"I don't think," Robi said. "But the question should be ..." She and Bishop hopped back when the cage neared them. "What kind of damage can he do from the cage."

"Do you think that's what happened with the other dogs. Maybe that was why Sparky was so different. He had to die to become an attack dog."

The cage moved side to side inching violently toward Robi and Bishop as Sparky went wild.

"He didn't die." Robi said. "He went into a zone."

"A zombie?" Bishop laughed. "You proclaimed him dead."

"I was wrong," Robi replied. "Does that dog look dead to you?"

"He doesn't look alive."

"Please," Robi snickered. "This is insane. Look at this."

With a laugh, and a bit of shock, Jeb proclaimed, "Fuck me," As he walked in the backyard with Tate and Nick.

"Oh, my God." Tate started laughing. "Look at Sparky the Zombie dog."

Robi rolled her eyes. "He's not a zombie."

Seriously, Jeb looked at her. "So Nick was wrong. He didn't die and come back to life."



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“He just looked dead.” Robi answered.

“Uh-huh.” Jeb nodded and took a deep breath. “No sense prolonging this. Why don’t you three and a half go in the house. Me and Tate will handle this.”

Robi ridiculed. “Yeah, right. Is this a macho thing. I could handle this.”

Jeb stepped to her. “I’m sure you can. But, I would like to and seeing how anything could go wrong, fearing for the safety of you and my baby ...”

Robi rolled her eyes.

“Will you go into the house?” Jeb asked.

“Fine.” Robi tossed up her hands, “Fine. I’d prefer Nick not see you taking care of this. It could be disturbing and Martha needs fed.” She opened the screen door.

“I didn’t get to pick any lilacs!” Jeb called out as they all went in.

Tate and Jeb were alone with the determined dog.

“Jeb, man, look at him.”

“Pretty wild.” Jeb said.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Tate asked.

“I believe.”

“Yeah,” Tate nodded. “It is gonna be so much more of a fuckin’ challenge for you to out run this thing.”

“Never ran away from a challenge.”

“True, but have you ever ran away from a Zombie dog?”

“There’s always a first.”

“Three second head start,” Tate walked behind the cage. “Go!”

Jeb did manage to outrun the high speed insane dog. Of course, Tate left Greek strapped to that dolly in the middle of the street, and Sparky stopping to gnaw on his super plaster legs, held up hinges. Jeb had to gain his attention again before the pursuit continued.

It finished at the basketball court, and the single gun shot that rang out through the dead town signified that it was over.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*July 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Brownsville, Tennessee*

Because of the fact they had to lay Greek across the backseat to the rear of the Humvee, Bishop was crouched by Greek, while Doc was moved to H-1, the vehicle Robi drove. H-1 and H-2 were the names given to the Humvee that would take them—hopefully—across country.

Doc nodded in approval, looking content squashed between Nick and the car seat. “Can you hit the repeat and play that song, again, there Jeb?”

“Sure thing.” Jeb reached for the radio.

“No.” Robi stopped him. “Eight times. Eight times in a row we have listened to that stupid song.”

Jeb gasped. “You blaspheme.”

Doc reached up and flicked Robi. “How in God’s name can you say that? You’re talking about an American Icon. Play it again.”

“No!” Robi barked. “I refuse to listen to Elvis’ rendition of The Impossible Dream, one more time.”

Jeb shook his head. “It doesn’t inspire you.”

“No, it doesn’t inspire me.”

“Cranky.” Jeb said. “Nick, why’s your mom so cranky?”

Nick shrugged. “Don’t know. Mom, why are you so cranky?”

“For starters, we’re detouring to Memphis.”

“Graceland.” Jeb corrected. “And you were out voted. Everyone wants to stop at Graceland.”

“Better,” Doc said from the back. “Before them aliens destroy it.”

“See.” Jeb pointed at Doc. “He’s got a point. Goddamn aliens will destroy it.”

Robi looked cross at him. “You’re an ass. Plus, I’m hot. It’s fuckin hot in here.”

“Turn up the air,” Jeb suggested.

“I can’t turn up the air, we need gas. We’re using gas because you decided to take canned goods from that town.”

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Jeb chuckled. "Souvenir babe. They make canned good there. Plus, they had dumplings in a can."

"You grabbed a luxury," Robi argued. "Not a necessity."

"No, I grabbed dumplings in a can." Jeb corrected. "Have you ever had dumplings in a can? They are a necessity."

"I have," Doc replied. "Tasty."

"See." Jeb said. "Worth the stock. Besides, you took stuff from that town."

"Tampons."

"Luxury items."

"Asshole," Robi said disgusted. "Fuck. It's hot. We need gas."

"You need more than that," Jeb mumbled. "OK, exit's ahead, pull off. We'll pump gas, let you have your air, and maybe if you're nice, I'll let you have a can of dumplings. That should cheer you up."

"No, getting you out of this Humvee will cheer me up."

Nick had to ask. "Why do you hate him riding with us? He's not that bad."

"He's big," Robi snapped. "Big eats up all the cold air and causes hot air. He makes the car hot."

Jeb laughed. "Turn here."

Robi signaled.

The two lane country road would have brought about another complaint had the overturned farm truck not appeared about a mile in the distance.

At first, Robi believed it was left over from the 'drop', but as she neared and slowed down, she saw it might not be the case.

"What's this," She whispered.

"Slow," Jeb told her, wound down his window and extended his arm as a signal to H-2 to back up. "Stop here."

"Why?" Robi asked.

"Please."

Curious, she glanced at him as her foot depressed the break. "You said, please?"

"Yeah." He said focused, grabbed the binoculars, and opened the door.

"What do you see?"

"Give me a second." Jeb, leaning on the door, raised the binoculars. "This is fucked up. What happened ..." Before he could finish his sentence, a shot rang out, and ricochet off the door.

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With a wave of his hand to send H-s back, Jeb quickly jumped in H-1 as another bullet seared by. "Back it up! Fast!"

Robi threw it in reverse. "To where."

"Brush, off the road!" Jeb looked behind him, "Floor it."

Robi did, a jerk of the car, and they sped back and of the road. H-2 did the same.

"What now?" Robi asked.

"Get down. Everyone, get down." Jeb instructed and grabbed his M-16. "Hold tight." He opened the door slightly. "Who the fuck is firing at us. A Dead fuckin world and some one ..."

Robi screamed.

Her door flew open, a hand reached in, yanked her by the hair and pulled her out.

"Jeb!" Nick cried out. "My mom."

More perturbed than worried, Jeb grabbed his revolver, and swung an aim on the man who held Robi. "Tell me you're fuckin nuts right now." Jeb blasted.

Robi fought and squirmed, but his hold on her was tight and she was unable to break free, despite, her kicks and turns.

"Hold fuckin' still," Jeb ordered. "So I can blast him."

The man laughed. "You people just think you can take over, don't you. Huh? Well, you ain't getting past us."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Jeb asked, annoyed. "Robi .. tilt your head."

Robi did. Before the man could react, Jeb fired a single shot. It seared directly into his forehead. He released Robi as he fell to the ground.

Robi scurried to the truck, and for her weapon.

"Everyone stay down!" Jeb ordered. "Nick, don't get out. Grab the baby."

"Got it."

"Tate!" Jeb shouted. "What do we got?"

Belly down, on the grade of the road, Tate raised the binoculars. "Hiding behind the over turned truck, I see ten. Yeah, looks like ten men with guns." Tate turned and looked at Jeb. "Aiming at us."

"What the fuck is wrong with these people?" Jeb shook his head. "I'm not dealing with this shit. Get me the 203."

"On it." In a low run, Tate made his way to H-2. He ignored the questioned posed by Manny and Bishop, grabbed the weapon and hurried to

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Jeb who laid low. "Here. Already loaded."

"Thanks. Stay back, watch them, make sure no more of the idiots are lurking back here. I'll be back."

From her protective cover behind H-1 Robi asked, "What are you doing?"

"Ending this." Started his crawl forward,

"They don't want us here. Why don't we just turn around and go."

Jeb stopped. He peered over his shoulder at Robi. "That has go to be the most passive fucking thing I heard. No. You didn't see what's in that over turned truck. I did." Saying no more, he continue forward until he was in range. Out of sight, Jeb lifted some to aim his weapon.

He fired.

The weapon 'popped' and with a whistle sailed a canister. It landed with precision in the other side of the over turned truck, and exploded with a hiss of steam.

Tate lifted the binoculars. "They're ruining ... they're running ... too late ..." He smiled. "They're dropping. Dropping .. oh, yeah, reminds me of a certain day."

Jeb set down the weapon and waved his hand, "Tate, stay back until I call. Bishop!"

Surprised at the call of his name, Bishop poked his head around the Humvee door. "Me?"

"Um, yeah," Jeb responded. "Since I heard you're the next best shot, grab a weapon. Come with me."

"Cool." Bishop did, courtesy of Tate and joined Jeb.

Robi watched the two men, still low, make their way to the over turned truck. She then moved to Tate. "Tell me he didn't kill them men."

"Nah," Tate answered while watching his brother through the lenses. "Gassed them. Put them out. They'll be that way for a good hour."

"Won't the gas hurt him and Bishop?"

Tate squinted is face in thought. "If they don't hang back until it dissipates."

"How long?" Robi asked.

"A few minutes. It's clearing now ... yeah. They're good. They're there." He set down the binoculars. "They're at the truck."

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“What is in that truck, Tate?” Robi asked.

“Take a look.” Tate handed her the binoculars. “Hope you have a strong stomach.”

Robi took the binoculars and raised them to her eyes.

First it was body parts and then Vomit when Bishop regurgitated upon seeing the bloodbath.

From what Jeb could estimate, it looked as if there were at least twenty people killed. Twenty people that were in the back of the farm truck were bullet spewn so badly, they were literally shreds.

Deduction and evidence told Jeb, a small explosive overturned the vehicle, and then the raid commenced. The driver and front seat passenger were burned beyond recognition. But it wasn’t a truck fire. Blow torch, Jeb guessed.

He stood at the scene assessing it.

Bishop wiped the vomit from his mouth, and made his way over to Jeb confident he wouldn’t up heave again. Voice muffled from his shirt over his face, Bishop asked, “How can you stand here and stare at this?”

“I can’t.” Jeb answered. “I’m just trying to make heads or tails out of what happened and why.”

“Can you?”

“Probably not.” Jeb shook his.

“God, all these people.”

“No, kids though. That’s a good thing. I couldn’t stomach that.” Jeb said.

“How many do you think are here?”

“Twenty, twenty five. I tried counting legs but ...” Jeb paused when Bishop gagged loudly. “You OK?”

Bishop nodded.

Jeb continued, “Look at this.”

“Do I have to?”

“Not a recognizable face. Please don’t gag. Unless our murderers robbed them, there had very little personal belongings. No luggage, no boxes. A couple duffle bags.”

“Why do you think our murderers didn’t rob them?”

Jeb tapped his boot against the blood. “It’s still damp. Just happened. Maybe half hour ago.”

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“Could have been us.”

“Would have been. These people weren’t prepared. Look at them. Not one of them were very big, average people. They’re all dressed in jeans ...” Jeb tilted his head “From I can tell. Simple. No weapons. So why? Why were they killed?”

“Maybe our murders had that strain of virus that made them go mad. Robi said she’s seen it.”

“Maybe.” Jeb sighed out heavily. “Shame.”

“Dude,” Bishop chuckled.

“Dude?”

“This is like a really sensitive side of you. I didn’t know you were this sensitive.”

“hey, I’m a sensitive guy ...” Jeb paused. “Sometimes.”

“What now?” Bishop asked.

“You know what? We can’t be that low on gas. I saw a sign on the highway.”

“Yeah, next station is about twenty miles.”

“That’s not bad. We can make it. We have that spare can if we needed it ...” Jeb gave a motion twitch of his head. “Let’s just head back before these asshole wake up.”

“We’re just gonna let them go?”

“We can’t arrest them. We aren’t the law,” Jeb said. “We just move on.”

Both men turned.

Two feet from the carnage, a voice called out. Male, but thin sounding, weak perhaps.

“Hinna hume munna da.”

Both men stopped.

Quizzically, Jeb looked at Bishop. “What the hell?”

Bishop turned around. “It came from back there.”

Again, the voice shouted, this time more interruptible. “Go do not. Me help! I prisoner am.”

Jeb didn’t have a clue what the man said, but he picked up the two words. ‘Help’ and ‘prisoner’. After mumbling, “Fuckin; foreigner.” He started to move toward the call.

“Wait.” Bishop reached out. “What if it’s a trap.”

“If you were gonna set up a trap. Would you pretend to be foreign.”

“How do you know the trapper isn’t?”

“One way to find out.” Jeb walked. “You coming?”

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“Why not.” After holding up a finger to Robi and the others, squeamishly, Bishop walked around the massacre truck in his follow of Jeb.

As soon as Jeb cleared the overturned truck, he looked for where the voice called from. But he didn’t see anyone.

“Call out again,” Jeb ordered. “We can’t see you.”

“Here up. Me help!” cried the voice.

Jeb scanned. Finally he saw him. At the gas station about a block ahead, a figure was hog tie and hanging from the telephone pole. “Fuck.”

“Holy shit.” Bishop commented. “What do we do.”

“What else?” Jeb responded. “I don’t know how, but we get him down. Maybe he can tell us why this happened.”

“And if not ...” Bishop pointed to the scattered bodies of those gassed. “What about them?”

“What about them?”

“Are they dead?”

“No. out.” Jeb answered.

“Then maybe one of them can tell you why. Because I don’t know about you, but I sure as hell would like to know the reason behind slaughtering a truck full of people.”

Job nodded. “You got a point. Let’s see what pole man has to say first.”

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Tate laughed when he saw the man hanging from the pole. It was a short instinctive laugh which was accompanied by a, “Man, that reminds me of early colleges days.”

Then he helped Jeb get the man down. Cut and drop—pretty much

He was dirty, face smeared with blood and grease. A few bruises graces his face and chest from being stoned. Hung from the pole, and stoned. The rocks, multitudes of them spread about. It was a wonder he had survived.

Jeb figured because the man was little, maybe five foot two. His age was hard to tell, his face was smooth and lineless. He had no hair, but carried himself older. He wore farmer jeans and a red plaid button shirt.

While Tate kept watched on the slumbering slaughterers, Jeb, Robi and the others tended to the newbie.

“Mas,” he said. “Name is my. Water I thank you.” He took the cup and gulped it.



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Nick snickered. "He speaks like the guy in the star wars movie."

"Nah," Bishop disagreed. "He spoke more in passive voice. He speaks like a foreigner who didn't learn the language fully."

"Ah," Mas nodded with a smile. "Yes. True. Land am I new to. Refreshed. Better feel I." He handed the water to Robi.

"How do you feel?" Robi asked. "How badly to you hurt?"

Mas peeked through the buttons of his shirt. "Heal I will fast. Sore I am not. Thanks many. Kind are you so."

Jeb, tired of waiting, intervened. "What happened. Why were you hanging from a pole? Why were the people in the truck shot. I'm assuming that ..." Jeb stopped when the stranger held up his hand. "What?"

"Understand not I can. Question time at a one." Mas said. "Please?"

Jeb looked confused.

Nick nodded. "I got this one. He doesn't understand. One question at a time."

"Oh," Jeb understood. "Fine. Mas. All those people killed, were you with them?"

Mas nodded sadly. "Friends. Family of my. Travel we together. Up set here, town far not. Come strangers. Hell all to went."

Nick interpreted. "Family and fiends, they traveled together until the stranger came and all went to hell."

Jeb gave a look to Nick that conveyed, he picked that up. Jeb continued in his questioning. "So you were in the town down the road?"

"Yes." Mas said.

"Since the drop?" Jeb questioned then saw confusion on Mas' face. "Since everyone dropped dead in the earth."

"Yes. Arrive here we did. Stayed. Hunter 23 communicate. There head we soon."

"Lost." Jeb tossed his hands "Hunter 23?"

"Map?" Mas asked.

Robi quickly retrieved a map from the Humvee and gave it to Mas.

Mas opened it and indicated to Southern California. "Hunter 23. Communicate. Constantly. Go there we soon."

Rob took back the map. "So-Cal, they were communicating there. Probably until the signal stopped, and that's why they stopped here."

Mas shook his head. "Hunter 23, planned signal stopping of. Advised did we."

Robi asked. "You advised Hunter 23 to stop communicating?"

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Mas nodded. "Risky was it. Up the signal picked. Foreign nation find. Destroy." He made a painful face. "Risky was it."

Robi looked at Jeb. "So-Cal wasn't destroyed, they stopped sending signals." She tuned to Mas. "Is Hunter 23 still there?"

"Best knowledge of my. Yes." He answered.

Jeb questioned, "You said about a foreign nation finding and destroying. Do you know this for a fact?"

"Yes," Mas said. "Transient signal. Heard. Already we were here. Hear signal, transmission. Land to be cleaned. Forthcoming is arrival in forces. Hunter 23 destination for us. Defend we will to Hunter 23 aid. Got we have months of three."

Robi exhaled and made eye contact with Jeb. "This is fucked up."

"Tell me about it," Jeb said. "I didn't understand a word he said."

Robi huffed. "Let me see if I got this right. Mas, clarify." She got agreement from Mas. "Mas picked up a radio signal that we were getting invaded. Right?"

Mas nodded.

Robi continued "The invasion would be to clean the land before they arrive. Cleaning, mining, the drop. The day everyone dropped dead, right?"

"More and ..." Mas said. "To this land come wave of second. Sooner than the arrival in months of three. Wave of second clean land physically of leftover virus."

Robi nodded. "Virus first, second wave, troops perhaps to pick off what is left, then the invasion in three months."

Frantically Mas nodded "Must forces gather. Defend we must of invasion. Months of there."

"I know, I know." She stood up and lowered her voice. "So you and I were right all along."

Disgusted, Jeb exhaled. "We were attacked. They are coming."

"Second wave first," Robi said.

"If we can beat them, we may stop the full invasion." Jeb looked at Mas. "Do you know when the wave of second arrives? I mean, second wave. When do they get here?"

"Soon if already not here."

Robi understood. "You heard this all on the radio?"

"Yes, ah," Mas spoke. "Called as you will, Geek of technology. Years have been here many, land of yours. Love." He smiled. "Technology of mine advanced. Signals heard no other of can do. Sadly ... share no longer can I."

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Destroyed.” He pointed to the truck. “But ... Rebuild technology that I can do, in time of short.”

Jeb looked with question to Robi. “What?”

“He’s a computer geek. He built something that picked it up the radio transmission. It was destroyed, he can do it again.”

Mas added, “With tools of proper. Problem is it not.”

Jeb questioned. “So he can build another radio that can pick up the enemy. Awesome, can he build one where the enemy can not pick us up?”

Mas smiled brightly. “Frequency, with band, of thread length. Not heard enemy by. Hunter 23 was to build for. Be there but I must. Do I can for you.”

“Wait,” Jeb held up his hand. “These men that killed your party. Did they talk to you? Did they know you knew this?”

“Invited we did to our town. Technology showed we to them.” Mas sighed. “out they found, too, from foreign land we are. Peaceful first, said they, us on our way they sent ...”

“Jeb!” Tate called from the distance. “Gas is wearing off. They’re stirring.”

Mas continued. “Believe we did. Mean they were. Leave we decide. In truck we pack up. A mile no more down the road we go, attacked. Escape I did. Catch to torment me. Did they. Save you did. Grateful I am much.”

“Jeb!” Tate called again. “What do I do.”

Jeb looked at Mas. “They thought you guys were the enemy?”

Mas nodded sadly.

“And they let you go, let you believe you were safe and just ambushed you?” Jeb asked.

“Yes,” Mas answered.

“Thanks.” He laid a hand on Mas’ shoulder and walked away.

Robi, curious, called, “Jeb. What are you doing?”

“Answering Tate.” Jeb said as he walked. “He asked what do to with our gunmen. Bishop! Come on. We may need you.”

Robi shrugged

Bishop trotted to Jeb. “What are we doing.”

“Tate asked what we should do with them. They’re waking up. We’re taking care of this situation.”

“How?” Bishop asked. “Yu said you weren’t the law.”

“No, I’m not. Which means, really, there are no laws. That’s why they killed the truck full of people. And that’s why ...” Jeb smiled. “We’re doing

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what we're doing."

"Which is?"

Before Jeb said anything, Tate, once more called. "Jeb, waking. What do I do."

Jeb raised his weapon. "Shoot them."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *20 miles outside of Memphis*

On the road again.

There were really cramped it was almost agreed upon to get another vehicle. Because of Nick's size, he was suppose to move to H-2 with Manny, Tate, Greek and Bishop. He could huddle in the back by Bishop, side by side with Greek's prone cast body. However, Mas wanted to get to know the others, and stated since he was smaller than Nick and grateful, he didn't mind crouching in the rear of H-2.

Once they had taken off, the ride was quiet. Unusually, quiet. Robi wanted to question Jeb on why he hadn't said much at all. Mas needed for them to stop at anther small town, 'for supplies' he said and something to work on until they stopped for the night.

And since they had left, nothing was really said. Nick made comment about Mas confirming the arrival of foreign invaders, but had a hard time believing that someone in a farmers jean outfit had the mind to build and tweak a radio that would use a signal unheard to the invaders.

Robi told him not to be a fashion racist, and more than likely, the mean spirited people that shot Mas and his friends probably made him wear the farmer jeans as part of the sick joke, before they hung him on the pole. Robi felt that theory was confirmed when Mas picked up newer clothes in that small town along with electronic supplies.

Martha started fussing, just about the time, Nick was gearing up for a trip to Graceland—home of Elvis. She started crying, and wouldn't stop.

"She's hitting the bottle away," Nick said.

Doc grumbled, "She needs alien love. Or lilacs."

Nick shook his head.

"Is she wet?" Robi asked.

"I don't know." Nick replied.

"Did she poop?"

"Uh!" Nick grunted. "I don't know. And don't ask me to sniff her, her poop smells weird."

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"It's just that ..." Robi winced when Martha released a shrill cry. She shifted her eyes to Jeb who stared out the window. After giving him a curious look on his behavior, Rob tapped his leg to get his attention. "I'm gonna pull over, OK?"

"Why?" Jeb sat up.

Robi pointed to the backseat.

"Oh, OK." Jeb said distracted with a nod.

Mocking him with an 'OK', Robi signaled and pulled over. When she stepped from H-1, she held up a hand to H-2.

"Everything OK?" Manny asked as he got from H-2.

"Yeah," Robi replied in a yell. "Baby is crying. Give me a minute to change her." She walked to the side passenger's door and opened it. "You guys can stay put, I'm just gonna open the back and change her." She reached for the car seat and noticed Jeb getting out. "I don't need help."

"If the ground opens up and swallows you, you will," He said and got out.

"Thanks," Robi mumbled and lifted Martha. The baby stopped crying. "Is that it?" She spoke in a mother tone to the child. "You just need picked up" She bounced the baby some and carried her to the back. "I'll just change you anyhow. Just to be sure."

Jeb was opening the back of H-2 when she arrived. "She stopped crying."

"Yeah, but I'm just gonna change her just ..."

"Geba ma leel!" Mas cried with excitement. He clasped his hands together and raced to Robi. "Geba ma le tut me don." He shifted locked eyes on Martha. "Apologies of my. Language I speak of my. Have one you do." He smiled brightly.

"Yes."

The expression dropped from Mas' faces and he looked lost as he reached for Martha. "One me too had. Lost." He shook head. "By gun killed with others."

For some reason, this caught Jeb's attention and he looked at Mas.

Robi spoke compassionately, "I'm sorry. I've lost two children of my own." She took a deep breath. "Yours is very recent. If there's anything I can do."

Mas mocked Robi's breath the forced a smile. "This seeing helps. Beautiful."

"Yes, she is." Robi said. "Actually, she was left with Jeb."

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Jeb interjected. "But Robi came along shortly, and now we're parents to her."

"Knows does the child." Mas reached out. "Knows does she. Mother., Father." He nodded to Robi then Jeb.

Robi was going to say a rebuttal but didn't.

Mas continued, "Help you may need? Help I can give."

"I'll take you up on that." Robi winked. "Right now ..."

"Ripe she is." Mas smiled.

"That's what we're thinking" Robi replied. "I'm gonna change her."

"Ah ..." Mas nodded. "Force no can do. Occur change will happen. Soon."

Robi looked curiously at him.

Mas paused to think. "Baby ..." He pointed to Martha. "Her own will she change soon. Worry you not. Tell I can."

Robi chuckled. "I meant her diaper. Yeah, babies constantly change."

"Hair." Mas touched the golden crop. "Worry you not. Loose she will soon, too."

Robi snickered. "I know. Both my girls had a lot of hair and it fell out before they were eighteen months old."

"Hating to interrupt." Jeb stepped forward. "But, can we do the baby diaper thing? Before the ground opens up and swallows someone?"

Mas nodded. He grabbed Martha's hand and looked at the baby. "Mother. Father. Gre Anan. Jeb. Rob-bi." Brightly he smiled. "soiled garments, let go I will you." He stepped back. "ah ... Jeb?"

Jeb looked up. "Yeah?"

"Mine of attacks, planted not here. Safe. Sense I do of Foreign mines." With one more nod, he stepped back, turned and headed toward H-2.

Robi pulled forth the diaper stuff.

"Did he say what I think he said?" Jeb asked. "He senses the mines?"

Robi dropped her voice to a whisper. "I think he said 'minds', he probably thinks he psychic."

"oh." Jeb winked. "That actually makes more sense. But just incase he isn't ..." he handed her the baby wipes. "let's hurry."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Graceland – Memphis, Tennessee*

The impact of it somehow wasn't the same as when Manny visited the home of Elvis as a child. He recalled his mother crying at the gates, and at the grave of the King of Rock and Roll. He toured the Mansion, and grounds, bought some cheesy mug from the gift shop and posed for numerous pictures. He and his family were packed in the station wagon, sweating but excited.

He always vowed one day he would return.

He did, several times. But Manny supposed the impact of it all was sharing the experience with others.

In a dead US, it wasn't the same.

He sighed.

The uniforms of three security guards lay on the ground. At one time a body was in them, but like all the others, they turned to dust.

He toured the grounds again, in fact, he was the tour guide because it was his sixth trip to Graceland. Everyone loved it. But Manny kept repeating, "it lost it's impact".

Why Doc took instant photos he still didn't know.

There was a bright side. Manny finally got to explore the areas of Graceland that were always forbidden to the public.

They weren't as exciting as he thought. A part of him wished they remained hidden. But he did get one dream come true ... he was staying at the Presley Mansion.

Mas was a unique character they picked up. Manny drove him into town to the local Home Improvement store and grocer. Mas picked up items he needed to finish his radio project. Although Manny saw some of the items and couldn't fathom how Mas was going to create radios, he was encouraging.

Manny was anxious to see the completed project. Especially when Mas said, visually they have to be just as hidden as the signal. He locked himself in the dreary basement of Graceland. Tinkers and clunks emerged from there, but Mas' noise was nothing compared to the bellows of laughter that flowed



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from the main family room.

Bowl of microwave popcorn in hand, Manny adjusted the air conditioning, and walked into the living room. "Gotta love that Memphis still has electricity. Popcorn?" he held up the bowl and then set it down on the coffee table. "Tate, how's the game coming?"

Tate and Nick were positioned by the huge screen television, getting a video game prepared.

Tate answered, "Almost there. Check it out. We got a second pair." He gave a nod to Nick.

Nick held up the headset. "As soon we're hooked up, we'll enter the names. Everyone playing?"

Even Doc agreed.

Bishop heard that question as he finished getting dressed, hollered down a "Count me in." as he tossed on a tee shirt. He felt chilled, and attributed that to the air conditioning. Of course, the coolness aided in him enjoying that hot shower.

His shirt stuck to his damp body, but that was fine. He paused in the hallway to check himself out in the mirror. Usually, that wasn't something that Bishop would normally do, but he had to on this day.

*'Whoa', he thought. 'Elvis would like to do the exact same thing. I am definitely doing an Elvis tune tonight.'*

The smell of popcorn pelted him and he eagerly hurried to the living room. Despite all the noise, Baby Martha was barricaded in a chair, sound asleep. Bishop paused at her makeshift cradle which was located by the door. He chuckled on how she could sleep through the racket, then proceeded down the two steps into the main area. "We ready?" he asked, clapping his hands together.

Tate was doing something with the controller. Names and letters moved on the television screen. "Before you ask," Tate said. "There are no Elvis songs in this game."

"Fuck," Bishop winced with disappointment. He spotted Robi on the one couch, she sat alone. Manny was with Doc on the other, and Greek was propped up on his dolly near the television.

He plopped down by Robi. "You playing?"

"Are you gonna laugh if I said, 'yes'?" Robi asked.

"No, this is great. Have you ever played this game?" Bishop questioned. "It's a lot of fun."

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"I don't even sing, so I doubt it'll be fun." Robi shrugged. "But I'll try."

"That's the spirit." Bishop nudged her. "I remember when this game came out. I thought it was odd, you know singing into the game instead of pressing buttons. So like where'd you get the beer?"

Robi gave an 'up' motion of her head. "Tate stocked the bar."

"Cool. Excuse me." Like an excited kid, Bishop rushed to the bar, stepping over the table. He searched around, and found the little fridge tucked under the bar. He retrieved a beer and when he stood he peered around. "Not that I thought he'd play this game, but where's Jeb?"

Tate finally set down the controller. "He'd play. He loves this game. But he's not in the mood."

"Sleeping?" Bishop asked.

"Nope." Tate walked to the bar. "Out."

"Out?" Bishop chuckled. "What do you mean?"

"A little place down the street." Tate shrugged. "My brother's being weird. I'll just let him be until he shakes off what ever it is that's bothering him." After getting another beer, Tate found a floor position.

Bishop saw it. No one else may have, be he did. As he turned from the bar, Robi's expression all but said her attention was caught and drawn to the Jeb subject. Tate was nonchalant about it, but Robi didn't look like she was. Her eyes watched Tate as if waiting for more information.

"Hey," Bishop spoke quietly. "You OK?"

Robi nodded. "You think Jeb is?"

"I think Jeb is a big boy ..." Bishop said, then paused. "You're worried. Tate doesn't seem to be ..."

"Tate wasn't in the car with us today. No." Robi again shook her head. "He's got something going on." She exhaled and stared out.

"Come on." Bishop stood and held out his hand.

"What?" Robi asked looking at his wiggling fingers.

"You don't really want to play, I do. And you're competition eliminated. I'll walk you down the street."

She just stared curiously.

"You want to check on him right?" Bishop said. "Alleviate your worries and come back. I think one of us should check on him. I stand firm by the belief that we shouldn't be alone. That includes, big rough, tough, Jeb."

After a brief look around the room in debate, Robi grabbed Bishop's hand for leverage.

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The tiny bar and grill really was only down the street from the Graceland mansion. Bishop walked Robi there, and once it was confirmed that Jeb was inside, Bishop left.

As strange as it was, the small bar was much more inviting to her. She slipped in the dark bar, lit by dim green hanging lights. A white luminescent glow came from the back, clock with a 'clacking' sound.

'Hound Dog' played on the jukebox, and Robi moved toward the shuffling of feet she heard in the back. The pool table came in view along with the sight of Jeb. He took a drink from a beer bottle, set it on the table and lined up his shot.

Robi cleared he throat. "Is this a private game, or can anyone play?"

Hunched over, cue in hand, Jeb raised his eyes. "Robi." He stood straight. "I thought you'd be with the others."

She shrugged. "I was. Heard you were here." She moved to the pool table "I haven't been to a bar in ages."

"I'd think this would be the last place you'd want to be."

"Why's that?" She asked.

"You have a hard time with me."

"True but ..." her fingers ran over the felt. "We are parents and ..." She snickered. "We should try to make this work."

"Absolutely." Jeb partially smiled.

Robi tilted her head. "Your mouth is working again."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't smiled all day. I see one trying to peep out. Usually you smile a lot."

"Not much to smile about." He set down his stick. "Wanna beer?"

"I'd love one."

"They have imported."

"No way."

Jeb walked toward the bar, waving Robi to follow. He took a bartender's position. "What can I get you?"

"Ah," Robi slipped onto a bar stool. "Give me a beer, and a shot of Jack."

"My kind of lady." Jeb lined up two shot glasses and then scanned the bottles behind him. "jack." He found it, and grabbed the bottle. He poured two shots.

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"Thanks." Robi accepted it. "So, why didn't you want to play the game?"

"I was ... pool."

With a single shake of her head, Robi held up her shot glass, tipped it to Jeb's and downed it. She gasped. "I'm talking ..." She paused to hit her chest. "I'm talking about the video sing along game."

"I wanted to be alone." Jeb poured Robi and he another.

"Want me to leave?"

Without hesitation Jeb replied, "No. I'd like you to hang out with me. I think ... I think you and I have a lot of things in common. We just can't figure them out because you're always fighting with me. Cheers." He lifted his shot glass.

Robi kept up, downing hers as well. "You're right. You annoy me. But ...I'm not here to be annoyed, I'm here to find out what's going on with you."

"What do you mean?" Jeb showed her the bottle in offer of another shot.

Robi shook her head. "All day, after we found Mas, you've been quiet. You wanna talk."

Jeb stared at her for a moment. "Yeah, I would."

"Wow."

"What?"

"I didn't expect that."

"You think I'm like you?" Jeb asked. "You think I want to shut out the world. Be tough and not anyone in?"

"Well, yeah."

"Well ... no." He said soft. "Granted, there are things I won't tell that bother me. But there are times you need some one."

"Do you need someone, Jeb?"

"Yeah, someone that isn't my brother, or someone that won't think I'm being lame."

"Then I'm that one. Talk."

Jeb nodded and leaned into the bar. He ran his hand over his face with a heavy breath. "What did I do today, Robi? I had my brother help me kill eight men today. Eight."

Robi looked upon him. "This is what's troubling you?"

Jeb nodded.

"Understandable. You're human. Yes, it will bother you. My God, I'd

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worry if it didn't."

"I killed eight men."

"Who killed about twenty-five people," Robi said.

"But was I as bad as they were?"

"Let me ask you this? Would you senselessly kill a group of people for no reason?"

"No."

"You played Judge, jury and executioner, Jeb," Robi said. "If you didn't, if you let them go, who is to say they wouldn't have followed us, or ... wouldn't have done that to the next town of people they hit. No." She shook her head. "If they killed Mas' people then they would have killed others. Doing so without cause. That's not you. You didn't do a wrong."

After a pause, Jeb said, "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now ...I'll allow you to feel bad, OK, it's justifiable. As long as you allow me to try to make you feel better."

The corner of Jeb's mouth raised in a smile. "You're on."

Robi pushed her shot glass forward. "Set us up."

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The game was pretty simple.

The players wore a headset with a microphone attached and did their darnedest to sing along with the chosen song. Compete in a Karaoke video game tournament. The better you do, the higher the score.

Doc made it.

He didn't get booed from the game, but the needle indicator that showed his points barely rose. Angry, he whipped off the headset, and stumbled his way to his seat.

"Four thousand points. What in God's name is that? I did good."

Nick laughed. "You shouldn't have picked a chick song."

"I have a high voice," Doc said.

Nick scoffed with a laugh. "Yeah, sure."

"The game hates me," Doc griped.

Bishop huffed. "Why are you complaining. At least you didn't get booed. I didn't make it halfway through the song."

"You suck, that's why," Doc answered.

"Thank you. Thank you very much for that." Bishop groaned. "I can't wait to see how well Greek does. Hopefully as bad as me."

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Doc gasped. "Look at you shooting down the cripple. I hope he kicks your ass."

"He probably will."

Tate rolled Greek to in front of the television. He adjusted the headset on him, the moved to the game. "Ready."

"Yeah," Greek cleared his throat. "I use to be one heck of a karaoke singer."

Tate laughed. "Then you should do well." He stated the game.

Greek did well. Despite the fact that his head and body were duct taped to the red dolly. He sang his song.

Bishop made his way to the Elvis bar and to where Nick was pouring a soft drink. Bishop sulked.

"Dude, you can't get mad," Nick said. "Greek said he was good at Karaoke."

"Yeah, but I'm highly competitive in video games. And . . . look at him." Bishop gave an up motion of his head. "He's so into it, he's rocking the dolly."

The dolly moved forward and back in a rocking motion as Greek sang.

Nick titled his head. "That can't be good."

"Sure, look at his score."

"That's not what I mean. I mean he can . . ."

Before Nick could finish his sentence, the dolly rocked hard and tipped straight back with a slam to the floor.

Greek kept singing.

Nick laughed hard and Bishop squealed in his laughter.

"Mom is missing this," Nick said.

"Poor Robi." Nick gave a single shake of his head and poured a drink, as he watched Tate lift Greek upright, and Greek didn't miss a beat. "She's probably miserable."

"She doesn't get a long with Jeb."

"Not at all." Bishop said. "Knowing her she's arguing and getting angry."

"But we need to remember," Nick added. "It was her choice to be miserable tonight. She choose to go to Jeb."

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Robi laughed so hard, she had tears in her eyes. "That's a daughter for

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you.” She pushed her glass forward.

Jeb refreshed it as he leaned over the bar. “I wouldn’t know, two weeks with her and her kid was enough to show me fatherhood wasn’t for me. Never again did I date a woman with kids.”

“You do well with baby Martha.”

“Baby Martha seems rather easy,” Jeb commented. “She really does nothing.”

“She’s still immobile.”

“True and unable to talk.”

“Or embarrasses you in public.”

“Never again.”

“I got news for you,” Robi whispered as if she needed to. “There’s no more public.”

Snickering, Jeb paused to sing a line from the Elvis song that played on the jukebox. “I love this song.” He sang again.

This made Robi laugh. “You love Elvis.”

“True.”

“You’re funny, Jeb.”

“Hal” Jeb cocked his head. “I know this. I always thought this. But, you call me an asshole so much, I was starting to doubt my humor.”

“Don’t doubt your humor, just understand, that you can be an asshole.”

Jeb tilted his head in a ‘true’ stating manner. He walked around the bar. “Do you shoot pool.”

“Well or at all?”

“Either.”

“I shoot pool. Not well.”

“Wanna play?”

“Sure,” With a shrug, Robi slid from the stool. She swayed. “Whoa.”

“Too much?”

“Nah, got my balance now.” She smiled.

“Then let’s go ...” Jeb paused, he tilted his head and smiled. “Hey, great tune.”

“Is there an Elvis song you don’t like.”

“In the Ghetto. But that’s not a racist thing.”

Robi snickered.

“Dance?” Jeb held out his hand.

“With me?” Robi asked sarcastically.

Jeb looked right to left. “No one else is here. And seeing how all Elvis

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tune only last two minutes, make up your mind before the song is over.”

“I haven’t danced in...” Before Robi could finish, Jeb had snatched her and pulled her close. He cupped his hand in hers.

With a drunkard laugh, Robi said. “You’re too tall, I’ll injure my neck if I look up to you.”

Jeb hunched. “Better.”

Robi laughed.

“Ok, now I know I’m not that funny.”

Robi crinkled her face, “I’m a little drunk.”

“Me too.”

“It’s been a while since I danced.”

“Me, too.” Jeb replied. “Wait. You were married.”

“He didn’t dance. So it’s been a while.”

There was a silent moment while they just danced. Then ...

Robi peered up to Jen, “Can I tell you something without sounding mushy, or corny?”

“Good God.” Jeb graveled in a playful way. “You’re gonna say something emotional. You are female.”

“Very much so.”

“Don’t I know that,” Jeb murmured.

“What was that?”

Jeb shook his head.

Robi continued, “I know I portray to be cold. I’m not. I lost a good bit of my life when the drop happened. All I have left is Nick. This.... this here with you is nice. Even if it’s only dancing, being in a pair of arms that are holding me...” she stopped.

“What?” Job softened his voice. “You know, you say the words arms and hold in the same sentence, I think ... I don’t know ... hug?”

Robi looked up.

“When is the last time someone hugged you other than your son?”

“I should ask you the same.”

Jeb shrugged. “Not since before the drop. Now you.”

“That would be before the drop for me as well.”

“All this tragedy and ...”

Robi reached up and covered his mouth. “Before you say anything. If I wanted to someone to hold me, or hug me, I am sure I could have asked. I kept myself at arms distance.”

“You’re not at arms distance now.”



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“No, I’m not.”

“So, are you asking me for a hug?”

Robi snickered. “I don’t believe those words came out of my mouth. I was just saying, you know, making a statement.”

Jeb nodded. “I understand and...” He pulled her closer. “Here we are two people that probably both could use a really, big long hug...”

“You’re too tall for a good hug.”

With a tilted head, Jeb gave an ornery smile. “Really?” he slid his hands to her waist, lifted Robi, and set her on the edge of the bar. “This will work. Actually, this will work fine.” Inching to her, Jeb’s body parted Robi’s legs. Hands on her waist he scooted her closer. “This will work fine.”

“And where in this entire conversation, Mr. Hoyt,” Robi spoke soft. “Did you get the idea that I wanted a dance, a hug, or even to be in a...” She glanced down. “Compromising position like this.”

Jeb laughed. “You are tough. I’m trying to break a barrier here.”

“What barrier?”

“Between us.” Jeb said. “I mean all we do is bicker. Finally, we aren’t bickering. I’m seeing a ray of hope, which is needed to raise our baby.”

Robi laughed at that.

“I like this Robi. The Robi who laughs, and is human, and is not fighting with me.”

“You’ll change you’re mind. I’ll start fighting with you again.”

“Man,” Jeb tossed back his head. “You’re killing me.”

“What?”

“You keep throwing back at me. I say this ... you say that ... when all I’m trying to do is...” Jeb paused.

“Hug me?”

“Actually,” Jeb winked. “I’m leaning more toward kissing you.”

The smile dripped from Robi’s face and was replaced with a blank expression.

“Uh-oh.” Jeb cocked back his head. “That was the wrong thing to say. What’s with the look? Should I wince? Prepare for the verbal lashing?”

“The look is because... you made my stomach flutter when you said that.”

“No way.”

Robi nodded.

“So could this be a go?”

Again, Robi kept eye contact, nodded.

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Half smile, Jeb leaned toward her. "I really made your stomach flutter."

"Yep." She whispered.

"Whoa. Pressure's on." His hand nearly encompassed her entire face, as Jeb laid his palm on her cheek. Staring, he lifted his index finger and ran it down the strand of hair that dangled, then slid his hand to the back of her neck.

Robi smiled with a slight snicker. "You're really coming off romantic."

"I'm a romantic guy."

With snort, Robi laugh.

"Ok," Jeb chuckled. "Maybe not. But I can start." Lips parted, other hand to her face, Jeb brought Robi to him, and he kissed her.

Soft. Tender. Barely moving. Barely without the tiny sounds of immature laughs from them both as they struggled to find their niche in the bar-moment kiss.

Then they did.

The tenderness morphed into intensity. Mouths widening, moving slightly harder.

Robi's hands went from resting on the bar to Jeb's hips, his back, until her fingers gripped his head in her absorbency of the moment.

They paused ... briefly for a breath, and then continued.

Jeb's palm cupped the back of her head, as his other moved freely down her side to her leg, then to the bar.

Crash.

Glasses, a bottle of Jack, and beer, flew from the bar as Jeb made room, and followed Robi's lead, bringing his body to hers and down to that bar. He nudged between her parted legs, lowered his weight, and inched slowly and gently upon her.

Robi gasped. Mouth opening, eyes rolling as his lips sought out her neck. Elvis Presley's version of, 'You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog', clicked into play as Jeb brought this mouth to Robi's.

Another kiss and then he stopped.

Breathing heavily, mouth hovering, he looked at her.

"What's wrong?" Robi asked.

He paused and said, "I love this song."

This caused them both to laugh.

"Do you know what we're doing her?" he whispered, then lifted some. "Not that we were mind you, but ..." He took hold of her arms, and lifted her to a sitting position as he stood upright. "Something is just not right

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about having sex on a bar, while Elvis is playing on the jukebox in his own hometown.”

“Jeb, please, we weren’t gonna have sex.”

A pause.

The both lowered their heads.

Jeb looked at Robi through the tops of his eyes, “The last thing I want to do is have sex with you,” he said softly.

Robi’s eyes widened.

“No, let me add ...” he held up his hand. “On a bar.”

Her head tilted in wonder.

“Come on, Robi.” Jeb’s voice was graveling tender. “Our world as we know it is done. Whether it’s just the US or the world. Things are different. There’s not lot of people left. And you know if two people are lucky enough to connect then the last thing they should do is start out their connection on the top of a bar.” He swallowed, then brought his lips to her ear with a whisper, “It’s should be different. Special. And not when we’re drinking.”

Robi cocked back her head with a look of shock, then grinned with a wide look. “Why, my Dear Mr. Hoyt. I do believe I just gained more respect for you.”

“Really?”

“Really. Help me down.”

Jeb did.

Robi walked around the bar and grabbed a new bottle, and two glasses. “Different. Special. Not drinking.” She winked. “You go it. But tonight. What do you say about this ...” She held up the bottle. “Elvis, and a little highly competitive pool?”

Jeb took the bottle and glasses from her, then leaned down and kissed Robi. “You’re on.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*July 4th*

Bishop heard baby Martha crying, and knowing he was the first to bed, decided to be the one to rise with her. He made her breakfast in Elvis' kitchen while he himself had coffee. All was quiet for about an hour until the house started to wake.

Greek was the first calling out, "I have to peel!"

Bishop remained in the kitchen, hearing Manny scuffle about to help him. The goddamn it, I peed on my cast' comment made Bishop smile, along with "Someone take these off of me, I can walk now!"

Holding Martha in his arms, Bishop held the bottle to her while he read an old newspaper and sipped his hot beverage.

He looked up when Tate scuffled in the kitchen at a quick pace. "Morning," Tate said. "Can I have some?" he indicated to the coffee pot.

"Be my guest."

"Thanks." He poured some. "Hey, you didn't by chance see a saw around this house did you?"

"A saw? Why do you need a saw?" Bishop asked.

"We're taking off Greek's body cast." Tate replied nonchalantly.

"What!" Bishop gasped in shock. "He only crushed his legs a few days ago."

"He says he's fine."

"Feeling fine and being fine are two different things," Bishop chuckled as he spoke. "Honestly, he's not fine."

Mas entered the kitchen in his farmer Joe wear, responding to Bishop's comment as he did, "Of Greek you speak? Fine is he. Done job of her Martha did healed."

This made Tate stop and Bishop look up.

"Her?" Bishop nodded down to the baby. "Did I hear you right, Martha did her job and healed Greek?"

Mas smiled. "Talented is she. Gifted."

Tate laughed.

Bishop tried to restrain. "If she healed Greek, she is talented."

"Ah," Mas nodded. "Of much. See I do you feed her."

"Um, yeah." Bishop looked at the bottle.

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“Soon very soon no need.” Mas said. “Week of no more, she will herself feed.” He touched her head. “Ripe she is.”

Tate started to walk from the kitchen. “I want out before you change her.”

Mas shook his head. “Herself she will change.”

“Uh, yeah.” Tate replied.

“Tate of Brothers Hoyt?” Mas called. “Ready is the radios. Demonstration soon?”

“Yeah, sure.” Tate said. “I’ll get the others after we get healed Greek out of his plaster armor.”

“I await.” Mas said.

“Good.” Tate walked out, stopped, poked his head back in and thinking Mas couldn’t see, signed to Bishop with a twirling finger around his temple. But his ornery smile turned slightly ‘busted’, when Mas turned around.

“Ah, to you too my friend,” Mas smiled and twirled a finger around his own temple.

Tate walked out.

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Mas had returned to working on his radio presentation, telling Bishop, in his own style, the he wanted the Brother’s Hoyt to be impressed. Bishop was to fetch Mas when Jeb and Robi woke up. Bishop didn’t have a problem with that, but when Jeb or Robi would wake up remained to be seen. He was sleeping long before they came in, and the last Bishop looked at the time, it was two am.

Nick had rolled out of bed and into the kitchen, helping himself to the waffles Bishop had made.

“Sleeping,” Bishop replied to the question of Martha’s whereabouts. “She got cried, I changed her, fed her, and she fell asleep.”

“That baby sleeps a lot.”

“I think babies are supposed to.”

“That much?”

Bishop shrugged. “Your mom would know best.”

“Mas says it’s normal.” Nick said.

“Mas says a lot of things.”

“Heard he built the radios,” Nick commented.

“And by what Manny said, he hasn’t a clue out of what.”

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“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Manny said he didn’t get anything that would even remotely make a radio.”

“Weird.”

Bishop nodded, and then looked down when an electric saw lay on the table.

“Found one,” Tate said. “Can you believe it? This should work well.”

Bishop shook his head. “You can’t take the cast off a man whose legs are crushed. He’s not healed.”

“Mas says Baby Martha healed him.”

Bishop rolled his eyes when Tate laughed. “Why are you removing his cast? You know it’s not time.”

“Honestly?” Tate asked.

“Please.”

“Manny wants to do a better cast.” Tate said. “He was able to find actually fiberglass cast material when he took Mas out.”

“Ah,” Bishop nodded. “Does Greek know this?”

“Nah,” Tate flung out his hand. “He’ll find out when it hurts. Plus maybe we’ll get Doc to tell him.”

“Tell him what?” Doc asked as he entered into the kitchen.

Tate replied, “Tell Greek he can’t have his casts off.”

“If he feels better why not?” Doc shrugged and walked to the coffee pot.

It was then, as Doc passed him, that Bishop saw Juanita. Doc had placed her on the table. Bishop stared at the head. “Doc?”

“Yeah.” Doc returned to the table with coffee.

“Why did you have Juanita?” Bishop asked, ignoring Tate’s snickering.

“Welp, son.” Doc slid at the table. “I had a few last night. She had a few last night.”

“Oh, my God.” Bishop covered his mouth.

“Yep. Her and I talked all night. What a smart gal, she is. Talked and talked.” He exhaled and stroked her head. “We got into a deep conversation about them aliens. Damn aliens kept projecting in my room. One even pretended to be Elvis. Like I couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Oh, my God.” Bishop repeated.

Nick and Tate laughed.

“Don’t you worry,” Doc said. “Nothing sexual happened between us.”

Bishop heaved out a breath. “Thank God.”

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“But don’t be surprised if it gets there,” doc winked.

“Oh my God.”

Tate nudged Bishop. “What was it you told Robi. Everyone needs a little head.”

Nick choked, and stood up. “I’m gonna wake my mom. She’s been sleeping long enough.”

Tate asked, “You think she’s OK?”

Nick nodded. “Yeah, probably just hung over. When she drinks a lot, she sleeps a lot.

Tate peered up while examining the saw, “Can you pound p\on Jeb’s door while you’re up there?”

With a reply of ‘Sure thing’ Nick went in search of his mom.

They remained in the kitchen in a sea of silence until, a loud, Nick ‘Uh!’ made them all jump up.

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Robi was sleeping half on her stomach and half on her side, and jumped to a sitting position when she heard Nick’s scream.

“What? What’s wrong?” Robi then winced and grabbed her head. “Fuck.”

Nick pointed. “Why are you guys in bed together?”

“Huh?” Robbie looked behind her and grunted. “Jeb.”

“Hmm.” Jeb lay on top of the covers, fully clothed like Robi.

Robi shook her head as she grabbed it. “We passed out drunk.”

Jeb spoke, “Speak for yourself. I just fell asleep drunk”

“Dudes,” Nick said. “This is like, really disturbing walking in and seeing my mom in bed with a dude.”

“As opposed to a woman?” Jed asked.

Nick gasped.

“You guys are both asses.” Robi swung her feet over the bed. “God, my head. What the hell did you do to me last night.”

Nick held up his hand. “I don’t want to know.”

Robi grunted.

Jeb sat up. “I feel fine.” He laid his feet on the floor and slipped in his boots, not tying them. “No one made you kill a fifth of Jack.”

Nick asked, “You killed a fifth?”

Jeb nodded.

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“No,” Robi said. “Close. But I never get sick off of Jack.”

“When’s the last time you drank that much Jack and chased it with beer?” Jeb questioned and stood.

“I don’t know.”

“There you have it.” Jeb walked around the bed and to the door. “I’m hitting the head and then getting coffee. Nick, is everything OK?”

“Oh, yeah, I was just coming to wake my mom, you too. Mas is ready to show his radios.”

“Let’s go check them out. You coming, Nick?”

“Yep.” He followed Jeb to the door. “Oh, Mom. I’m traumatized.”

Robi only glared at him.

“See ya, downstairs,” Nick pulled the door closed.

Robi plopped backwards on her head. She would join them downstairs as soon as she stopped getting the urge to gouge her eyeballs from her sockets.

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If the daggering pain wasn’t bad enough, Robi was ready to kill whoever it was that was using the saw.

“Tate,” Jeb replied as he handed Robi coffee.

“God, kill him.” She walked to the table where Mas had items covered.

“Rob-bee.” Mas smiled. “Well are you not?”

“No,” Robi said. “I have a terrible head ache.”

“Sorry am I,” Mas said.

“Its her own fault,” Nick interjected. “She drank too much last night.”

Mas looked curiously at him. “Important are liquids.”

“True.” Nick nodded. “But not alcohol. That’s not important.”

Mas gasped. “Alcohol.” His eyes widened. “Poison it is.” He looked horrified. “Us Deadly to.”

Robi nodded. “Thanks for the lecture.”

Mas shuddered, then chuckled. “Death them to be, should alcohol invaders be fed. A ha!” he nodded. “Yes?”

They all just stared at him.

Jeb leaned into Robi. “He wants us to get the enemy drunk.”

Mas nodded. “Solution. Yes. Difficult is it, know I.”

“True,” Jeb said. “But you can easily kick a drunk man’s ass.”

Robi winced. “Can you not talk so loud.”



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"I'm not ..." Jeb put his lips ear her ear and spoke louder. "Talking loud."

"Asshole."

Mas left the room, and returned with a sleeping Martha. "Resting, Martha is. At best is the gift. Her will you hold. Heal shall she." He extended the baby to Robi. "Tightly."

Nick looked up at Robi. "He wants you to hold the baby."

Bishop came in the kitchen, "Who took the baby ...oh there."

Nick said, "Mas wants Martha to heal Mom. She has a headache."

Bishop snickered "Eh said she healed Greek."

Nick chuckled as well, "Yeah, that's why Tate's removing his cast."

Just as Robi's hand touched upon Martha, she stopped. "Tate's doing what?"

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The buzz of the saw filled the air along with Tate's laughter. Robi burst into the basement workshop, and yanked the plug, stopping all power.

"What ..." she said out of breath. "Are you doing?"

Tate lifted his goggles. "Hey, Robi."

"I said ..." she walked to him. "What are you doing?"

"Cutting off Greek's cast." Tate replied.

"Uh!"

"Hey, Robi." Greek said brightly. "No more peeing on myself. They come off today."

"No, they don't." She argued. "Manny." She turned to Manny who was covering his mouth in attempt to hide his laughter. "You guys think this is funny? He crushed his goddamn legs. Broke them in so many places, I don't know if they'll ever heal, let alone heal in a few days." She winced in pain. "All of you need your heads examined."

Greek declared. "I feel great!"

"You feel doped on morphine." Robi replied.

"No," Greek insisted. "I haven't had any. And I feel healed."

"You're not healed." Robi argued.

"Rob-bee." Mas stepped forward. "Healed she did, Martha of legs of Greek."

Tate nodded. "What he said. Healed."

Robi huffed out.

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Just then ... crash. The left cast fell forward from Greek and on to the floor.

“Great.” Robi tossed her hands up.

Crash.

The other fell forward as well.

Robi covered her face.

Manny, snickering, approached her quietly, speaking in her ear. “We found an orthopedic clinic. We have the stuff to put a fiber glass cast on him.”

Dragging her facial skin, Robi slid her hand down her face. “Why would you guys fuck with me like that?”

Manny shrugged and pointed to Tate.

“Asshole,” Robi snapped, then stepped to him. “You ...” he eyes shifted when she saw Greek move his leg. “No.” She turned to warn, but it was too late.

Greek stepped forward with one leg, then the other. “Whoa. Yes!” he hoped. “Is this great or what?” e jumped up and down.

“Hold it.” Robi said and bent down. She took a closer look at his legs. “Jeb?”

“Yeah.” Jeb joined her.

“Where are the bruises and abrasions?” Robi asked. “They were there, right?”

“Were.” Jeb said after crouching to peek. “Aren’t now.”

“Fuck.” Robi stood up.

Greek laughed in excitement. “Watch me dance a jig.” He started to dance about. “I’m healed. I can go to the bathroom. Speaking of which ...” He darted to the steps. “Think I’ll go now. I’ve been holding it in.” he walked up a few steps. “Terrible gas, I’ve had.”

Tate and Manny both mumbled. “We know.”

Mas stood proudly with Martha. “Healed she did.”

“Goddamn Aliens,” Doc proclaimed. “At least they’re good for some things.”

Offended Mas clutched Martha. “Meanly so speaks he.”

Robi pushed in on here eyeballs, her face crinkled in horrible pain. She paused in her pain wallowing moment, opened her eyes, and looked at Mass. “Give me the baby.”

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“Gone?” Jeb asked.

“Gone,” Robi replied as they huddled in the kitchen. She snapped her finger. “Three seconds after I held her. Gone.”

“Maybe your sinuses shifted.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I get sinus headaches. Sometimes I wake up, they are irritated and need to just shift a little.”

“Wow. I get them, too. I didn’t think about it.”

“See.”

“What about Greek?” she asked.

“That one I can’t explain.”

“Ready am I,” Mas called out.

Jeb, gently taking Robi by the arm, turned her from the counter and toward the table where everyone stood around. “This ought to be interesting.”

The items were covered, and then Mas lifted the cloth and proudly revealed what he had done. ‘La-Wa.’ He boasted.

Bishop commented, “You and Doc will be great friends.”

Mas gave a smile to Bishop but didn’t quite get the sarcasm behind it.

On the table were a few cap to ketchup bottles some pickle and olive jar lids. Various lids encircled two Whitman Candy boxes.

“Work will they,” Mas explained. “Here through, receive.” He laid his hand on the candy box. “Extra. Waves heard no, enemy by.” He laid his hand on the other. He then picked up a ketchup cap and handed it to Jeb, he gave another to Tate. “Test shall you. Speak with button press, listen with button no.”

Nick explained, “You press the button to speak and when you want to hear ...”

“I know.” Jeb looked at the ketchup cap. “You can’t be fuckin’ serious. Look, Mas ...”

“Check it out,” Tate said. “Little screen inside.”

Jeb turned the cap over; indeed there was a screen and the tiniest of black buttons on the side. “My fingers are to big for this.”

“Ah,” Mas grabbed a pick jar lid. “This try.”

Jeb grumbled.

Tate didn’t. In fact, he was up for playing the game. “Hey, Jeb, I’ll go in

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the other room and try.”

Jeb grumbled again.

Still snickering like a school kid, Tate darted in the other room.

Mas indicated to Jeb to put the lid near his ear.

Jeb wouldn't.

Robi nudged him. “Don't be grumpy, do it. Be nice.”

“Fine. I'll put a fuckin' pickle lid to my ear.” He raised it. “There are you ...”

Silence.

“What?” Robi asked. “What is it?”

Jeb looked at the lid. “Fuck me.” He searched for the black button and pressed, bringing the lid to his ear. “Yeah, Tate, I really fuckin' hear you.” He handed the lid to Robi.

She held it near her ear. Her eyes lit up. “He's singing.” She turned to the others. “They work.”

Mas nodded and waved out his hand to the table. “Made I did, all for enough.” He reached to the table. “Ah, Rob-bee. Special. You for.” Proudly he headed her a lid to a baby food jar.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Some would describe Jeb as looking ‘weird’ speaking into the lid of an olive jar. He preferred the ketchup cap, but that was too small for his fingers. “Roger that, Tate. What about northeast?”

“We’re heading that way now. But other than that, it’s a dead zone.”

“Dogs?”

“Negative.”

“The mall?”

“Negative there, too. No dogs.”

Mas, who was seated at a small table near Jeb in the mansion family room, tugged Jeb’s arm. “Wave of second?”

Jeb sighed out. “Mas needs to know if you’ve seen any second wave?”

“Negative there, too.”

“Negative.” Jeb told Mas. “Bishop has ...” With a single hand movement, Jeb flipped a notepad. “A regional Hospital here as a possible survivor link?”

“We’re gonna stop there en route.” Tate said, “What about supplies.”

“Greek is working on that. You, two be careful.”

“Did you mention to Robi, about that thing?” Tate asked.

“Not yet. Later. She’s doing something. I know Bishop and Nick are getting antsy, they want to go to the mall.”

“Want Manny and I to swing by there and check on them.”

“Uh ...” Jeb paused. “No. No. By the time you hit north, come back, they’ll be here. Just check in.”

“Roger that, over.”

Jeb pulled the lid from his ear. “This is amazing.”

“You I thank, Jeb.” Mas said.

“Fuckin’ awesome. How do you power it?”

Mas pointed up.

“What? Is there a receiver in the mansion?”

“Sun.”

“The sun?” Jeb laughed and looked down at the Whitman candy box. “The sun. Seriously.. How?”

Mas pointed to a tiny glass piece embedded in the letter ‘a’ on the box. “Sun. Advance, are we home of my. Technology than you.”

“I’d say. Where exactly are you from?” Jeb asked.

“Far away miles of many. Chichitatan.”

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“Chi ...”

“Ch-itch-a-ta-tan.”

“So you kind of skip out the itch in the word.”

Mas nodded.

“Chichitatan. Hmm.” Jeb shook his head. “Doesn’t sound familiar. Where is that near, Turkey?”

Mas started to answer, but Bishop walked in the room.

“Hey, guys,” Bishop spoke, “Any word from Robi. Can me and Nick head over there?”

Jeb land a hand on Mas’ shoulder “We’ll let you get back to work.” He walked across the room. “Has Nick spoken to his mother.”

“She keeps saying in a minute. We want to go to the mall.”

“Greek gave you a list?” Jeb asked.

“Few clothing items. Nothing spectacular.” Bishop shrugged. “What do you think.”

Mas stood. “Mall?” he clapped his hands. “Wonder of I. Mall may Go I?”

Bishop looked at Jeb for an answer.

Mas touched his chest. “Wave of second, see can I. Know can I. Useful protection of Bishop and Nick.” He turned. “Radio take we.”

Jeb nodded a few times. “Sure, you can go.”

Bishop winced.

“Stop it. Take him. He may be useful. He hasn’t be wrong yet.” Jeb raised an eyebrow. “He got a grip on technology we don’t. Says his country is more advanced.”

Bishop snickered.

“Laugh if you must, but look at our radios.” Jeb lifted the olive lid.

Bishop cleared his throat. “You’re right. Where’s he from anyhow?”

“Somewhere outside of Turkey. Chi ...”

Mas corrected. “Chichitatan.”

“Yeah,” Jeb said.

“Hmm.” Bishop thought. “You sure that’s Turkey. Maybe it’s outside of Asia. You know the way they are. Plus ... he knows about the enemy. That may be close.”

“Does he look Asian to you?” Jeb asked. “No. Turkish. And get Nick, and then stay put here, I’ll go see what the hell Robi is up to.” Jeb started to leave the room. “Play with Mas or the baby.”

“The baby is sleeping.”

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“Again?” Jeb asked.

Mas smiled. “Changing is she. Much rest. Soon ...” he chuckled and waved out her hand. “Rest like me, will she need not much. See, shall you. Father .... Proud be.” He nodded.

“Um, ... yeah. Thanks.” Jeb said and walked out.

Bishop smirked. “He is a proud father, isn’t he?”

“Ah,” Mas nodded. “Prouder be shall he, when Martha of baby change. See you. Wait.” Mas winked.

“Luckily, we have a few years to wait. Right.” Bishop said.

“Years?” Mas shook his head “days.”

“Days, huh?” Bishop said pacifying. “Wow. Cool. OK, I’ll be back. I’m gonna get Nick.”

“Mall?” Mas asked as Bishop started to leave.

“Yep. We’re going to the mall.”

After Bishop walked out, Mas clapped his hand together once, and then returned to working on his radio.

\*\*\*

Clearly, it was an office, and the door was closed. Jeb knocked once on the door and opened it. An empty reception area greeted him, and he called out, “Robi?”

“Back here.”

He followed the sound of her voice to the double oak doors. He knocked again, and entered “Hey.”

Robi peered up from behind a huge desk. “Hey.”

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting on Greek.”

“For?” Jeb stepped in.

“Plans, feed back.” She set down the pen and leaned back.

“For the trip.”

“Of course.”

“Aren’t we a team, Robi?” Jeb asked.

“Sure.”

“So, if we’re ea team. How come I’m not involved in this?”

Robi chuckled. “I’m sorry. I ... I didn’t think you wanted involved. Everyone usually just leaves it up to me, and asks what we’re going to do.”

“Well, my friend, not me.” Jeb walked to the desk. He sat on the edge

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before he, one leg touching the floor. "I don't want you to feel you have to carry this alone."

"I'm not."

"I'm here."

"I know. And you ... you have enough to worry about with our safety."

Jeb smiled. "Thank you for that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you trust me with your safety."

Robi turned her views to the map, and lifted a pencil. "You're amazing, I never seen anyone react like you." She shook her head, not looking at him. "I was in the service for nine years and I ..."

Jeb grabbed her hand, stopping her from writing. "I didn't know that."

"Oh." Robi looked up. "That was a while back."

"Why did you leave?"

"Shipping off to war was a bit much with motherhood," Robi said. "My husband got tired of moving around."

"What branch?"

"Army."

"Oh, yeah." Jeb smiled. "Nurse?"

"You got it." She winked. "Field triage."

"Rank?"

"Captain."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am." Jeb smiled, and slid from the desk, he crouched before her.

"What are you doing?"

"Hitting on you."

"Jeb," Robi sighed out. "I don't know if you and I starting something is a good idea."

"You're right." Jeb nodded. "It's not. It's a great idea."

"No, hear me out. I just don't know how that will go over. I mean, we're taking this small group of people cross the country. People tend to feel ganged up on when there's a couple involved."

"Sort of like, he does what he does because she wants him to do it."

"Exactly," Robi said. "Or she does what she does because he says so. No one will ever distinguish our opinions as our own. Make sense?"

"Absolutely. OK."

"Sorry."

"No problem," He leaned into her and kissed her. "We'll just keep it



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secret.” He stood up.

“Jeb ...”

“Nope. Don’t want to hear it. OK ...” Jeb turned and looked over the map, ignoring her laughter. “Where we headed.”

“Definitely, if we stay on forty it will take us nearly to So-Cal.” Robi said.

“But we really can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Vegas.”

Robi chuckled. You really wan to go there.”

“Aside from the fact that Bishop got a signal, yeah, I’d like to. Seriously, what do we have to lose?”

Robi shrugged. “True.”

“And we do have Weatherford, OK. It should take us about eight hours to get there.” Jeb informed. “I say, we leave tomorrow morning, stop there, look for survivors, spend the night, and head to El Paso. But there is something Tate and I want to do before we leave.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll tell you about it later, but it’ll take us a few hours.”

“That’s fine.” Robi nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Oklahoma City?”

Greek’s voice entered the office. “I’m leery about stopping at major cities.” He stepped in. “We just don’t know what is there. We could run into people like the men who killed Mas’ town.”

Jeb folded his arms. “Makes sense, but what about survivors?”

Greek shrugged. “Our survival is most important. Wouldn’t you say? Getting us to So-Cal is vital. If we find people, great, if not, oh well. I truly believe the second wave is already upon us. We’ve seen no people. That worries me. We’ve been lucky. Let’s keep it that way. We just don’t know what lies ahead.”

\*\*\*

Doc tagged along. He didn’t have much to do, and when he heard Bishop and Nick were going to a mall, he certainly didn’t want to miss out.

They parked the borrowed, Elvis Cadillac by the front doors, parking there for easy exiting.

It wasn’t a huge mall, but it wasn’t small by any means. Both Bishop and Nick were armed with rifles, Mas carried nothing, and doc had Juanita.

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“Where to?” Bishop asked. “You guys coming with me and Nick.”

Doc replied, “Nah, I’ll find you. I want to do some window shopping, Maybe .. Juniata here would like something, would you Juanita?” Doc waited. “Would you.” After getting no response, he looked at Bishop.

Nick nudged him. “Dude, you gotta.”

Bishop sighed out. “It’s my stint.” He paused ‘fine.’ Then upped his voice and added the accent. “Oh, no, doc, I nee na-ting. I just need to be with you.”

“That a girl.” Doc smiled. “Let’s go.”

Nick asked, “You think he’ll be OK?”

“Sure, he’ll be fine.” Bishop said. “Mas?”

“O-di- taj a grek a mo.” Mas held out his hands. “Mall I am at!” He gasped out. “Be to Glory. He dropped to his knees and began to kiss the floor.

Bishop shrugged “Guess not.”

“Guess not,” Nick said. “Ready?”

“Oh, yeah. We’re men on a mission. Let’s go. We know what we need to find.” Tossing his rifle behind his shoulder, Bishop led the way.

\*\*\*

The thin tin box was about eight inches wide, and twelve long. It had a depth of four inches, and the case was given to Tate by Greek, along with a list of items that were needed.

A lot their medical supplies and emergency things were used up on Ray and needed replenished. Greek was a doctor, so Tate took the list to Doc who agreed it was a good list. He brought the list to Robi, but she pretty much said to Tate if Greek listed it, it’s good.

The regional medical center was quiet, but it exhibited signs of some struggles when the drop occurred. Tons of cots were lined up with clothing from those who succumbed to the disintegration.

There were absolutely no sounds or noises from survivors. Bishop insisted that he heard they were there, in fact, last contact made with the television station said they were seventeen strong. Where did they go?

Tate would look for clues once he finished the task of filling the tin medical box.

Some of the items were easy to find. The gauze, sutures, dressings, anti bacterial lotion and morphine. The antibiotics were tricky, and it seemed as if

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he couldn't find any.

"Got it." Tate held up a bottle. "There's only like three."

Manny closed a drawer. "More than I found. What is it."

"Good old penicillin."

"Penicillin?"

"Yeah. What's wrong with that?"

Manny winced. "I'm allergic. You would think Doc or Robi would think of that."

"Do they know?"

Manny shrugged. "Even so, there are people allergic."

"Guess you shit out of luck if you get sick."

"Thanks."

"Why don't I look for a non penicillin based antibiotic as well?"

"Could you?" Bishop replied "I'm gonna it this office here." He pointed to the door. "See what's in here."

"You do that." Tate began to rummage about. He was looking for something, but truth be known he had no idea what would be considered a non-penicillin based antibiotic.

"Tate?" Manny called out.

"Yeah?"

"Come here. We have a problem."

Closing up the tin box, Tate pulled his rifle forward and went to the office. He pushed open the door. "What's going on."

"I think I found, at least one of our survivors." Manny tilted his head. "No make that two."

Tate lowered his weapon. It was an office, a simple one. With a computer and phone, but all of them were blood stained with old dried blood. Body parts, many barely recognizable, scattered about. "How do you figure two?"

"Head." Manny pointed his gun at the partial head. "And sort of head." He swung an arm across the room. A quarter of a section of a head lay on the floor. It contained an eye, cheek, and piece of an ear.

"What the hell did this?" Tate asked.

"Don't know, but look at this." Using the end of the rifle, Manny lifted a paper, from under it, multitudes of black, spider looking creatures crawled out. They weren't normal spiders, they were too big, and their backs were green.

"Grab one." Tate said.

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“With what? My hand?”

“Anything. I’ll find something. We have to get one of these to Doc.” Tate spoke in a near shock, eyes focused. “What ever these things are, may have something to do with our survivors disappearance.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just a hunch.” With an upward motion of his chin, Tate gave a point to the first head, crawling out of its mouth were more of the creatures.

“Ah, man.”

“I think I saw a specimen jar in there. I’ll be back.” Tate stepped out of the office.

Manny stood there, looking at the creatures. He thought he started seeing more in the brief moments he was alone, but he chalked it up to his imagination. “Tate, hurry up, why don’t you? These things give me the creeps.”

“Got something,” Tate rushed in with a small container. “Where should I take one from.”

Manny pointed.

Lifting the lid, Tate brought the petri dish to the table’s surface. As he slid it to the bug, the instead stood on its hind legs and hissed.

“Fuck,” Tate retracted his hand. “Did you hear that.”

“Hear what?”

It hissed again.

“That.”

“Don’t tell me that was the bug.”

“I won’t.” Brave, Tate swooped down the container and caught the bug. He quickly put on the lid, with an excited chuckle. “But it was. Got it.” He held I up.

Hiss.

Only the hisses were louder, more of them.

“Tate.” Manny stepped back.

Tate slowly turned around. “Shit.”

Multitudes of the bugs began to seethe out of the vents, computer furniture, body parts, almost as if the walls bled them.

“Run?” Manny asked.

“Run.” Tate did s spin, and jolt out of the room, right behind Manny. The hissing grew louder, He slammed the door shut behind him, tossed items on the floor to block the opening at the bottom of the door, and raced out.

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Doc wasn't real certain he liked being yanked from the mall. He knew Bishop and Nick who were in an intense video game match weren't happy, but Tate had news.

Once Doc found out he got to pull out his trust microscope, he was happy. He had that microscope since med school. It was old, out of date, but it worked.

"Hmm." Doc looked at the bug. "Take a look robo cop."

Robi peeked. "Shit."

Tate spoke out of the group who watched them. "I am no expert, by any means, but I can plainly see that bug is fucked up, It's big enough to not need a microscope."

Doc grumbled, "Can't see the facial features up close, can you butt head."

Tate mouthed the words, 'Butt head.'

"Where did you see it before?" Doc asked Robi.

"Its masticized version of the microbe." Robi replied.

"Exactly."

Mas stepped forward "I may?"

Doc held out his hand. "BE my guest."

Mas lifted the petri dish. "Ahh." He looked at Tate. "Many?"

"Tons."

Mas turned to Jeb. "Must we destroy to, before found is human the scent. Multitudes, then come they. Many too to fight. Breach while gathered."

"Why?" Jeb asked. "Are they dangerous?"

"Brave among you who is he?" Mas asked.

Jeb raised his hand. "Me."

Mas took his hand and turned it palms up. "Poison not, pain much is it. Prepared?"

"Sure."

Mas dropped the big into Jeb's palm.

It hissed.

Jeb's eyes widened some. "Fuck. Shit." He shook off his hand, the bug fell to the ground, and he stomped on it with a loud crunch. "Fuck." He held out his hand to Robi, "It started to burrow itself."

"No," Mas shook his head. "Eat."

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"It was eating my flesh?" Jeb asked.

Mas nodded. "One this does." He pointed to Jeb's palm. "Many them of, would no Jeb there be."

"How do you know this?" Jeb asked.

"Test it was, enemy of," Has replied. "Home of my, dropped many did they."

"So you were hit with them?" Jeb shook shi head and looked at Robi. "Fuckin' Chinese come up with all the bio weapons."

Robi nodded. "Who would have through a bug."

Bishop asked. "Mas do they start in the blood stream. We seen something like this is a dog's blood. Did it make its way out."

Mas shook his head. "No. Similar they be."

"Ok," Jeb said calm. "Obviously, they can die." He scraped his boot. "But I'm gonna assume there are too many for us to smash. So how can we kill them?"

Mas reached into Jeb's tee shirt pocket and pulled out a lighter. "Flame."

\*\*\*

"We're gonna need more than a flame thrower," Was Jeb's comment when they arrived at Regional hospital.

It was bad enough that it took Jeb and Tate over an hour to locate a flamethrower, but the disappointment was worse because they couldn't use it right away.

The entire three floor structures was black, Black from the budes that covered it like a thick velvet blanket.

According to Mas, all they had to do was start a decent fire. The flames and heat would wither the pests away. But getting close enough to set explosives was a problem.

Tate lost the draw, and in lugging the four propane tanks close enough to the building to explode, he acquired over twenty bites from bugs that zapped out at him.

They didn't hurt as bad as the burns Jeb gave him when searing them from him.

The explosion rocked Memphis, and the fore produced flame sand smoke that cold be seen for miles.

It burned through out the night.

Robi caught hint of the amber glow as she stepped outside of the mansion that evening in search of Jeb.

## A Path to Utopia

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Bishop and Manny were making a late dinner delight of Spam surprise and rice. Nick and Tate were engrossed in a game. Mas was working on something, while Greek and Doc played checkers.

She carried baby Martha on her hip. The night air wasn't cool; it was thick and carried a hint of a smoke smell.

Down the front steps into the driveway, Robi looked about. It was quiet, and the only voices were those coming from the house.

After not seeing, Jeb she turned to go back in the house.

Jeb's singing voice carried from the distance. "Oh-oh, Say can you see. By the dawn's early light."

Robi saw him walked from around the house. "What's so proudly we hail." Robi squeaked out the words. "At the twilight's last gleaming."

"Whose broad stripes and bright stars. Through the perilous fight."

"Oh the ramparts we watched ..."

Together they finished singing the National Anthem. There was a moment of silence, and Robi looked at Jeb. "Why are we singing the National Anthem."

"You know what day it is." Jeb said. "Don't you?"

Robi whispered out. Fourth of July."

"Independence. And we are watching ..." he pointed outward to the fire that raged in the distance. "A fight for our independence."

"In a series of many," Robi said.

"That we will win." Jeb winked. "Like this one. So ... what brings you out here?"

"We were ... we were looking for you."

Jeb stepped closer. "Hey, she's awake."

"How do you like that?"

"And not crying." He laid his hand on Martha's cheek, and she turned her face into his hand with a coo and a smile.

"Oh, my God." Robi smiled "Look at that."

Martha held out her arm, squeezing her fingers to Jeb as if asking to be held.

"I think she wants you to hold her."

"Why?" Jeb asked.

"I don't know."

Jeb tossed his M-16 around his shoulder and lifted the baby into his arms.

Martha 'cooed' again with a delightful exhales.

"Jeb, I think she likes you."

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"I'm not natural at this."

"You're doing fine." Robi said. "She sense you care."

Upon her words, Martha nuzzled to Jeb.

"She's like a puppy," Jeb chuckled. "Thank you for his."

"Were going to be eating soon. You coming in?"

"Nah." He shook his head. "Can I bother you to bring me something out?"

"Sure. IS everything OK?"

Jeb exhaled. "Just worried. Just .. keeping on my toes."

"The bugs."

"Yeah," He nodded.

"Understandable."

"I'm gonna keep the spotlights on, and an eyes open all night."

"Need company?" She asked.

"I'd love company. But I need you to get sleep."

"What about you?"

"I'll sleep in the truck. Bi biggie. Plus, I want to be up bright and early. There is something me and Tate want to do."

"You said that before." Robi reached for the baby. "Here, I'll take her."

"Thanks." Jeb slipped Martha into Robi's grip.

"I'll let you get back to your watch," Robi said. "I was just checking on you."

"Thank you for that. I mean it. Thank you."

Robi nodded, and turned.

"Wait." Jeb called out.

"What's up?"

Jeb took a step to her, leaned down and laid his lips on Martha's head.

"Did you just .... Did you just kiss the baby?"

Jeb sniffed. "It's that farther thing coming out in me."

Robi laughed. "Good night Jeb, thanks for looking out for us. I ... I really feel safe knowing your on this."

Jeb gave a gentle smile; he let his hand run down her arm as she turned to go back inside, and then himself, returned to looking out.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*July 5<sup>th</sup>*

It was an addiction. Like some people have an addiction to alcohol, or gambling, or drugs, Bishop was addicted to something else.

Spam.

It was an odd one, but it started when he was younger, and an addiction he believed he conquered before the age of twenty-four. Under the doctor's advice, to knock of the canned ham product, because his cholesterol was through the roof, much too high for a guy so young.

But Bishop loved it. He crowned himself culinary king of Spam. Creating new and exciting dishes constantly. Often inviting others over to try a dish, he was proud of.

He had the standards, as he called them, Spam Barbeque, Green Eggs and Spam. Spam and Cheese. But he ventured out with international tastes such as, Spam ala King, Sweet and Sour Spam, Spam Tacos, Spam Stroganoff, and Spaghetti with Spam. Once and a while when feeling extremely motivated, Bishop would have the Spam buffet where he would feature all his Spam delicacies.

He was at it again. All it took was one bite of Spam and he was as hooked as he was five years earlier.

Doc called him, 'whacked', stating Bishop was much to young to remember a comedy show where they did spam spoofs. Bishop would be the new poster boy for that in the new world.

He rose bright and early, making breakfast and coffee. He woke Robi before it was done, leaving a cup of coffee next to the bed.

It wasn't even six in the morning.

"I hope you aren't mad," Bishop held out a chair for her in the kitchen. "I just haven't seen you and I wanted to spend time with you."

"We're traveling together, how can we not see each other."

"Come on Robi, ever since Jeb joined up. He kicked me out of our vehicle. I thought we were becoming friends, but he sort of swallowed the whole deal."

"Swallowed the whole deal? What do you mean."

"He's the whole picture." Bishop pushed the plate forward. "Now, that's your business but ..."

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"No." Robi interrupted him. "You're right. We have a country to cross, a life to start." She laid her hand on his. "I liked the talks we had. I like this. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Smells great." Robi took a whiff. "What is it."

"A western omelet. Had to use the frozen veggies, but ...it works. Dig in."

Robi plunged her fork into the eggs. "Spam?"

"Absolutely."

She smiled. "I peeked out this morning. The fire is still burning."

"Mas, says that a good thing. What ....what do you make of Mas?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's odd," Bishop said. "Doc says he's an alien."

"You mean illegal. He is from Turkey and ..."

"No," Bishop said. "Outer space. Martian like."

She nearly choked on her food. Wiping her mouth, she took a swig of coffee. "Mas is not an alien."

"But he knows all that technology."

She shrugged. "Eh probably was a professor in Turkey. He's just brilliant that's all."

"You're right. And the big does look foreign."

"Tell me about it." Robi said. "I just wished I could have seen the hospital when it was covered."

"Tate took a picture."

Robi peered up. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Bishop shook hi head. "With the digital camera. He was showing them to us last night. Got the fireball pretty good."

"Sorry I missed that."

"You went to bed early. Weren't you feeling well?"

"Oh, no, that wasn't it." Robi shook her head. "Martha was out. And Jeb was on night watch. I wanted to get some sleep, so I could relieve him, or at least he could sleep without worrying on the trip."

"Makes sense."

"Speaking of Jeb, have you seen him? Has he stopped in at all from his watch."

"Oh, yeah. Him and Tate chunked out of here about a half an hour ago. Grabbed some breakfast and were gone. Manny is on watch now."

Robi looked at her watch. "God, this house came alive early. Where did

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the brothers Hoyt go so early?”

Bishop shrugged. “Don’t know. They said they had something to do, rally important, before we left.”

“Jeb mentioned having to do something. In fact, he mentioned it a few times. But didn’t say what it was.”

“Knowing the Brothers Hoyt, it probably is demented.”

“Nah,” Robi shook her head. “And you know what? I’m not gonna worry about. I want to enjoy my food.” She lifted a fork. “However, trust me. It’s probably nothing. I mean seriously, in light of everything, how demented could it really be. Not much.”

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“That’s isn’t only the most demented thing I have ever heard, but the sickest!” Robi blasted. They were her last words to Jeb, then she got in the Humvee, all packed and ready to go, and they took off. She never spoke another word the first hundred miles ... to him. The radio communications with Bishop were working just fine.

She had to admit. At first, Robi thought it was a joke. Everyone knew about it. Acted nonchalant, of course it had to be a joke.

Then Tate showed her the pictures, and they confirmed that Jeb was not joking when he said, “We wanted to see if Elvis really died, so we dug up his grave.”

No one else seemed to have a problem with it. But Robi.

Jeb grew irritated, every mile they drove without her speaking to him, angered him more. She was mad ... obviously. About what, he knew, by the ‘why’ of it all was what he wanted to know. Robi never got to that, and they rate they were going, she wasn’t doing it any time soon.

Jeb huffed out loudly, again it was ignored. He turned to the back seat to Nick. “How long does she bear a grudge?”

“Days.” Nick answered. “Forget about it, Jeb. Just let her go.”

“I can’t. Days?” he shook his head and faced forward. After a moment, he turned sideways to watch Robi. Thinking that would do it, staring her down.

Robi ignored him, only glancing to the back to Nick and Martha as she drove.

“No,” Robi chuckled, speaking into the radio device Mas designed so

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she could wear, talk, listen, and drive. "That had to be the seventies, not the sixties, and it was a disaster film, but not end of the world." She chuckled "Bishop, I'm sure. It was a boat that turned over. I'm sure ..." She paused, laughed. "Oh, for sure. Oh! I forgot about that one. I'm not a crier but that one got me choked up."

"Hundred fuckin' miles," Jeb mumbled.

"Well, sure. But when you're talking large scale each individuals going to treat it differently," Robi said. "No, Bishop, I called that one already."

"Enough." Jeb leaned over, placing his face real close to Robi's.

"And I ... hold on, Jeb's breathing on me." Cocking back some, Robi looked at Jeb. "What?"

"A hundred of our miles."

"OK."

"You haven't spoken to me."

"I'm talking to Bishop."

"Not any more," He leaned his mouth closed to hers and blasted. "Bishop. End this call now. I have to talk to her." He moved the radio from Robi.

The Humvee swerved.

"Asshole!"

"No." he tossed it in the back. "Now, talk to me, not Bishop."

"If you have a problem feeling neglected, switch vehicles."

"That has nothing to do with it, and you know it." Jeb said.

Nick groaned from the back. "Guys, if you two are gonna fight, can I go in another vehicle."

Both Robi and Jeb replied at the same time, the same way, "no."

"Fine." Nick lifted the headset and upped is volume.

Robi growled.

Jeb shook his head. "I can't believe your behaving this way in front of our baby."

"Oh knock it off."

"You know if off."

"I told you to knock it off first!" Robi screamed.

"Why are you so fuckin pissed?"

"Like you don't know."

"I don't."

"Please," Robi scoffed.

"OK," Jeb calmed down. "Pretended I don't have an inkling. Tell me

why you're mad."

"“I'm not mad, I'm pissed you're sick, Jeb. Sick. Sick. Sick.”"

"Ok," Jeb nodded "Why am I sick?"

Robi gasped. "You dug up Elvis' grave. Can we say desecration? No probably not, too big of a word."

"Hey! You're gonna tell me, that you never wondered I Elvis really died."

"No."

"Bull."

"And even if I did, that doesn't give me the right to dig up the persons grave."

"Who cares?" Jeb tossed out his hands. "Do you know how hard it was to open that fuckin' concrete vault."

"Poor baby."

"And he wasn't even there!" Jeb yelled. "Sand bags. Four sand bags."

"You think they maybe buried him somewhere else, just on the outside chance an asshole like you would dig up his grave."

"No. And for your information, Miss Smarty pants, I didn't desecrate his grave. You can't desecrate a grave where no one is buried. So there. Ha!"

Robi stared forward.

"Now you're pissed because you lost the argument."

"No, I'm pissed because I have to drive with you in the car."

"Deal with it." Jeb sulked. "Our baby is in the car."

Robi didn't say anything.

"Fighting with me in front of Nick. Good thing he has his headphones on. Listening to his music, blocking us out."

"Will you shut up?" Robi blasted. "Just ...shut up."

"What? You haven't talked to me yet."

"Because I don't want to fight with you." Robi said. "Now, shut ... up, don't make me take drastic measures."

"Oh." Jeb snickered. "You think you're frightening me? Robi, please drastic measures. What are you gonna do."

"Knock you out."

Jeb laughed loudly. "Knock me out? Knock me out."

"Knock you out." Robi said. "Drastic situations call for drastic measures."

"OK, I'm game." Jeb said with a smirk. "How are you gonna knock me out?"

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“You don’t think I can?”

“No, I don’t.” Jeb said. “And if you do, al power to you. Judos. So, go on, knock me out.”

Robi peered in the mirror. “Nick?”

Before Jeb even realized what had happened, Nick reached forward with an already prepared syringe, and plunged it into the back of Jeb’s neck.

“Fuck.” Jeb’s hand shot to where he felt the pinch. He pulled out the syringe and looked at it. “Fuck.”

Robi smiled. “Night.”

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### ***Weatherford, OK***

Nine times the opening line to the song, ‘Oklahoma’ was sung in H-2. Nine times since they crossed the state line. But since no one really knew the rest of the song, the opening line was al that was sung.

“Weatherford, OK.” Greek said, sad they pulled into the town. “Population Nine thousand forty-six, last census. Bishop survival count ...” He scanned down the pad. “This cant be right. Two hundred thirty.”

“That’s what the guy reported.” Bishop replied.

“Sounds high, awfully high.”

Manny said as he drove, “But if it’s accurate, we should be asking the question.”

Tate finished. “Where would two hundred and thirty people be?”

Manny peered closer to the windshield. “Town looks empty. Maybe they moved on.”

“Could have,” Tate said. “So Cal?”

Greek leaned forward “Where is she going?”

“Probably looking for a camp spot,” Manny said, “Place for us all to stay and park it. OK, she’s stopping. She looks for the big houses.”

Tate snickered. “Elvis’ mansion must have spoiled her.”

Manny pulled the vehicle right up behind Robi.

The house was large and located just one half bock off the main drag. Robi stepped from the Humvee, stretched, then reached inside and pulled out her rifle. “Stay close,” She said to Nick. “In fact, stay with Martha until

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we check out the house.”

Bishop, Tate, and Manny walked toward Robi. Mas, Greek, and Doc stayed by the Humvee.

“What’s going on?” Many asked. “You checking out the house.”

“Yeah,” Robi nodded “Tate, you wanna come with me?”

Tate nodded.

“After we check out the house,” Robi said, “We settle in for the night, then head out looking for any supplies, and survivors. I’d like to stay in packs. One pack here, one out. In case we run into those bugs. Everyone stay here, Until Tate and I check out the house.”

“Where’s my brother?” Tate asked.

Robi pointed to the Humvee with her rifle.

Tate peeked inside. “Man, he is out like a light.”

“Yep, sure is,” Robi said, “He wouldn’t sleep, wouldn’t shut up, so I knocked him out.”

“That can’t be good for us.”

“Well, neither is your brother if he isn’t rested.” Robi walked toward the house. “I’ll wake him in an hour. You coming?”

Tate looked at his brother once more, shook his head, and followed Robi.

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The house was clean, no one inside, and no sign of the bugs tat she worried so much about. She was about to give a wave of come on’ when she noticed it. Or rather him. Mas. He stood by the beck Humvee, arms tight to his body, and he looked, to Robi, as if he were scared.

Manny was at the edge of the walk. “All clear?”

“Yeah,” Robi answered. “No signs of survivors or bodies. Someone cleaned out this town; I think it’s possible our survivors moved on. What’s wrong with Mas?”

“Get this. He’s afraid. He says something about the night, then stars talking Turkish.”

“Did you ask if h as worried about the bugs?”

“Yep. He shook his head.”

“I’ll take a crack,” Robi said and walked over to Mas. “Hey, Mas, what’s up? Why are you scared.”

“Fine is day. Bad is night. Go we must. On we move.” Mas said.

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“Do you think we’re in danger?” Robi asked. “Now?”

“Night.”

“At night.” Robi nodded. “Are they the bugs?”

“No.”

“Another creature? The enemy?”

“No,” Mas shook his head. “Gi fi tatta fola geena.”

“I see.” Robi turned her head, looked back at Manny, and rolled her eyes. “OK.” She returned to Mas. “I’ll make you a deal. We’ll hang out here. And once it gets dark, as soon as there is any sign of trouble, we’re out of here. Gone.”

Mas nodded. “Fast?”

“Very fast.”

“Promise.”

“You have my word.” Robi held up her right hand.

“Leave shall we fat. Ready I shall be.” Mas nodded fast. “Thanks of many, Robi. Worried am I.”

“I see that.” She laid her hand on his shoulder. “But we’re fine right now?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Robi turned, walking to the first vehicle. “Whose gonna give me a hand?” she asked then opened the passenger’s side door. “Anyone?” She glanced in on Jeb, sound asleep, oblivious to anything.

Tate approached. “HA hand with what? Him?”

“Yep.” Robi nudged him with her rifle. “I want to get him inside and on the couch.”

Bishop checked out the distance between the Humvee and the house. “You’re kidding right?”

“Nope. He needs to go in.” Robi said.

Manny asked. “Why can’t we leave him here?”

“For starters, it’s a hundred degrees. It’s too hot to be left in a car. He’ll die. Again, I’ll ask who’s gonna give me a hand.”

Tate laughed. “As in which one of us will help you out.” He fluttered his lips. “I’d have to say you should ask, how many of us are gonna help you lug his big ass in that house. It won’t be an easy task.”

“You don’t think?” Robi asked.

“Trust me.” Tate said. “You’re looking at two hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight. It’s gonna be a task.”



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Tate was right. However 'lugging' wasn't as big of a task as getting him out of the Humvee. Only two of them could get a grip in getting him out of his seat, and Jeb proved too heavy for that. He careened down to the pavement, his head saved only by Manny's quick reaction.

It took six of them. Tate, Robi, Manny, Bishop, Nick, and Greek to tote Jeb into the house. All of them having a piece of the sleeping Jeb. His body going whichever way they led him, no responsive at all to the bumps and jolts.

They managed though and after only dropping hi twice, they got Jeb in the house and on the couch.

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The hospital was empty, the clinic too. There were no signs of survivors at the radio station, nor at the local school. Manny, Tate, Bishop and Nick, walked the streets of Weatherford, calling out for anyone But no one replied. They circled on back to base.

They found nothing.

People wise. Bishop, however, made a find.

"Spam," Tate grunted out the word. "You don't need any more Spam."

"I beg to differ." Bishop spoke as he walked. "You can never have too much Spam. Look. It's already barbequed. Do you know how rare this is? They haven't made that in ages."

Tate looked at the can. "The can looks ages old."

Manny added "Probably get sick from it."

"No, it's fresh. Doesn't expire for a while. "Look at the date." He showed Manny the can.

"Wow." He said sarcastically. "It's about as bust as your survival list of two hundred."

"Hey," Bishop defended. "That was the number I was given. And are we headed in the right directions."

"Were right ahead." Tate replied.

Bishop shook his head. "We turned down the wrong street. Ours is next."

Nick stopped walking. "Dudes."

The other three halted.

"Look." Nick pointed.

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Up ahead, slumped in the grass, appeared to be a man.

“Hey!” Tate called out. “Hello!” he started to jog toward the man. Manny, Bishop and Nick kept up behind him.

It was a man. He was slumped on what looked like a little Blessed Mother statue, His clothes were dusty, and he looked as if he had the same ones on for months. ... Smelled like it too.

Tate reached down. “He’s warm.” Just as his hand touched upon the man, the man opened his eyes,

“Hey.” Tate smiled. “How are you.”

The man didn’t respond. His mouth opened and no words came out. His face was pale, and lips dry.

“Are you OK?” Tate asked.

Manny questioned. “Are you hurt?”

His eye shifted slowly. He lifted his arm and it flopped down. He returned to staring out.

“Can you walk?” Tate asked. “Hey.” He snapped his finger in front of the man’s face.

He received nothing. Not a blink, not a sound. Nothing.

“Something’s wrong. Let’s get him back to base and to see Robi.” Tate started to lift the man. “This guys needs some help.”

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Jeb was still zonked. On the couch, semi on his side, he slept. Robi placed a bottle of water on the table by his head, along with a glass. She opened, the water, poured some, and looked at the time.

Turning to wake him, she jolted when his eyes popped open.

“Yeah, it’s time to get me up.” Jeb reached up, threw his arm around her waist, and yanked her down to the couch.

Robi struggled; she wasn’t giving onto the position he sought. He grabbed her legs to lift them on the couch; she’d put them down. He pull her to the pillow, she eject to a sitting position.

“I’m not cuddling.” Robi said.

“Do I strike you as a cuddler?” Jeb asked sitting up.

“No.”

His chest against her back, he whispered in her ear. “But, don’t you think since you knocked me out ...”

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“Nope.” Robi stood.

“Question.”

“Answer.”

“That stuff you knocked me out with? Is it supposed to give e a headache.”

“No.”

“Man, I have a horrible headache.”

“I can get Martha. Or ...” as she handed him three pills. “Take these.”

“Wait a second. If that stuff isn’t suppose to give me a headache, how did you know to get me an aspirin?”

“Tate whacked your head off the door frame when we were carrying you in.”

“Oh.” Jeb downed the aspirin. “I may have to put Martha to the test.” He rubbed his eyes. “Where is she?”

“With Mas.”

“Where’s he at?”

“By the car. He won’t leave. He’s scared.”

Jeb swung his legs over the couch and rested them on the floor. “Did he say why?”

“Yep.” Robi nodded. “But he keeps going back to his native tongue. Unfortunately none of us speak Turkish.”

“And you don’t have any idea of why he’s scared?”

Robi shook her head. “We know it’s not the bugs. Something to do with night.” She shrugged. “Anyhow ...”

The door opened and Nick raced in. “Mom.”

“What’s wrong?” Robi asked.

“We found a survivor.”

Upon hearing that, both Robi and Jeb flew out.

They kept him at the house next door, and away from everyone, just on the outside chance he had something.

Robi didn’t think so. In fact, her diagnosis was the man had been malnourished, in shock and if the forty-something guy didn’t eat or drink soon, he would die. He was non responsive, and didn’t speak. Manny and Bishop named him ‘Bob.’

He could barely lift his head, let alone walk. Robi send Tate to the hospital for an intravenous unit and she pumped him with saline to hydrate him.

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Of course, she was just a nurse. Everyone really waited for Doc's opinion. And they all stood around the man while Doc examined him.

"Dead" Doc removed his stethoscope. "Yep. Dead."

Jeb rubbed his chin. "He's breathing."

"Yep. But still dead."

Jeb gave a quick snap glare to Tate who snickered. "Uh, huh" Jeb nodded. "So should we bury him?"

Doc shrugged. "Up to you. Right now he has the strength to unbury himself, so it's your call."

Bishop raised his hand. "If he's breathing. Moving. Eyes open and looking about. How is he dead?"

"Doesn't have a heart beat."

"Ok, enough," Robi spoke up. "Doc, I examined him."

"Are you a doctor?" Doc asked.

"No."

"I am. Dead."

Robi scoffed. "He is alive. He has a heartbeat."

"Did you hear it?"

"It's faint."

Doc looked at everyone. "That means she didn't hear it, she's just covering."

Robi rolled her eyes.

Doc rolled his right back. "This intravenous is useless. You're pumping through veins that aren't pumping."

"What do you mean?" Robi asked.

"I couldn't get a blood pressure on him."

"I did." Robi replied. "It was low, but it was there."

"Hmm." Doc nodded. "Must have died somewhere in between your exam and mine. But he's dead. I assure you. Might as well just forget about him."

As Tate was explaining to Doc that they would just leave him in the house, and there was no reason to waste energy burying him ...Robi walked out.

Bishop found standing on the front lawn of the house they all would share. Robi didn't move.

"Hey, you." Bishop approached from behind. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

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"I mean, Doc's rambling. You never let it bother you before." Bishop said.

"He said the guy was dead. Clearly he isn't."

"So what?" Bishop shrugged. "Why are you losing your cool about it?"

"I didn't say I was."

"No, but you questioned Doc. Usually, you'll just let him go. So, can I ask why are you letting his eccentric imagination get to you?"

"That guy gets to me."

"Bob?"

"Yes, Bob. Why did they leave him? Where is everyone else? I didn't ..." she dropped her voice to a whisper. "I didn't hear a heartbeat, Bishop."

"No shit?"

"No shit." Robi folded her arms tight.

"Is he really dead?"

"No!" Robi snapped. "He's not dead. His heart rate is weak. Bob isn't dead, he's dying. But there's more, I can't put my finger on it. And ..." She turned, stopped and tilted her head. "Why is Mas sitting in the Humvee?"

"Beats me."

Robi walked over to the Humvee. She opened the door, and was greeted with the ding. "Mas? You put the keys in the ignition."

"Cars of both," Mas answered.

"Why?" Robi asked.

"Ready w should be, to leave. Set does the sun soon." He shuddered.

Robi gave a single nod, an exhale and turned to finish talking to Bishop. But he was walking in the house. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To get my things."

"Why?"

"If Mas says we should be ready to go. I'm listening. He knows shit." Bishop walked into the house.

Robi sighed out in aggravation. "Everyone in this group is insane. Everyone."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Directly on the street, right outside 1443 Hopper's square, a small campfire burned. The entire gang, with the exception of Mas, sat around that fire. They had eaten dinner there. After discovering yet another town where electricity had survived, they also discovered a few packs of frozen hot dogs.

Hot dogs on an open fire. The coffee, and marshmallows.

They sat on over turned milk crates, enjoying the fire. The temperature was actually cool for July, and the fire kept it conformable.

Jeb extended a bottle of beer to Robi.

"Thanks," Robi took it. "Did you check on him?"

"He now has Martha with him," Jeb crouched by Robi.

"Did you speak to him?"

"He's says he is getting ready. He took ... he took our belongs out of the house and packed up the car."

Robi peered over her shoulder to the two Humvee parked in the driveway. "He is really dead serious about this."

"I know." Jeb scratched the bridge of his nose. "What do you want to do."

"You think maybe we should leave here in a bit. After we settle."

"Appease him?" Jeb asked.

"Possibly. I know he's only one person, but still ... " Robi faced the group. "What does everyone think?"

"About?" Manny asked.

"Leaving in a little bit. I know we all decided to settle for the night, but Mas is really being paranoid."

Manny nodded. "Mas scares me. He's psychic. If he is scared, I'm scared. I say, let's finish up the marshmallows and head out."

Greek shook his head. "Driving at night is so dangerous. Especially now."

Tate added, "So we'll take it slow. Pull over first place, hotel we see."

"Goddamn aliens." Doc grumbled. "He knows we're gonna get attacked."

Jeb finally stood, and he stood behind Bishop who sat next to Robi. "You took my seat."

"Mine is open."

"Why would you take my seat?" Jeb asked.

"Why did you care?"

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"Fine." Jeb stepped over Bishop, then over the fire to take the seat across. If for anything, to stare at him.

Manny cleared his throat. "As I was saying. I think my biggest guilt comes from the fact that I was seeing another woman, too."

"Why?" Robi asked.

"Why am I guilty or why was I seeing another woman?"

"Seeing someone else." Robi drank her beer. "I mean, this was someone you just had a baby to."

"I'm superficial. Or was," Manny said. Plus high. I was always high."

"No excuse," Robi interrogated. "What do you mean superficial?"

"She got fat."

Robi's mouth dropped open. "You found another woman because your pregnant girlfriend got fat."

"And stayed fat." Manny nodded. "Real fat."

Tate snorted a laugh. "Was it only for sex?"

"Yes, that was it."

"Oh my God," Robi gasped. "That is really shallow. You don't strike me as shallow."

"I'm usually not. But she got fat." Manny said.

"So you said." Robi added.

"How much?" Doc asked. "How much weight id she gain."

Manny fluttered his lips. "A lot. She was one twenty when she got pregnant. Five foot five. Perfect. She gained a hundred pounds and lost three. I swear it was all in her butt."

Bishop shook hi head. "I'm gonna have to side with Robi, here."

Jeb smirked sarcastically and mumbled, "Figures."

Bishop ignored him. "This was a woman who bore your child. Heavy or not, it should change the way you felt."

"It didn't." Manny defended. "I still loved her. But ... but it was impossible to ..." He cleared his throat. "Put it this way. I wasn't 'man' enough to find my way."

"Whoa," Nick exclaimed. "Dude that's a big butt."

Greek added "Or a small penis."

Nonchalantly, while drinking her beer Robi said, "Manny doesn't have small penis."

Choke.

Not just Robi, everyone coughed and choked.

"What?" Robi asked. "I saw his penis when he leaned against that boiler

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and got burned. It's not small. Get your minds out of the gutter. God."

"She did." Manny nodded "She saw my penis. Anyhow, that was the problem."

Tate said, "Did you try creative manipulation?"

"Guys." Robi winced.

Manny replied, "How do you creative manipulate without making the woman feel bad. You don't."

"Guys." Robi winced again. "Bishop, your turn."

"I've been thinking ... but it's hard to think when you're listening." Bishop scratched his head. "OK, the most recent thing I feel guilty about is my parent. They died in the drop ... obviously. But they died having sex."

"Uh!" Nick blasted. "Dude, that is like horrible. Did you find them."

Bishop nodded.

Tate laughed. "Sorry. So why are you feeling guilty. Did you like stare at them ..."

"Uh!" Nick grunted. "Stop. Did you?"

"No." Bishop defended. "I just sort of let them stay in the position."

Robi lit a cigarette "That's nothing to feel guilty about. Really. I would have done the same. Who's next?"

Greek raised his hand. "Did you guys know that Weatherford, this place here, was very instrumental in the westward expansion."

Bishop looked at him curiously. "How is that a confession."

"It's not. But I thought I'd share." Greek said. "People used to stop here on the way west. Like us. I really don't have a confession, I lived a good life, unlike you heathens."

Jeb laughed as he twirled his rifle in the ground. "I told a woman I was gay because I couldn't think of any other way to get out of the relationship."

Robi laughed, "Oh my God, and she bought it."

Jeb shrugged. "Yeah."

Bishop chuckled at that as well. "I can't see anyone buying the fact that you're ..." his stare went outward. "Hey, is that Bob?"

Everyone looked.

He was more of a shadow in the distance, walking slanted.

"Where's he going? He must be feeling better. That IV did the trick, Robi." Bishop said. "Hey Bob!" he called out. "Over here guy."

Bob stopped.

Bishop called out again. "Come on, join us!" he waved his hand.

Then Bob ... grunted, spun to face them fully, and raced top speed their



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way.

“Wow,” Bishop said. “He is doing better”

He arrived at the campsite within seconds.

“Hey, Bob,” Bishop said. “Join ...”

As Bob reached the circle, he growled loudly, and then with arms extended mouth agape in a groaning cry, he lunged forward and onto Bishop, knocking him back and onto the ground.

“Holy shit!” Robi jumped up. In fact everyone did.

It happened so fast, Bob was on Bishop, and Bishop was fighting. It appeared as if Bob was actually trying to bite him. Hard, Robi seared her foot into the side of Bob, sending him rolling from Bishop. She reached for him, and as Bishop turned to stand, he screamed.

Bob sunk his teeth into Bishop’s calf.

The butt of the rifle slammed hard into Bob’s head then Jeb turned the rifle around and fired a single shot. Bob released his grip on Bishop and rolled over.

Bishop grunted loudly in pain, grabbing his leg.

“Guys.” Manny called out.

“Let me see.” Robi said fast, crouching down to him. “Let me see. Move your hands.”

“Guys?” Manny called again. “Look.”

All of them turned and looked. At the end of the street was a mob. One of them in the distance groaned out. It was like a starting bell, and they entire mob of two hundred or so, ran toward the campsite at full speed.

“Fuck!” Jeb started firing. “Everyone in the trucks! Now!”

Manny, Greek and Doc ran.

“Get up, get up,” Robi urged as she helped bishop to his feet. “Nick, run!”

“What the fuck are they?” Jeb fired.

Tate saw his shooting was useless, one or two went down. He turned, and hoisted Bishop over his shoulder. “Big brother, let’s go!” He raced to the Humvee. “Robi!”

“Jeb!” Robi tugged him. “Now.”

“I’m not running from a group of fuckin’ people that ...” He switched the rifle to automatic and blasted out in machine gun style. “Fuck. Won’t go down.” He spun on his heels, hightailing it with Robi to Humvee one.

Greek and Doc had already jumped into the lead Humvee with Nick.

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Behind them, in the other, Manny slid into the driver's seat, "is everyone in?"

Tate all but through Bishop in the Humvee and jumped up front. "Now we are."

Manny started the Vehicle. "Thanks, Mas. Come on Robi."

"Keys, keys." Robi looked. "Thank you Mas." She turned over the ignition. "Martha."

"Mas has her." Jeb answered. "No go. Go. Go."

Slam!

The first of the mob hit into the car.

Slam. Slam.

Before then knew it, both vehicles were immersed in a sea of bodies, rocking and hitting the Humvees.

Robi screamed. With a hard hit, and a 'slam' and man jumped don the hood of the Humvee and gnawed toward the window.

She shuddered "I hate Zombies."

"They aren't zombies." Jeb argued.

"Dude, they're zombies," Nick said.

Doc peered out the widow to those trying to eat their way in. "Zombies."

Greek nodded. "Zombies."

"They aren't fuckin' zombies" Jeb bit his bottom lip. "What is the hold up, Robi? Hit it!"

Robi threw the truck in gear and peeled out. One, two, three of them flipped over the hood, and the vehicle bounced and thumped with each person they hit in their high speed flee from town.

From the speedometer that read fifty, to the rear view Mirror. Robi kept shifting her eyes, foot hard to the gas, watching not only the Humvee behind her but the ensuing mob as well. "How fast can they run."

"Almost as fast as us," Jeb said.

"How far to we're safe." Robi reached for her radio, fumbling.

"I got it." Jeb took the radio. "Who do you want to talk to."

"Mas. Ask him how far until we're safe."

"Fuckin' safe now, just need better ammo to ..."

"Radio him!" Robi snapped.

"Fine." Jeb took the radio.

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Greek kept peering back. "They're gaining on H-2."

"I know." Robi said as she drove.

Mom, up there, turn, that road takes us to the highway, remember?" Nick asked.

Robi drove. "It's so dark."

Doc was calm. "Alien virus did this. Reanimate our dead to kill us. All aliens."

"Enough," Jeb said then finally got through on her radio. "Thank God. Manny ask Mas how far until we can stop running." Jeb paused. "He had to wait not only for Manny to ask, but Manny to translate. "OK, thanks."

"How long?" Robi asked.

"A few miles. Mas says they stay close to home."

Robi sighed out. "Thank God." He lifted her eyes to the mirror to check the progress of the chase.

"Robi!!" Jeb yelled. "Watch out!"

No sooner did she return her eyes to the road, she saw what Jeb was referring to.

In the road, center, standing there was one of them. She didn't slam the breaks, or even swerve; she hit right into him at high speed.

Slam!

He banged on the hood, rolled up over the windshield and over the roof.

"Nice," Jeb smiled.

"Mom?" Nick called with worry

When Robi peered in to the mirror to respond to Nick she saw the man in the back window.

"Fuck," Robi called out then swerved the car to try to shake him loose.

No good.

"What" Jeb asked.

Then the clumping on the roof was heard.

"Fuck," Jeb commented. "He's still alive?"

Crash!

Through the windshield on Robi's side, came a hand. It seared through and grabbed onto Robi's face. In her struggle, the Humvee swerved.

Jeb reached over and tried to not only free Robi, but also control the car. The Humvee was all over the road, left to right. Screams entailing in the Humvee from the back seat, Jeb managed to free Robi's face. The hand still

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reached in, as the man plopped onto the hood.

“Slide down,” Jeb instructed to Robi. “Scoot down low!”

“I won’t be able to see.” Robi dodged the reaching hand.

“Can you see now?”

Robi scooted down some, driving the Humvee like a little old lady lost behind the wheel.

Jeb grabbed his rifle, and pumped the chamber. Grabbing the door handle, he flung it open, held the bar above the door footstep, and swung out of the car, standing on the edge of the vehicle. With one arm, he raised his rifle, aiming at the assailant, just as he arched back for another strike at the window shield.

One shot exploded his head and the man flew from the Humvee.

Jeb returned inside.

“Robi,” Manny called over the radio. “Come in.”

Jeb replied, “What’s up?”

“You guys OK?” Manny asked.

“Fine.” Jeb said out of breath.

“We lost them. They aren’t following us anymore.”

“Good.”

“But we need to stop, and soon. First place you see,” Manny said Bishop’s bleeding bad and we have to do something.”

\*\*\*

If there was one motel in the world than Robi hated it was the Days Inn. Although she claimed not to be racist, she often stated her reasoning for hating that chain was every one she stayed was owned by foreigner and not kept well.

The motel was the first they encountered once they reached the safety zone. A two-story structure with the outside entrances into each room. Mas gave them the safety thumbs up, and Jeb sought out the keys for the doors.

Luckily, the hotel hadn’t advanced into the card key phase or they would have been out of luck.

101 adjoined with room 102, and Robi claimed those rooms. She could place Bishop in one, and Martha within ear shot in the other.

Bishop groaned out in pain, his leg seeping blood. Jeb ripped the shower curtain from the stall and laid it on the bed per Robi’s instructions, and then they laid Bishop on that.

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She ripped his pant leg, and poured a saline solution over the wound.

“Hold still” She instructed. “Where are the rest of my med supplies! Tate!”

Tate flew in. “Sorry, they were in the back.” He dropped the case on the bed next to Robi.

“Robi flipped open the box. “Bishop you’re gonna have to calm down. She looked up to Jeb and Tate. “He has to be knocked out.” She returned to themed case.

Jeb turned to Tate. “You or me.”

“You probably have a better chance,” Tate said. “Go on.”

Curiously, Robi glanced at them. “What are you ...” before she could say anything, Jeb had cold cocked Bishop rendering him unconscious. “What was that for.” she asked.

Jeb answered, “You said to knock him out.”

She showed him the syringe. “This would have done it.”

“Sorry,” Jeb said.

“Sorry,” Tate echoed.

Robi grunted. “This bite is bad. OI have to start an antibiotic IV. Tate, in the color, I have a bag labeled, can you get it?”

“Sure thing.” Tate rushed out.

Robi prepped the sutures, and reached for Bishop’s wound.

“Will he die?” Jeb asked.

“Not from the wound.” Robi said. “He could from infection.” She began to suture him. “We’ll just have to wait and see.” She looked up to a sleeping Bishop, then back to her work. “This is a fuckin’ nightmare.”

\*\*\*

It had quieted down. By midnight, everyone had pretty much claimed a room. With Jeb’s help, after she had stitched Bishop. They cleaned him, and attached an IV using duct tape to hang the bag.

Bishop wasn’t waking. That was fine, he needed rest. Robi had just checked his vital signs for the third time, when she turned to the knock on the door.

“Come in,” she called out.

Jeb walked in with a cup. “I brought you coffee.”

“Thanks.”

“And scrabble.” He held up the box.

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“Why?”

“Do you plan on leaving this room?”

“Probably not. I want to monitor him?”

“Then I’d like to hang out with you, too.” Jeb said.

“I’d like that.”

“We can talk about him while he sleeps.”

Robi chuckled.

Jeb snapped his finger. “Speaking of sleeping, come here.” He waved her to the door that adjoined the rooms.

“What?” Robi asked.

Jeb opened the door. “Take a peek.”

Robi did. A crib was set up center of that room, and Martha was sound asleep in there. “You found a crib?”

“Yeah, now she’s good. We can hear her if she cries.” Jeb shut the door.

“What about Nick?”

“He’s bunking with Tate.”

“That’s good.”

“But I must warn you, Tate is drinking.”

“Christ.” Robi walked back to the bed.

“How is he doing?”

“Fine. His vitals are strong. He’s not fevered. Which is good. Something like this enters the blood stream quickly. So his body isn’t affected ... yet.”

Bishop moaned softly. His head went from left to right, then he sprang upright calling out, “No!”

Robi rushed to his side. “Bishop.”

Breathing heavily, Bishop looked about. Shifting his eyes in a nervous manner from Robi to Jeb.

“Hey,” She spoke softly. “Calm down. You’re OK.”

“I ... I ... I ... I was bit.” Bishop said, panicked.

“Yeah, you were. But you’re fine. Hold still, OK, so the IV doesn’t come out.”

Bishop’s eyes trailed the line of fluids going into his arm. “I was bit.”

Robi nodded.

“I was bit.”

Jeb huffed “I think we fuckin’ established that.”

After snapping a harsh look Jeb’s way, Robi returned to Bishop. “I stitched you. You’re fine.”

Bishop shook his head. “I know what it means. Robi ...” He swallowed.

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“Robi, you have to shoot me.”

“What?” She laughed at the ridiculous notion of it. “Shoot you.”

“In the head. Please.”

“What the hell are you talking about.”

Desperate, Bishop gabbed on to her arm, speaking in a whisper. “I know. I know. I was bit. I’ve seen the movies. You’ve seen the movies. You know I’ll become one of them. I don’t want to become one of them. Shoot me. Please.”

“Bishop ...”

“Jeb,” Bishop said. “Please. You know it. I’m domed. Shoot me. Don’t let me be one of them.”

Jeb bobbed his head for a second, and then shrugged. “OK.” He pulled out his revolver and aimed.

“No!” Robi blocked him. “What re you doing? Are you nuts?”

“He wants shot.” Jeb said.

“And you’re gonna just shoot him?” Robi asked.

“Well ... yeah.”

“Well ... no.” She demanded. “No.”

Jeb put the revolver away. “You heard him. And he has a point, if he was bit by a zombie, he’s becoming a zombie.”

Robi bit her lip. “You yourself said they weren’t zombies.”

Again, Jeb shrugged.

“Insane.” Robi faced Bishop. “Look, Bishop. You’re not even fevered. “You’re not showing any movie signs of being a zombie.”

Jeb added. “But those were movies, Fiction. How accurate are they? He can become one in a snap without even dying first.”

Robi growled. “And he could not become one. Understand? Like you said, movies. We don’t know.” She looked at Bishop. “We don’t know. Personally, I find it pretty insulting to Jeb that he has to shoot you before you become dangerous. Don’t you think he can handle you if it happens.”

“But I don’t want it to happen.”

“Tough.” Robi said. “I refuse to shoot you just because you thin you might be come one.”

There was a knock at the door.

Robi called out, “Come in.”

“Mom?” Nick opened the door slightly. “We were having a meeting. I was wondering if we could see you.”

“Yeah, sure.” Robi said. “Jeb can you stay with Bishop?”

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“Absolutely.” Jeb stepped closer to the bed.

“And for God’s sake,” Robi warned as she approached the door “Don’t you dare shoot him. I mean it.”

“I won’t shoot him,” Jeb replied, annoyed. “God.”

“This is insane. Now excuse me while I go deal with issues that aren’t insane.” She walked out.

\*\*\*

“This is the most ridiculous conversation I have ever had,” Robi said, standing before Nick, Tate, Greek, Manny, and Doc. “You people want to ... kill Bishop.”

No one replied or said anything.

Robi paced before him. “Do you hear yourselves? You want to shoot another human being ...”

“In the head.” Manny said.

“Oh, yes, in the head.” Robi tossed out her hands. “All because you think, he’s going to be a zombie.”

Greek nodded. “We saw movies. Night of the living dead.”

“I don’t care!” Robi blasted. “Are you out of your goddamn minds? You are basing this decision on a horror flick. Come on.”

Tate raised his hand like a schoolboy. “In our defense ...”

“You have no defense. You hear me. None of you.” Robi scolded.

“Mom, you gonna tell me it didn’t cross your mind?” Nick asked. “You aren’t worried he might be a zombie.”

Robi nodded once. “Yes, it crossed my mind, and is on my mind that it might happened. But it never crossed my mind to shoot him in the head ... at least ...” she stammered. “At least until he was dead.”

\*\*\*

By the time Robi returned, Bishop was fast asleep Tucked in, covers tight, he looked peaceful. Robi checked his pulse to be safe.

“I hit him with morphine,” Jeb said, cleaning his gun. “He was in pain.”

“Oh, Ok, thanks.”

“He also was whining. I can’t take that shit.”

“How compassionate.” Robi pulled up a chair next to Jeb.

“So, what was the meeting about?”



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"They want to kill Bishop."

Jeb raised his eyes. "Seriously?"

"Yep."

"That's insane."

"You think?" Robi shook her head. "Weren't you gonna do it a little bit ago."

"Nah," He fluttered his lips. "I wouldn't do it. I was just messing with Bishop. I think it's fucked up he believes he's gonna be one of them."

"You don't think?"

"Nope. They're not zombies." Jeb stated matter of fact. "Was Bob dead?"

"Not entirely. he had a pulse."

"Zombies are dead." Jeb shrugged. "So the movies say. No, they were hit with some nerve agent, that's all. Nerve agents are chemical, not biological. Therefore, not contagious. They could have gnawed his legs off and he wouldn't be one of them. If he dies, he dies, he isn't coming back. Trust me."

Robi sighed out.

"Don't even tell me you were worried."

"About him being a zombie?" Robi asked. "Uh, yeah."

Jeb shook his head with a chuckle. "And I thought you were a realist."

"You're right." Robi stood; she lifted the edge of the cover and started to examine the wound on Bishop's leg. "You're right. But ... on the outside fictional chance that it could happen ..."

"Robi."

"No hear me out. Let's do shifts. OK. We'll both stay here and watch him. How's that." She placed the badge back on.

"And ...I he becomes one we'll just pop him off."

Robi nodded.

"Sounds good." Jeb put his gun away. "But it isn't gonna happen. Neither is asleep. I'm not tired. Scrabble?"

"You know what? That sounds good. Break out the board."

"And the Jack?" Jeb lifted the bottle.

"Oh, yeah, and the Jack." Robi smiled. She checked on Bishop's IV, felt his head for any temperature change, and then settled into what she believed, was a long night of games.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*July 6<sup>th</sup>*

Mas had been working on something all night. He claimed it would be a new way to try to find survivors if they had hooked up with anyone from Mas' land. When he handed Greek a Frosted lake cereal box, Manny knew it was time to do something else.

At five in the morning, everything was quiet. Mas was awake, he never really seemed to sleep. Greek was awake as well. There was no noise or signs of the others, and since Mas was 'at ease' Manny felt 'at ease' as well about the task he wanted to do.

They had rested for the night in a decent place. More visible as the sun started to rise. It was one of those highway stops. The kind you see as you sail down the highway. A town pretty much centered around chain hotels, restaurants, gas station and truck stops. Signs for the business were perched on huge poles, preceded by billboards stating the location was miles ahead.

All things they didn't see in the black of a moonless, cloudy night.

But the clear amber dawn sky brought the vision to Manny as he went out side for air.

He knew he had to get it.

From the balcony, he spotted it. Most of it was a rear view, so Manny could only hope the rest was intact. Bu he'd have to get a closer look to see. Rifle in hand, he toted himself from the hotel in an early morning walk down about a quarter of a mile.

"Oh, yes," he spoke to himself. "You are a beauty."

When he neared it, he saw the damage was minimal, and he chuckled in amusement. "I know this band Get out this is awesome." Manny ran his hand across the country band name that was painted on the side of the huge, deluxe tour bus.

It was obvious, that the bus had barely been moving when the drop occurred, it rolled to a stop against a guardrail, and there it ran out of gas.

Manny examined the front. No damage, a scratch, but the headlights weren't broken. It would need a battery and some gas. But before he did any of that, he had to check out the inside.

Like everyone else, the bus driver was dust. His clothes still on the seat. The bus smelled, like rotten food, and Manny saw why. Take out containers

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were sprawled out everywhere, along with the clothing of those who had rode the bus.

The bus was as Manny expected, decked out. There were bus style seats for only a couple rows, then a longer oak table, graced the left side, he supposed for dining. A short couch, small fridge, and microwave. With an amused chuckle of a kid, he kept going to back in the bus.

Bathroom, and in the rear of the bus were bunk beds. It wouldn't be more perfect. Manny wanted it. A bus would be handy if they found survivors, and a single Humvee would carry supplies, not to mention, the storage section of the bus.

"This will work," Manny said then lifted his radio. "Greek, come in. Hey, I'm good. I'm fine. It's awesome. Gonna clean it, service it and get it ready before I present it to the queen. How are the frosted flakes." He chuckled at the grumble Greek gave him. "OK, I'll radio if I need anything. Over." He put his radio in his pocket, checked out the time, and began to work.

\*\*\*

Bishop never sported a fever, and slept through the night. Robi had just checked him, and removed the IV bag. She knew it had to be early, but day, the sun peeked through he creases of the curtains.

'Flattered' was the world that caught her attention, tiles still laid out on the Scrabble Board, which sat on the edge of the bed. She folded the board, dumped the tiles, and did a quick 'put away' of the game.

Feet propped on the edge of the bed, Jeb slept in the chair. Robi honestly tried to step over them, but bumped into his legs, smashing them down, and causing Jeb to wake.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Is he dead?" Jeb asked.

"No." She shook her head, turned, and nearly tripped over the empty bottle of Jack. She raised it. "You're going to make me an alcoholic yet."

"Please." Jeb scoffed and stood up. "I'm hitting the bathroom."

Robi nodded and moved toward the drapes. She opened the outer ones slightly to let in some daylight. As she parted them, she jumped when Mas stood there. She waved. He waved and walked to the door.

Robi opened it. "Morning, Mas."

"Bright be it." Mas stated and handed Robi a cup. "Espresso, like you

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said Nick. Fix machine.” He pointed upward. “Sun by the run.”

“Wow. No way.” Robi accepted the cup. “A latte?”

“Milk.” Mas tilted his hand back and forth. “Powder. Best not, but have we all.”

“I understand. Did you want to come in?”

“No.” Mas shook his head. “Interrupt will I not.”

“You’re not interrupting.”

“Am but I.” Mas held up a finger. “Taught me did Nick to say correct.” He paused. “Glorious day .... To you. Glorious. Con .. grat...” he grunted in frustration. “Congrat shoe ...”

“Congratulations?”

Mas nodded “Yes. Yes. Congratulations to you. Glorious day. Embrace.” He smiled and walked away.

“Thanks.” Robi called out of the door, and then closed it. “Wow, that was weird.”

“What was?” Jeb asked as he returned to the room.

“Mas was here. Brought me a latte.”

“Where’s mine?”

She shrugged. “Anyhow, he ...”

“A latte? Really? That is strange.”

“That’s not the strange part. He congratulated me and said it was a glorious day for me.”

“Hmm.” Jeb stared in thought. “Maybe he meant congratulations for doing a great job on Bishop.”

“Maybe.”

“Glorious day meaning, he’ll survive.”

“You’re right. Probably.” She sipped her latte then set it down. “I’m gonna go check on Martha.”

“OK. Weird isn’t it? She isn’t crying.”

“I know. Maybe she finally got through her crying when she wakes ritual.”

“OR maybe she is sleeping longer.”

“We’ll see.” Robi reached for the adjoining door. “Shit.”

“What?”

“It’s stuck.”

“Stuck or locked?”

Robi tried the knob. “Locked.”

“You have the key?”

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“No, but I know I left the other door unlocked. I put that latch in the door so it wouldn’t close all the way.” Robi walked to the door. “In case you know, someone else heard her before I did. I’ll be back.”

“Good thing we didn’t have to rush over there.”

“Tell me about it.” Robi walked out. As she turned right, she saw she was correct, the door was slightly ajar. Summoning her pleasant voice, Robi called out as she opened the door. “Hey Martha how ...” She stopped. Literally froze for a second, then backed, closed the door and walked back to the next room.

“Everything OK?” Jeb asked. “Still sleeping?”

“Can you ... can you come here?” Robi walked back out.

“What’s wrong?” Jeb flew out with her.

“Take a breath”

“Why? Did she shit badly.”

Robi ignored that remark and pushed the door open. It swung wide and stayed that way.

Martha giggled.

“Fuck me,” Jeb wisped out.

The crib set center of the room and indeed Martha was in there. Bright, wide-awake and happy. But Martha was no longer a six-month-old baby. About the size of a three year old Martha stood in the crib, gone was her blonde hair. Gone. The diaper was the only article of clothing on her and it was hanging from her left leg.

“Mummy!” Martha held out her hand. “Duddy!” she giggled again.

Both Jeb and Robi looked at each other and said the same thing out loud, “Mas.”

\*\*\*

“Aliens,” Doc grumbled peering into the crib. “Told ya. I told ya. She’s an alien. So’s the little guy, right there.” He pointed at Mas who sat on the bed

Tate peered into the crib. What looked like a skin suit was there, along with a pile of hair and tattered clothes. He touched the skin, and then rubbed his fingers. “It’s her skin. You know when Mas said she was gonna change I thought he meant her diaper.”

Jeb replied, “We all did.”

Mas seemed oblivious to everything, he was happy watching Martha run

about the room.

She wore one of Robi's shirts, which hung to her feet. She was upbeat and happy, giggling and running. Doing the same thing repeatedly. "Mummy." She hugged Robi's leg tightly. "Dudday!" She then gripped onto Jeb's legs, squeezing on and embracing as if she loved his leg as much as him.

Jeb lifted his leg some, moving it back and forth and around, Martha clung tight, giggling. "This is fucked up."

"No, this ..." Tate pointed to the crib. "Is fucked up. Wait until Nick wakes up and sees her. She morphed."

Mas stood. "Morphed?"

"Morphed," Tate explained. "Change."

"Ah, yes." Mas nodded. "Expect to be. Usual. Of this I told."

"Will she change again?" Robi asked.

Mas nodded.

"When?" Robi asked. "Cause we certainly don't want any more surprises."

Mas shook his head. "A while." He brought his finger to his lips and tapped, then snapped. "Years of yours .... Change will she .... Fifty."

Jeb's eyes widened. "She'll be a child for fifty years? Like this?"

"Yes," Mas nodded. "Absorb much. Intelligent much. Teach you should the language. Knows of some already."

"Yeah," Jeb nodded. "She knows how to say Mom and Dad."

Tate asked. "I wonder what else."

Robi shrugged. "We can ask." She crouched down and pulled Martha from Jeb's leg. "Martha."

"Mummy." She embraced Robi happily, and then kissed her on the cheek. After a single kiss, she then kissed her again, and again, really fast, pick like.

Robi snickered. "Bishop does that to her."

"Bishop?" Martha smiled. "Uncle Bishop?"

Robi gazed up to Jeb. "He refers to himself as Uncle Bishop."

Jeb rolled his eyes. "Please don't tell me she learned everything from Bishop."

Then Martha blurted out a happy, "Fuck,"

Robi nearly choked as she laughed and stood. "Well, we know what she learned from you."

"Jack!" Martha said. "Shot of Jack!"

Jeb gave a nod Robi's way, "And we know what she learned from you."

## A Path to Utopia

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“Man,” Tate said. “You guys are turning her into a miniature sailor.”

Mas rose and walked their way. “Much to teach. Time to do. Martha fast she learns. No worries. But protection she needs.” He rested his hand on Martha’s baldhead. “Instinct has she, born with. Fellowship found ...”

Jeb interrupted. “Fellowship?”

Mas held up his hand, paused, thought then replied. “My people. People of mine, instinct of Martha combined. Suitable parent protectors sought and found. Rob-bee, Jeb.” He motioned a hand their way.

“Wait” Tate intervened. “Are you saying she was left with us on Purpose because you’re people knew we would protect her.”

“Goddamn aliens, those bastards,” Doc said.

Mas ignored him. “Yes.”

Robi snickered. “She was left with you two, maybe you were supposed to be the mother Tate.”

“No,” Mas shook his head. “Path of Robi determined. Jeb to meet. Martha await.”

Tate talked his thoughts out loud, “Wow, this is a lot. Your people found the best parents to protect her. Protect her. You mean nourish, love, care ...”

“Protect.” Mas repeated. “From danger of all. Special she is. With all protect you must.” JHE looked at Robi and Jeb stern. “You must.” He crouched down to Martha. “Power of her enemy fears. Strong. Enemy can she defeat by ... death defied.” Grabbing her little left hand, he turned it palms up. “Death defied for many. Power of light.” As he raised her hand a blue light emerged from her palm, it glowed warmly, “The healer.”

\*\*\*

Her tiny hand rested just above Bishop’s wound, and all of them watched as the sutures popped out of the immediately healing gash.

Jeb pointed. “That’s going to come in handy.”

Robi whispered in awe. “This is why she is dangerous. If she can heal wounds, a lot of people won’t die, meaning they can’t just kill us.”

Tate added, “They can send in bugs.”

Robi nodded. “True.”

Martha pulled back her hand, got on her knees, and with a smile, kissed Bishop. Loudly yawning, she curried from the bed, walked to the other, climbed on top of the covers, curled up, and went fast asleep.

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Curiously, Robi looked at Martha. "She wears out." She turned to Mas. "She wears out, fast."

Mas nodded. "Sure she will, when lilacs of stead diet she does not get."

"Lilacs," Robi whispered. "What about other seasons. Can she not heal if she doesn't get lilacs?"

"Heal she can. Just tires. Lilacs, no tire."

Jeb asked, "Can she consume any other flowers as a substitute?"

Mas shook his head. "Lilacs."

"Fuck."

Robi looked at him. "We can green house them." She quickly turned her head when Bishop groaned. "He's waking up." She neared him.

Again, he groaned.

"I'd be careful," Tate said. "Maybe he's a zombie.

Robi stepped back.

Bishop opened his eyes.

Silence.

"What's going on?" Bishop asked. "Why's everyone standing around?"

Tate called out, "Shoot him, He's one of them."

Jeb raised his weapon.

"No!" bishop held out his hand. "I'm talking. Zombies don't talk."

Laughing, Jeb put his gun away. "We're kidding. You look good. Are you feeling better?"

"Sick humor. But, yeah, I am, thanks." He sat up all the way, and then paused. "Who ... who is the kid?" he pointed at Martha.

Robi answered. "Martha."

"Martha?" Bishop asked. "You're kidding."

Tate shook his head. "Nope. You've been asleep for about two years. Coma."

"Oh, my God." Bishop's mouth dropped. "Two years."

Rob rolled her eyes. "No, you haven't been out two years. They're teasing. Martha .. she ... she morphed."

"Morphed?"

"Morphed." Robi nodded.

Bishop looked at her. "She still sleeps a lot."

Robi replied, "When she heals she sleeps. She healed you."

Bishop looked down at his leg. "Dude, it's better."

The door to the room burst open and Nick flew in. "What's going on? Is everything OK?"



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“Oh, hi, honey,” Robi smiled. “We were just watching Bishop.”

“Oh.” Nick rubbed the sleepiness from his eyes. “I woke up, everyone was gone. I was worried and who’s the bald kid?”

Robi answered, “Martha.”

“Martha?” Nick asked. “What happened to her? She grew.”

“She morphed.” Robi said.

“Cool.” Nick said.

“Wait” Ate held up his hand. “We’re like, all engrossed in Martha. We find out, she’s valuable, she’s a healer, and ... most importantly, she’s not from this world, or at least earth. But none of us are stopping to think .... If she’s an extra terrestrial, then what about him.” He pointed at Mas.

“Goddamn aliens,” Doc snapped.

With Bishop wide-awake, feeling better and alert, along with mostly everyone but Greek and Manny there, they grouped around Mas to hear his tale.

In translation.

He hasn’t a clue about his home planet. He was only a baby when his parents left on a pilgrimage to a new planet. Over population, and the government asked for volunteers. His father a great teacher, as Mas stated, packed up the family and left.

There were three such solar systems that they could have chosen. Three mother ships set course.

They ended up on earth.

Even though they were millions of years from tier home planet, and travel through the galaxies was simpler to them, they still held communication. Only problem, communication with the home planet took five earth years to reach Mas.

Travel from the galaxy took as long as twenty earth years.

Which worked in earth’s favor and disadvantage. Mas’ people were sending help. They left many earth years before, but possibly wouldn’t arrive for another year.

Mas told of how his family arrived in America at a time when many immigrants arrived, they blended in. Although both his parents were highly intelligent, are far superior to anyone on earth, they took a job at the home of a university presidents home as head house people. They had a house, food, and didn’t starve during the great depression.

Mas recalled his father befriending a scientist and even helping him

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solve his atomic energy dilemma. Mas didn't recall the name, but said the scientist had frightening hair.

Twenty some years earlier, Mas' father received a radio call from the home planet telling them about the Mazcheks.

Their race was a mogul race of savages and heartless people. Their planet had lost all resources. They had to colonize. They had to find a new home comparable to their own. They settled on earth.

But Earth was already over populated, so they had to clean house.

Three waves.

First a virus. Something to wipe out 99 percent of the world. A second wave would come in three forms, what they were Mas wasn't sure. The second wave would clean house even more, and those who remained would be taken care of when the third and final wave arrived. They were soldiers.

That way would arrive just before the pilgrims. About two years or so.

Mas knew if that third wave could be beat, the pilgrims would be forced to turn around.

Mas' father had devised a plan.

They knew what virus would be used, and his father reinvented an immunization to it. If they failed in saving enough people, then those like Mas had to scatter about to help bring together those who beat the drop.

Bring them together to fight the third wave.

Mas' communication with his people across the world was cut when his belongings were destroyed, along with his people on that truck.

They had town. They were organizing. They were making progress.

Then the mad men showed up.

Mas' father, mother, wife, and child were all killed in that massacre.

But Mas had a mission he had to complete.

He had to pull together survivors, locate a healing child, and band them with others in one strong location.

So-Cal.

But all communication with So-Cal was lost. Mas hoped they heeded his advice and shut down communications, if they didn't, their silence could indicate that a second wave hit them.

There were many, last Mas heard, in So-Cal.

Mas also cleared up the immunity factor to the drop.

Unlike what was said on the news, it wasn't hereditary. It wasn't gene related.

It was instant noodle related.

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When the governments failed to listen to the warnings of impending attack, or take serious Mas' father's immunization, Mas' people took it upon themselves to find another way to inoculate.

Taint the food supply.

But they had to do so within a year of the expected drop.

After many meetings to determine which food would be consumed by the most people, they decided.

There was a food that was consumed in massive amounts, especially by the young and college age students. Young fit soldiers in the battle would be needed.

They decided on Ramen Noodles.

Perfect.

Mas and Several others secured a job in the factory. They would pick one week and taint all the seasoning packets of noodles with the anti-toxin.

Millions of packets they figured. Millions and millions of survivors.

Unfortunately, the dry batch of seasoning they tainted didn't belong to Ramen; it belonged to the Chick Chang Chow Mien noodles, a new instant noodle meal.

The Chick Chang's didn't sell very well, and were discontinued. After several months, the remaining packets were destroyed.

Suffice to say, when Mas mentioned Chick Change Chow Mien Noodles. Everyone in the room, including Doc, proclaimed their love for the noodles and their sadness that they were discontinued.

Chick Chang Chow Mien Noodles.

"Wait," Robi chuckled. "We're all alive because we have weird taste in food?"

Mas nodded. "Yes."

Robi had to sit down on that one. "How bizarre is that. How much did we have to eat to get immune?"

"One helping."

Robi fluttered her lips. "I had enough immunity for my whole street."

Jeb said, "ME, too."

Before the conversation continued, at that moment, a horn beep came from outside followed by Manny's voice. "Hey, everyone."

All those in the room stood up.

Footsteps. Running. Closer.

The door opened

"Hey," Manny stepped inside out of breath. "Check out what ... what

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..." He looked at the bed. "Whose the kid?"

Rob I answered, "Martha. She changed."

"Oh." Manny nodded. "Come see what I got." He flew out of the room then came right back in. "She morphed?"

\*\*\*

Tony the Tiger's eyes had flickering lights. An indication of power and, when the light was steady, a signal.

Greek couldn't get over how strange it was to see lights on the front of the Frosted Flake Box. Nor could he get over speaking into the tiger's mouth, while calling out for someone.

He knew it was getting close to 'leaving time', especially with Bishop up and moving. So he wanted to look for survivors, or call out to them. The radio was enemy safe, and Greek slipped away right after the good part of Mas' story to work with the radio.

"Alpha Two-three-nine," Bishop spoke into the cereal box. Giving the simple code Mas said to state. "Can you read me? Broadcasting from Oklahoma. Anyone there." He pulled back, looked; Tony's eyes were flickering. No signal. He waited. Nothing.

He moved the dial on the side of the box. The lights weren't steady. "Alpha two-three-nine. Can you read me? Broadcasting from Oklahoma. Anyone there?"

Nothing.

Next one. Next steady light.

"Alpha two-three nine. Can you read me? Broadcasting from Oklahoma. Is anyone there?"

Again, nothing. Greek reached for the dial.

Hiss. Static.

\*\*\*

Everyone groaned when Jeb did it. Raise his hand as he stood on the bust step and made everyone wait outside the bus while he and Robi went aboard.

Prior to that, he 'called the bus', stating that he, Robi, Nick and Martha should get first dibs on the bus because they were a family.

What about Tate? Everyone asked.

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He was needed to protect the other vehicle. Two Hoyt's in the same vehicle wasn't safe.

Robi disagreed and wanted to stick with the Humvee. She knew if she switched to the bus she would have to share driving time with Jeb, she wasn't certain she could handle the bus.

"It's comfy," Jeb said to Robi on the bus, giving one more scolding look to those outside who pounded and complained.

"Jeb, why are locking people out?"

"It's not locked," Jeb said. "They are staying out of the bus out of respect for my wishes."

"You frighten them."

"Oh, I do not, stop."

"Ok, so why must we speak in private?"

"I thought we'd test out the bunk beds."

"Jeb ..." Robi chuckled and try to squeeze by him.

"Seriously," Jeb grabbed onto her arm. "I think you and I should be in the bus. Along with Nick, Martha and of course, Uncle Bishop."

Robi raised an eyebrow. "You want Bishop to ride with us."

"Yeah."

"He annoys you."

"It annoys me more when you two chat on the radio like girls on the phone."

Robi nodded once, then folded her arms. "No."

"Why?"

"I like the Humvee."

"You can't like it better than this."

"I do. Plus I can drive the Humvee. Don't get me wrong," Robi said. "I like the bus idea."

"Think of this," Jeb said. "We stop for the night. This can be our home. We won't need to ..."

"Our? Our home?"

Jeb grumbled. "OK, you're right. We aren't in a relationship. But, we are now officially raising the child together. And other than the leadership thingy, why are you against us being in a relationship."

"I don't want to limit myself," Robi said with a smirk. "Really, Jeb, I get involved with you, I won't get out, and what if someone better comes along."

"Such a chick thing to say."

Robi smiled. "No. I stay with the Humvee. You want the bus, Tate can

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ride with me.”

“No, come on.”

“Why are you so insistent?” Robi asked.

“Why are you?”

“For starters. The bus works fine ....”

“Thank you.”

“Stop.” Robi held up her hand. “Let me finish. The bus works fine for now. But what happens when we pick up survivors. Then we’ll have to make room in our home, for strangers.”

Jeb waved out his hand. “We’ll get another vehicle. This will be traveling headquarters. Besides, Robi, really, you keep mentioning others. What are the odds we’re gonna find anymore survivors?”

“Guys!” Greek raced onto the bus.

Jeb shook his head. “So much for private meetings.”

Robi rolled her eyes at him. “Stop. What is it Greek?”

He caught his breath. “I got a call on the radio. I found survivors.”

\*\*\*

They all rushed into Greek’s room, excited, yet, a little on the unbelieving side.

“Here,” Greek pointed to the cereal box. “I just spoke to him.”

Robi asked, “How many are there? Did you find out?”

Greek shook his head. “I was so excited. I told them to hold on, and ran and got you. One of you guys wanna talk to them?”

Robi gave a nod to Jeb, “You can.”

Jeb stepped forward and stopped. “Wait. I got to ... I have to talk into the cereal box?”

Greek nodded. “Yeah, right into Tony’s mouth.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Nope. Works like a charm. Mas’ radio works. Wait until you hear how clear.”

Jeb took a seat at the desk. “I feel fuckin’ silly talking to this.”

Greek showed him the button on the side. “Just press this and talk.”

As Jeb pressed, Tate made a tiger growl.

Following the showing of his middle finger to his brother, Jeb spoke. “Anyone there? Over.”

“Whew-Dog.” The heavy laced Country accent came through. “I know

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you another voice. Hey ya'll."

"Hey ... ya'll." Jeb said deep. "Where you guys at?"

"Little town located just at the Texas Oklahoma border. Red River. Where you all at?"

"Town called Clinton."

"Why you ain't just a hop skip, and a holler. My name's Travis. Who am I speaking to?"

"Jeb."

"Jeb? As in Jebediah?"

"Yes," Jeb answered.

"Jebediah what?"

Jeb huffed. "Hoyt not why is this ..."

"Jebediah Hoyt. Sounds like a preacher," Travis said. "You a preacher."

"Fuck no."

"Sounds like you can be a preacher. Thinking about it."

"I said Fuck no, suing the word fuck, what's that tell you."

"You swear?"

Jeb let go of the button. "I say fuck these people. Wish them well."

Robi shook her head. "Ask how many of them there are."

"Fine." Jeb pressed the button. "Travis, how many of you are there?"

"I think fourteen. Not sure."

Jeb's mouth opened. "Fourteen and he's not sure. What the fuck."

"Jeb." Robi whispered. "Stop."

Travis said. "Y'all gonna pop on in and see us?"

Jeb's mouth opened, but before he could say anything, Mas laid his hand on Jeb's.

"Jeb. People of fourteen. Army to add. Think about it must you. Vital of enemy to fight."

Tate added, "He has a point. If we're gonna build an army, we need bodies."

Jeb said, "I say we go back and round up all the fuckin' zombie things while they're harmless, and use them as weapons."

Robi drew a bright look. "That is not a bad idea. But don't ask me to help."

"Hello?" Travis called out. "Y'all still there? You popping by?"

Jeb hesitated, looked about the room, then replied, "Yeah. We'll be there in an hour."

"Yahoo," Yelled Travis, "Break out the barbeque Bud, w have company

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coming.”

Jeb rubbed his eyes after disconnecting the radio call. “OK. Robi, what do you think?”

Robi answered. “I say we all don’t go. It’s not a good idea, just incase there’s trouble. Me, you, Tate, and Manny. All good shots incase of ambush.”

Jeb started to nod, but stopped. “Wait. Bishop is a better shot than Manny. Even you.”

“Yeah, I know, but I want to go,” Robi said. “I should go, and I want Bishop to still relax after his ordeal, and we need him to watch Martha. Plus, should something happen to me, I want Bishop watching over Nick.”

Bishop smiled. “That’s sweet. Thank you for that.”

“What?” Jeb asked. “Bishop raising Nick. Fuck that. We’ll be back. He stood and walked to the door. He held it open. “Tate, Robi, Manny. Let’s go now, before it gets too late. We’ll get weapons, and take the Humvee. Everyone, we’ll be back in about two hours. Hang tight.”

Robi gave Nick a kiss before walking to the door, then a kiss to Bishop’s cheek, she whispered a thank you and left with the others.

Doc called out, “Jeb?”

“Yeah,” Jeb paused before leaving.

“Can you bring us back some of that barbeque.” Doc asked.

Jeb didn’t answer, he just walked out.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Clinton, OK*

Like a statue of art in a museum, Bishop and Nick stared at Martha as she sat perched on the counter style table of the bus. She was an anomaly to them. The bald little girl, tiny and petite, still wore the shirt Robi gave her. She sat Indian style, brightly smiling, and she stared right back at Bishop and Nick.

“Mas shouldn’t have gone,” Nick said. “Now we don’t know what to do with her.”

“He said care for her and teach her while he’s gone,” Bishop replied. “But really. A couple hours, what’s she gonna learn?”

“True.” Nick nodded. “It was funny, though watching Mas chase the Humvee.”

“Yeah,” Bishop snickered

Martha snickered.

Bishop gave a shoulder nudge to Nick. “Look, she thinks she understands us.”

“I know.” Nick sighed out, and leaned back in his chair. “I like the bus.”

“Dude, we should get more.”

“No, dude, we should get trailers.”

“Yes. Yes.” Bishop nodded. “Homes on wheels. Guy, we won’t need electricity. We’ll have it everywhere we go.”

“We should mention it to Manny.”

Little did they notice as each of them spoke, Martha watched them like a ping-pong match.

Bishop said, “They guzzle gas.”

“True. And you know how annoyed mom gets every time we have to stop to refuel.”

“It has to do with Ray.”

“You think?” Nick asked.

“Dude, yeah. He was killed at a gas station. Bet me your mom hates fast stations from here on in.”

“Makes sense.” Nick’s head turned to the single knock on the bus door, before he could say, “come in.” Greek entered.

“Found some clothes.” Greek laid them on the bus seat by Bishop. “She

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needs clothes. Found them in a packed suitcase. They should fit her until we can find a store.”

“Thanks,” Bishop said.

“Did she eat?” Greek asked. “She might be hungry.”

“Hmm.” Bishop tilted his head. “Does she eat now?”

Nick said, “We can ask her.” He looked at Martha. “You hungry?” he rubbed his stomach then pretended to eat. “Food?”

Martha nodded. “Spam.”

“Dude,” Bishop drew wide-eyed and gave a high five to Nick. “She knows Spam.”

Greek groaned, “Oh brother, I’ll go fetch some.” He walked back to the bus door and stopped. “Oh, by the way. You two may want to watch leaving her alone with Doc.”

“Why?” Nick asked.

“He was mumbling something about wanting to do a live autopsy on her.” He started to walk out, but halted when Martha screamed.

One scream. About two second long, short and shrill.

Greek’s eyes widened. “But we won’t let him.”

Martha smiled.

Greek looked at Bishop and Nick. “She can’t possibly know?”

After a glance at Martha Bishop shook his head. “Nah.”

After Greek had left, Bishop told Nick to gather up some ‘Learning’ things while he dressed Martha.

Nick arrived back at the bus at the same time Greek arrived with some heated luncheon meat.

Suffice to say, Bishop was slightly disappointed in Greek’s lack of originality on preparing Spam.

“Oh, who gives a damn,” Greek handed him the plate. “It’s warm. Cut up. Just feed her.”

“Let’s see if she can feed herself.” Bishop placed Martha on the bench style seat, the put the plate before her.

Martha picked up the first piece, ate it, and smiled.

Bishop nodded pleased. “Wait. You like that. You’ll love what I do with Spam.”

“Don’t ruin he child.” Informed Greek as he started to leave. “I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Bishop blew him off and returned his attention to Nick and Martha. “What did you get?”

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"I found some books." Nick handed them over.

Bishop looked. "Cool, there's a Dr. Seuss in here. That will work. The rest of these ..." He shuffled through. "Dude, the Stand?"

"I just grabbed what I could."

"I may read this later." Bishop put it aside. "OK, let's teach her."

"What do we do first?"

"Names." Bishop said. He smiled at Martha and pointed at her. "Martha."

Martha giggled. "Martha."

"Good. Good." Bishop said. "And this is ..."

"Nick."

"Very good." Bishop smiled. "I am ..."

"Uncle Bishop."

"Yes!" He gave a high five to Nick, then as she glanced back at Martha, he saw her little hand raised. "She wants high five." He gave her one. "Good girl."

"Martha good." She said.

"That's right," Bishop spoke child like and tender. "Martha is good. Nick is good."

"Nick is good." Martha repeated.

"Uncle Bishop is great."

Martha sat up straight. "Uncle Bishop is great."

"I wanna be great." Nick said.

"OK, fine. Nick is great." Bishop informed Martha.

"Nick is great."

"Mommy is great." Bishop taught.

"Mummy is great."

Bishop continued, "Unlike Jeb." He nudged Nick. "Who's mean."

"Duddy mean?" Martha questioned.

"No," Bishop waved out his hand then spoke pleasantly and upbeat. "Duddy is super big and mean."

Martha smiled. "Duddy super big and mean!"

Ornery, Bishop turned to Nick. "We are so gonna have a blast with this."

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***Red River, TX***

Just about two miles after the crossed the Texas state line, they started to see the signs for Red River. It was nothing like a hop skip and a holler, not at all. Once they left the highway, they took a series of back roads.

"Where the fuck is this place?" Jeb grumbled.

"Should be right ahead," Manny said from the back seat, looking at a map.

"Fuck." Jeb shook his head. "The longer we're away the more damage that can be done."

Curiously, Robi glanced at him. "Damage to what?"

"Martha," Jeb replied, "You have Bishop teaching her."

Mas added his two cents, "Bishop well shall he teach."

"Yeah, sure." Jeb nodded. "He's gonna fill her head with shit about me."

Robi gasped. "That is so wrong. I can't believe you'd thin that about Bishop."

"Watch. I'm right" Jeb winked.

Tate aimed a point from the back seat. "Twelve o'clock."

Rob slowed down. "Looks like we have a gate keeper."

A fence was erected across the road, which by the map was one of two roads into town. On a folding lawn chair, sat a man, a rifle was perched on his lap. He stood when the Humvee approached.

He was scrawny man, about five foot seven, dangling hair, and an age hard to tell. He chewed on something, what it was couldn't be figured out.

"You them?" He asked.

Perturbed, Jeb wisped out, "Oh My God. How many fuckin' people come here."

The man laughed. He pointed at Jeb and laughed hyena style as if Jeb were the funniest man alive. "That's a hoot. Hold on." He walked over to his lawn chair, picked up what looked like a coffee can and spoke into it.

Robi turned to Jeb. "Bet there's a Mas here."

"I'll tell 'em," The man said. "And Bud, they got a woman."

Rate whispered "Warning sign."

Jeb gave a nod to Tate.

"What?" Robi asked. "What are you talking about."

Manny replied, "If they mention we have a woman, they don't have one."

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The man opened the gate then walked to the Humvee driver window. "Come on through. Keep going. You'll see the barbeque"

After mouthing the word, "Barbeque," Robi drove through the gate.

Three blocks down the tree-lined road, they ran smack dab into the small town. A tone stop light town with minimal business. If a person blinked, they would literally miss it.

Four men gathered around a blazing and huge barbeque grill. The type that die hard backyard chefs, and tailgaters would use.

"Keep it slow," Jeb instructed.

"No, shit." Robi said. "You think I'm gonna plow right into them?" Robi brought the Humvee to a crawl, then finally a halt. As soon as they stopped, a tall and portly man, raced over to the Humvee. His blonde hair was wavy, and neatly combed; he was clean-shaven and smiled brightly as he tapped on Robi's window.

Robi opened her door. "Hello."

"Goodness." He embraced her. "Goodness. Goodness."

Tate extended out a hand, breaking the embrace. "OK, enough. She's fragile."

"Sorry." He stepped back. "Travis, Ma'am." He extended a hand. "So nice to meet you."

Robi tried to hold a firm grip, but her arm waved up and down. "Robi," she introduced herself. "This is Tate, Jeb, Manny and ..."

"Sam!" Travis said brightly. "How'd you get with them, Sam?"

"Mas." Mas corrected.

"Sam," Said Travis.

"Mas."

"Sam."

"Mas."

"Enough," Jeb barked "Please. It's Mas."

"Oh," Travis nodded. "I get it. You got that dislexia disease."

"What the fuck?" Jeb questioned. "It's not dislexia, it's dyslexia, and no. His name is Mas."

Suddenly, Mas squealed in delight. He clapped his hands together once and called out. "Sam! Ge fricca tat zo."

Emerging from the men was a Mas look alike, the only difference between Mas and Sam was the fact that Sam had a few strands of hair just above is left ear.

"Tat zo. Tat zo juna frepa zol." Sam faced to Mas and the two of them

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embraced.

Jeb raised an eyebrow at the foreign talk between. "Oh, they will have to speak English. It's a must."

Robi backhanded him in the gut.

"What?" Jeb asked, and then looked up. They were encircled by a large group of men, all staring at the curiously. "Hey, Einstein," Jeb gave an upward motion of his head to Travis. "There's more than fourteen."

"Fourteen what?" Travis asked.

"Christ." Jeb reached behind his back for his revolver. His fingers touched the handle, as the group of men before them began to part like the red sea.

He was preceded by four armed men. A well rehearsed play. First, the commoners parted to make way for the henchmen then they split, two by two, and Bud Hershman emerged.

He wasn't what Jeb expected, especially if Bud was the leader and it appeared as if he were.

Jeb envisioned a stronger looking man, maybe one in his late fifties, or early sixties. Redneck values, slick hick accent.

But Bud Hershman wasn't any of those.

The average size man of height and weight was, without a doubt, a clean-cut guy trying to look rough and tough. He had only a slight hint of a country accent, his hair thin on top. He nodded to his henchmen and they lowered tier weapons, he then looked at Jeb, Tate, and Manny. "You here can at ease these weapons. No harm here."

"I'd rather not, but ..." Jeb put his revolver back behind his pants. He motioned his head for Tate and Manny to lower their guns.

Another nod of Bud's head, and his two henchmen stepped to Jeb, reaching behind him for the gun.

Jeb stepped, back, pulled his revolver, and aimed it shorter man. "I lowered I won't give it up. Back up little man. Now."

Bud chuckled "It's Ok, Stew," he said to his henchman. "Perhaps these folks we'll see none of us are enemies." He sighed out, and then showed his hand to Robi. "My name is Edward. People around here call me Bud. You are?"

"Roberta Pierce. Or Robi." She shook his hand. "And these are ..."

"Robi." He whispered out the name. "Rob ...bee. Hmm. Beautiful." He grabbed her other hand. "It is such a pleasure to ..." He turned over her left hand and noticed her wedding band. The band Robi had yet to remove.

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“Married? Are one of these en your husband.”

Robi started to answer. “Actually ...”

“I am.” Jeb reach to him, lowering Robi’s hands from bud. “I’m her husband.” Jeb held out his hand. “Jeb.”

“The preacher?” Bud asked.

Jeb let out a two ‘ha’ snide chuckle. “Uh, yeah.”

Bud cleared his throat. “Well, seems odd to get to know each other here. Why don’t we head up to my office and we can talk. How’s that?” Her waited for a response, and the one e received was a nod. Bud, turned, gave a simple wave to follow and led the way through the men, calling out, “Keep the barbeque going, men. We’ll feast in a bit.”

Robi, Jeb, Tate, and Manny started to follow.

Jeb stopped. “Mas.” He called out. “Mas, come on.”

Mas was engrossed with Sam. He smiled, waved, and started to head toward Jeb.

Bud halted him with a friendly lift of his hand. “No, visit,” he informed Mas, the spoke to Jeb. “Your Patagonian can visit with ours. Unless he is vital to your meeting?”

Jeb looked at Robi.

Robi answered, “Mas should be fine. Go on Mas, chat with your friend.”

Mas nodded happily. “Much thanks, Robi. Miss I did, acquainted again, shall we.”

Bud smiled. “Good. Ready?” he continued on his straight ahead path.

With some trepidation, the four of them followed.

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For some obscure reason, the four of them were left in the office located on top of a hardware store in town. It was said to them to be Bud’s home and office. The main room, where they all waited, was the office.

A medium sized oak desk, sofa, two chairs, and a large round meeting table with maps was the make up of the room.

“Kitchen, bathroom, bedroom.” Jeb said as he returned from the small hall. “Not much. He has a purple bedspread. Fucked up.” He walked to the main picture window where the curtains were open and the window was only covered by a thin shear. “Does anyone else think this is odd?”

Manny asked, “You mean that the curtains are open.”

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Robi shook hi head. "That's not what Jeb means. I know what you mean, Jeb. It is odd. Why are we waiting here alone? I mean granted, he said he'd be right back, but still."

Tate checked out the time. "He's been gone eight minutes."

Jeb pointed a finger. "He's up to something."

Manny showed concerned. "You don't think he's gonna kill us, do you?"

Jeb shook his head. "No. If anything happens ..." he pulled from his pocket a ketchup cap. "Watch." He held it to his mouth. "Greek, you there."

"Yep. Still here. Read you loud and clear."

"Good I'll keep you posted. As soon as we find out what Princess Bud wants. Over." Jeb replaced the cap into his pocket.

Manny said, "That is amazing that the radios work at this distance."

"Wait a second," Robi stepped forward. "The radios don't work at this distance. Fuck."

"What?" Jeb asked.

"Its' only a few mile radius. We have to be relaying off of something." Robi said. "Bet me this Sam guy built a similar radio."

Tate added, "So hey can hear everything we say."

Robi nodded. "Whatever we transmit."

Jeb smiled and bough the ketchup cap back to his mouth. "Hey, Greek. Did I mention that this Bud guy keeps staring at Manny's butt? Yep. Over."

Robi, trying not to laugh, pointed in a scold to Jeb. "You nee to e a little more mature."

"Why?"

"Why?" Robi asked. "Because it's the grown up thing to do."

"Yeah," Tate added. "You're a father now. But, you might not be after Bishop gets done with Martha."

"Fuckin' Bishop." Jeb grumbled.

Bud returned. They all spun in his direction as they stood around the table.

"Hope you're fine," Bud said. "I'm sorry about the delay. Problem with the barbeque."

Manny asked, "What exactly do you barbeque?"

"Livestock," Bud replied. "The wipe out didn't .. wipe out the live stock. Sam says they aren't even infected, so we eat them. Tonight ... pork." He smiled. "So, you folks are form Clinton? Not much in that town. How are you surviving."



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Robi replied. "We're passing through Clinton. We stopped there."  
"Travelers."

"We prefer settlers." Robi gave a polite smile.

"East to west or west or east."

"East to west." Bud nodded. "You're probably wondering about our little town."

Jeb wanted to say, 'not really' but refrained.

Bud continued. "I'm not from around here. I was an insurance man. I was driving to Amarillo when the wipe out happened. Actually, I was in a diner having food. Suddenly, everyone just .... Well. I don't need to tell you. I managed to find about four more people; this was just east of Oklahoma. We, like everyone else, pretty much hung around the television until the signal died."

Tate asked. "Did you mark down survivors?"

Bud nodded. "Yeah, then after about two weeks, we went searching. We stopped in a town called Weatherford. Did you folks go there?"

Manny whistled. "And left there."

"Yep." Bud chuckled. "We were over run. Lost one of our guys there. I got bit. We got in the car, and kept driving until we ran out of gas. Which was just off the exit. Ben Evens was with me and he found the town and people. Three. They nursed me back to health. When I was healed, I realized the people in the town, the thereof them were starving. They weren't smart. Not using their resources and I helped them. And stayed."

Jeb questioned. "So when you got here, that made six. How did you end up with so many?"

"Travelers. Sam was the first." Bud answered. "They all stopped and stayed. Like you folks are gonna do. How many are you?"

Robi replied. "Oh, no, we're not staying."

"You're not?" Bud snickered. "Well, what are you doing?"

"We're headed west to California."

"Southern?" Bud asked.

Robi nodded.

"There's nothing there."

"We don't know that." Robi said.

"They stopped sending a signal."

"We think that perhaps that was on purpose. To avoid being picked up."

"Or they were and are wiped out." Bud said. "If that's the case, then

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what?”

Robi surged. “Stay. Make the best of it.”

“That’s absurd,” Bud commented. “You’re traveling on bad dream.”

“And you have what here?” Robi asked.

“We have water, livestock ... protection.”

“We can get water, livestock ... we have ...” Robi held out her hand toward Jeb. “Protection.”

“But you lack leadership.”

Robi laughed. “We lack no such thing. Are you saying because this town has leadership, you, that we’re insane for going forward.”

“Pretty much. I mean, Ok, let’s face it. It’s pretty simple to lead four people.”

Manny interjected. “There’s more. We have more. They just aren’t here.” He said smug, “Plus, you know, our leadership is pretty tight. It was tight at the church in PA when we were set up like you, and this whole entire trip has been tight. Robi does a good ...”

“Her?” Bud asked. “She’s your leader.”

Robi replied, “We all sort of ..”

Jeb interrupted. “Yeah, she is. She leads. We follow.”

Bud chuckled. “That’s good. Real good.”

Robi passively nodded a few times with a cool, calm look, and then smiled “Ok. Well, we jus need to know if any of you wanted to join us. But ... you guys got it together and we’ll just leave. Let’s go guys.” She walked to the door.

“Wait.” Bud called out. “You’re leaving? You aren’t staying for the barbeque.”

Robi, hand reaching for the door paused. “As nice as it is of an invitation, we’ll pass. But thank you for your hospitality. Good luck, OK? We have to leave.”

She opened the door and as soon as she did, shifting of shotguns rang out and she was face to face with multitudes of barrels.

Bud walked to her. “Leave? I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

Jeb drew. Tate and Manny drew their weapons as well.

“Drip it.” Bud ordered. “Drop it now.”

“How about I just drop you?” Jeb held his aim steady. “I won’t have a problem with that.”

“Then will you have a problem with watching your wife die?” Bud asked. “Because you kill me, they’ll kill her.”

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Jeb shifted his eyes to the weapons aimed strong on Robi.

“Drop them.” Bud instructed. “One woman. If we can’t have her, no one will. We haven’t had a woman here at all. So no loss to us if she bites it. What’s it gonna be?”

Jeb didn’t answer. He made eye contact with Robi, then waited a beat and he, Tate, and Manny lowered their weapons.

The main street of the town was called the court. To symbolize a kingdom, ironically Bud upon referencing himself as leader and king, also made a comment about being a princess.

He did that with a smirk.

Jeb, Tate, and Manny were being escorted down the street where the vehicle waited. They were given back their weapons as well. The only thing they weren’t given was Robi.

Tate spoke through clenched teeth as they approached the court. “We aren’t leaving this place without her.”

“Shut up,” Jeb whispered.

“No, Jeb, listen ...”

“Shut the fuck up,” Jeb said low. “You think I’m that fuckin’ stupid. Follow my lead.”

“This better work.”

“It will.” Jeb continued walking. “But first ... we have to leave.”

Tate stopped. He looked at Jeb.

“Trust me.”

The three of them were reunited with Mas. He was confused about what was going on, and neither Tate, Jeb nor Manny could explain. They simply said they’d give him all the information in the Humvee.

“As my gift,” Bud stated. “Exchange. Fair exchange. Sam will go with you. Plus, you may take two more of my men. I believe that’s fair. Don’t you?”

Jeb stared him down. “Yeah, it’s fair. We were getting a divorce anyhow.”

Bud smiled. “Good.” He walked to a homemade platform, and stepped upon it. He spoke loudly bringing silence to the group. “Our visitors have decided to leave us. They are going to Southern California to look for survivors. Two of you, Travis and Ben, have expressed interest in going.

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These folks are happy to take you.”

Travis did a huge yelp of excitement and a skip. He raced to Jeb. “I can just pick up things. Don need to wait for me to pack.”

“Ben?” Bud asked. “Are you willing to go. Do you want to go?”

Ben nodded. A quiet guy, mid thirties.

“Would you like to get some things together? You can, but I am sure, you can get al you want on your trip.”

Ben agreed and, he, like Travis, joined Jeb, Tate, and Manny.

Bud continued. “The woman is tired from traveling and asked to stay here for a while. I saw no problem with that, and thought it was best. Especially since her and I had quite the instantaneous attraction.”

Jeb leaned into Tate, whispering, “This mother fucker is so dead when I’m done with him.”

Bud said more, but Jeb, Tate, and Manny paid no attention. Within moments, they were escorted to their Humvee, and then escorted out of town.

Gates closed.

Tate drove, and wasn’t happy. “We just left.”

“Keep driving.” Jeb instructed. “Manny, give me your bag. Empty it.”

Manny emptied the contents of his bag. “You want everything out?”

“Leave the binoculars, and toss in your weapon. Plus ammo.”

“Flashlight too?” Manny asked.

“Yep.” Jeb accepted the bag.

“What are you doing?” Tate asked.

“Keep driving.”

“What’s the plan?” Tate badgered angrily. “You said you have a plan.”

“I do.”

Travis leaned forward. “They gonna follow you. See em?”

Jeb looked in the side view mirror. “I see them. What do you know?” he asked Travis.

“They’re supposed to follow you fer about five or six miles once you get on the highway. Once you’re out of sight, they’ll stop.”

“See.” Jeb said. “That’s the plan. Drive five or six miles up the highway, stop. I’ll get out. You guys go get the others and be ready to get us. I’ll have her out of there this evening.”

Tate turned his head toward Jeb. “You can’t go in alone. No way. I won’t let you.”

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"The less the better." Jeb said.

"But alone ..."

"Nope." Jeb cut him off. "I won't be alone. I'll have Travis. He knows that town inside and out. If anyone can get me in there, and help me get Robi, it's him. Right, Travis?"

Travis grinned from ear to ear. "Right." He nodded, and then the happy look was replaced with a confused one. "What am I saying right about?"

Jeb slightly rolled and faced forward. He gave a motion of his head to Tate for him to keep driving. And they did.

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### ***Clinton, OK***

The ride back was a silent one, and they made it there rather quickly. Not even Mas and Sam spoke to each other at all in the native tongue.

When they pulled to the Day's Inn, Greek was the first one out to greet them. He had a lot of worry on his face, and when he arrived at the Humvee, he saw why.

"Guys." Greek said out of breath. "Where's ..."

Tate held up his hand, "I'd rather explain once and while Nick is here. OK?"

"You radioed. The radio call was weird."

"I know." Tate stepped in front of the Humvee. "Nick." He called out.

"Jumper willickers," Doc proclaimed. More goddamn aliens," He referenced Sam.

Many only gave a shake of his head to Doc.

"Hey, wait." Doc stepped closer. "Where is Robo cop and Flake?"

They were laughing when they stopped from the bus. Nick first, with Bishop right behind him. Bishop carried Martha.

"Hey, guys." Nick said brightly.

Bishop slowed down. His eyes shifted. "Wait a second, where's ..."

"My mom?" Nick moved faster. "Tate where's my Mom."

"Listen, Nick." Tae spoke calmly. "I have to tell you something."

"No. No." Nick shook his head and rushed to the Humvee. "What happened to my mom? Tate? Where's my mom?"

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Bishop closed his eyes. "Oh, my God, please don't tell me Robi and Jeb are ..."

"No." Tate answered quickly. "They aren't. They aren't dead. They're fine. We had a problem. We gotta pack up and get moving, OK?" he laid his hands on Nick's shoulders. "The town was all men. They took your mom at gunpoint and threatened to kill her if we didn't leave."

"You just left her?" Nick asked emotional. "How could you leave my Mom?"

"Nick," Tate said strong. "We left your mom. Jeb did not. OK? OK?" he waited for a nod. "He's there. He's gonna get her and we just got to go back and get them. Do you think he's gonna let anything happen to you mom?"

Nick whispered emotionally. "We have to get her."

"We will," Tate said. "Jeb will. I can bet my life an promise you that."

"Is my Mom OK?" Nick asked.

"I believe she is." Tate replied.

"But we don't know," Nick's voice dropped. "I wish we knew."

With an airy revelation, Bishop spoke, "Guys? We do know." When he saw he had their attention, he raised Martha's hand. "She's fine. Robi's fine." Bishop smiled. "We do know. Look."

From the palm of her tiny hand raised a small golf ball size, globe of blue energy. The blue ball, it was cloudy and swirled with a mist. When the mist cleared, inside the ball was an image of Robi.

She was fine ... and wearing a dress.

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"And then ..." Travis spoke as he and Jeb walked the wooded area toward town. "When I was in eighth grade, I had this wart ..." he held up his bended elbow. "You can see the scar. Used to be a wart ..."

Jeb just kept his focus straight ahead and his pace steady.

Travis continued, "Anyhow ... I used to pick and pick it. It'd bleed, and then the dang thing would just grow back, bigger. Till one day, my Daddy told me to stop picking at the wart. And he took me out to the shed. Know what he did?"

"No."

"Guess."

"No."

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“Come on, guess.”

“Fine,” Jeb huffed. “He beat you?”

“Ew Dog, for picking a wart?” Travis laughed. “Hogs a runnin’ your pa must of whipped you for nothing.”

“Travis ...”

“Bet you got beat for not eating your vegetables. Probably why you’re so big. You ate al your vegetables because your pa beat you.”

“No, I like vegetables.”

“I don’t.”

“Travis.” Jeb stopped. “Why did he take you out to the shed?”

“To burn off the wart.”

“Your father burned off your wart?” Jeb asked.

“Yep, lit a switch, poker red, and held it to me. Burned that wart right off.”

“So the scar was from being burned.”

“No, it was from picking the wart. Weren’t you listening?”

Jeb grumbled. “Do you ever shut up?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you asking me that? Is it a trick question.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” Travis thought. “Yeah, I do. There.”

Jeb tried to ignore him, and kept moving.

“Wait.” Travis called out. “Stop.”

Jeb did. “What’s up?”

Travis pulled him back, and then pointed outward. “Invisible eyes. Sam made them. You get close, they’ll see you coming in.”

“Is there anyway around them?” Jeb asked.

“Yep. Gotta mirror?”

“A mirror? You have to be shitting me.” Jeb moaned. “OK. Stop. I saw a car about two miles back on the road. Let’s go.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Fine.” Jeb started to leave.

“Or ...” Travis sang out.

“Or what?”

“Well, these are always going down. They take a day or two to send someone out to fix them, Bears and stuff. Don’t know if they’re bears, but animals take them off. I suggested squirrels but ..”

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“Travis, what’s your suggestion?” Asked Jeb, irritated.

“I was just saying, if you can shoot one of the eyes, you could get by it. You can shoot it. Your aim any good?”

With a look that said, ‘I can’t believe you asked me that’, Jeb stepped forward and raised his gun.

Although the tree was a good fifty feet away, and the invisible eye was only about six inches in diameter, Jeb nailed it. A single shot, a searing ping, and the eye was gone.

They continued their journey forward to Red River.

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The dress probably belonged to some older woman, or perhaps was an old dress from years earlier. Robi couldn’t possibly imagine, anyone she knew wearing it. But yet, there she was forced to change into the dress. The thin, country dress was plain, with a flowery pattern, and a V-neck. No real style or shape, just a one-shape garment.

She changed while they watched her at gunpoint, or she changed without them. Either way. She had to put on the dress. Bud’s orders.

“A lady should always look like a lady,” Bud told her. “And sorry to say in them Army pants you look like you might be a lesbian.”

“Maybe I am.” Robi said snide.

“You got a husband.”

She sniffed and tossed her head in the air. “Maybe I fake it.”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t good enough for you not to fake.”

Robi was pretty certain the conversation wasn’t going anywhere, so she decided to change it. “Look, Bud, I’m not putting on a dress.”

“You will.”

“I won’t.”

“You have to look pretty. Don’t you want to look pretty? I mean, you have potential.”

“Gee thanks.” Robi said.

“Because, to be honest, you don’t look pretty now.”

“Bite me.”

Bud whistled. “Feisty.” He made a sizzle sound. “I like that. If you want that, I can handle that. Now get ready.”

“For what?” Robi asked.

He tossed her the dress. “Me.”



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It was then she was given the ultimatum dress under gun or not. She chose to get changed alone. At the while, she plotted an escape. Looked for a route out. The window would work. She could always jump the window. It was only a couple stories high. But amidst all those thoughts, she remembered Jeb. Jeb had to have had a plan.

He would be there. Of that, she was certain.

But he had to see where she was. So she drew the curtains open a bit for his view.

Bud returned holding a bottle of wine. He was wearing a red silk robe, and it was obvious he was either naked or only wearing under shots beneath it. His bare chest should through the part of the robe and his thin, pale, legs poked out the bottom.

What frightened Robi some, it wasn't the robe, it was the fact that he returned with four men.

"We're gonna have some fun tonight." Bud said. "Would you like some wine? It might help you relax."

Robi nodded. A drink wasn't a bad idea. He poured her a glass; she downed it and extended the empty container. "More," she said.

Bud refreshed it.

She finished the second glass as fast as the first, the whole time thinking how she could waste time until Jeb arrived. Where was he?

"Why are they here?" Robi asked.

"Assurance," Bud replied. "You and I ... we're gonna be intimate." He winked.

A sick knot formed in Robi's stomach. "Like with the dress? I either do it at gun point or not?"

"No." Bud shook his head. "I wouldn't make you be intimate with me under gun point."

"I'm not having sex with you, Bud. Forget it." Robi stated.

"Not sex." Bud whispered with a hiss to his 'S'. "Seduction."

Robi laughed. "Sorry." She covered her mouth. "But the seduction thing is out as well. Let me repeat ... you will not ... seduce me. We will not ... be intimate .... There will e no sex. Period."

"Final word?"

"Yes." Robi was adamant.

"Boys," Bud called them.

Te second Robi saw the four men move her way, she bolted. He route

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to the door was obstructed, so she geared for the window.

She was grabbed; one of them locked an arm around her waist. She elbowed back, caused a grunt, and flipped the man over her shoulder. She shot her foot directly to his chest, turned, and was greeted with three shotguns. All aiming at her face.

"You can make this easy ..." Bud stepped forward. "Or you can make it hard. I'd rather ..." He smiled "Make it .. hard." He snickered "And fun." Bud gave a twitch of his head.

Robi saw the butt of the rifle head her way, but she blacked out upon connection.

"There. There. See?" Travis excitedly said, as he laid belly down on the roof of a structure a few streets away from Bud's building.

Jeb used his binoculars. "Yeah, I see. But I don't like what I'm seeing."

"What? What?"

"He's carrying her somewhere."

Travis laughed. "Probably seduced your wife and is heading toward the bedroom. ... Ow!"

Jeb had hit him in the back of his head. "He didn't seduce my wife. Something's wrong." He lowered the binoculars. He didn't need them to see the streets between him and Bud. The barbecue was still going strong, a fire burned, and everyone was drinking. "All right," Jeb said. "I can make it across the street. But I got to figure out how to get into that building. He has here men guarding it. If I shoot them, I'll draw attention. Think you can distract them."

Travis nodded. "Yep. Can do that. But what about just taking the fire escape up there. Ain't no guards on that."

Jeb looked to where Travis pointed, and smiled.

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It didn't take Robi long to return to consciousness. The pain aided in awakening her and so did the stuffed feeling in her mouth.

Her temple throbbed, her wrists pulled, and she couldn't speak. Not only had Bud gagged her, but he had her tied to the bed as well. Arms out, and she couldn't even lock her legs; they two were spread and tied.

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She was still dressed, but somehow Robi didn't think that would matter. Jeb had better hurry. She was running out of ideas.

Bud entered the room and whispered, "They're gone. We're alone." He sighed. "Set the mood. Are you feeling in the mood, my love?"

Robi widened her eyes in a warning way.

"Of course, you are? I'm being silly." He walked to the dresser and set down his wine. On top of a table was an old Victrola. Bud lifted an old vinyl album, set it on the turntable, and wound up the record player.

The music began.

Queen's, 'We Are the Champions'

Only the old 1980's song sounded demonic, and slow. But it was music, which Bud seemed to take as a symphony.

He danced slow, swishing his body back and forth. "You like this. Yep." He turned backwards and wiggled his backside in front of her, side to side, then in a gyrating, manner.

Robi could see his clenching butt cheeks sucking in the robe as he tried his hardest to be an erotic dancer. All she could thin was, "Oh my God. Where's Jeb?"

Bud walked over to the bed and sat down. "Let me tell you a little about myself, princess. I am a giver. I like to give. You like that." He nodded. "Yeah. I'm not a selfish lover so I aim to please before, I am pleased." He leaned down to her, bringing his lips near her face.

Robi turned her head.

"What was that, oh, absolutely." He brought his lips to her neck and began to kiss her neck. Wide mouth, wet and slippery he moved up and down. Bud moaned and raised his head. "You want me to do what?" he chuckled. "Princess, of course."

He stared at her, and then trailed his fingers down the center of the V-neck. He pulled until the 'V' moved lowered, and then Bud shifted the garment to the side, and exposed Robi's breasts.

Her bra covered her flesh, but not for long, Bud moved the cup, and released her.

Robi concentrated elsewhere, on anything, \anyone, she could wiggle her body, but in her mind, Bud would only take that as a sign of her excitement.

So, Robi laid still. Completely still.

At first, he touched her breast with his fingers, then, he lowered his ea, parted his lips, and extended his tongue.

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He found her nipple, and his tongue flicked it about, and then encircled it.

Robi groaned .. in disgust. Turning her head, not wanting to see. It was bad enough she was getting a mouth bath from Bud.

Bud stopped. He pulled away from her breasts, slowly, and with suction. A chuckle, and he shifted his body so his arms could reach for her dress. With his hip digging into her hip, he raised her dress to just mid undergarment "Pink undies," he said. "You knew I like pink." Reaching under the dress, like he was peeling an exotic fruit he lowered her underwear just a bit. "What was that?" he asked.

Robi closed her eyes. Jeb. Jeb. Where was Jeb?

"You're constricted? Of course, what was I think?" He brightened his voice. "Ahead!" he reached for the nightstand and lifted a pair of scissors. Just slightly, he lifted the dress enough to get an aim.

Like a surgeon, he preformed his surgery. Two cuts, and the underwear dropped from her body. He lifted them, and tossed them.

Bud smiled at Robi as his hand went to her high, then slipped inward and up.

Robi's eyes opened wide.

"Yes" He whispered seductively. "You like that. Don't you?" He moaned as manipulated her. He wasn't rough with Robi. In fact, his hand moved painstakingly slow. Fingers touching, encircling .... entering. "More?" he snickered, "Of course. How's that. Better." His free hand stroked her face, and then he laid his hand on her head. "You like it." He made Robi nod. "I know. Yes. Feel it." Hand still in control of her head, he brought her forward. "No, wait. You can't have that yet. Impatient girl." He stopped manipulating her and stood. His erect penis poked from his robe.

Robi looked away.

At that point, Bud took old of himself and danced his and about his manhood. "You enjoy this, I know. But I have to save myself. I know what you want. I know what I want." He walked to the foot on the bed and stared at her open legs.

Although not much of Robi was exposed, she was still covered by her dress; Bud locked a view on her. He moistened his lips as he climbed on the bed. A crawl, a taunting crawl.

Kneeling between her legs, Bud arched forward, lowered his head and mouth, stopping when he felt the cold, hard steel of a gun to his temple.

"Move that mouth any closer," Jeb graveled, "And you'll give new

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meaning to the last supper.”

Bud looked up.

“Back away.” Jeb ordered.

“Look,” Bud said. “You have no right to be in here.”

“Fuck it.” Jeb revved back and nailed Bud, rendering him unconscious. He rolled him onto the floor, and immediately rushed to Robi. “You OK?” he undid the gag and pulled the cloth from her mouth.

After catching her breath and nearly regurgitating, Robi breathed out. “Thank you.”

Jeb worked at untying her.

“Hey.”

“What?” Jeb asked.

“I thought ... I thought you had a thing for me.”

“What?” Jeb laughed. “Where is this coming from?”

“Weren’t you frantic to find me?” Robi shoo her arm when it was freed.

“Absolutely,” Jeb freed her other arm.

“Well, I thought you’d be more excited to see I was all right.”

Jeb smiled. “I am.” He leaned into her. “I ma very excited to see you. Especially with your breast exposed,” he nodded at her. “And ... well.” He cleared his throat. “Nice breasts.”

Robi fixed her shirt, then reached down and grabbed her dress and lowered it. “He cut my underwear off.”

“I see that.”

“What?”

“I mean ... well, they’re on the floor.” Jeb freed her legs. “Done. Let’s go.” He extended a hand to her. “You want your clothes. The again, climbing down that fire escape might be interesting if I head down first.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” Robi went into the other room. “They’re still here. Give me a second.”

“Not a problem.” Jeb walked around the bed and looked down to Bud.

Within a minute Robi returned. “I feel weird.” She stomped her foot into her boot, then raised her leg to lace them.

“Why?”

“Just not wearing any underwear.”

“Look at it this way. No embarrassing panty lines.”

She snickered and laced her other boot.

“Ok.” Jeb said, “What about him.”

“I don’t know.”

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“I can kill him. Do you want him dead?”

Robi shook her head. “No. He didn’t hurt me. Just pissed me off. He copped a feel, but he was at least gentle.”

“Nice, the gentle rapist.” Jeb stared down. “We can leave him here or ...” he turned with a bright smile.

“What? What are you thinking?”

The ornery look stayed with Jeb. “I got an idea.”

\*\*\*

It had been hours since Bud’s men had heard from him, and they grew not only a little concerned but envious as well. So, they went to disturb him.

What they found they didn’t expect, and two of the four men even laughed.

Bud was in the bedroom as they thought, but only Bud was tied to the bed, and he was wearing the dress that Robi had sported.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

They had driven until the darkened skies told them it was time to stop. They had enough food supplies, and planned to do a ‘camp out’ until the next day.

The bus really made a difference in that.

Two tents were pitched.

It was quiet on the bus; Robi possessed the back end where the two bunk beds and desk were located. Bishop’s oft reading voice carried to her, but it didn’t disturb her.

She had maps on the desk and held the baby food jar. Leaning back in the chair, she chatted. “You know you can come over here and we can discuss this. You’re like ...” She peered through the window. “Fifteen feet away.”

Greek replied, “but isn’t this so old world?”

“Yeah, it is. Sort of. OK, where were we?” she lifted the map.

“I have to agree with Jeb. I say we go to Vegas.”

“But like with everything else, the last signal we have noted was from Bishop’s list.”

“True,” Greek said. “But, think of it. People may associate that place with the Stephen Kind novel and go there.”

“You really think?”

“It’s worth a shot.”

“Ok, then ...” Robi made a note. “Well head up to Vegas, see what’s there. Any luck reaching anyone else on the radio?”

“No luck.”

“Any ... any word from Red River?”

“None.”

Robi breathed out. “We’re good then.”

“That’s what I think.”

“Ok. Here’s the deal. Don’ drive yourself crazy with calling out al the time. Anyone that’s listening for radio transmissions are going to listen on the hour. Just do a sweep, on the even hours. How’s that.”

“Works for me, boss.”

“We’ll head out first light. Hit the next town. Pick up supplies, clean up, and move forward.”

“How many miles tomorrow you want to accomplish?” Greek asked.

“Five or six hundred? You think that’s pushing it.”

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“Nah, with the stopping, it’s a full day. Should be good. Get us to Vegas day after tomorrow.”

“My thoughts, too.”

“Well, good night, Robi, glad you’re safe.”

“Night Greek.” Robi rested the radio lid on her lips, staring down at the maps, before setting it down and grabbing a notebook.

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There was a roof trap on the bus, and Jeb probably could have taken that inside, but he opted for the long route. After informing Tate-whose sleeping bag was sprawled on the bus roof—that he’d be back, Jeb hanged jumped from the side of the bus. He did a quick check of the perimeter. He could see Robi sitting in the back of the bus, the light was still on, she wasn’t sleeping, she was writing something.

Glasses? Robi wore glasses? He made a mental note to tease her about that, but not on this night. She probably was too preoccupied with all that happened.

His watch said ten PM, which Jeb knew wasn’t correct. He always set his watch ten minutes ahead.

Entering the bus, he saw Travis sleeping in the front row of bus seats, and the other new guys just in the next row. He walked through the curtained area, where Bishop was laying on the couch. Martha was curled up with him, and a book was open on his chest.

“You sleeping?” Jeb asked in a low voice.

Bishop opened his eyes. “I dozed off.” He adjusted Martha as he sat up. The book fell to the floor.

Jeb picked it up. “The Stand?”

“Yeah.” Bishop covered Martha and stretched as he stood. “Good book.”

“Heavy reading.”

“Martha’s enjoying it.”

Curiously, Jeb looked at him. “Martha?”

“She asked for it. She’s asked a million questions though. Driving me nuts.”

“Martha?”

“She’s pretty smart.”



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"I'd say." Jeb handed him the book. "Is she getting it."

"Yeah."

"Better than me," Jeb chuckled. "I never got it. Anyhow ... I'm gonna see Robi."

"Wait."

"What?"

Bishop leaned forward. The door was slightly ajar. He whispered, "You think she's OK?"

"That's why I'm here."

"So you didn't get an idea?"

"You know Robi." Jeb said. "Nothing really bothers her, if it does, she doesn't show it." He began opening the cupboards.

"What are you looking for?" Bishop asked "Spam?"

"Fuck no. Jack."

"I hid it from Baby Martha."

"What?" Jeb asked with a laugh.

"She hasn't a clue it's alcohol. She sees how much you guys drink of it." Bishop opened the cabinet under the sink and used that as a stepping stool as he reached.

"Hold on." Jeb interrupted, opened the cabinet out of Bishop's reach, and grabbed the bottle. "Thanks."

"You think it's a good idea that you two drink every night?" Bishop questioned.

"What are you, Mother Hen?"

"Yeah, I guess you can say that." Bishop commented. "You guys are like the town drunks."

"You're ridiculous."

"I'm serious."

"On what ground do you base this decision?" Jeb snapped. "Because we have a drink every night. Do you see us slobbering drunk?"

"No. But most alcoholics don't get slobbering drunk. You both drink every night. So, yeah, I'm basing it on that. You both drink a lot."

"What else is there to do?"

"How about coffee?"

"How about minding your own business?"

"Look..." Bishop held up his hand in defense. "She has a son, and a daughter now. I just want to make sure she is OK."

"She's fine." Jeb said. "And not an alcoholic."

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“She also ...” Robi’s voice entered the room. “Is in earshot. You guys need to know that in a tin bus, sound travels.” She grabbed the bottle from Jeb’s hand. “Thanks.”

“Robi,” Bishop sounded apologetic. “Look, I ...”

“Was just concerned. I know.” Robi said. “But I’m fine. I’m not an alcoholic.”

Smug, Jeb turned to Bishop. “See.”

Bishop flipped him off.

Jeb swung out hitting his hand.

“Enough.” Robi poured a drink. “Jeb?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Robi poured him one. “Bishop.”

“No.” Bishop said. “I want to be in the right frame of mind. Clear. Someone has to be.” He walked over to the couch.

Robi shrugged and held her gals to Jeb. “Cheers?”

“Cheers.” He clinked glasses with her.

The both sipped.

Jeb asked. “How are you?”

“Good. Fine.”

“No ... I don’t know, residual bad feelings.”

Robi snickered. “I’m not scarred if that’s what you mean. I’m not traumatized either. I’m fine.”

“Good.”

“But, I do ....” She played with her glass. “Want to thank you. Thank you for coming to my rescue.” She shifted her eyes when she heard Bishop groan.

“You’re welcome,” Jeb said. “Anytime.”

Another groan from Bishop.

Jeb spun. “What is your problem? We’re having a private moment.”

“Uh, Jeb,” Bishop sat up again. “Little information for you. You can’t have a private moment when someone else is in the room.”

“Get lost.”

“You get lost, I was here first.”

Jeb bit his bottom lip, trying to ignore him. He lowered his voice to Robi. “Wanna go in the back?”

Bishop huffed a laugh. “Like I didn’t hear that. Can you be anymore obvious, you’re trying to hit on her.”

“Can you be anymore obvious, you don’t want me to.”

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Robi closed her eyes.

Bishop stood. "So you are."

"Why do you care?" Jeb asked. "We ...connect."

"She's also the only woman." Bishop walked to him. "I tin it's a little unfair that you have to totally encompass her time so she has no choice in the matter."

"Uh, you think maybe she likes me?"

Robi said. "You think I'm in this room?"

Bishop ignored her. "You think maybe, Jeb, if she wasn't the only woman, you'd be the same way?"

"Absolutely."

"Please." Bishop fluttered his lips. "I know you're type."

"My type?"

"God," Robi grumbled and poured another drink.

"What exactly is my type?" Jeb asked. "You don't know who I am or what I like. If you're gonna make accusations little man, you better know what you're talking about."

"Little man?"

"Little man."

Bishop laughed. "You think maybe you're just a mutant."

"What the fuck?" Jeb squealed. "Mutant."

"Too large."

Jeb laughed "I'm fuckin six foot four, how is that too large."

"You would ask that." Bishop ridiculed. "Considering the average height of a man is five foot ten, that's too large."

"Fuck you." Jeb gave an 'up' to his head.

"Fuck me, no fuck you."

"I should have shot you I the head when everyone thought you were a zombie," Jeb said.

"Oh, you would." Bishop snapped.

"I could. You asked."

"I was out of it."

"Guys." Robi held up her hand. "This is stupid. Stop. OK?"

They were locked in a stare down.

Jeb spoke. "If you weren't so little ..." he stopped.

"What? You'd beat me up?" Bishop laughed.

Again, Jeb bit his lip and turned to Robi. "Do something about him."

"Bishop," Robi tried not to laugh. "Please."

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There was a silent moment.

"Jeb!" Nick rushed on the bus. He caught his breath. "Tate needs you. Stat. We have trouble."

"What kind." Jeb asked,

"Men, lots, in the distance, but coming this way." Nick said. "We think it's that town."

After putting down his drink, Jeb rushed out.

"What do you got?" Jeb asked as he crawled onto the roof of the bus.

"Twenty seven men, armed." Tate handed him the binoculars. "Take a look. Moving steady, but not fast."

"Looking for us?" Jeb lifted the binoculars.

"I'd say yes." Tate replied. "Seeing that I recognize the one."

"Which one?"

"Second row, third from the left."

"Pervert Bud," Jeb lowered the binoculars. "You think they spot us?"

"More than likely. Wanna snuff the fire?"

Jeb took a moment to take another look. "They're on foot. Where are their vehicles?"

"My guess, parked on the highway."

"That muddy road."

"Yep. Saw our tracks."

"Fuck. OK." Jeb handed the binoculars to Tate. "Keep watch. Keep a sniper's position."

"Got it."

"I'll be back." Jeb climbed down.

Manny was the first to inquire, and everyone was standing around. "Well?" Manny asked. "Are we under attack, or gonna be?"

"Probably," Jeb said.

"Should we run?" Manny asked.

"Fuck no. We aren't fuckin' running from twenty plus men. That's ridiculous. Especially when Me, Tate, and Bishop, are expert shots."

"And me," Robi added. "Hello."

"I know, but ..." Jeb hesitated. "Look ..."

"No." Robi shook her head. "No. Fuck you. I know where you're going with this." She walked to the side bus door where a rifle was leaning. "I'm fighting."

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"No, you're not."

"I am capable of fighting, and I will."

"Yeah, I know."

"Jeb ..." Tate called. "They closing in."

"Robi, listen, we can handle this. But if something goes wrong ..."

"I don't care," Robi said.

"I do!" Jeb blasted.

"I don't need you to be chivalrous." Robi argued.

"It's not chivalrous, ok!" Jeb yelled. "It's him." He pointed to Nick. "You have a son. Top priority. Protect that son. I'm here to do that, to help. You yourself called me security. Let me do my job. He already lost a father, and sister; you wanna have him lose a mother on a wayward lucky shot? No!"

Robi cocked back, saying nothing.

"Now take the keys, take your ass, pack up the Humvee with Nick, Martha, Doc, the alien twins, and you back into the woods with until all clear. Got that?"

"But ..."

"No buts, we have seven men that will end this situation. Go. Hustle. Now."

Robi grimaced, but she followed his orders. She hurried everyone together, packed into the Humvee, and at low gear, and slow, backed into the woods.

Jeb waited until they were clear, which didn't take much time. He joined Tate on the roof of the bus along with the others, belly down, peering out.

"Well?" Tate asked. "What's the plan?"

"I'm thinking," Jeb said, holding binoculars for better viewing.

"We can ht them with the gas, knock them out, and move. Or we can just open fire and taken them out now."

"This is ridiculous," Jeb put down the binoculars, a drubbed his chin.

"What is?" Tate questioned.

"The fact that there are a hundred fuckin' people left in the world, and this is happened. I'm not gonna let us kill each other."

"What are you going to do?"

"Got your radio?"

"Yeah."

"Let me know when I'm in ear shot."

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“What are you doing Jeb?”

Jeb began to climb down from the bus.

“Jeb.” Tate whispered harsh. “What are you doing?”

“Ending this shit. Cover my ass. If they shoot me, wipe them out. Got it.”

“Be careful.”

Jeb gave a single nod, and descended from the roof of the bus. He opened the underbelly of the bus, and grabbed a hand spotlight from the storage. Running low, he kept going until Tate told him, he was close.

Jeb crouched down, in the wooded area. “Ok, look,” He said to Tate. “I need you to be my eyes.”

“Got it.”

Jeb turned on the spotlight. “Hold it!” he called out.

Tate reported, “They’re halting. Tell them stop right there.”

“Stop right there,” Jeb ordered.

“Stopping. Stopping. Stopped. OK, they look confused, they see the spotlight, they don’t see you.”

“That’s they way I want it,” Jeb stated then aimed is voice. “Look. There are more of than you think. Take your chance. Go on! But here’s the deal. Reality check gentlemen, we can have your entire little group there, wipe out and gone in ten seconds. Your choice to believe that or not. Right now, I’m gonna be honest. This is stupid. We’re all that’s left. We can’t be fighting each other and killing each other.”

Bud responded. “We aren’t here to fight or shoot. I just want my woman back.”

“Your woman?” Jeb asked. “You mean my wife.”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t have her.”

A pause.

“Why?” Bud asked.

“Why?” Jeb grew irate and stood up. “What are you fuckin’ stupid? I don’t need to tell you why.”

“Jeb, down.” Tate ordered.

“No.” Jeb barked.

“No what?” Bud questioned. “I can’t have her.”

“No you can not have my wife!” Jeb blasted them mumbled. “She isn’t even my wife.”

“Fine!” Bud yelled. “You leave me know choice but to call you on it.”

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“Call me?” Jeb asked. “What do you mean, call me?”

“I challenge you to a dual. A fight to the finish, not death. But to the finish. What do you say, the winner takes the woman.”

Jeb had to pull the radio from his ear; Tate’s laughing was annoying.

“What kind of fight?” Jeb asked.

“Man to man. Fist to fist.”

Jeb grumbled at Tate’s laughter. “And when it’s done, it’s done?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. We’ll fuckin’ fight for her. Come to the clearing. But leave your weapons where you are.”

“But what if you shoot us?” Bud asked.

“If we were gonna shoot you, we would have done it already!” Jeb blasted. “Lay your fuckin guns down and come to the clearing.”

Jeb waited, he listed as Tate reported it appeared they were all lowering their weapons. When he received an ‘all clear’ form Tate, he returned to the bus.

Manny, Bishop, Tate, and Greek, along with the new men were there.

Tate, however was still laughing.

“What is so funny?” Jeb asked.

“You have to fight for Robi, against Bud.” Tate wiped the smile from his face. “Sorry.”

“You never know,” Jeb said. “He could be a challenge. Never underestimate your opponent. What f he’s like one of those karate guys.”

To that, Tate laughed.

Bishop stepped forward. “Why is he calling her your wife.”

Jeb looked at him. “Why are you making this so much your business.”

Tate gave a nudge to Jeb. “They’re emerging.”

Jeb raised his rifle, nodded to Manny who turned on the spotlight. “Raise them hands gentlemen.” He ordered.

They all did. The whole row.

“We have no weapons,” Bud said. “This is a gentlemen’s fight.”

Jeb gave a signal to Manny and the others to lower weapons, and he walked they walked toward the line of men at the same time Bud led his men.

Bud spoke, “Two me against each other. First man down for a five count is out. Sound good.”

Jeb nodded. “Works. Let’s do this.”

“Good. But I didn’t say it would be me.” Bud stepped back, gave a short

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whistle, and called out, “Pedro!”

From the group of men, Travis yelped then gasped, “Pedro!”

Raising an eyebrow, Jeb looked over his shoulder to Travis. “What are you yapping about.”

Travis pointed.

Tate said, “This might be a challenge.”

Bishop smirked. “It’ll be interesting. But you better not lose.”

After giving a quirky glance to Bishop, Jeb finally turned around. Pedro was before him.

Pedro was about ten years Jeb’s junior, and about four inches taller, he also had him in bulk.

Jeb didn’t flinch,

Bud stepped back “Gentlemen begin.”

“Wait.” Jeb said. “You said gentlemen. It is a gentlemen’s fight, right?”

“Right.” Bud said.

With a smile, Jeb held out his hand. “Te let’s begin this as Gentlemen.”

Bud gave an ‘OK’ nod to Pedro.

“Pleasure,” Pedro held out his hand.

“All mine,” Jeb said, gripped his hand with a firm shake, and then yanked Pedro into him. With a quick upward knee to the groin, Pedro buckled slightly, and Jeb greeted him with a jabbing head butt. The second a startled Pedro cocked back, Jeb reached out, gripped his head, and delivered one, hard quick jab, square in the face.

Jeb moved back as Pedro teetered and fell to the ground. Jeb grinned “One, two, three, four, five. I win.”

“Holy cow,” Bud stammered. “That’s our biggest guy.”

“He fought well.” Jeb said.

Bud only looked at him with a shocked expression.

“OK, here’s the deal.” Jeb gently rested his foot on Pedro’s chest. “We’ll all know what’s coming our way. Instead of working against each other, we should be working with each other. Now I’m willing to forget the little ‘you touched my wife and tried to have a snack’ situation, and not break your fuckin’ neck over it, so we can try to think of a way we all can become a strong force, instead of an opposing one.” Jeb then asked, “What do you think.”

A still stunned Bud could only nod in agreement.

“Good.” Jeb clapped his hands together once. “Peace treaty accomplished, let’s all have a drink.”



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The exchange and plan was simple. Radio communications were intended to be kept between Red River and, as Red River would call them 'US' or Utopia Seekers. With lines of communications open, US would contact Red River when they arrived at So-Cal. Once all was secure, those in Red River would venture was to join the crew.

That was the plan. That and go to Las Vegas, because Red River had received a signal from there as well. A signal that since depleted, but there as a lot that could be blamed on that.

A few beers and shots later, the Red Rover crew was on their way, peacefully.

Problem solved.

Problem one.

Problem two still remained.

She may have said it a hint over a whisper, but it conveyed a lot when she spoke the words to Jeb, "fuck you." Robi told him.

"Excuse me?"

Robi tossed the rest of her drink on to the fire. "You need me to repeat it?"

"Um, yeah, please, because I though I heard you say ..."

"Fuck you." Robi nodded once. "Fuck you, Jeb. Did you understand it that time?"

"Well ... yeah, but ..."

"Fuck you." She spun on her heels, and marched toward the bus.

"What the hell did I do?" Jeb tossed out his hands.

Bishop, with a smirk, replied, "I'd say you pissed her off."

"Shit the fuck up." Jeb blasted.

Greek spoke up, "Wanna know what you did?"

Jeb looked at him. "Did she tell you?"

"Nope. Doesn't need to." Greek shook his head. "I was married for many years."

"Aw," Jeb whined. "She's menstruating, isn't she?"

Across the open air, from the bus, Robi's voice carried. "Oh! I heard that. You suck. Fuck you!"

Slam. The bus window slammed.

"She is." Jeb nodded. "I mean what else would cause this sudden

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switch.”

“You,” Greek said.

“No, shit.” Jeb snapped.

“Fine, you don’t wanna know. Go ask her yourself.”

“You know what? I will,” Jeb said as he started toward the bus. He stopped when Bishop whistled. “What is your problem?”

“You really want to go and talk to her, right now?” Bishop asked. “Go on. She’ll lay you out.”

Jeb scoffed. “You think I’m scared of a little woman with a loud mouth.”

“I am,” Bishop said.

“Me, too.” Greek added.

Manny raised his hand. “Count me in.”

“Dude,” Nick said. “I know her. Be scared.”

Tate interjected as well. “She did kick my ass the first day I met her.”

“Pansies. All a bunch of pansies.” Jeb ignored their warning and went to the bus. When he arrived, he tried the door. It was locked. He knocked.

No answer.

“Robi. Robi, you locked the fuckin’ door. Now, do you honestly think I can’t get in?” he asked.

Robi slid open the back window and stuck her head out. “Go away, Jeb. Right now, I am not in the mood to talk to you.”

“How about argue?”

“That either!”

“I can get in.”

“Don’t break the fuckin’ door, I mean it, or I’ll shoot you.”

Jeb snickered. “I don’t need to break the fuckin’ door.”

Robi laughed. “Then fine, try to squeeze in one of these widows. I’ll lock them all” She slid back in and slammed the window.

Jeb spoke quietly, “Lock them all. Go right ahead.” Like a burglar, he crept around the bus, and silently climbed to the top.

“Hey, Robi!” Bishop called out. “Jeb’s coming in the roof hatch.” No sooner did he say that, a single shot seared by his foot sending dirt in the air.

“Next time!” Jeb yelled. “I hit you.” He lifted the hatch and climbed in.

Robi shifted the barrel of the shotgun. “Did you just shoot at my friend.”

“Yeah,” Jeb lowered her weapon.

“Get out.”

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“No!”

“You and your big mouth are gonna wake the baby.” Robi pointed to Martha who was sound asleep.

“I got news for you, Robi. A nuclear bomb couldn’t wake that baby. Now, what is your problem?”

“You.”

“Established. Give me more. Care to tell me why you keep telling me to fuck off.”

“I believe I said, fuck you.” Robi stated.

“Yeah, yeah. Now spill it. I won’t have this tension.”

“There you go again.” She waved her hand. “Taking charge, given orders.”

“I’m confused.”

“Figures,” She said. “Look, I don’t need you to take charge and give orders for me. I don’t need anyone to do that.”

“Want to tell me when I did that?”

Robi laughed in ridicule, “You can’t be serious. Tonight asshole!”

“What? Because I told you to get back to the Humvee.”

“That and the fact that you popped open a few beers, poured a few shots, started to negotiate with Pervert Bud and his crew before you even let me know.”

“So this is what it’s all about?”

“Yes.” Robi said. “Look Jeb. I want no one but myself to lead me. That includes you, got that? You took it upon yourself to make decisions for the whole crew.”

“No one seemed to mind.”

“I did.” Robi said. “I did. How do you know I want to meet up with them in So-Cal.”

“Robi, you know what? You don’t have a choice.” Jeb stated.

“No, you didn’t give me one.”

“No, not me. The fuckin’ aliens didn’t give you one.” Jeb argued. “Like it or not, we are going to be at war. At war with a force, we know nothing about. We are a minimal army and we need men. They are men.”

“So, it doesn’t matter what he did to me?” She asked.

“Yeah, it matters. And if he ever tried anything again, I’ll kill him.”

Robi scoffed.

“What? What is that for?”

She shook her head.

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"If you wanted him dead before, you should have said something. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you didn't want to kill him."

"It has nothing to do with that," Robi said. "It has everything to do with your chivalrous attitude toward me."

"And I'm not supposed to have that?"

"I can take care of myself."

"Like you did with Bud?"

Robi folded her arms. "That was a low blow."

Jeb's hand shot to his forehead. "You know .... Not a couple hours ago, you were thanking me. Now you're giving me a hard time."

"I just don't need you to jump to my rescue or make deadly threats on my behalf."

"Well, get used to it." Jeb said. "I will. Especially since you and I seem to have something happening."

"We don't have anything happening. Based on everything, I'd say I have more of a relationship with Bud."

Jeb bit his bottom lip. "You know what? Fuck it. Fuck it. I'm not going to argue with you. Wanna know why?"

"Why?"

"Because tomorrow you'll be totally different. Why? You're more female than you give yourself credit."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean."

"Your fickle like every other female. And tomorrow, when I'm still pissed, you won't be. Plus it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you just started your period."

Robi gasped.

"You did, didn't you?"

She gasped again.

"Go on, gasp. Inhale that shock. I'm right."

"What makes you so sure of yourself?"

"Because that ..." he pointed. "Box of tampons wasn't there an hour ago."

Robi's mouth dropped open.

Jeb smiled. "So ...So, I'm gonna go out with the guys, have a drink, leave you be, and deal with you tomorrow. Goodnight." He kissed her on the cheek, turned, walked to the door, unlocked it, and left.

Robi grimaced. Then after a frustration growl, she spun to the counter and looked at the tampons. "I can't believe I left these here. Fuck." She

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snatched up the box, and stormed to the back of the bus.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

*July 7<sup>b</sup>*

### *New Mexico, Texas Border*

Robi never got over the smell of rotten eggs, to enjoy them. The hen house was packed with egg-laying chickens left to their own resources. Some were dead, some kept laying eggs. Most eggs had rotted and the putrid smell filled their air.

Manny swore he saw the farm in the dark hours as they looked for a place to stop for the night after leaving Red River. It was only three miles, and back tracking wasn't a total loss.

They salvaged four chickens. They all were pleasantly surprised at the eggs they were able to determine were freshly laid. In fact, the men stopped to fry the four eggs up over an open fire, scrambled.

They shared four eggs.

Robi declined her forkful.

It wasn't a matter of needed food; it was a matter of taste. And at the moment that they all indulged, she still had that rotten egg smell in her nostrils.

Just as that started to leave her, in came another annoying thing.  
Singing.

It started just as they arrived at the Oklahoma border and was still continuing as they neared New Mexico.

It was bad enough that Jeb started humming it, and then went to singing it, but when the new guy Ben said e knew it on guitar, she knew she was in trouble.

Outvoted.

Everyone thought it was a good idea to stop at the first town, hit a music store and get Ben a guitar. Music for the trip would be nice.

In a sense, Robi agreed, until Jeb and Ben began to play the same song over and over in an attempt to get it right.

Robi suddenly hated the song, "Amarillo by Morning."

She hoped that in the few miles into New Mexico, he'd find another song. It wasn't that Jeb was bad singer, he wasn't. Not the e greatest, but not

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bad. But the repeated singing of the same song worked her nerves.

“Mummy.” Martha approached Robi. “Martha drive?”

“No, no, sweetie, you can’t.” Robi told her. “And can you please sit down. In case I have to stop.”

“Martha sit by Dudday?”

“If you want.” Robi’s yes shifted to the rearview mirror when she heard Jeb announce, ‘from the top’. “And Martha, make him stop singing.”

“OK.” Happily, Martha raced to the section of the bus where Jeb sat with Ben. “Mummy said stop singing.”

“She did, did she?” Jeb lifted Martha to his lap. “Do you like the way I sing.”

“Pretty.” Martha laid her hands on Jeb’s cheeks.

“I’m a good singer, huh?”

Martha smiled and nodded, and with the same smile said innocently. “Dudday mean. Very Mean.”

“Really?” Jeb asked. “Who told you Daddy was mean?”

“Uncle Bishop.”

“Well, Uncle Bishop is a dick.” Jeb spoke pleasant. “And I’m gonna sing. OK?”

“Ok.” Martha said, and then turned his face to look at her. “New song?”

Jeb chuckled. “Sure, we can do a new song.” He winked at Ben, and appeasing the three year old he asked, “What song?”

“Bohemian Rhapsody.” Martha said brightly.

Jeb and Ben just looked at each other.

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***Tucumcari, NM***

Mama Mia

Mama Mia

Mama Mia .. Let me go ..

It was far too much for Robi to handle, everyone that was on the bus excluding her, jumped in with the acoustic rendition of Bohemian rhapsody. Every man thinking they could hit that high note in a pre pubescent manner.

The sign was just that ... a sign.

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The two miles was a long trek, mentally, but when they pulled into town, Robi announced as she stepped from the bus, an irritated, "Lunch."

They stopped singing and playing.

Jeb turned and looked out the window. "Why does she always pick the quaint little fuckin' towns?"

Bishop said as he stood, "The question should be, why did she get off the bus without someone with her." He walked to the exit.

Outside, Robi met up with Manny and Doc. "Boy, you two were lucky you rode in the other car," she told them.

Manny chuckled. "Tate slept, Doc read, and the ET twins were jabbering in their own language. I kicked back and drove in my own world."

"So did the goddamn aliens," Doc added.

Robi turned to the Humvee as she did; the presence of Bishop startled her. "You emerged."

"Everything OK?" he asked.

"I'm noticing Mas not getting out of the Humvee. Worried maybe?" She shrugged.

"Want me to find out if it's a safe stop?" Bishop asked.

Robi nodded.

Bishop walked over to the Humvee, not far from them. He knocked, opened the door, conversed for a second, and returned. "Fine. They didn't even know we stopped. This is ... Tucumcari?"

"Yeah, why?" Robi asked.

"I have that on my list. Four people."

This caught Robi's attention. "Really? Maybe we should fan out. Look."

"That's what I think. Whose next schedule to make lunch?"

Robi pointed to Manny.

Bishop said, "Because if you want I can make lunch."

Manny shook his head. "No. No Spam. I'll cook. And why is everyone taking so long to get off the bus?"

"I don't know." Robi walked to the bus door and stuck her head in. "We're stopping for lunch, we have to fan out. We have reports of survivors here."

Jeb yelled. "Be right out."

Stepping back to Manny and Bishop, Robi said. "Someone want to wake Tate?"

Manny replied, "He said unless it's an emergency, let him sleep. He



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stayed up all night. He had watch.”

“OK.” Robi agreed.

At that moment, Jeb, Nick, Ben, Travis, and Greek emerged from the bus.

“What were you guys doing?” Robi asked.

Nick answered, “Planning our next list of songs.”

Robi turned toward Manny. “Wanna drive the bus.”

“No.” Manny raised his hand. “no way. I’d rather deal with the ET twins and doc bitching about them, than that. No.”

“Swell. OK.” Robi looked at her watch. “No supply searching unless we find something valuable. It’s just about noon. Fan out. Look for survivors. BE back in an hour. Manny will set up camp for cooking. Sound good? Teams ...” Robi paused. “Tate is sleeping, so Me, Bishop and Nick will go south. Jeb, Greek, and Ben, north. Travis stays here and stays here with them. Questions?” She saw Jeb raise his hand. She ignored him, “OK, let’s go.”

“I’m raising my hand.” Jeb said. “Boss.”

“What?” Robi asked.

“Are you still not talking to me?” Jeb asked.

Robi ignored him,

“God, how long does this menstrual attitude last?” he asked.

Robi snapped a view to him. “Grow up.”

Bishop with a smirk, inched to Robi. “My rifle is on the bus. I’ll be right out.”

Robi nodded.

Jeb shook his head, “We need more ammo. I’ll get it out.” He walked to the side off the bus and lifted the hatch, as he crouched down, a ‘ping’ against metal sounded off.

He stood straight, and turned to Robi. “Did you just throw something at me?”

“No.” She replied.

“What was that?”

“What was what?” she asked.

‘Ping’

“That.” Jeb said. “I hear ...Ow!” he his hand slapped down to his leg. “I got bit or something.”

Everyone raised their weapons.

“Bug?” Robi asked.

“I don’t know.” Jeb started to turn. His body jolted, and his hand

grabbed his backside. "Fuck." He jolted again. "Fuck."

"Something's biting your bum?" Robi asked.

'Ping' the noise rang out again.

"The bus, it hit the bus." Jeb turned to the bus. "There." His finger extended to the side. "It's ... Ow ... goddamn it!" he yelled and grabbed his head. "Fuckin bb's." he bent down, growling with each jolt of his body. "BB's."

Robi choked a laugh. "As in BB gun?"

"Yeah." Jeb started to look around. "I'd say everyone take cover but ... Ow .. Shit .. Goddamn it." He rubbed his arm. "I'm the fuckin' target."

"Because you're the biggest target." Robi shielded her eyes.

Bishop came from the bus. "Is someone shooting BB's at the bus?" he asked. "From inside it sounds like it."

Robi snickered. "No, they're hitting the bus when they're missing Jeb."

Bishop looked and laughed when Jeb jolted. "Who's shooting?"

"I can't see." Robi peered around. "Whoever it is means no real harm. They have a sniper position and ...." She stopped.

"What?" Bishop asked.

Robi cocked her head to the store two buildings down.

Jeb bit his bottom lip, "I'll be right back."

"No." Robi said and lowered her voice. "I say we just surround the building. They'll come down or we'll go in."

Jeb nodded.

Robi gave a twitch of her head and the entire group of them raced to the building.

On the left side of the front door, Robi closed off her ear to hear what Bishop was saying.

"Back is secure," Bishop reported. "Unless they can sneak underground. They aren't getting out without us getting them."

"Give it a minute," Robi whispered.

"No storming."

"No. Not yet." She leaned toward the front door and aimed her ear.

Jeb whispered, "I'm fucking welting here and you want to ..."

"Shh." Robi told him, and then spoke into the microphone. "I hear footsteps. Get ready."

"Roger."

Robi raised her weapon, and mouthed 'get ready' to Jeb.

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He nodded. Just as he did, the door to the store flew open, fast and with a vengeance, smacking Jeb right in the face.

Perhaps she should have, but Robi laughed, and by the time she was over the shock and amusement of what transpired, the person was a blur.

"Fuck," Robi blurted. "They took off." She then, began to the chase.

Jeb shook off the pain in his nose, wiggled it a few times, turned, and saw Robi running. He too, took off.

Down the street Robi raced, and within as second, Jeb had caught her.

"Slow poke," He commented as he passed Robi and noticed the shooter veering down another street. "Left." He charged, and turned the bend. "It's an ..."

He never got the word 'alley' from his mouth. The shooter was ready for him, sending a garbage can to the ground as a blockade. One that Jeb tripped and fell over.

Robi heard the clunk, rattle and Jeb's grunt, cautiously turned the corner, called out, 'Klutz', as she jumped over Jeb, and saw the shooter was climbing a fence. Robi forged ahead, full speed. "No you don't." She grabbed the foot. "Stop. We aren't gonna hurt you." She purchased a grip on the wiry and kicking legs. "And don' you dare nail me or I won't hesitate to kick your ass. Now stop!"

The shooter did.

"Down. Now," Robi said gently. "Please."

The shooter stopped fighting, and jumped down. They wore a lot of clothes and a hood, to cover their identity.

Whoever it was, was shorter than Robi, little, face shielded by the hood.

Robi was out of breath as she reached out, and removed the hood. She gasped. "You're just a little girl."

"Am not." The teenage girl barked in her southern accent, turned, and started to run. As she tried to make her escape, she paused to kick Jeb in the shin.

He was ready, he latched on to her.

She fought. Squirming and kicking.

"Knock it off!" Jeb ordered.

"Gotta get to my Pa. I have to get to my Pa." She resisted. "Let me go!"

Robi approached her, as she did, Bishop, Nick, Greek and Ben arrived.

"It's a girl." Ben said. "A little girl."

"Am not." She struggled in Jeb's hold. "And let me go. I need to get to my pa."

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Robi faced her. "Calm down."

She didn't.

"Hey!" Robi yelled in her best mother voice. "Calm!"

The girl stopped fighting.

"Now, what's going on?" Robi asked.

"I got to get to my pa." She said. "He's sick. He needs his medicine. I was getting it. Now let me go you big baboon." She struggled again.

"Do you have the medicine?" Robi asked.

"In my pocket."

Robi reached, the girl turned, but she still managed to get the bottle.

"Give it back!" the girl ordered.

Robi lifted it to read the label. "Insulin. I'm a nurse, we have a doctor. OK?" Robi said soothingly. "Now, take me to your dad. OK?"

The girl nodded.

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Her name was Eva Weston, and her and her 'Pa' lived two streets down from where they found her. It was a tiny little house with blooming flowers, a well-maintained yard, and a tall white fence.

She agreed to take Robi to her 'Pa', and would allow only Bishop to go along, too. She claimed he had a trusting face.

Robi grabbed the medical bag, and followed the young girl.

"Lived in this town long?" Robi asked.

Eva worked the padlock on the fence. "My whole life."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen, well, fourteen, but I'll be fifteen next month." She replied. "You?"

"Old," Robi replied, then reached out and gripped the fence. "Have you had trouble?"

"Not since the dogs died off," Eve answered. She removed the lock and opened the fence. "Pa said we had to build the fence for them. Then if strangers come into town." She headed to the house.

Bishop asked, "Are there anymore? Or is it just you and your father?"

"Me and Pa. Mr. Clausen was here and he and that woman left a couple weeks ago. Went to California. Ain't heard from him. Then again, the cell phone stopped working last month."

"You had a cell phone until last month?" Bishop asked. "Wow, that's

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convenient.”

“Pa said our satellite must’ a been the last to go.” She approached the door. “We tried calling people, but ain’t no body answered.” She walked in. “Pa’s in here.”

Robi asked. “Your mom? Where is she?”

“She died in a car accident four years ago.” Eva closed the door one Bishop and Robi entered. “Pa! I’m back.”

It was a single floor home, and Eva led Robi and Bishop to a back hall. “Pa?”

A cough.

“Yeah, honey.”

Eva breathed out. “I get so worried. We ran out of medicine.”

“Who you talking to?” he asked.

Eva opened the bedroom door. “Pa, some people arrived in town. One of them’s a nurse.”

The older man, probably in his mid sixties lifted himself up to a sitting position. He was pale, sweaty, circles dark. He coughed before speaking. “Well I’ll be.” He tried to smile “Parker Weston.” He introduced himself. “I’d shake your hand, but I’m sick.”

“Robi Pierce, and this is Bishop,” Robi said and approached the bed. “I’m a nurse. Do you mind if I take a look at you? I brought a medical bag.”

“No, not at all. I’m glad.” Parker said. “I’m happy you people showed up. Told you, Eva. Didn’t I? I told you people would show.”

Eva nodded. “Some seem nice. One guy seems really mean.”

Robi smiled. “That’s just a front. We were surprised you folks were here.”

Parker said. “I wanted to drive to California but ... I was fearful of my health.”

“You’re a diabetic?” Robi asked.

“Yes.”

“Is that your only health problem.” She lifted the stethoscope.

“Far as I know.”

“Has it been manageable before the ... before the ...” She searched for the words. “Drop?”

“Was. Still can be.” Parker replied. “Lately it’s been a bitch. I caught one of them summer colds and it’s been out of control.”

“Have you been checking your blood sugar?” Robi sat on the edge of the bed.

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“Just did.” Parker reached for the little blood sugar monitor.

“Ok.” Robi exhaled. “How about we check it again, I have your insulin. We’ll d a thorough exam. Sound good?”

Parker nodded.

Robi turned to Eva and Bishop. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

Bishop nodded, and reached for Eva. “Come on, you can show me around the house.”

Eva was reluctant, but followed. “I’ll be right here Pa. Right outside the bedroom.”

Parker gave a thumbs up.

When the door closed, Robi smiled. “Let’s see about getting you all better.” She hooked the stethoscope around her neck and pulled out the blood pressure cuff.

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The living room was tiny and well kept. Neat, dust free. A plant with blooming flowers graced the windowsill, just below it a table full of pictures. The sun streaked through that window, adding that perfect country magazine home look.

Bishop recognized Parker in one of the photographs as he hunched to view them all. So many. “Are these your family?” he asked Eva.

“You think my Pa’s Ok with her?”

“Fine. Robi’s great.” Bishop said, zooming in on a photo with Eva, Parker another woman and two men. “Mom?” he showed her.

“Yeah. That’s my Ma. My brothers, too.”

“Where were they?” Bishop asked.

“They lived in town when it happened. I was the baby by a long shot.” Eva nodded. “You got any kids?”

Bishop shook his head. “No.” he set the photo down. “So you had the dogs around here?”

“They were bad.”

“Boy, tell me about it.” Bishop said.

“Then they turned into like Zombie dogs.”

“Yah.” Bishop said with enthusiasm. “It was weird. Did they leave? We stopped seeing them.”

“Ones around here, died.” Eva sighed out. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“Who Robi?” Bishop asked then shook his head. “No.”

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"You like her?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"But she's married, huh?" Eva questioned.

"No, her husband died. Her son ..." he pointed toward the door. "Isn't much older than you. He lived."

"Is he mean?"

"Who Nick?" Bishop chuckled "No, he's a great kid."

"Maybe ... maybe after some time passes, you and her and Nick can be a family."

Bishop smiled at the naivety of the girl. "Let me let you in on a secret. I'd like that, but ..."

"But what? She don't like you?"

Bishop shrugged. "I don't know. I thought she could, you know. But then ... but then one of our group keeps getting in the way."

"Another guy likes her?"

Bishop nodded.

"Does she like him?"

"Hard to say. I think he annoys her."

"Which guy is it?" Eva asked. "I saw a bunch."

"The big, mean one."

Eva's eyes grew wide, and then she cringed. "He probably scares her, and she's afraid to tell him to go away."

"You're probably right."

"You're cuter than him."

"Ah, thanks." Bishop smiled. "I'm nicer."

Eva chuckled. "I bet."

"You're a really nice girl. It's gonna be nice to have you on my side." Bishop winked. "By the way. Can I ask why you shot him?"

"He looked threatening."

Bishop nodded. "Makes sense." He turned when he heard the bedroom door open.

"Pa," Eve said with a rush.

Robi walked into the living room.

Bishop asked, "Well?"

"Well, I think," Robi said. "You should go get Martha."

Eva looked upon Bishop with curiosity, but Bishop knew exactly what Robi meant, and why she requested the baby.

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Tate extended his plate for a second helping. Normally he wouldn't but Manny made too much. "Never ceases to amaze me what you can do with rice and an open fire," Tate said.

"Thanks," Manny replied. "At least it's not Spam."

Tate laughed and took his seat by Nick at the table and with everyone else.

"Need to get some rabbit," Travis said. "I like rabbit, anyone else?"

"How do you cook it" Manny asked.

"Barbeque it," Travis replied. "Tasty. Slow cooked barbeque. Mm."

Manny facially showed how he didn't think that sounded bad, then he peered to Jeb. "What are you doing?"

Jeb stood behind Martha, tying a ribbon to her head. "Making her look like a girl."

"She wears dresses," Manny said. "That's pretty ... wrong. I don't know, the vision of you tying a pink ribbon in hair."

"A little girl's hair." Jeb corrected. "My little girl. And ... I think it looks good. Nick?"

Nick nodded. "It works. Where did you get it."

"Found it in the drug store while I was looking for Midol for your mother." Jeb said.

"She asked you to get Midol for her?" Nick asked.

Jeb shook his head nonchalantly. "No, but I thought Id slip it in her coffee."

"Man," Nick chuckled, "That's wrong."

"No, this is wrong." Jeb reached down to Martha. "No ...use a fork." He gave her the fork. "Don't eat like a dog."

Martha giggled. "Bishop said this is how Dudday eats."

"Bishop is wrong," Jeb told her. "And what did I tell you about Uncle Bishop."

Martha smiled. "He's a dick."

"Very good." Jeb said proudly.

"Hey, big brother," Tate said. "Why did you sit down and eat."

"Na, I'm good." Jeb replied. "I'm worried about Robi. The little demon child probably ahs he hostage, and with Bishop there, you know she's no protected."

Tate shook his head. "Be careful with how you treat the demon child.



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She may be Nick's only chance for a woman."

"Dude," Nick said. "She's cute."

"She's the spawn of Satan," Jeb commented. "Speaking of Spawns." He pointed.

Manny looked, "Where's Robi."

Jeb watched Bishop and Eva approach from down the street. "Probably skewered, slow cooking and barbequed. I wouldn't put anything past Rosemary's baby."

Tate stood up. "Looks like the offspring won't come any closer." He gave an up motion of his head when Bishop came to the table. "Where's Robi?"

"With Eva's dad." Bishop said. "I came fro Martha, I need to take her. Robi requested her."

Curiously, Tate asked. "How bad is he?"

Jeb added, "He must be bad if she's requesting Martha."

"He didn't look good." Bishop said. "Can I take her?"

"Can she eat first?" Jeb replied, "If she has some healing to do, she'll be out for a while, and I think she really needs to eat."

Bishop shrugged. "Sure. Hey, Martha, why don't you hurry up and finish so you can come with me to see Mommy."

"See Mummy?" Martha asked excitedly. "Dudday come?"

"No," Bishop shook his head. "Only us. Wanna come?"

Martha nodded.

"Hurry up and eat." Bishop told her.

With those instructions, Martha lowered her head to her plate, and in what seemed like an inhale, cleaned the plate of every grain of rice. She lifted a messy face with a grin.

"How's that, Jeb?" Bishop asked. "She ate."

"Uh ...." Jeb lifted the plate. "Um, yeah, sure that works. Take her." He placed the plate down as Bishop lifted Martha, "Man we have to work on her manners."

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Robi brushed Eva's hair while holding a ponytail holder in her mouth.

"I can't do ponytail," Eva said. "I try, but the pieces hanging my dang face, and I keep blowing them like this ...". She fluttered her lips.

"The secret," Robi said as she secured her band. "And you'll learn this

as you get older, is to pull it tight and spray those strands back.” She picked up the hair spray, shielded Eva’s face, and squirted. “There.”

Eva swished her ponytail. “Feels good. Speaking of feeling good. Where’s my Pa?”

“Give him a few minutes.” Robi said. “Trust me. When Martha went out like a light, I knew the job was done.”

“What’s that little girl got to do with it.”

“You can say she medicinal luck.” Robi smiled.

Eva stood up. “She could have slept here.”

“I know, but big mean, Jeb wants her where he can see her. She kind of latched on to us as parents.”

“I can see why she wants you as a Ma. Did you have any daughters?”

“Yeah,” Robi nodded sadly. “Two.”

“Big girls or little girls.”

“Little. They were my babies.”

“They left this earth like my Ma and brothers?”

“Yeah, they did.” Robi said solemnly.

“I’m sorry about God taking your babies.”

“So am I. And I’m sorry about your Ma and Brothers.”

“But ...” Eva said brightly with a lifted finger. “Like Pa says. We still have each other. We can be alone in this world, but God said, nope, gotta leave them a partner. You got your son.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Can I ask a favor?” Eva asked. “I know you just did my hair and all, but can I ask something.”

“Sure.”

“Can I have a hug?” Eva asked. “Sure been awhile since I had a Ma hug. Ma’s hug the best. Since you’re a Ma, I figure you’d give a good Ma hug.”

“Oh, honey,” Robi extended her arms, “Any time. I would love a hug.”

Eva latched on. In fact, she pressed her head to Robi’s chest, clinging to her waist.

Robi wrapped her arms tight around Eva, Cradling the back of Eva’s head, and burying her lips to the top.

“This is nice. This is a Ma hug. I feel your heart.”

Robi closed her eyes tight. She couldn’t speak.

“Sure am glad we found you before I got my period.”

She couldn’t help it, Robi laughed.

“I ain’t had it yet. Pa said that’s a blessing.”

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"Um, yeah it is." Robi smiled and broke the embrace. "Be glad."

"Pa." Eva said with surprise. "Oh my."

Robi turned. She was shocked and taken aback when she saw Parker step into the living room. E was not at all, as she saw him in that bed. His color was back, deep and rich; his salt and pepper hair was life as he had it combed in a Clint east wood manner. His was fit man, strapping. A man who looked older than his sixty-one years while ill, looked much younger when better.

"I feel like a million bucks." Parker said. "Don't' know what the baby did. But shoot ..." he whistled. "I could run a marathon."

"Look at you," Robi gleamed. "You are not the same man."

"Pa!" Eva raced and hugged him. "You're better."

"Much," He returned the hug. "And ... I'm really up to meeting the rest of the folks. Robi?"

"They're up to meeting you, shall we?" Robi held her hand toward the door.

Embracing his daughter, Park answered, "We shall."

\*\*\*

Only a few of the crew were outside when Robi returned with Parker and Eva. She headed straight for the bus, annoyed that it was running.

"Why are we wasting gasoline running the bus?" she asked as her greeting.

Jeb answered, "it was hot, we wanted to cool down. Not like there's really a gas shortage babe."

"Babe?" Robi asked and shook her head. "Babe?"

Greek was there, he slowly stood. "Is the new guy out there?"

"Yeah. He's anxious to meet all of you." Robi held up her medical bag. "I want to put this in the office."

Bishop peered out the window. "He looks good. I'm gonna go meet him."

"Go on." Robi said.

Greek asked, "What was wrong with him that you needed Martha?"

"He had pneumonia in both lungs, legs swollen, pretty much was suffering from congestive heart failure."

"Wow," Greek blinked. "He would have died had we not arrived."

Robi nodded. "And left that sweet little girl alone."

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“Ha!” Jeb laughed. “Sweet. Oh, she’s about as sweet as the girl in the Exorcist.”

“You just have that attitude because she shot you with a BB gun,” reek said.

“Uh, yeah, wouldn’t you?” Jeb asked.

“Nope.” Greek replied, and walked to the front of the bus. “Let’s go meet the guy. He seems like a nice man. About my age, will be nice to have a man about my age to talk to who isn’t nuts. Not that Doc is nuts.” He smiled.

Bishop followed.

Jeb stayed.

“Why aren’t you going to greet him? That’s rude,” Robi told him.

“I will. I need to see you.”

“You see me.” Robi started walking toward the back of the bus.

Jeb kept up close behind.

At the back door, Robi spun. “What!”

“I told you. I need to see you.”

“You see me. What?”

“Man, you’re tough. You need to forgive and forget or at least deal with the menstrual problems more reasonably. You would think after all these years ...”

Slam.

Robi slammed the door on him.

Jeb opened it.

“Go away!”

“No, I’m serious I need to see you. I have a problem.”

“A problem?” Robi asked.

“Yeah, of a medical nature.”

“Are you serious?” Robi asked.

“Yes, very, I can’t go to doc with this.”

“Why?”

“One, he’s fuckin whacked,” Jeb said. “Two I don’t trust those old shaking hands with my best asset.”

Arms crossed, Robi leaned against the desk. “Go on. What is it?”

“This.” Jeb began to undo his pants.

“Whoa. Wait. What the hell are you doing?”

“Showing you my problem and needing you to fix it.”

“What your penis.”

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Jeb smirked with a short, snorting laugh. "My penis doesn't have a problem. You could easily find out."

"God are you crude. You said your best asset. What was I supposed to think?"

"Glad that you would consider my penis my best asset. However, I do not. Even though it is up there, no pun intended."

Robi rolled her eyes.

"Why would you think about my penis anyway."

"You were undoing your pants."

"And that means I'm sowing you my penis."

"Will you just knock it off and tell me what your problem is." Robi snapped.

"Fine. I want to be able to sit down. But I can't."

"You have hemorrhoids?"

"No. I do not have hemorrhoids. I do however ..."

Jeb finished undoing his pants. "Have a BB imbedded in my ass."

"You ... you . what?"

"Have a BB embedded in my ass. At least I think it's a BB, I have a hole ..."

He twisted his body to look behind. "Yeah. From the Demon child."

"Oh my God." Robi laughed.

"It's not funny. It hurts. Not bad, but enough to make me wince when I sit and I'd rather not wince when I sit."

"I can understand that. Let me see."

"Thank you." Jeb turned, lowered his pants and then the waistband of his boxer shorts. He leaned against the bunk bed. "See it?"

"Wow."

"Impressed huh?"

"Absolutely, I can not believe this thing ..."

Robi reached out and touched.

"Ow."

"Punctured the skin. Wow."

"Ow."

"OK, hold on." Robi turned for her bag.

"Can you get it out."

"Yeah, you're just lucky that it isn't deeper or I would have perform mini surgery. But ..."

Robi placed on gloves and grabbed a bottle of medication. "I can pop it out like a zit."

"Really?"

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"Yeah, old sill, this might sting." She applied a topical. "D you want me to numb the area."

"Nah, I'll be good."

"Now I'll be pressing the flesh, so it may hurt."

"I can handle it."

Robi placed her probing fingers to the flesh of his backside. "I'll try to be gentle."

"Thanks."

"Does it hurt." She pressed gently, her hand spreading across his rear to get a grip.

"Actually ... no."

"Good."

"You are gentle."

"I try. It's tricky, I want to squeeze harder. But ... I thin I can do this by being easy."

"Good."

"Almost ..." Robi said. "There. Out."

"Really?"

"Out. Hold on, I'll put a band-aid on it. It's bleeding." She grabbed a gauze pad, added some saline, cleaned the wound, and then placed a bandage on it. "Done."

"Thank you."

"You can pull up."

Jeb grabbed his pants.

Robi began to clean up. "Are you going to come out and meet Parker?"

"The new man? Yeah, in a minute."

Removing her gloves, Rob faced Jeb. "I'll go wash up and meet you there."

"Sounds good."

Robi started to leave, but stopped. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine."

"You're just standing there."

"I can't move."

"I don't think it hurt that bad."

"Not that. I can't turn around. Not yet. Give me a minute."

"Why ..." It dawned on Robi. "No."

"I'm a guy. What can I say? You were grabbing my bum."

"I wasn't grabbing your bum, I was working on it."

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“Exactly.”

Robi gasped. “It was a medical procedure. You did not get ...” She leaned forward and peered at Jeb. “You did!”

“Sorry.”

“Asshole.”

“What?” Jeb asked. “I can’t help it.”

“How can you get aroused from a medical procedure.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t. But it was you. What can I say? You arouse me. So, take it as a compliment. You should feel honored.”

“Honored? Don’t flatter yourself.” Robi walked out.

Jeb stood there, and started to fasten his pants. He was finding a little amusement in the situation until he heard Tate outside the door ask Robi ‘Where’s my brother.’ And when Robi responded, “He had a BB in his ass, I got it out, and he’s standing there with a hard on.”

Jeb smiled wider. Robi’s attempt to embarrass him to Tate was about to backfire ... big time.

\*\*\*

They moved the party to Monroe Street, both the Bus and the Humvee. It was after Parker arrived and introduced himself, and saw really no reasons to be on the middle of main, not when Monroe—his street—was so much nicer.

Plus it had its perks.

At least for dinner. The pit stop which was supposed to be just lunch, was decided to be a day stop.

David Summer lived in the house next to Parker for twenty-two years. In fact, all the neighbors had long standing residences on the street. David and Parker went back to the days when they would show x-rated movies on the side of the houses while the wives were at Bingo.

Each neighbored had a role to play in making Monroe Street the festive summer hub.

David died in the drop, but his legacy and participation lived on, in the form of a huge backyard barbeque grill that partnered a gigantic barbeque pit.

They were David’s but the whole neighborhood would use them when the weekly, summer cookouts entailed.

Manny was prepping the grill. The heat was excruciating, and he kept using his arm to wipe the sweat.

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He turned, shifting his eyes irritated to Bishop who sat on the ground, oblivious to the heat, even though an open put fire roared. He held a rotisserie probably used for chickens, and there was about a dozen open cans of Spam at his feet.

“Man, what the hell are you doing?” Manny asked.

“Dude, if you can cook, so can I. This is a feast right?”

“Spam.”

“No,” Bishop said. “Spam Ham. Barbequed and tasty. Got some sauce ...” Bishop took a block of span and carefully slid it over the rotisserie. “When I’m done this will be the pork.”

“There is something wrong with you. I never met a man who liked Spam so much.”

“Every man can love Spam, he just needs to give it a chance. Speaking of which ...” Bishop gave an upward twitch of his head toward Jeb who sat at a picnic table with Eva and Greek.

Both Jeb and Eva had arms folded. Greek looked as if he were ready to scream.

“What’s up with that?” Bishop asked, “Do you know.”

“Oh, yeah. Robi is making them make amends. Greek is mediating.”

“Is it working?”

“Does it look it?”

“No,” Bishop chuckled, continued to spear his Spam, while trying to listen.

Greek rubbed his temples. “I refuse to rehash my life. Now, one of you speak.”

Jeb rolled his eyes. “I don’t understand why this is u\important.”

“Robin thinks it is,” Greek said.

Eva added, “You would know if you had any respect for her.”

“Listen to you.” Jeb scoffed. “All mouth.”

“Better than all body,” She folded her arms. “Mr. Greek can I please go with Nick and Tate? They’re playing basketball. I wanna play. I’m good. I can do anything a boy can do.”

Jeb chuckled. “That’s because you don’t know what you are yet.”

“Jeb!” Greek snapped. “She’ a child.”

“She is no a child. She is a demon seed in a girl’s body.”

Eva jumped in, “Better than a mor0on in a baboon body.”

Greek whistled. “Ok, enough. Let’s break this down. Eva, let’s tsar with



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you. Why did you shoot Jeb?”

“Good question,” Jeb said. “Why?”

“Well, when I saw Robi, I didn’t know here, right? But she was a woman, and it was very obvious that she wasn’t liking him.” Eva said. “Plus, he seemed mean and the biggest one to hit.”

Jeb fluttered his lips. “She aimed at me because I was the biggest and is making up the whole thing.”

“I am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not. You grabbed me.”

“You shot me!” Jeb yelled. “And kicked me, and tripped me.”

“Can’t help it you can’t fight.”

Jeb bit his bottom lip.

“And are mean,” Eva continued.

“You got room to talk little one.”

Greek said, “In Eva’s defense you are the meanest of the bunch.”

“Don’t help her.” Jeb barked.

“See?” Eva said smug.

“See,” Jeb mocked.

Eva gasped. “Can I go? At least let me sit with my Pa and Robi. I like Robi, she’s gonna be my new Ma.”

Jeb facially scoffed. “Please.”

“She is.” Eva stated.

“She ain’t gonna be your new Ma,” Jeb imitated her. “She got a kid, two, she doesn’t need another. Especially you.”

“Well, when she married my Pa.”

Jeb laughed. “Your pa.”

“I know that Bishop fella likes her and all, but my Pa is better.”

Again, Jeb laughed. “Your Pa is old.”

“My Pa is not old.”

“He’s old.” Jeb repeated. “O-L-D ... Old.”

“Oh, look you can spell.” Eva said. “Good for you.”

Jeb growled. “Old.”

“My Pa is not old. He knows how to treat a woman, unlike you. And ... and .. He’s not big, lumpy with a big bum.”

“I do not have a big bum.” Jeb snapped. “And Robi likes my bum.”

“She does not.”

“Does too. She was feeling it up on the bus, saying, “ Jeb made his voice

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higher. "Oh Jeb, I like your butt."

Eva's mouth dropped open.

Greek waved out his hand. "Jeb, please, she's a child."

"She is not a child. She is an alien plot. A carnation of evil wrapped up in a pre pubescent female body."

"I'm telling my pa." Eva stood up.

"Go tell your Pa," Jeb instructed.

"He's gonna whoop your butt." Eva turned, stopped, and spun around with a grin. "Better yet, he's gonna steal your woman, that'll hurt you worse. Ha!"

Jeb stuck his tongue out at her as she walked away.

"Jeb, Jeb, Jeb," Greek shook his head. "This isn't good. This isn't healthy this ..."

"Is fun." Jeb smiled. "Finally someone I can butt heads with ..." he stood. "And win. See ya."

"She's ... she's ..." Greek called out, but Jeb kept on walking. "A child."

\*\*\*

They shucked corn. On the porch of Parker's home, he and Robi shucked and tossed the cobs into a pot.

"This is amazing," Robi said. "All of this."

"Well, we always like to have plenty for the streets big Fourth of July festival," Parker said as he shucked. "But, as you know, Fourth of July came and went without incident. Eva and I had a few, but the rest ... planned to eat in time."

"This will be wonderful," Robi said. "So, Parker what did you do before everything died?"

"I was the Sheriff."

"You're kidding?" Robi asked shocked. "Really?"

"Yep." Parker stated. "Two years from retiring to. Was gonna call it quits at sixty-two. I retired all right."

"Were you working the night it happened?" she asked.

"Ready for this?" Parker said. "Was on my first date since my wife died. My first date."

Robi's eyes widened. "Hell of a way to end a date."

"Tell me about it. She was ... a new woman in town. Which worked for

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me, 'cause most women associated me with Melinda my wife. Anyhow, new woman, new teacher, got her to go out. We had finished a late supper and were headed to Lawrence's for Karaoke when it happened."

"Were you driving?"

Parker stared down to the ear of corn, he paused, and reflected ....

June giggled as they walked down the street. "Probably the best meal I have ever had."

"Come on," Parker said. "Wasn't that good."

"Yes, it was."

"It was tasty, don't get me wrong. I think the meatloaf was a little over done."

June giggled again, "I come from the big city. I love diner food. But I have to say the company was the best part of the meal."

"I didn't bore you?" Parker asked.

"Not at all," June said.

He stopped walking. "I have to admit, I was a little nervous. This being my first date and all."

"I'm glad it was me."

"Me, too. I just ..." Parker stopped again. A buzz rang out and the streetlights flickered. "What the heck?" he turned his head just as June dropped to the concrete with a clunk. "June."

Her head split with the hard connection, and blood flowed freely.

Parker crouched by her, feeling for a pulse. "June? June." He grabbed his radio from his belt and pressed in the button. "Tuc32, come in. Tuc32, come." He waited "Goddamn it what ..." A squeal of tires, sent this attention to the street as a red pick up truck careened into the front of a store. Glass shattered. "Holy God, Sam." Parker knew the man. "What the devil ..." as he rose to his feet, two more vehicles crashed.

.... Parker snapped out of the memory. "Then, you know, I panicked, and ran all the way home."

"Eva was fine."

Parker nodded. "Oblivious, watching a movie. We even drove for miles looking for people. But only a few in town survived."

"Thank you for sharing that story."

"I bet we all have an interesting vision of what happened."

"I saw a plane fall from the sky."

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“See.” Parker pointed an ear of corn. “Interesting. Share.”

“I will. Hey, maybe we can make that part of the picnic conversation topic you mentioned.”

“Have to have one every year. This year ... the most interesting ... whacha call it, the drop?”

“Drop, yes.”

“Drop story.” Parker said. “Shame we don’t know what happened.”

“Yeah, we do.” Robi said softly.

“What? We do?”

“Yeah, see what ...”

“Pa!” Eva raced on the porch. “Hey!”

“Hey, sweetheart.” Parker gave his daughter a hug. “You staying out of trouble?”

“Jus fighting with Jebodiah.” Eva said as she hung on to the porch rail, swinging back and forth. “He’s so darned mean, you really ought to beat him up.”

Parker just chuckled with a shake of his head. “I’m sure you’re handling him just fine.”

“I am. You having fun?” Eva asked.

Parker held up the corn. “Just shucking.”

“I see. You and Robi. She’s pretty ain’t she Pa?”

“Eva?” Parker asked stern.

“Yeah?”

“Go.”

“OK. I’ll go find Tate and Nick to play ball.” Eva took off running.

“Sorry about that,” Parker said.

“No, no problem,” Robi replied.

“So ..You were saying. What happened to this world?”

Rob leaned forward elbows on knees, and began to tell him.

\*\*\*

To say Parker didn’t believe the alien story was an understatement. Until he met Mas, and he slowly was convinced.

The lack of a belly button or nipples, along with blue underarm hair, secured his belief.

It took half the meal for Parker to get over his shock.

Mas explained how his umbilical connection port sealed after 200 years.

Robi had to take the honors of explaining Parker’s July picnic tradition

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of a conversation topic in which everyone had to share their experience.

On the lines of the old time question, ‘where were you when Kennedy was shot?’ and “What were you doing when the towers fell?” Came the new one. What happened with you when the drop occurred.”

Nearly everyone told his or her tale. A repeated tale with different scenarios, no one’s any more or less interesting than another. All pretty much the same. But Tate boosted his was different.

Rob laughed. “How can yours be different.”

“It is. I have the coolest drop story. That’s why I was saving it for last.”

“Jeb didn’t tell his,” Robi said.

Tate tossed out his hand. “Jeb’s nothing compared to mine.”

Jeb nodded. “He’s right.”

“Go on,” Robi encouraged. “We’re waiting. What is your drop story?”

“I was drunk,” Tate said. “No wait. Hammered. I had been seeing this girl for about seven months and she dropped me for a woman.”

Manny choked. “You didn’t see this coming?”

Tate shook his head. “I just though she didn’t want to fool around because she was saving herself. Who knew.” He shrugged. “Either way. I was hammered. I went out after work, of base, and was too drunk to even think by nine PM. I got ride to the gate, stumbled into base, hoping the MP’s wouldn’t notice. They didn’t. I made it home, stumbled upstairs and fell to the bed.” Tate continued with his story ....

A pounding headache caused Tate to open his eye as he laid face first on this bed. Thee sun was shining; he squinted his eyes, and groaned.

“Fuck!” He sprang up when the alarm clock read Nine forty-two am. “Fuck. Wait.” Tate lifted it. “Its’ blinking. Lights went out.” He looked at his watch. “Ok. It’s seven thirty. I’m good. Late but good.”

After making it to the kitchen starting coffee and downing four ibuprofen, ate submerged himself in a hot shower.

He didn’t long to get dressed, sipping his coffee as he put on his uniform. He rushed about, not really paying attention to anything.

ON his way out the door, the phone rang. Answer? Don’t answer?

He opted to answer incase it was his boss. “Yeah,” Was Tate’s greeting.

“Tate!” Jeb said frantic, yet excited on the other line. “God, I was praying you’d answer.”

“Uh, yeah, but ...”

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"I've been trying to call you all night."

"Karen broke up with me, I got hammered. Passed out."

"I'm on my way ...."

"From Norfolk, Cool, I'll see you when you get her."

"Tate ..."

"I'm late, gotta go. Stop at my office." Tate hung up and raced out the door.

He worked on base, so he didn't have to drive. He ran all the way to the duty office.

"Hello?" he called out when he entered. "Sarge?" He looked about. No one was at the reception desk. "Carol? Hello?" Tate scratched his head. "Where is everyone?" He heard voices on the television and looked up to make sure there wasn't a major news story happening. Upon seeing a badly dressed newswoman, Tate hurried to his office.

With no one around, and no one really noticing he was later, he fired into his normal morning routine. He logged into his email and downloaded his messages.

"Maybe she emailed." Tate said out loud. "Jeb. Dad. Nah. Come on."

He had started his responses, getting the business ones out of the way first and saving the fun personal ones for last. About forty-five minutes into his email routine, Jeb burst in the office.

"Tate."

"Hey." Tate smiled. "Are you OK?" he stood. "You look bad."

"Oh, my God." Jeb raced to Tate. "Oh My god." He hugged his brother. "Thank God, you're OK."

"I am. I mean, no I'm not." Tate said. "I feel bad about the break up. Even worse. I got drunk I think I screwed it up more."

"Tate ..."

"I called Karen, she argued with me, and I told her to drop dead." He shook his head. "How wrong was that."

"On the nose."

"What?"

"Tate, look ..."

"No." Tate held up his hand. "No big brother advice. I should have seen it coming, I didn't."

"You haven't seen anything, have you?" Jeb asked. "Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"You haven't noticed at all?"

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"Noticed what?" Tate asked. To be honest I have been rushing since I slept in. Why?"

"Aren't you the least bit curious as to why I'm here?" Jeb asked. "Why I'm frantic."

"Well, yeah." Tate leaned against the edge of his desk. "Something happened. Man, I'm being selfish. Something is going on with you. Please ..." he held out his hand to a chair. "Sit down, big brother. Tell me all about it."

.... The table was silent when Tate finished.

Nick was the most in shock. "That's not true."

Tate held up his hand. "I swear."

"Oh, my god." Nick sat back.

"Wait," Bishop said. "Robi is driving, a plane falls from the sky. I'm in a video arcade. Manny is arguing, you ... you missed the end of the world?"

Tate nodded. "I missed it. Drunk. Pre occupied. Late." He shrugged.

"That's funny," Bishop commented.

Parker finished off his beer, and set the can on the table as he stood. "Well, I have enjoyed this evening. Let me and my daughter help clean up then we'll be on our way."

Robi faced him. "You're joining us for the journey, right?"

Jeb shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Of course," Parker stated. "But we have something's we'd prefer not to leave behind and a long night of packing is ahead of us. Now .. we'll give you a hand with clean up, but where is that girl?"

Jeb mumbled. "Probably sacrificing animals."

Bishop laughed, and answered Parker. "She's playing video games with Doc on the bus."

"Thanks," Parker tossed out a short whistle then aimed his voice. "Evie! Come on, high tail it out and help clean up out here."

"In a second Pa, can't let Doc beat me."

Parker gave a toss of his head.

Robi said, "Don't worry about cleaning up. We got it."

"Thank you, what time is take off tomorrow."

"About eight." Robi replied.

"See ya' right before." Park laid his hands on Robi's shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, so much for all you did today." He turned and

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walked to Jeb with an extended hand. "We shared a meal, conversation ..."

"I'm not sharing her." Jeb nodded his head at Robi. "So don't ask."

Parker laughed. "No, I was just gonna say we ain't shared handshake. Parker Westin, formally introducing myself."

"Jeb Hoyt. Thought you were gonna say something about your daughter."

"Bout the way you fight with her?" Parker snickered "Know, wasn't born with rose colored glasses. I know what she's like. Heck, she was worse with the mailman than she is with you."

You're kidding?"

"Nope, he gave it right back to her."

"Bet she ever shot him with a BB gun,"

"I'll take that bet," Parker winked. "When she was waiting for something in the mail and it didn't come, she got him good. Almost faced federal charges. She's a rough and tumble, like her brothers. Got worse when her mother passed."

"Pa!" Eva came from the bus. "You're gonna get the cooties ya' touch him again."

"Cooties?" Jeb asked. "Cooties? Man, now I know you're some reincarnate using an old word like that."

"Pa, there he goes again, picking on me."

"Jeb." Parker gave him a firm handshake. "See ya' in the morning. Let's go Eva," He put his arm around her.

"We ain't cleaning up?" She asked as they walked.

"Packing."

Eva grumbled, then waved with a smile to Robi, as her and her father left to go in the house.

Manny stood. "Anyone up for a game of gin?"

Robi shook her head. "Actually, I'm gonna get this cleaned up, set a course for tomorrow and go to bed." She reached for the large skewer that held minimal remains of the Spam barbeque.

Jeb asked, "Bed? It's only nine o'clock."

"After I get settled, it'll be later." Robi picked off Spam from the skewer. "Bishop, this was wonderful."

"Thanks." He grinned. "And I'll play gin, Manny."

"Cool. Lets' wash the pots and get it together." Manny said. "Bet Doc will play."

Jeb stepped closer to Robi. "Since when do you go to bed at nine



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o'clock."

"Since when do you care?"

"Since I would like to spend some time with you."

"Well since I'm still mad at you, I'm going to bed."

"Is it a menstrual thing?"

Robi's mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you asked then when I am standing with an impaling object in my hand."

"Sorry." Jeb paused. "Is it?"

"No!"

"Why are you still mad?"

Robi stared. "I'm not." She picked another piece of Spam.

"Good. Since Martha is comatose, have a drink with me and kick back?"

Jeb raised his eyebrow.

Robi inserted the meat into her mouth. "Yes."

"Yes." Jeb leaned to her and kissed her. "Whoops. Sorry. Did I do that?" he licked his lips. "Barbecue. Tasty." he smiled, and started to clean up. He noticed Bishop was staring. "What!" he blasted.

With a 'whatever' attitude look to him, Bishop just shook his head.

\*\*\*

Out in the distance, not too far, but away from everyone, a small fire crackled, a bright light illuminated for Jeb and Robi.

Jeb lay on his side, propped on an elbow, book in hand, while Robi was before him, partially sitting, using his mid section like the back to a chair.

"You're not bored, are you?" Jeb asked.

"No, it's fascinating, I'm still in shock."

"Why is that?"

"You're reading to me."

"I wanted to share this with you since I found it this afternoon. I thought it was a really cool book idea. I'm liking it."

"Me, too."

"Very prophetic," Jeb commented.

"Big word."

"Thanks," He smiled. "But come on, who would have thought some author would have listed this as one of the possible plans."

Robi sat up more to face him. "What if the author was Alien?"

"What do you mean?"

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“Like Mas or Sam. When was it published?”

Jeb opened the page. He muttered out, “Days to the End, copyright .. wow. 1976.”

“See. Bet me.” Robi said. “Bet me this guy was one of Mas’ crew. We should ask him.”

“He did say they were trying to get the word out.”

“We’re really going to have to ask him. Jeb?”

“Hmm.” Jeb was finding their spot in the book.

“Why didn’t you tell your story?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your story about what happened to you with the drop. Why didn’t you tell it?”

“Well, Tate told his and I figured why even bother telling mine.”

“But Tate wanted to save his for last, so why didn’t you jump in and tell yours.”

Jeb shrugged.

“What’s your story?”

Jeb began to sing. “Morning Glory, What’s the word, humming bird? Ave you heard about Robi and Jeb?”

Robi laughed. “What?” She sat up all the way. “What is that?”

“Come on, Bye-Bye Birdie. You never saw?”

“Oh wow.” She covered her mouth as she laughed. “I remember that.”

“Yeah, but the song was about Hugo and Kim.” Jeb nodded. “I improvised.”

“Adlibbed.”

“Whatever.” He shrugged.

“So, why don’t you want to tell me?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to tell you, it’s just that I want to forget.”

Robi gave a quizzical look. “Was it that bad?”

“I think so.”

“Then ... then I won’t ask. OK?” She turned her body. “When you want to tell me, you will. You can read some more.”

“I was ... I was filling in for Sgt. Stefano.”

Robi returned to facing Jeb.

Jeb continued, “I was in charge of the Junior ROTC. Kids nine through thirteen. There were twenty of them.”

“Oh, my god.”

“I didn’t want to fill in. I never do that shit. His wife went into labor and

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I just went down to the hall to cover. We were closing out standing information when the drop happened.”

“Oh, Jeb.” Robi laid her hand on his cheek.

“I still can see those kids dropping. It was something I never expected to see, or would ever want to see again.” He laid his hand over hers. “I wanted you to know, so, you can understand me completely. And ... and ...”

Robi waited.

“And I think we should go back to reading now.”

“Sounds good.” Robi started to turn, but Jeb stopped her.

“After ...” He leaned closer to her, slightly parting his lips for a kiss.

“Jeb!” Tate called out. “Jeb!”

“Fuck.” Jeb pulled back. “Over here.”

“Jeb.” Tate caught his breath. “Sorry to interrupt. But ...we may have a slight problem.”

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The vision of Mas slammed Jeb like a ton of bricks, angering him upon site.

What was Mas doing?

At first Jeb feared that it was sabotage, but then reasoning took over and Jeb tried to look at the situation objectively.

The side of the bus was open, the hatch still propped. Mas had the weapons removed and scattered about the street. He sat center of the weapons, some of which were taken apart.

Jeb looked at Robi, “Thoughts?”

Robi shrugged.

“Tate, did you ask what he was up to?” Jeb asked.

“He said he’d only tell Robi.”

“Fuck that, he’ll tell me.” Jeb shifted the chamber on his revolver and walked to Mas. “Little man, you better have a damn good reason for doing what you’re doing?”

“Ah, Jeb.” Mas tossed out his hands. “Begin I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you start with why you have our arsenal out and torn apart.”

“Part a torn?” Mas shook his head. “Improve.”

Jeb used the tip of his boot to shuffle a few loose pieces. “This doesn’t look like an improvement.”

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Robi tried. "Mas why are you taking apart our weapons?"

"Must." Mas stood. "Must."

Robi nodded. "OK, why must you?"

"Have word received." Mas stated. "Power of fire too weak."

Tate deciphered. "Dude, our firing power is too weak?"

Mas nodded.

Tate chuckled. "The XM8 is awesome."

"Enough it is not," Mas said. "Power of more we must. Work hard. Fast." Mas nodded. "Fast very. Improve. Enhance."

Jeb asked. "Why?"

"Yours of weapons." Mass reached down. "Power not enough for wave of second."

"Second wave?" Robi asked. "The second wave is coming?"

Mas nodded. "Jeb. Stop we must. Supplies need I. Can empower, make best, weapons of yours, I can."

Jeb nodded. "Do you know what you need?"

"Much power," Mas answered. "Wave of second, mighty. Strong. Scattered here. There. Enough about, se we will. Fight we will."

Robi understood. "So the second wave is coming. They won't be everywhere, but we will face them."

"Yes."

Jeb remained rational. "Ok, can you prepare us other than the weapons. Get us ready? We'll get you what you need."

"Prepare I will," Mas said. "Short is time."

Tate remarked, "You said that. The second wave. When?"

Mas hesitated before answering. "Four days."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*July 8<sup>th</sup>*

*Tucumcari, MN*

The drip coffee maker slurped out its last drop, and Robi anxiously awaited the brew. Usually coffee was made over an open fire, or Sterno, but since the founding of the bus, making coffee the way she was used to was at hand.

Jeb and Tate had taken Mas out for supplies, since the sun started to rise. They had to go to the next town, and even via radio, she hadn't heard anything. She wondered if they were out of range. They were exceptionally quiet.

She had lost the egg lottery, so she was stuck with Eggbeaters, which was fine with her. She did however, envy Greek, Doc, Nick, and Ben when they got their farm fresh eggs sunny side up.

The smell of the day before had long since left her senses, and she had to admit, the fresh eggs smelled wonderful.

Spam and scrambled eggs worked.

Parker and Eva hadn't checked in yet, of course it wasn't even seven o'clock. Rarely, unless they all put in a late night, did anyone sleep late.

Sam didn't go with Tate and Jeb, and Robi realized she hadn't spoken to Sam at all. She was going to take advantage.

The odd little man was seated just left of the picnic area, by a tree and reading a book. Robi carried her own book in fact the one that Jeb had been reading with her the night before.

"Hello," She greeted him. "May I join you?"

"Yes, you may." Sam extended his hand. "The spit is great for reading." He spoke slow and articulate, each word not slurred or delivered in the backwards manner Robi was accustomed to with Mas.

"What are you reading?" Robi asked.

"Men are from Mars." Sam held up the book. "I find it very amusing. I have dated earth women. They are very charming, and intelligent creatures."

"Thanks."

"You are welcome. What is it that you are reading?"

"Something I wanted to ask you about." Robi took a seat next to him on the ground. "Jeb had found this book. Are you familiar?" she handed it over

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to him.

“Ah, yes, a great foreshadowing,” Sam said. “I know the author very well.”

“So, is he one of your people?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“I knew it,” Robi grinned. “Thanks. Where is he now.”

“Sadly he was killed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We have lost many people,” Sam said. “But many remain. We are here. Just about. You will find us. And we will find you.”

“Why didn’t you go with Mas to get supplies?”

Sam shook his head. “You have a saying. To many hands ...”

“Spoil the soup,” Robi finished it. “So you think you’ll interfere.”

“When we have an idea. The one with the idea will execute. It is not right to step in unless help is asked for.”

“I understand. Mas, he is very good at weapons. He can do communications. I am better. Communications is my specialty.”

“How did you know the second wave was coming?” Robi questioned.

“The message came through. We received. As the second wave nears, we must also limit all radio contact unless needed.”

“I understand. So I should stop calling out to check on them?”

“Yes. Roberta. The second wave will not be pretty, nor will it be easy. You know this, do you not?”

Robi nodded.

“It will come with blood shed if it is not fought properly. The second wave will last two years or more, unless we defeat them.”

“The third wave, will it come then?”

“If we defeat the second wave. The third wave may not come at all. Some of them will be here soon.”

“But not to fight?”

“To organize.”

“So we’re not fighting the actual race that wants to take over. We’re fighting their henchmen. But they’ll be here, building them.”

“Yes.”

“What .. what do they look like?”

“Depends it does on where they settle.”

“They adapt?” Robi asked.

“If warm, they shed, it cool they cover.”

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“Like fur?”

“Yes, they ....” Sam snapped his finger. “You know of their commonly known form.”

“I do?”

“Yes, a tale that has grown throughout the years. A myth as you may think.”

“Really? Which myth?”

“Bigfoot.”

Robi’s mouth opened slightly, she paused before saying anything. “Bigfoot.”

“Sasquatch.” Sam said. “As many call him. He has been here vacationing.”

“Bigfoot.”

“Yes.”

“We have to battle an army of bigfoots?”

“Yes.”

Robi chuckled. “Well, they don’t seem that tough.”

“They are not,” Sam said. “But the second wave is.”

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“Quit biting your nail,” Tate ordered Jeb as they stood in the street.

It had been hours since they returned from getting Mas his supplies, and Mas took four of the XM8’s off to adjust them.

They had followed Mas’ request to meet him at the edge of town, just where the old Burger King Billboard met the turn off road from the highway.

Gil’s diner was there, along with a gas station, it was short distance from town.

“I can’t help it.” Jeb said, in reference to biting his nails.

“Why are you nervous?”

“Think about it. Every time he touches something I worry.”

“He hasn’t touched much,” Tate commented.

“True.”

“And .... He made a radio out of a baby jar lid.”

“A receiver out of a cereal box.”

With a smirk, Tate nodded “Imagine the weaponry.”

“Make you wonder what we’re up against.”

Robi’s voice joined in. “I don’t know what the second wave is, but I can

tell you the third wave is bigfoot.”

Both Tate and Jeb turned to her.

“Bigfoot?” Jeb asked.

“Bigfoot.” Tate repeated.

“Bigfoot.”

Manny joined, “What about Bigfoot.”

“Oh,” Robi explained, “Sam, said the actual Aliens that want us are Bigfoot.”

“Fuck,” Manny whispered. “You know I knew it. I knew Bigfoot was alien. I said it years ago.”

Tate widened his eyes. “I never thought it existed.”

“Wait,” Jeb held up his hand. “So if we fight an army of third wave, we’re actually fighting ... Bigfeet.”

Silence.

Every chuckled.

Robi pointed, “That was good.” She looked at her watch. “Mas said to be here for the demonstration. Where is he?”

Jeb shook his head. “Don’t know. I also don’t know why he has us so far away from everyone else.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to frighten the kids,” Tate guessed.

Jeb scoffed. “Kids. Martha sleeps. Nick isn’t really a kid, and the demon child would never frighten.”

Manny added, “Firing power, or it make back fire, wants to make sure no one else is around to get hurt.”

“About to find out,” Tate pointed to Mas who walked up the street, toting tow weapons, and Bishop at his side.

“Fuck.” Jeb barked. “Fuckin’ Bishop got first view.”

“They don’t look different,” Tate said. “Really. Look.”

Robi said, “They don’t look like he changed anything at ...” she paused. “Did you guys feel that?”

“What?” Jeb asked.

“Are we in earthquake territory?” Robi asked.

Manny shook his head. “Not that I know of. I didn’t feel anything either.”

Jeb shrugged. “Me either.”

“Guess it was my imagination,” Robi said.

Mas approached. “Weapons have I. Demonstrate we must. Power to ensure.”



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“Mas?” Robi questioned. “Why does Sam talk normally, and you speak like you do. I would think you would both talk the same.”

“Ah,” Mas nodded. “Sam of poor. Disability he has. Similar it is, to dyslexia of your people.”

Robi choked out a cough. “Poor Sam.”

Mas nodded.

“All right. All right,” Jeb griped. “I’ve been waiting. Let’s test these bad boys out.”

“Bad boys they are not,” Mas commented. “Weapons.”

Sarcastically, Jeb growled out, “No. Really? Gee. Thanks. Let’s test them.”

Robi snipped, “Stop it. Don’t pick on Mas.”

Very proudly, Mas handed Jeb the weapon. “Fires it does, like the old, but power of fire like no other.”

“Really.” Jeb mounted a grip on the weapon. “What should I shoot?”

“There it was again,” Robi said. “Did you feel it? I’m not crazy.”

“Hold.” Mas stated to Jeb. “Explain I must.” He passed out the remaining rifles to Tate, Manny, and Bishop. “Special one, I make for Robi.” Mas smiled at her.

“Cool.” Robi said. “Go on, explain.”

“Bullets, no.” Mas said. “Pack of power, the clip is. Charged. Energy.”

“How many shots?” Tate asked. “Or rounds.”

“Beams.” Mas replied.

“Beams?” Jeb asked.

Mas took the weapon from Bishop. “When shot of single .... Beam of ten. Very powerful. When shot of many, beams of fifty.” He removed the clip. “When Danger there is ...too much. Overwhelmed. Detonate.” He showed the button on the bottom. “Seconds of ten, explosion of mass power. Run. Run fast.” He reinserted the clip. “Questions?” he handed the rifle back to Bishop.

Tate had one, “How many of these power packs did you make?”

“Twenty.” Mas answered. “More I will make. Test you will,” he instructed Jeb.

“Ok.” Jeb raised the weapon. “What should I shoot?”

“Hit can you, that telephone pole?” Mas asked. “Far it is.”

“Please,” Jeb scoffed. “Consider it hit.” He aimed, finger ready, and depressed.

A single, high pitch tone emerged, with a blue dot of energy that seared

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across the air and into the telephone pole. There was a delay, a second maybe, then the pole exploded into a million splinters.

"That works." Jeb said, and then chuckled. "Fuckin' nice."

"Oh my god," Tate explained almost giggly. "Oh My god."

"IS there a kick?" Manny asked.

"No," Jeb answered, "Feels like firing air."

"There it is again." Robi said. "I know you people felt that. Mas?" She saw the look on his face. "Mas."

"Ready should the weapons be." Mas stated.

"They are," Jeb said. "And no, I didn't feel anything, Robi."

Bishop asked, "With this kind of fire power, it makes me wonder what exactly we'll be shooting."

Mas stepped back. "Close to that."

"Close to what?" Bishop asked.

"That." Mas pointed.

They all turned.

Irritated, Bishop, not seeing anything asked again. "What?"

Crack!

With the loudest, ear piercing noise, an immediate shake of the ground, the earth split twenty feet from them.

"Man your weapons!" Jeb ordered out. "Get ready for anything!"

And anything was what they got. Out from the split, shot a snake like tentacle, it hisses and seared high speed across the concrete, snatching on to Robi.

Robi went down when the creature snapped her forward and began to drag her toward the pit.

Jeb aimed to shoot as Tate flew forward toward Robi.

Mas stopped Jeb. "Current. Robi killed."

"Fuck." Quickly he pulled his revolver, aimed, and fired. It took three shots, and the tentacle released Robi.

Tate was there; he grabbed hold of her, lifting Robi just as a new tentacle slapped down.

It missed them both.

Suddenly more, two, three eight tentacles whipped from the split in the ground.

"Now!" Jeb ordered out and fired.

The creature squealed with each hit it took, each hit that exploded it's wiry extensions until it stopped fighting and slipped back into the hole.

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Manny yelled out, "Is it dead?"

Jeb replied, "I don't know." He looked at Mas. "Is it?"

Mas shrugged.

"What is that?" Jeb asked. "A shrug? You're supposed to be the expert. Tate." He lowered his weapon, "Cover me conventionally."

"Got it." Tate pulled his revolver.

Jeb paused as he walked by Robi, "You OK?" he asked.

"I think." Robi nodded. "What are you doing?" She reached out as Jeb walked to the hole. "Jeb."

Jeb waved his hand out at her as he walked to just the edge of the opening. He pulled forth his weapon, aiming into the hole "I don't see anything moving. Man ...". He winced. "Fuckin' stinks." He breathed outward onto the back of his hand, and then looked into the hole again. "Nope, it must have ...". Jeb skirted back when a tentacle slapped down by his leg. For some reason he slammed his boot down hard on the tentacle. The creature didn't make a noise, but the tentacle crushed with ease. Jeb nodded. "Dead."

Robi turned to Mas, "What now?"

"Leave we must." Mas said.

"Are there more?" Robi asked.

"Doubt I do," Mas said. "Danger in lies, of fumes omitted. The hour grows them stronger."

Bishop heard this, and contributed to questioning. "Fumes. As in deadly?"

Mas nodded. "Inhale too long. Yes. Too much. Yes. Out it fans, five miles. Thick for hours. Hours it takes to do so. Must we leave, and must we leave now."

"Wait." Tate held up his hand. "Let me get this straight. The fumes are strong. They row y the hour and fan out. You could get sick and die, right? Well what about him?" Tate pointed to Jeb who was peering in the hole. "Will he get sick?"

Mas nodded. "Could."

"Jeb!" Tate yelled. "Get away for the hole man."

"I hear you guys!" Jeb responded. "I'm fine. I won't get sick."

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It was the fourth time. Jeb blurted an excuse me and rushed to the small bathroom on the bus. The fourth time in ten minutes, and it concerned Robi.

She knocked on the close bathroom door.

"In a minute," Jeb said, his voice held a hallow effect, and that told Robi one thing. He was speaking into the bowl.

"Jeb," Robi opened the door, but could barely do so. Jeb's legs were blocking it as he hovered the commode. "You OK?"

"Yeah."

"No, you're not. This is the fourth time you've ran in here."

"I didn't know you were ..." he broke off, up heaving an unproductive heave.

"Dry?" Robi asked.

"Very much so ..." Jeb heaved again. "Oh my God." He rolled to a sitting position against the tiny wall/ "I don't think I ever was this sick."

"Any stomach pains?" Robi asked.

"No, just nausea."

Robi held out her hand. "The moving bus can't be helping."

"Not at all."

"Let's get you to bed."

"No, I'll be ...." He turned his body and heaved over the toilet. "Fine."

"Jeb, I ...." Robi felt the tug to her pants. She looked down, Martha was standing there. "Yes, sweetie?"

"Is Dudday sick?"

"Yeah, he's ..." Robi smiled a sad smile. "He's very sick."

Martha flashed a closed mouth smile to Robi, and then slipped through the slight opening of the bathroom.

Robi closed the door and walked back to the table where Bishop, Mas, and Sam gathered.

"How I he?" Bishop asked.

"Martha's with him now." Robi answered. "Mas, why did that make him so sick? Was that the second wave?"

Mas shook his head. "No."

Sam added. "It is what was left of the first wave."

Robi looked at him curiously, "The first wave was a virus."

"Yes, indeed." Sam said. "And the virus molecules that did not find a host, found each other. The manifested into creatures."

Bishop asked. "How many?"

Sam shook his head. "This I do not know, but I will say, since so many

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people have died, there may not be that many. Still, their odor upon death will kill.”

“We have to find them,” Bishop said. “So we know where to avoid.”

“Leave them be.” Sam said. “They are more deadly to the Loomis. Or the third wave.”

Robi blinked. “Loomis? That isn’t the name Mas used before.”

“The Loomis is the earth name we have give the race. Easier to say,” Sam smiled.

“OK, I’m game.” Bishop said. “How are they ore deadly to the Loomis than us.”

“They will kill earth’s inhabitant. Yes.” Sam said. “However, they will kill you if they get you. The Loomis ... they hunt.”

Robi grinned. “So if by chance the third wave does arrive, the manifestations will congregate to where the Loomis reside.”

“Possibly,” Sam said. “If the second wave doesn’t destroy them.”

“Shit,” Bishop wisped. “Here I thought we had another back up. And our peace has ceased.”

“What do you mean?” Robi asked.

“It won’t be long before Jeb joins us.” Bishop pointed to Martha who walked into the bus are. She yawned loudly, crawled up onto a bus seat, curled into a fetal position, and fell fast asleep.

Within seconds.

“Fuckin’ awesome.” Jeb emerged. “I feel great. Bishop get out of my seat.”

Bishop raised his eyebrows to Robi. “See what I mean?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Grants, NM*

About an hour into the journey, Greek started receiving weird signals via the tiger cereal box. Not voices, or noise, or patterns. But it seemed to be newscasts, or music at times. Nothing clear or consistent. Bleeps and blips would come in and out.

Everyone thought he was nuts. Because as soon as he called someone's attention to it, it stopped.

He asked Robi to pull over. They turned into dead air, until Jeb himself swore he heard a snippet of Hank Williams.

No one else heard it.

IT was determined that perhaps they should stop; allow Mas and Sam to see what they could get, but to do so after they passed Albuquerque.

No sooner did they get just beyond the cit limits of Albuquerque, the signals were no longer deemed Greek and Jeb's imagination. Still short, and able to be missed, the music would bleed in and out in one to two second samples.

Something was coming through.

The stopped by the Rio Grande, and while MAS and Sam worked on that signal, trying to determine what and where it was coming from, Parker thought it would be a great idea to peel potatoes.

It would pass time. They'd seal them in bags, stocking on filler for meals, and cutting them would give something to do over talk on the bus.

All well and fine, Jeb had suggested, but they risked losing fingers wit the way Robi drove.

Under the hot July sun, they peeled.

Well not everyone. Some choose to just kick back and wait it out.

"You know," Parker said, "An idle mind is the devil's playground."

Bishop quickly looked at Jeb. "Don't say it."

"Say what?" Jeb asked.

"I know what you were going to say," Bishop said.

"Oh, so now you're a mind reader. I wasn't going to say anything."

"Right. I saw the look on your face." Bishop shook shi head. "He said about the idle mind being the devil's playground and I saw it, you were gonna make a comment about Eva."

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“That would be rude.” Jeb stated. “Eva is a child.” He dropped his voice to a mumble. “A child with a demon streak, but still child none the less.”

Robi quickly checked for a reaction from Parker. He kept peeling. “You let them talk about your daughter like that?”

“She may be sweet to you,” Parker said. “But I don’t think she’s all that sweet to Jeb. Will be that way until she gets used to him, or he diverts his attention on someone else.

“Guys!” Greek raced to the crew. “Pack up the potatoes. We really got someone.”

Robi set down her knife. “You sure? You talked to them?”

“No,” Greek said. “But there is definitely a signal. Mas and Sam can’t figure out what exactly is causing it. But they locked in. It’s an unprotected universal signal.”

Bishop added, “Which means that if we’re getting it the enemy is getting it.”

Greek nodded. “Chances are they already got it. That’s what Mas and Sam think.”

Jeb questioned. “They think it’s a set up for us?”

Greek shook his head. “I asked that, they said no. If they were setting us up, they’d use other means, like actual radio calls. Sam said they’d never use such an assortment of sound bytes to make contact.”

Park asked, “Assortment of SoundBits.”

Greek replied, “News. Music ... porno.”

Bishop coughed. “Porno. Doesn’t sound like someone reaching us, sounds more like we’re tuning into someone’s television.”

“Wait,” Robi halted. “If they think the aliens already locked in, then how is the signal still running? All other signals stopped.”

Parker mumbled out, “no threat.” He saw he had their attention. “The places wiped out before, the places that were sending signals, they had large groups. They were a threat. This obviously is a small group, or maybe even two or three people.”

Jeb agreed. “Like you and your daughter. You guys said you were using the cell phone for a while. They probably found you a long time ago, and deemed you guys not a threat. Like any army, they are gonna worry about the threats first. OK, how were they able to lock in.”

“Ready?” Greek chuckled in amusement. “They found an old cell pone, rigged it, the LCD display now works as a tracking. We don’t have an exact location, but they said the closer we get the stronger the signal will be. We

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can follow that.”

Jeb asked. “You said we know where it’s coming from.”

Greek nodded. “About thirty miles west from here.”

Robi turned to Parker. “Familiar with what’s thirty miles west.”

“Grants,” Parker replied. “Small Indian Reservation town, tourist attraction. Beautiful place. We’re headed that way anyhow.”

Robi didn’t debate. It was something they had to check out. Parker and Bishop cleaned up the potato mess, while Jeb gathered the others who were just lounging around.

Both vehicles headed west, and the tracking signal grew stronger. Even the sounds coming from the cereal box were steady. So much so, then when the grunted, groans, and explicit sexual instructions started carrying over the airwaves, Robi had Greek turn it down.

They arrived outside of Grants, and they tracking led them on a series of right and lefts. When they drew close, enough they stopped.

Leaving the bus behind for safety purposes, Jeb Robi, Tate, Manny and Mas moved forward with the Humvee. A half a mile from the near steady signal, Tate, Manny and Mas were left on the road as a back up while Jeb and Robi went forward on foot.

Mas sensed no danger or alien presence and it was decided that they should be as least threatening as possible when approaching.

A KOA campsite sign greeted them first, and they knew they had arrived when a six-car blockade barricaded the entrances.

Whoever they were, they weren’t far.

“Hear that?” Jeb asked. “Faint. But do you hear?”

“Music.” Robi replied.

A few more feet and they arrived at the blockade.

“This isn’t very secure,” Jeb said.

“Secure enough. It blacks the main road to the campgrounds. I’m gonna look over there.”” There was a fence on both side of the car barricade and Robi walked to her right.

“See anything?” Jeb asked.

“A trailer.”

“It’s a campsite.” Jeb said. “I believe you’ll see many.”

“No but this one isn’t with the others,” Robi said. “Come here and look.”



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Jeb scooted Robi's way. It was there. A trailer, parked in the middle of the main campgrounds, hidden somewhat between the buildings. "Wanna check it out?" he asked.

"We've come this far."

Jeb grabbed hold of the fence and began to climb.

Robi watched him, shook her head, and then walked around to the entrance that was blocked by cars. She squeezed through with ease about the same time Jeb had jumped to the other side.

"There's always an easier way," she said.

"Yeah, when you're little." He motioned his head. "Let's go."

It felt safe to Robi. A bit of country music played, and something about that told her she was entering into a friendly terrain.

They past the manger building, tuned the corner and stopped.

Actually, they stopped when Jeb kicked a bottle ... one of hundreds of empty bottles of booze.

"What the fuck?" he bent down and lifted the bottle. "Someone likes to drink."

"Has to be more than two people." Robi peered at the mess.

"Talk about littering."

"No, talk about us being alcoholics." She laughed.

Jeb laughed as well, tucking his rifle behind his back. "You wanna call out or me?"

"Maybe I should," Robi said then aimed her voice as they mobile home came into view. "Hello!"

Nothing.

"Hello!" she called out again.

The music stopped.

"Hello! Anyone there?" Robi yelled.

There wasn't a verbal answer at least not first. A racket of noise emanated, bottle dropping, glass breaking, something falling over, almost as if they frighten whoever was there.

The woman's voice was old, that much could be told, but it also was crass as she shouted out, "Holy fuckin' God! Is someone there?"

They heard her. They both looked at each other.

Robi spoke out "yes," She inched her way there.

"Oh my god!" the woman yelled.

Robi could hear the sound of rushing; the woman must have knocked everything over as she came from around the trailer.

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

She looked stunned to see Robi and Jeb. But she was nowhere as stunned as Robi and Jeb.

Robi froze.

Jeb blurted out an 'uh!' then spun around when, the little elderly woman, obviously past eighty, short, thin, wrinkly, flew from behind the trailer in her welcome. She wore only a bikini bottom, no top, and her aging breasts swung as she came to a halt.

"People!" She flung out her arms and raced to Robi.

Robi embraced her, and winced at the scent of booze. "Hello."

"Fuckin; heaven's sake." She stepped back. "I wasn't ... I wasn't ..."  
She hiccupped "Expecting company. I was sunbathing. What's your name?"

"Roberta. Call me Robi."

"What about him?" She twitched her head to Jeb. "Ain't he gonna turn around."

Jeb cleared his throat. "I was just trying not be rude, Ma'am, since you aren't dressed."

"What?" She asked. "Ain't you ever seen a naked woman before."

"Not one like you, no." Jeb answered.

"Are you gay?"

Robi snickered.

"No." Jeb replied. "But I'd feel more comfortable if you got dressed."

"Fine. Fine." She was extremely excited. "Come around. Come on. Watch the bottles." She led the way, teetering, and staggering in her walk. "Wanna drink?"

"No," Robi replied.

"Be right out." She walked in the trailer. "Make yourselves at home."

The moment the door closed, Jeb finally turned around.

Robi's hand shot to her mouth as she tried not to laugh. She whispered. "Is she great or what?"

Jeb moved to Robi, leaned close and whispered "Fuckin' granny exhibitionist. Wait." He bent down and picked up another empty bottle. "Scratch that. A drunkard, granny exhibitionist."

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She emerged from the trailer in clothes. Loose fitting cloth pants and a long shirt. Something more fitting for a woman of her age. She introduced herself finally as Josephine; she did so with a hiccup as she brought out Little

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Debbie cakes, and another bottle of Jack.

"Now you have to be thirsty." She plopped the bottle on the picnic table.

"Well," Robi tilted her head. "I guess I can have one."

"Good girl." Josephine poured some in the glass. "What about you Skippy?"

Jeb raised an eyebrow. "Skippy."

"You don't like the name?" she asked.

"Not particularly."

"Too bad." Josephine sloppily slid into the picnic table bench. "So how'd you find me?" She downed her drink and poured another.

Robi replied, "We picked up a strange signal. Music. Porn."

Josephine smiled. "Gotta love that porn on the net." She raised her lass.

"The net?" Jeb questioned. "What do you mean the net?"

"Where else do you think I'm getting porn, Skippy?" She asked. "The net."

"You can't be going on the net." Jeb said. "There isn't any net."

"How the fuck do you think I got my porn. Was watching old Johnny wad movies just this afternoon." Josephine said.

Jeb asked, "How can you get the internet if there's not cable or telephone line."

"Ever hear of a fuckin' satellite connection?" she asked.

Jeb turned to Robi.

"What?" Josephine asked, "You two never thought of that."

Robi shook her head. "We just assumed, and really I never thought about using the Internet."

"What else is there to do?" Josephine said. "Now granted a lot of sites are not running. But most are. Still up running. That's all there is to do. Eat. Internet. Get a tan."

"Drunk." Jeb said.

"You gotta problem with that?" She asked.

"No." Jeb said. "Just stating."

"Good cause you shouldn't." She spoke in her drunken way. "You don't look like a man who is allergic to the bottle. Got the hands of a thirty five year old the face of a forty five year old. Tells me you drink lot."

"Ever think maybe being in the service my whole life did that." Jeb argued.

"You don't drink?"

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

“Yeah, I drink. But ...”

“A lot?” She asked. “You’re a lush aren’t you? Got nerve to make them snide comments about my drinking.”

Jeb breathed out. “What am I? The poster child for the most hated man in this part of the country. Do I look mean?”

“Not attractive.” Josephine said.

Jeb gasped.

Robi snickered “I think you’re very handsome, Jeb.”

Josephine snorted a laugh. “He the only man you seen in the past few months?”

“As a matter of fact ...” Jeb leaned to her. “We’re only two of a group. There’s a lot of men in our group.”

Josephine sprang to her feet. “Men! Men? Let’s go.”

“Down, boy.” Jeb said. “We’ll get there. We want to know you first.”

Josephine sat back down. “Fine. Can’t believe a lot of men, and you picked this one. Married to him a while?” she asked.

“Not to him.” Robi answered “We just met when everything happened.”

“And was he the only man then?”

Jeb huffed out. “Why is this important?”

Josephine slammed her hand on the table. “I wanna know what kind of woman she is. You can tell a woman by the man she picks. You seem like a nice gal. Just trying to figure out what you see in him. He could be nice. Don’t know. He hides that personality.” Josephine refreshed her drink, and Robi’s. “Then again, is he hung?”

Robi choked and coughed as she took a sip. She wiped her mouth. “We haven’t reached that point yet.”

“Better check.” Josephine winked. “In fact, all them men. We should just split them and have ourselves a ball. No need for one on one relationship if we got enough men. I did that in my youth, you know. Commune..”

Jeb winced “Ok, all right. Enough.”

Josephine ignored him. “How many men?”

Robi answered. “Nine men. One teenage boy, and two aliens.”

“Aliens?” Josephine asked. “You got male aliens?”

Robi nodded.

“Illegal? Like Mexicans?”

Robi shook her head. “Outer space.”

Josephine blew out through her parted lips as if stunned “I’ll be

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dammed. Actual aliens. Here I thought it was a dream.”

Jeb asked. “What? Did you think you dreamt aliens?”

“Bunch of them, yeah, one day, right here.” Josephine relied. “Big old ugly things looking in my windows.”

Robi looked at Jeb. “Big ugly things?”

“What?” Josephine asked, “Your aliens aren’t big and ugly?”

“No,” Robi replied. “Our are short and bald.”

Josephine whistled. “Must have been a dream then.” She finished off her drink and poured another. “Course, I tried to talk and they ran away. I was just needing someone to talk to. Since you know, everyone left the campsite.”

“Ma’am?” Jeb questioned. “Do you think they left the campsite? Like packed up and left?”

“That’s what I said.”

“It didn’t strike you as a little odd that everyone just left?”

“Yep. But I was drunk and I figured ...” She hiccupped. “I figured they told me, and I forgot.”

Robi tried. “Did you try to find anything out when they didn’t return?”

“I told you, weren’t you listening. I went on the net. But being I the middle of goddamn nowhere, can’t get all the websites. When they didn’t come back, I took squatters rights. Mine. Payment due for stealing my husband.”

Robi linked slowly. “Stealing your husband.”

“Camp owner. Stole him.” Josephine said. “Ran off with him, closed the camp, kicked everyone out. That’s what I figured. Now this is my campground.”

With an ‘Oh my God,’ Jeb ran his hand down his face. “Ma’am, do you know what happened?”

“I just told you.”

“No, I mean, what really happened. Everyone didn’t leave the campsite.”

“Where the hell else are they?” Josephine asked. “Dead?”

“Uh .. yeah.”

Josephine paused. She looked at Robi who nodded, and then she downed another drink. “Christ almighty, now it makes sense.”

Robi nodded again.

Josephine continued, “Everyone in the campsite died. Was it a gas leak? Chemical leak?”

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

“No,” Robi told her. “It was more than the campsite. It was the world.”

“Jesus Christ!” Josephine cocked back. “The whole world died? Where the hell was I when this happened?”

Jeb mumbled, “Drunk.”

Robi nudged him. “So, you see. We’re a group of survivors. We’re heading to California. Would you like to join us?”

“You mean you and your husband? You ain’t gonna ask me to do anything kinky are you.”

“No,” Robi tried not to laugh.

“Not that I don’t mind kinky, just that I don’t find your husband all that attractive.”

Jeb remained in control. “Thank you for that. But like we said, I’m not her husband.”

Robi stated, “We want you to join our group.”

Jeb added, “No group sex.”

“Get your fuckin’ mind out of the gutter, Skippy,” Josephine snapped. “No one said anything about groups sex. Christ. How can you be married to is man?”

“We’re not married,” Jeb huffed.

“Any men in this group?” Josephine asked.

Robi replied, “Nine.”

“We told you this,” Jeb snapped.

“Nine men. OK. Sounds good.” Josephine stood. “Let me go get my stuff, OK?” She tried to turn, and step over the picnic table, but she tripped and fell.

“Shit.” Robi jumped to her feet and rushed her way.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” Josephine stood up, swayed, and caught her balance. “Gonna grab some stuff. Don’t go anywhere.”

“We won’t.” Robi watched her walk to the trailer door.

“I’m gonna get my stuff. Plus, I want to go on line and tell my friends, I’ll be out of contact for a while.” She opened the door.

“Ma’am?” Jeb called out. “What friends?”

“You don’t think I have friends?” She asked. “I have friends. My on line buddies. Two of them. We chat everyday. They told me the world ended, I thought they were on drugs. Good God, the world ended. The floozies in Vegas were right.” With a shake of her head, she took a step to go inside.

“Ma’am?”

Irritated, Josephine topped. “What now?”

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“Don’t be specific about us, our group, plans or anything when you chat on line. OK. In case it’s monitored by the enemy.”

“Enemy. You mean the Russians?” she asked.

“Could be.” Jeb cleared his throat.

“Fine. I’ll say nothing, just to be safe. Fuckin’ end of the world and the Russians are still holding a grudge. Christ.” She went in side.

With question, Robi faced Jeb. “Two floozies in Vegas?”

“Her on line chat buddies.”

“Real?”

Jeb shrugged. “Could be her imagination.”

“Could be an alien trap.”

“We’ll find out, we’re heading that way anyhow.” He started at the trailer. “This is gonna be interesting.”

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It wasn’t going to work. Not in Josephine’s current state. There was no way, no how she was making it on foot to the Humvee, despite how much she argued the fact.

Rose duffle bag at her side, the tiny woman, not bigger than four foot ten, stood with Robi by the gate while Jeb fetched the vehicle.

Jeb didn’t tell Tate, Mas, or Manny anything at all. Except they found one lone survivor. A woman.

Both Manny and Tate perked up at that, until they drove close enough to get a look.

“Still wonder if she’ll put out?” Jeb asked Manny.

Manny swallowed.

Tate chuckled “Oh, my God. Look how cute she is.” He put the Humvee in park.

“You say that now.” Jeb said. “Wait.”

“What?” Tate asked. “Is she wicked.”

“Yep.”

“Maybe it’s you.” Tate opened the door.

“Join may I?” Mas asked.

“Sure.” Jeb tossed his hands up, as Mas and Manny both hurried to meet her.

Her eyes budged as Tate walked to her. The Josephine placed on her

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best smile. "Will you look at you." She peered up to Tate.

Robi introduced. "This is Jeb's brother, Tate. Tate meet Josephine."

"Ma'am." He held out his and.

"Ain't he just a hottie." Josephine commented. "Turn around let me see the goods."

Snickering, Tate did as instructed.

"Face and body," Josephine nodded. "And you picked that." She pointed to Jeb. "Wait. Another hottie. A Latino." Josephine took a step, swayed, and then gave up on walking. She waved Manny to her. "Hey, you Cuban boy."

Manny snorted a laugh.

Robi had to turn, she couldn't stop laughing.

"Yeah you," Josephine winked "You're a cutie too. And ..." she whistled upon seeing Mas. "You are just my type."

Mas approached her. "Meet to pleasure."

"My kinda guy." She winked. "He's got meat to pleasure."

Hyena. That was the style of laughter that emerged from Tate. "She's great."

"A pip," Jeb said snide.

"Toots." Josephine tugged on Robi's sleeve. "Three hot men and you picked the big guy. Man. What the fuck was going through your mind."

Mas answered, "A baby have they."

"No kidding." Josephine stated. "You're with him because of a kid? Not a reason to get married. But now you got reason to cheat on your husband."

"I'm not her husband." Jeb argued with her. "Can't you remember that."

"Jeb," Tate scolded softly. "Come on, be nice."

"Yeah," Josephine said. "Be nice to your son."

"Brother," Jeb corrected.

"Looks like your son."

"Fuck. I can't win." Jeb turned, grabbed her bag, and carried it to the Humvee.

Robi asked. "Ready, Josephine."

"Yep." She held out her arm to Mas. "Care to escort me."

"Mine all pleasure." He allowed her to loop her arm through his.

"What's your name?" She asked.

"Mas."

"Hass?"

"Mas."



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“Howdy Hass, I remember you from Bonanza.” She walked with him to the Humvee.

Manny asked. “Is she for real?”

“Very much so,” Robi replied. “And very much drunk. I think she stays that way.”

“Never a dull moment on this road trip.” Tate said. “Did we figure out how we picket up her signal?”

“Get this. The net.” Robi answered. “She hooked up with a satellite connection.” She started to head toward the Humvee. “Better yet, she claims she chats with two woman from Vegas.”

Manny paused. “That makes sense. We got signals from there.”

Robi nodded.

“Two women?” Tate asked ‘Manny you might get laid yet. If not ...I’m sure Josephine will put out.”

Manny just stopped cold with an utter look of disgust on his face. “That’s not right.”

Laughing, Tate ushered Robi to the Humvee.

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Mas and Sam both suggested that they move quickly out of Grants. Just on the outside chance, Josephine was monitored. They did so, with the intention to stop in a few hours for the remainder of the day.

The bus grew more crowded, and though there was still room to grow, a third vehicle was picked up in case there really were floozies in Vegas. Anyone who wanted peace and quiet, or a chance to sleep, rode in the Humvee with Manny. Those who wanted to chat rode with Travis and Ben in the Mini Van. In the Humvee were Greek, Doc, Tate for protection, and Parker, who claimed he couldn’t wait to get to Arizona to clear his sinuses.

Josephine’s perfume was killing him.

The Mini van with Travis and Ben carried the Alien twins who were anxious to learn country western music.

While Robi drove, Nick and Eva played an intense video game. Baby Martha waited between them for her turn.

Bishop fell in love with Josephine over a game of chess. Not ‘love’ in the usual sense, he took an immediate liking to her.

Probably because Josephine favored Bishop.

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

"Was the champ in my day,' she said.

"I can tell," Bishop stared in thought at his pieces.

"Need another drink?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"What's up with the bald little girl? She sick."

"Alien." Bishop lifted his knight, paused, and put it back down.

"They're every where aren't they?"

"Yep. What happened to your husband."

"Heard he died." Josephine said. "though he left. I'll miss him. Was a good lay."

Bishop laughed. "Oh, yeah?"

:"Hard to find a man that's a good lay. You'll be a good lay one day if you practice."

"How do you know I'm not a good lay now?"

Josephine laughed. "You're young. Skill comes with age. Except with ... let me see that tongue."

"Uh!" Nick grunted out from the floor. "Stop this talk."

Josephine flung her hand out. "His way of covering up them hormones. Good thing that girl got me now, huh?"

"Good thing."

"Move your piece."

"I'm thinking."

"Where's the can?" Josephine asked.

"In the back."

"Thanks," She lifted her large purse.

Bishop saw this and smiled. "I won't touch your purse."

"Never leave it. Never have. A woman should always visit the restroom with her purse. Have to freshen the private parts. Never know when you'll be exposing them."

Both Nick and Eva grunted out in disgust from the floor.

"Fresh one is better than a bitter one."

"Uh!" Nick snapped.

Bishop snickered. "I'll uh keep that in mind."

Toting her purse, and with a wobble from alcohol and the moving bus, Josephine walked to the back. She was just about to go into the bathroom when she spotted Jeb. The sliding door to the back of the bus was slightly open, and she could see him sitting at the small desk.

He stared out. Tapping his pencil, looking more in thought than

working.

“Skippy.” She knocked on the door.

Jeb looked up. “What’s up. Did you kick Bishop’s ass.”

“Slow poke Magee is taking his sweet time. I have to take a leak.”

Jeb winced. “Thanks for sharing. Bathroom is to your right.”

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Working.”

“Uh ha.” She nodded. “Looks to me like your day dreaming.” She took a step.

“Nope. Thinking. Working on a plan.”

“A plan for ...” Josephine paused. She saw it on the desk, propped against a pencil holder. An instant picture of Robi. “Christ, Skippy. She’s right up front. If you want to stare at her go on up there and stare in person. Can get a lot further.”

Jeb snickered. “Not that I need advice from you.”

“Why not? Been married eight times.”

Jeb’s eyes widened. “Eight times?”

“Fuck, you know how long I been alive.”

Jeb’s mouth opened.

“Don’t answer that.” Josephine said. “Anyhow. Can’t get no where staring at her picture unless you plan to jerk off to it.”

“Oh my God.” Jeb’s mouth dropped open. “You can really be foul.”

“I’m honest.”

“Besides ... things are moving rather slow. It’ll get there.”

“How long ago did the world end?”

“Four months.” Jeb replied.

“So I’m gonna take it you didn’t get laid the night of the world’s end.”

“No.” he chuckled.

“Been a while since you had physical contact.”

“There was a slight incident between me and Robi, but I was being a gentleman. It stopped. Where is this going?”

“It’s been a while for both of you. Bet you with the right incentive it wouldn’t move slowly. In fact ...” Josephine opened up her purse. “Got something that may help.” She pulled out a small square silver case, no bigger than six inches. She laid it on the desk before Jeb. “This might do the trick. Show it to her. Now I got to pee.”

Jeb smirked. “Hey. Wait.”

“What? Why do you do that? Why do you wait until I walk away.”

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

Shrugging, Jeb looked at her. "Why is this important to you. Why do you care?"

"It isn't because I like you. I don't."

"So why try to help?"

Josephine peered behind her, and then dropped her voice. "That hottie out there."

"Who?"

"The pup I'm playing chess with."

"Bishop?"

"Yeah, him. Well, he wants your woman bad. And if you don't get a move on with her, he may make his move. Can't have that. I want him all to myself." She pointed to the box. "Try that."

Jeb snickered as Josephine walked away. She lifted the silver case, and the lifted the lid.

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The divider curtain between the driver's seat and the first row of bus seats was always open, so Robi was shocked when it was pulled closed right after Jeb came up front.

"Hey," He squatted by her.

"Hey, why'd you close the curtain?"

"Privacy. We don't get much." Jeb spoke soft.

"No, we don't. Maybe ... tonight we can make time?"

"I'd like that. So ..."he cleared his throat. "Check this out. Josephine has the hots for Bishop."

Robi snickered.

"And .. She wants to have him." Jeb nodded once. "But she thinks he wants you."

"He does."

"Thanks."

Robi smiled.

Jeb continued, "Anyhow ... she wants me to speed it up with you, so she gave me something to help."

"What's that?"

"This." Jeb set the case on the dashboard.

"What is it?"

"Portable movie player." Jeb powered it up and fumbled with the little

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buttons.

“You’re fingers are too big for that.”

“Tell me about it. But ... let me see. This is what she gave me.” He pressed play. “Would you be interested in engaging in something like this?”

Robi looked at the image that popped on the screen, and in her shock and laughter, lost momentary control of the bus and swerved it.

Thumbs, bangs, and groans came from the back.

“Sorry!” Robi yelled out, then snickered. “Oh my God, Jeb.”

“You’re not offended, are you?”

“No. Shocked and I think you’re approach was very funny.”

Jeb breathed out. “Good. It was trying to be amusing.”

Robi shifted her eyes to the mini screen and the moving pictures of a man delivering oral sex to a woman, close up.

“You know ...” Jeb sat on the floor. “This could be the perfect ice breaker.”

“Watching a porno together?” Robi asked.

“Not watching it. We don’t have to watch it. Hell we can use the case as a symbol or suggestion.”

“Jeb?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve barely kissed.” Robi said.

“That’s because every time we start, someone interrupts us. We need ... we need to find a moment alone.”

“Hmm,” Robi nodded. “So we can do that?”

The corner of Jeb’s mouth raised in an ornery smile. “If you want.”

“One step at a time.”

“As long as you plan on talking that one step with me.”

“Who else would I want it to be with?” Robi asked.

“Really, do you mean that?”

“Jeb.” Se breathed out his name. “Yes.”

“Good.” Jeb stood; he kissed her on top of the head. “One step at a time.” He turned for the curtain.

“Jeb?” Robi called. “Your movie player.”

“Nah, leave that there for you. Entertainment while you drive.” He winked then slipped through the curtain.

Robi chuckled. She shook her head, reached for the player. But she stopped, retracted her hand, and let the movie play through.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Although the all-star country bumpkin's tour bus had its perks, it wasn't the Comfort Inn. Even though the Comfort Inn wasn't the posh setting, it was the easiest place to park, stay, and sleep.

They set up camp in the parking lot of the motor lodge, which set right off the desert section of the highway.

Food was scarce in the town; the only grocer being a little convenience store with much of its stock eaten by animals and anything in the refrigerator had gone bad.

There was always Spam.

Spam and potatoes.

Bishop boosted that everyone could thank him later. It took Tate to remind him that there was plenty of food, they didn't need spam.

"I fuckin' love Spam." Josephine proclaimed as she finished the last morsel. "Gotta love a man who can be inventive with Spam. My fourth husband was Spam inventive."

Tate chuckled. "Been married a lot, huh?"

"Yep. Can't be tied down," she said.

"I'm curious." Tate said. "How did you meet your husband?"

"You can't be serious?" Josephine laughed and poured herself a drink. "I can't recall. I met the last lone on the Internet."

"Really?"

"Yep. Used to have cyber sex. Then we hooked up. Sad disappointment, couldn't keep up with me." She looked at Bishop. "I need a younger guy for that."

Bishop coughed. "What about Doc. He's a few years younger than you."

"Too old." Josephine said.

"Parker."

"Too old."

Tate added, "Bishop."

Josephine smiled "Perfect, could make your toes curl."

"Excuse me," Bishop stood. "I need a drink."

Josephine held up her bottle.

"I'm gonna settle for wine or beer." He walked to the cooler.

"Have to change that," Josephine commented.

Tate nudged Josephine. "You got him excited."

"I bet. What about you? Why'd you let your brother get the woman first? She asked.

Tate shrugged. "I didn't think about it. It just sort of happened that way. Jeb got the girl."

Bishop returned. "I can tell you how it happened."

"Oh this ought to be interesting," Tate said. "Go on."

"Like you did with the campsite," Bishop explained. "He took squatters rights. Came on so strong, she was scared to death to turn him away. Now she's stuck with him."

"Goddamn shame," Josephine said. "Hey!" she yelled to Jeb. "Skippy! You're an asshole."

Tate laughed. "This is great. I should share stories about what he used to do to me when we were kids."

Josephine shook her head. "I dislike him more and more. Maybe I should have given him that sexual aid."

With a unison 'what' Tate and Bishop both looked at her. It was just at the point where Jeb joined the table.

"Now," Jeb said as he sat down. "Why are you calling me an asshole?"

Tate lifted a finger. "The question should be, why is Josephine giving you sexual aids?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jeb asked.

"Josephine said she gave you a sexual aid," Tate repeated.

"She did not," Jeb scoffed.

"Oh no?" Josephine snapped in her drunken way. "What about Boot Babes of Bangladesh? Huh?" She hiccupped. "Love that flick. Gave him my mini player to watch."

Tate chuckled. "She gave you a porno film? No way."

Jeb waved out his hand.

Bishop asked. "Did you use it?"

"None of your business," Jeb said.

Tate's eyes widened. "You did. When?"

"Shut up," Jeb said.

"You struck out," Tate joked.

"Shut ... up."

Bishop huffed. "I can't believe you showed Robi a porno."

Jeb gave him a disgusted look. "You think she was offended by that?"

"I'm offended by that," Bishop said. "Why would you do that?"

Josephine answered for him, "I believe he said so he could tag it."

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Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

“What!” Jeb blasted. “I said no such thing.”

“Did too.” Josephine nodded. “used those exact words. Maybes something else.”

“Listen coot ...”

“Hey!” Bishop yelled, “Don’t talk to her like that. You’re just pissed because she told us what your intentions are.”

“My intentions.” Jeb asked. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean.”

“It means, you grab the viable woman for one thing.”

“The viable woman?” Jeb questioned, “Well that lets me know what you’re thinking about Robi.”

“Knock it off,” Bishop argued. “You know what I mean.”

Jeb laughed in a taunting manner. “You think I have one thing on my mind.”

“My response to that is Boot Babes from Bangladesh,” Bishop said. “You wouldn’t show it to her if you didn’t want to get laid.”

“Knock off the fuckin’ chivalrous routine. You know that’s not my only interest.” Jeb snapped. “And I will not defend myself to you. So, I’m warning you now ...”

“Warning me?” Bishop asked.

“Warning you.”

“Am I supposed to be scared of you?”

Jeb chuckled. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Should I spell it out?”

“Can you?”

Jeb bit his bottom lip.

Snide Bishop sat back. “You know what? I understand what you’re implying. I should be afraid of you because you’re so big. Well, big man, if you were so big, maybe you wouldn’t need a sexual aid.”

Jeb launched to his feet and in defense so did Bishop.

“Hey!” Tate called out. “Enough. OK? This is stupid. And if you two keep on picking, I will set up a perimeter and let you go at it. And ...” He raised his eyebrows to Bishop. “I will let him kick your ass.”

Bishop didn’t flinch.

Josephine slammed her hand on the table. “God damn it’s a whose balls or bigger. I say we slap the Willy’s out on the table and let me take a look.”

In the midst of Jeb and Bishop both turning in shock to Josephine, Robi came over.



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“What’s going on?” she asked.

Quick, Josephine. “They’re rifting over whose penis is bigger and better for you. I say we lay them out. What bout you?”

In a gasp of shock, Jeb squealed, “What ... the fuck are you talking about lady?”

“Jeb!” Robi snapped, “Hey, respect, OK she’s your elder.”

“She’s a loon.”

“Jeb!” Robi yelled.

“Fuck it. I give up. Defend Grandma drunken Moses all you want. I’m not fighting with you.” He snapped a turn and stored off toward the bus.

“God.” Robi breathed out. “You know what, Bishop? You two have to stop. OK? Just stop.” In a lick, she had turned and walked off.

Bishop started to follow, but Tate stopped him.

“What?” Bishop asked looking at the fingers clenched to his arm.

“I have no beef with you,” Tate said. “I thought we were cool.”

“You’d just sad you’d let your brother kick my ass.”

“Guy, He’d kick my ass. I’ve never seen a man he couldn’t beat.”

Bishop breathed out. “There’s always a first.”

Tate gave him a serious stare. “You think you’re that man. Fine.” Tate lifted his hand. “But listen, you got to let it go.”

“Let what go?”

“Robi. You’re bitter. Let it go. Let them go. It’s obvious she chose my brother. And to be honest, I didn’t even think Robi chose him. It just happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“But it will,” Tate said.

“Because of Boot Babes in Bangladesh.”

Tate smiled ‘You really think a porno is gonna seal the deal with Jeb.’

Josephine murmured out. “It would with me.”

Tate pointed back to Josephine with his thumb. “Robi’s not her. She seems complicated, and hasn’t let anyone in but Jeb.”

Josephine snickered “She ain’t let him in.”

Tate tried to contain his laughter. “Understand?”

“Why is that?” Bishop asked. “Why Jeb? I was attracted to her from the first moment I saw her. I tried to be her friend. Tried to be close. Why Jeb?”

Tate shrugged. “That I can’t tell you.”

“Forgive me for saying I have a hard time accepting that the better man won.”

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"There's no winning. These are people. Things happen. And no one saying you have to accept anything, you just have to chill."

Bishop sighed out in defeat. He heard Tate's words, but only nodded in acknowledgement of them before saying, 'excuse me' to fetch another drink.

Exhaling, Tate sat back down at the table with Josephine.

"Can't ever say the best man won." Josephine poured Tate a drink. "Can't."

"So true." Tate nodded thanks for the drink.

"I still think it would have been more fun to have them lay it out on the table to see who had the better goods." She raised her glass to Tate.

"Yeah," Tate clinked the glass. "Me too." With a smile, he downed his shot.

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The white cotton balls felt foreign to Robi and she ran her fingers through the lot of them as if she had never felt them before. She had, it just was a really long time. She had forgotten how soft they were.

The night was winding down, no one was really tired, and it just seemed like a good idea to visit the medic clinic. Parker made the suggestion, stating that there was always a possibility that there was something there they needed. It didn't hurt to look.

Plus, they spent an hour reading patient charts for amusement.

Most of the charts were thin, one stop, one time, pass through patients on their short visit through the highway city.

Parker found Robi amusing. The way her hand was just resting in the jar of cotton.

"Fetish?" he asked as he walked in.

"Huh?" Robi looked at him, and then realized where her hand was positioned. "God, I was captivated. Maybe it is." She smiled and replaced the lid.

"We can always take them."

"We could."

"I'm gonna head on back to camp." Parker said. "I heard Josephine mentioning something about chatting with my Eva. She's quite the find, but she's gonna be trouble." He whistled, "Bet me."

"Ok, I'll gather up my stuff."

"No need. You have company."

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Curiously, Robi glanced at him.

Jeb appeared in the doorway.

"I'll let you two be, night," Parker said.

"Good night," Robi smiled.

"Jeb, watch her. She has a thing for cotton," Parker winked.

"Thanks, Parker." Jeb laid a hand on his shoulder as he left.

"So..." Robi sighed out. "What bring s you here."

"Not cotton balls," Jeb stepped in the examining room. "You. You said we'd spend time alone, and you sneak off with Parker."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were mad."

"I was. But not at you. Frustrated." Jeb folded his arms. "So .... What do you want to do? Hang out. Talk. Go off somewhere." He paused by the table. "Play doctor."

Robi chuckled. "What kind of doctor do you want o play?"

Jeb flipped out the stirrup and flicked his eyebrows a few times.

Robi laughed. "You know they usually start with a breast exam."

"I'm game." Jeb stepped to her. "Actually ... " He slid his hand behind her neck and pulled her close. "I would just really like to kiss you right now."

"I'm game."

"I'm glad." Bringing his hand hands to her face, Jeb lowered his lips and kissed Robi. His mouth moved softly, emotionally, and he pulled away, with partially closed eyes, finishing the kiss with a brush of his nose to hers.

He kept his face close. Not moving. Barely breathing, Just taking in her essence.

"Jeb?" Robi's spoke his name softly.

"I need you to know something," he whispered.

"What's that."

Still the same, without moving, lips close, he kept his voice in a whisper. "You're more to me than just securing a woman."

Softly, Robi chuckled "Where is this coming from?"

"You need to know that. I showed you the porno, but it's not important. I really like you, Robi. I really do."

"I like you too, Jeb."

Jeb nodded.

"Jeb? It's OK to want to sleep with me."

"I was afraid I was coming off too strong with that."

"Nah. It's been a while .... I believe I'm ready to take a step with you."

"I'm glad."

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“Why are we whispering?” Robi asked.

“It’s more romantic.”

“You don’t strike me as romantic.”

“I just want to strike you as anything but someone that only wants to get laid.”

“Whoa.” Robi stepped back. “You have to stop listening to Bishop.”

“I just don’t want you to think that way. It bothers me that he said that, because it makes me wonder if that’s what every man thinks.”

“Maybe ... maybe that’s what every man thinks, Jeb, because that is how every other man would be.”

As if she said the revelation statement of the century, Jeb perked.

“Didn’t think of that did you?”

Jeb didn’t answer.

“Besides, how do you know I’m not just wanting you for sex?”

The corner of Jeb’s mouth raised. “That would be a switch.”

“It would be. But ...” Robi walked to the table. “It’s not true. I will say I find you very attractive.”

“Really?” Jeb seemed surprised.

“Really. I’m attracted to big guys.” She hopped up on the table. “So, why are afraid of me.”

Jeb chuckled. “Who said I’m afraid of you?”

“Are you?”

He cleared his throat before answering. “Yes.”

“I thought so.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Robi swung her legs as she poke. “You never prolong a kiss. You pull back. Find reasons not to continue. I’m here, waiting for you to play doctor and you Jeb Hoyt, are way over there.”

“Nervous?”

“You? Nervous?”

“Yeah,” he nodded.

“Doesn’t mean this has to go anywhere, Jeb. We can kiss without sex.”

“But ...” he took a step to her. “Can we play doctor without sex?”

“Probably not. You know .... I’m in a good position, sexually. I’m in my prime. I haven’t had it in a really long time. I’ve been thinking about it ... a lot. Chances are, I’m gonna enjoy it, so you don’t have to worry about the first time being bad. You really should take advantage of that.”

“You’re different when you’re with me.”

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"How's that?" Robi asked.

"You're not that rough and tough babe. You're kind of. ... Flirty."

"That's with you." Robi winked.

"So you think you're in a good position."

"I think so, yes."

"Nah." Another step and Jeb arrived. He scooped up under her legs, turned her body, and placed her legs on the table. "Better." In kissing her, he inched her to lay back.

He delivered soft kisses, to her lips, her neck. His reluctant hand, which gripped the table, eased up and moved to her thigh. It was bare, she wore shorts, and Jeb smoothed his rough hands over her soft skin.

Robi moaned at his touch.

Pulling from the kiss, Jeb bit his bottom lip. "Prolonged enough."

"Getting there."

He stepped back.

"Afraid again?"

"Not at all." He walked to the end of the table. "You boosted a good position. Let's see if I can come up with one."

Robi grinned with orneriness when he pulled out the stirrups, and reached for her leg. "Why, Mr. Hoyt? I do believe you are getting somewhere."

"Oh, yeah." Wide smiled, Jeb placed both feet in the stirrups and widened her legs. He lowered his lips to her knees and kissed her. "I heard a lot of women fantasized about this."

"Sex with their gynecologist?"

He replied with an hmm, as he softly kissed her thighs.

"I think ... I think ..." Robi breathed out through parted lips. "It depends what your doctor looked like."

"If I were him?"

"I'd fanaticize."

Moist. His lips were moist as he teasingly caressed the inside of her thighs. While his hands played with the edging of her shorts, pushing them inward, exposing more of her legs, Jeb allowed his fingers to brush gently against the cloth of her shorts. Robi closed her eyes, clutching the table in anticipation.

Using his foot, he manipulated a stool at the end of the table, and then lowered himself to it. "This is perfect."

Breathy, Robi responded. "I didn't think Doctor's examined you with al

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of you clothes on.”

“We can call this the preliminary exam.” Close, so close to the center of her being, Jeb breathed enticing warm air against her. His hand ran up slowly, slipping underneath her shirt, across her belly, under her bra, and gently touching Robi’s breast. Then, against the fabric, Jeb pressed his mouth, using his lips to massage.

Robi seeped a moan.

A single knock.

“Mom,” Nick called out as he entered, “Parker said not to bother ... UH!”

Slam

“That’s not right,” Nick’s voice faded. “That’s like my mom.”

Robi’s hands when to her face, as Jeb ejected back so hard his chair rolled with a bang into the wall.

He inched. “Fuck!”

As they sat in their own silence over the shock and embarrassment of what happened, Nick’s voice continued griping until it was no longer heard.

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He was greeted with a series of ‘Dude I’m busy’, before Jeb finally cornered Nick in the hotel room he deemed his own.

Of course, he had to wade through the video games; he played with Eva, where Nick intentionally ignored Jeb. It wasn’t because he was mad; it was Nick didn’t know what to say.

Finally, after Parker called Eva in for the night, the jaunt to Vegas was happening early, Jeb had nick to himself.

He locked the door.

“Dude, I’m tired.” Nick pulled down the covers.

“We need to talk Nick,” Jeb said and pulled up a chair near the bed.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Yea, there is. Tonight.”

“Uh!” Nick grunted and climbed into bed.

“What you saw ...”

“Uh!” Nick winced. “That’s was my mom. Guy.”

“Yea, I know, Nick. But men and women ...”

“Stop.” Nick held up his hand.

“What?”

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“You sound like you’re gonna go into the birds and bees talk.”

Jeb hesitated, and then shrugged. “I am.”

“I heard it.”

“But I always read, if a kid walks in on you, that you should explain what was happening.”

“Dude,” Nick said. “I’m a teenager. I know what I walked in on. Explaining things will make it worse.”

“Sometimes Nick, things aren’t what they appear.”

Nick stared.

“See, you may have thought you saw what you saw, when actually you didn’t see what you thought you saw.”

“You aren’t gonna like try to lie your way out of it, are you?” Nick asked. “And say you were doing something else.”

“I could have been examining you mom.”

“Uh!” Nick grunted. “You aren’t a doctor. I know what I saw. Your head was where it shouldn’t have been. I bet my dad’s head wasn’t even there.”

“I would venture to guess that after all the years of marriage, you dad’s head was there.”

“Uh!”

Jeb hunched. “Can you knock it off.”

“I don’t want o talk about it.”

“Fine.” Jeb snapped. “We’ll talk about something else.”

“Why?”

“Because I think we need to talk, and keep talking until the awkwardness is gone.”

“It’s gone.” Nick said. “I don’t feel awkward with you.”

“Oh, yeah. What did you walk in on?”

Nick grunted and pulled the covers over his head.

“I thought so. Let’s talk.” Jeb removed the covers.

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Baby Martha had fallen asleep. It didn’t take much, it was right after she ate some dried cereal, and she crashed on Robi’s lap while Robi watched an old movie on Josephine’s player.

She laid the child down in the adjoining room, wondering if she’ ever

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get to know the child, since she slept so much.

Covering her, Robi left the room and pulled the door almost closed in her own room.

Maps and papers spewed across her own bed. The papers were copies of Bishop's notes he had taken while monitoring the television and radio. Bottle of Jack on the nightstand, Robi poured a drink and prepared to indulge in the reading. She had read his notes before, but she always hoped she missed something.

A sip of bourbon slipped down her throat about the same time there was a knock on her door. She looked at the time of nearly one am, put down her glass and answered the door call.

Jeb leaned against the archway. IT was obvious he had one hand behind his back.

"This is a surprise," Robi said. "It was getting so late, I thought you were getting scared to come and see me."

"I had to talk to Nick first."

"How did that go?"

"He didn't want to talk about it."

"if he didn't want to talk about it, where were you?" Robi asked.

"Oh, with Nick. We talked about other things. In fact, I tucked him in, chatted a while, then told military stories."

"He's sixteen."

Jeb smiled. "Yeah, I know. But it still had the same effect. He's out like a light. Boredom." He brought forth his hidden hand, showing a bottle of wine. "Can I come in?"

Robi opened the door wider.

Jeb stepped inside. "Looks as if you weren't expecting company." He gave a nod of his head to the messy bed.

"Not really." Robi saw the look on his face. "But hoping." She hurriedly moved to the bed and gathered up the papers. "When you didn't return, I figure you fell asleep."

"Like waiting on a two year old to sleep, I was waiting on Nick."

"So he won't wake up?"

Jeb smiled. "Exactly. Martha?"

"Sleeping."

"Figures," he said.

"I see you brought wine. Is it a seduction thing?" Robi joked.

"Robi," Jeb whispered out her name and set down the bottle. "I want to



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be with you. But ... I am really willing to just see what happens. As long as ... as long as we can spend time together. I think if we try, something will always go wrong.”

“I agree.”

“So .... I say we act like a couple, kick back, have a drink, watch a movie, we have that little player.”

“I got movies.”

“See.” Jeb smiled. “What do you think.”

“I think I’d like that.” Robi said. “When won’t I pick a movie, you prop the pillows.”

That was an agreeable to Jeb. He poured some wine in the little plastic cups, which were still protected by an outer wrap. After clearing of the rest of the papers from the bed, he doubled up the pillows, propped them up, and to look forward to just spending time with Robi.

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The slight breeze through the open window flickered the flame on the single candle that lit the room.

They whispered.

They laughed.

Under the sheet, Jeb lay on his side, his chest close to Robi’s back as they relaxed in the after-time of lovemaking.

Head propped up on the palm of his hand; Jeb ran his fingers down Robi’s bare arm as he spoke in a crackling whisper, “so imagine. There you are. Twenty-five.”

“Why twenty-five?”

“That’s the age I heard.”

“Go on.”

“Twenty-five, young guy. Kind of worked up, waiting for your cyber date to arrive. She does. Talks dirty to you. You talk dirty to her. You read that she’s if getting off.”

“Oh my God.” Robi winced.

“And then you jerk off. Man, cyber sex made in heaven. You email this wonder cyber woman, tell her how she magically writes words that make you spew fast. The after weeks of nightly engaging, you find out that the picture you’ve been getting off on, was pulled from some obscure porn site, and you’ve been beating it to some eighty something woman.”

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Robi laughed. "That is not true."

"I swear to God that's the story she told." Jeb reached to the nightstand, lifted his glass took a drink. E offered it to Robi who shook her head. "Anyhow ..." he placed the glass down and kissed her shoulder. "She was telling Parker that story."

"I would have loved to see Parker's face."

"So would I. But I was eavesdropping." Jeb said. "She also told about the young guy that begged to meet her. She told him she didn't look like the picture. He didn't care. And she met him in a motel room. He was like twenty two"

"Did he run?"

"She said he didn't," Jeb replied. "Said, and I quote, they fucked like bunnies all night long."

Robi groaned loudly.

"Wanna get grossed out even more?"

"No."

"Tough. She said he..." Jeb paused. "Never mind. It's too gross to repeat."

"Ok, now you have to tell me."

"Put it this way. He enjoyed a meal and said he devoured better than anyone."

Robi sang out a long 'ew'.

"That's funny, though."

"You know what's funny." Robi rolled on to her back.

"What's that."

"They say that the very young guys about twenty-one, and the ones over sixty do it the best."

"Sex?"

"Oral."

"No way."

"Yep." Robi nodded. "I had a female friend that said the young guys are enthusiastic so they are non stop. The old guys just have been doing it so long, they do it great."

"Makes sense." Jeb nodded. "So us in between guys have lost that enthusiastic edge, and now have to wait on experience."

"That's what Rhonda, my friend said. She would know."

"What do you know?" Jeb asked.

"Not much. I've not been with many men, and to be honest ...it's all

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the same to me. Oral sex is oral sex. I have yet to experience it where it sticks out.”

“About this point ...” Jeb ran his fingers across her skin. “Any guy would say, well, I have a technique. But the truth is ...” He snickered “I don’t. So ... you have to deal with it on a regular level.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“I figured as much.” Jeb kissed her. “This was great tonight.”

“Yeah, it was. Very nice, Jeb.”

“Do you want me to leave.”

Robi shook her head. “I’d like you to stay.”

“Yes.” He smiled. “Ready to sleep?”

“Actually, I am. Vegas tomorrow.”

“Should prove interesting.” He paused. “Night, Robi.” He kissed her softly. “I could get used to this.”

Robi remained silent, responding only with another kiss.

Jeb fuddled with his watch, checking for the alarm on it. He removed it, set it on the nightstand, extended over, and blew out the candle.

As he returned to his laying position, he fell naturally into a ‘spoon’ position with Robi, snuggling close and comfortably for the night.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*July 9<sup>th</sup>*

*Las Vegas, NV*

The sun reflected brightly off the thick layer of sand that blanketed the city like a snowfall. It was nearly blinding as they rolled closer into the strip of the desert city.

A place that used to be alive, thriving, bright. Now the only brightness was the speckle of sunlight cast from the sand.

What had happened?

What had caused the sand to thicken over Vegas, and in some spots up to twenty, thirty feet high?

There was no way the bus would make it. Not at all. Fear of the sand getting into the mechanics, caused them to park the bus the second they noticed accumulation.

Perhaps a dust bomb, or something occurred. Or as Greek suggested, it was a desert town, and it was conceivable since there was no movement, no city crews, nothing to deter the accumulation of sand, it just built and built.

Whatever the reason, it was surely the apocalypse when they arrived in Las Vegas.

Manny had been asked if the bus would be safe. If sand or dust could exactly get into the motor. He didn't think so, but to be on the safe side, he blanketed the motor as they sealed up the bus.

Most stayed behind, until an all clear was given. After that was deemed, the others would roll into Vegas, perhaps a second trio with the first Humvee would be needed.

"It's like a fuckin' desert." Jeb shifted the gear on the Humvee. "I remember when I was in Iraq. Fuck. This is worse."

Robi jolted as they ran over something. She rocked into Tate, then into Jeb. "What was that?"

"Could be anything. Car. Who knows. Hey, Josephine. Do you have any clue where your friends would be?"

"Oh, sure." Josephine replied. "They're staying at the MGM grand. Said it was the only one accessible. But I bet it's the best one. Sinatra stayed there."

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“Sinatra stayed at the Sands,” Greek sated.

“Yea, you’re right.” Josephine said. “Boy oh boy. Hot Damn. I’m gonna meet the tarts.”

Jeb raised an eyebrow as he peered into the rearview mirror at her. “Anyone know where the MGM Grand is located?”

Greek had his nose buried in a map, squished in the back seat with Mas, Josephine, and Manny. While Bishop hunched in the back. “Should be right ahead.”

“Where?” Jeb asked. “I can barely make out the signs.”

“Ok, hold ...” Greek turned his body. “We passed the stratosphere. That’s that tower. Which means, that big bump we just hit was probably the Wet And Wild sign. Former wet and wild, now dry and Dull is there. We got a while. It’ll almost be at the other end of the strip.”

“Great.”

“See that tiny triangle with a ball?” Greek asked.

“Yeah.”

“That’s the Circus, bare right. We’re off the road. Bet things smooth out once we’re off the road.”

Tate added, “Bet me it’s not as sandy down there either. What the fuck happened here?”

Bishop replied, “Maybe if the tarts are really here, they can tell us.”

Jeb drove; he focused more on landmarks, and listened to Greek as he called out the different hotels on the strip. Tate was right. The sand did diminish the further in the drove. They still were driving on sand, and not road, but it wasn’t as bumpy. They could see the hoods of cars that were just spewed across the road.

A scene repeated everywhere they went.

The MGM Grand.

It wasn’t covered and it peeked up in its glory as they closed in.

Jeb drove right up the front steps, and parked the Humvee. The front doors were clear.

“You’re sure this is where they said.”

“What?” Josephine snapped. You think I’m senile.”

Jeb just bobbed his head, until Josephine smacked him.

“Hey!”

“Hey yourself Skippy!” Josephine. “Let me out. I want to see my friends. Move it.” She nudged Greek.”

“Fine. Fine.” Greek opened the door.

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The moment she stepped out, Josephine screamed. She extended her hands outward, as if feeling for something to see. "I'm blind. I'm blind!" she screamed.

Bishop offered her a pair of sunglasses.

"Goddamn the sand is hot." Josephine adjusted the glasses.

Robi blew out, and pulled her tee shirt outward. "It's really hot."

Jeb said, "You should have been in Iraq."

Tate scoffed. "Enough of the Iraq stories."

"Oh, no." Jeb shook his head. "Mr. I served my war time behind a desk in Washington DC."

"Guys," Robi called out.

Tate ignored her. "As if my job wasn't important."

Bishop called, "Guys."

Jeb responded to his brother. "It wasn't serving the war."

"I beg to differ."

"Guys!" Bishop tried.

"You would beg to differ," Jeb said. "You were comfy and cool, I was hot and dodging car bombs."

"Play me a fuckin fiddle." Tate snapped.

"What is your problem?"

"Guys!" many yelled.

"What?" they both responded.

Manny pointed at the front doors.

The two women emerged with sunglasses and did so slowly, apprehensively. They both wore silky robes, colorful, and flowery. Both had long blonde hair, about twenty-five years old. They both stepped out at the same time.

In synch, they looked at each other, screamed in excitement, and bolted in a run toward the gang.

The first of the women, wearing the bluer of the robe, leapt her body with a slam into Manny. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and plastered him with kisses.

The second woman did the same to Bishop.

Tate grinned. "Cool."

"Oh my god!" the first woman spoke, "People. People. Men." She released herself from Manny and moved to Tate. She did the same to him.

Josephine nudged Robi. "If they slam into me like that I won't be able to hold them."

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The other woman made her rounds, and as she jumped for Jeb. He stepped back and extended his hand. "Ma'am."

She giggled with enthusiasm, grabbing his hand for dear life, She brought it to her cheek, laughed, and then kissed it repeatedly.

Jeb pulled his hand back with a polite smile. "Ma'am, this is my wife." He reached out to Robi.

The woman gasped with a huge grin, she jumped into Robi embracing her. She pulled aback, laid her hands to Robi's cheeks, and kissed her smack on the lips.

"Beautiful," The woman whispered. She spoke airy, "Millie. Millie."

Millie clung to Tate. "I know."

"Excuse me," Josephine broke through. "You two the floozies."

Minnie shirked again and headed toward Josephine. "Slut202."

"Don't leap on me" Josephine held up her hand. "But you can hug me,"

"Millie, it's Slut202. She came. She said see you soon, and she is here."

"Oh, slut202." Millie sobbed, and then with open arms, shared the excitement, and within seconds both woman were hugging Josephine.

Tate inched to Jeb and Robi. "Floozies. Tarts. Slut202?"

Robi chuckled.

Jeb shrugged. "Welcome to Vegas."

\*\*\*

Everyone anxiously awaited nightfall. Millie and Minnie told them that the power was still going, and like clockwork, automatically, the strip lit up.

It was site, especially when the sand glowed.

Aside from the lights, there were other things planned for the evening.

There couldn't have been a better place; the MGM Grand was decked out.

Ben planned to live out his dream, and perform on the MGM stage. He set the show time for nine PM, and gathered up his 'posse' as he called them for rehearsal.

Manny was amazed at the kitchen, and with Greek's help they were able to salvage from the freezer of the MGM and near by restaurants, enough steaks for everyone.

Manny was prepared to serve up the feast of a lifetime. He didn't let Bishop anywhere near the kitchen, just incase he got one of his Spam ideas.

As odd as it was, everyone did his or her own thing. Dinner would bring

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them all together and a chance to get to know the new women.

OF course, Josephine wouldn't leave their side. The three of them lounged by the pool, under shading umbrellas.

Parker loved the slot machines. Of course, to him they sort of lost their impact when winning or losing didn't matter. When it wasn't going to be the big thrill to hit the major jackpot. He realized how much enjoyment was lost when he hit from triple times seven, and had to tilt the machine to get it to stop ringing because no attendant would be by.

He piddled around the hotel, music still piped through the intercom system. The girls, whom he originally thought were fraternal twins, told him out of boredom they kept the hotel running.

He stopped at the ballroom but was quickly kicked out of rehearsal because Ben didn't want to ruin the show for him. Stopping at the sound and light area, he chatted with Nick and Eva who were self-learning how to light and run the sound for the show.

Parker carried a little notepad with everyone's name in it, and checked them off as he stopped and bothered each person.

Tate found the promo picture booth a blast. He took about a dozen self-portraits, and Parker even posed for a few.

"I think everyone should get their picture taken here," Tate said.

"Why is that?" Parker asked.

"Not so much for now, but for later on, down the road, in history. So the people of the future can see the new founding fathers. Us.

"Even if it is wacky photos from a photo booth."

"Even that. Hey, none of us has bothered to take any pictures. To document any of our road trip. Robi keeps a log, yeah, but no pictures."

That was it.

Eureka!

Parker had found his purpose. He thought about it over the last couple days. What would his purpose be in the new world? He could help with law and order, but Jeb and Tate were much younger and stronger men. Although, Parker had them with wisdom, hands down.

Pictures.

They were so close to So-Cal, or Utopia as a few of them called it, they could almost smell it. By the next nightfall, that's where they would be.

Parker had a mission, and sought within the hotel for the means.

The gift shop was still packed with merchandise. Parker imagined



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someone asking if he needed assistance. He felt like Charlton Heston in the Omega man.

"No, I'm fine," he said. "Found what I need. Right here." He lifted the camera. Extra film? Sure." He walked to the counter and behind it. He grabbed a bag and loaded the seven packages of instant film. "This is hardly gonna be enough. I may have to go shopping." His eyes lifted. "Really? A gift shop upstairs."

A sign on the wall that read, "Can't find what you need here? Try the Love Shop."

"What the heck is the love shop?" Parker asked. "Well, guess I'll find out."

He took his bag, complete with two cameras and film, and headed to the working elevator. He rode it to the desired floor and followed the signs.

The Love Shop.

It was a romantic little nook, with lace, gowns, suits, jewelry, flowers. Pretty much anything, that could be used for a wedding. He loaded up another bag with remaining instant film. As he turned to leave, he saw it. The Chapel, The quickie wedding chapel. He wouldn't have thought much about it, had the doors not been open, and he saw Jeb in there.

He debated on stopping in, but Jeb looked in thought, and he decided to leave him alone.

No reason to bother a man while he was praying, even if it really wasn't a real place of worship.

On his exploration, Parker decided to take the other elevator down to the main floor. He figured he'd venture out into the city to collect more film. As he rounded the bend, he saw a peculiar sight.

Doc.

Doc sat in a chair, before a long line of window staring out.

"Gonna hurt your eyesight." Park said to catch his attention.

Doc turned his head. He sported a small pair of round sunglasses "I'm covered."

"That you are."

"What are you up to?" Doc asked.

"Well, a scavenger hunt." Parker held up his bag. "Tate put it in my head. Said we don't have anyone photo documenting this trip."

"Or the beginning of our little town in So-Cal. Cause I don't think there's anything left there," Doc said.

Parker breathed out. "Me either. I don't think any of us think that."

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"From the ground up." Doc stated. "You'll capture it all. Good idea. Have to get some apple tree pictures too."

"Why is that?"

"They're pretty."

"I'll remember that." Parker stood behind him. "I; about to go outside. Would you like to join me?"

"As a matter of fact, I would. I'm not getting any answers here." With an exhale, Doc stood.

"Answer?" Parker asked. "What kind of answers. To what?"

"I've been here about two hours. Watching. Trying to see what those two are up to."

"Who?"

"The goddamn aliens." Doc taped on the window.

Parker looked. In the distance, in the sand, both Mas and Sam sat Indian style. They were perched upon a large dune with what looked like a satellite. They had some other items Parker couldn't make out. With an 'hmm', Parker faced Doc. "One way to find out." He gave a flick raise of his eyebrows. "Let's go."

Laying a hand on Doc's back, he escorted him from that window. But he didn't walk away without one more look at the alien duo.

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Greek clicked away on the laptop. He was amazed that he was able to connect to the internet via satellite. He had two windows open. One for the net, the other in some chat room that Minnie and Millie had told him about.

He kept going back to the one page. How long was it maintained? It was a web blog of some eccentric writer. The last entry was only 14 hours earlier. They were talking about Rice Crispy treats and finding their way to Utopia.

Utopia.

It was more of a universal name than So-Cal.

"Any luck?" Robi asked as she entered the back bedroom of the suite.

"Um, no." Greek sat back. "Not yet. Amazing. Who is this person and why haven't they given out their whereabouts."

"The writer Minnie mentioned."

"Yep." Greek nodded.

"She said that it isn't the same person as the artist person."

Greek shrugged. "Who knows. All I know is that I've been in the chat

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room for over an hour and nothing.”

“The girls said they’d show.”

“Then I’ll wait.”

“Anything else interesting?”

Greek shook his head. “Just that fact that someone kept Yahoo news going up until a month ago.”

“Greek, that’s .. that’s amazing. Where are these people.”

“My guess.” He rubbed his hand over his mouth. “Hiding. Hiding because they all internally know.”

Robi nodded in agreement. “I’ll let you alone. Find me, OK, if anything happens.”

“Will do.”

Turning, Robi returned to what she was doing.

She had picked out a heck of a suite, three rooms, on the top floor. She remembered reading somewhere that they had more square footage than her home.

On the carpet, she sat back down with Martha, a chessboard between them.

“Where were we?” She breathed out and looked down. “No, no, sweetie. You can only move one square with that,” Robi told her.

“Sorry Mummy.”

“That’s OK, you’re learning.” Robi watched her move the pawn. “Good.” She then moved a piece. As she leaned to the board, Martha stroked her hair.

“Pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“Me?” Martha rubbed her baldhead. “Where is Martha’s hair.”

Robi struggled for an answer.

“When Martha becomes a mummy?”

Robi smiled. “Yes, when you get big, you’ll get hair.”

“I will be pretty like Mummy.”

“Thank you.” Robi reached out and touched the child’s face.

The door opened and Jeb walked in. “There’s my two favorite ladies.”

“Dudday!” Martha held out her hands.

“Hey you.” Jeb reached down and lifted her. “I see you’re playing chess. Are you kicking Mommy’s butt.”

“No, but I am trying to win.” Martha replied.

“Man,” Jeb said. “I can’t believe last week we’re changing her diapers.

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This week chess.”

“But, she’ll be like this until we are old and gray, and beyond.” Robi smiled.

“Why do you like that concept?” Jeb asked.

“Well, as a parent you hate seeing your kids get old. You wish you had this special secret formula to make them stay small.” Robi stood up. “I thought you were practicing.”

Jeb wiggled his Adam’s apple. “I have to reserve my voice for tonight. I have a big solo.”

Robi chuckled and Jeb kissed her.

“I have to talk to you about something,” Jeb set Martha down. “Martha why don’t you go read *The Stand*. Since it deals with the town we’re in.”

“Ok. I am on that part now.” Martha ran over to the couch. He big book set on the table and she lifted it.

“What’s up?” Robi asked.

Jeb stepped to her. “I want to ask you something.”

“Sure.”

“Marry me.”

“What!” Robi stepped back.

“I’m totally serious. Marry me. I thought we’d get Parker to do it, they have rings upstairs we can ....”

“Jeb. Jeb. Wait.” Robi held up her hands. “We’ve not known each other very long.”

“And who cares?” Jeb shrugged. “We’ll know each other until we die.”

“Where s this coming from?”

“All of this, Robi.” Jeb held out his hand and pointed to Martha. “She calls us Mommy and Daddy. Like it or not, she labeled us a family. We’re almost at So-Cal. We’re almost at our starting point. I’d like to arrive in So-Cal not only a team, but a indivisible couple.”

“We don’t need to be married to do that.”

“Yeah, we do. We head into that community as husband and wife. We’re an official team. Official couple with a family. Families are strong.”

“Jeb,” Robi wisped out. “We can be a family without being married.”

“Why don’t you want to? Do you think it’s silly.”

“A little.”

Jeb shook his head. “I want to be able to cal you my wife, Robi. I want people to look at me as your husband. I don’t know, call me silly, call it strange, I just think it makes us stronger as a couple.”

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"Jeb, do you love me?" Robi asked. "Because, even though I have deep feelings for you. It isn't true love yet. I'm getting there. I'm not there yet."

"Well, I'm getting there too. But there's more to it than love. There's companionship. Friendship, respect, and the ability to make one kick ass tem. That's us."

"You really want this."

"Yes. Yes, I do." Jeb nodded strong. "When I called you my wife to Minnie, it felt right. It felt good. What do you say?"

From the couch, Martha spoke up. "Larry. Melissa. Husband Wife. One week."

Jeb cocked a brow with a curious look. "What is she talking about?"

"Oh, the book. A couple in the book who got married."

"See. See. She is saying, do it. Do it." He stepped to Robi. "Do it."

Robi stared at him. "Can I think about it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"But only until tonight, because I want to be married before we leave."

Jeb walked over to the couch and sat down with Martha. "Tell me about Larry and Melissa. Read to me."

Robi watched as Martha opened the book, leaned into Jeb, and started to read.

He couldn't be serious? Robi wondered. Married? Why in the world would he want to do it so soon? He brought up valid reasons. Even though Robi came off as if she believed he was insane, a part of her didn't think the idea was all that bad.

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The steaks were perfect. Pink inside and exceptionally juicy. But no matter how high quality of meat they were, they were nowhere near as juicy as the tales the girls shared.

Minnie and Millie had known each other since the kindergarten. Ever since they found out that people thought they were related, they dressed alike, spoke alike, wore their hair alike. Only twice in twenty years did they ever disagree and once was recently, when Minnie wanted to shut down the fountain in front of the MGM grand.

They both wanted to be actresses, and performers. They attended dance class, singing lessons and had very supportive parents.

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By the time they were eighteen, they heard about a stage production that had open auditions in Las Vegas.

From their home in Minnesota, they drove to Vegas to audition. Neither of them made it.

They were easy to tell apart if you looked at their eyes. Minnie had blue eyes, Millie had green. Millie tended to be more boisterous, while Minnie was reserved, and more intelligent.

"We started working in the all night Steak and eggs place," Minnie explained as they all sat around a banquet style table. "Both of us."

Millie continued the story, "But that wasn't paying the rent. We tried to get into Casino waitressing. But that was union."

"You have to know someone," Minnie said. "One night at the restaurant, we were joking around, it was dead. But one guy saw us and offered us a gig."

"A paying gig," Millie said. "Boy did it pay well. We got to sing and dance."

Robi sipped her wine. "That's wonderful. Were you still doing it when everything happened?"

"Actually ..." Millie spoke. "We were in the middle of our show. Ten chorus girls all dancing. I was doing my bit which was simulating oral sex on another girl ..."

Robi choked. "Excuse me?"

"Oh," Millie giggled. "Sorry. We were in Girls, Girls, Girls, the musical. It's a erotic, lesbian musical."

Robi choked. "Wow."

Minnie smiled. "It was a great show. We'll perform it but we need more women. Maybe you and Slut202 can fill in. We'll show you the parts. You don't have to really do anything sexual. It has a great story line."

"Um ..." Robi stammered. "Sure."

Millie perked. "Great! As I was saying though. We were in the middle of a show when it all happened."

Minnie said, "It's just been us two. And boy are we glad to have some penises now."

Again, Robi coughed.

"Hot Dog!" Josephine called out. "I can agree with that."

Clearing his throat, Bishop decided to change the subject. "You two mentioned that you have been in contact with several people on the net."

Millie nodded. "We were in touch with Slut202, Utopia, and WriterG,

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who runs a group of people. That's the one that that one fella ... the guy who is eating upstairs, that's who he's waiting to hook up with on line."

"Greek," Bishop informed her. "So he's waiting to catch WriterG?"

Millie nodded.

Tate asked, "What do you know about Utopia?"

Millie shrugged. "Not much, we lost internet contact with them a month ago. They were setting up a community."

"Do you know anything about this community?" Tae questioned.

Millie looked to Minnie

Minnie answered. "They wanted us to join, but we told them we were trapped. They said they'd send someone to us. Never did. They asked us to hold tight until they had the place running smoothly and operational. Since they already had enough people there, they wanted to get organized. Last we heard, they were a week away from sending someone to us."

Jeb asked, "How many people?"

"Hundred," Minnie answered. "Hundred. They were basically setting up a new civilization. They found a huge military installation outside of San Diego, with an underground facility as backup. But like I said, we haven't heard nothing in a month. Nothing. I think WriterG may know ..." She cocked her head. "Speaking of writer G."

Greek walked to the table, he bent down to Robi, laid his hand on her shoulder, and whispered in her ear.

Robi nodded, smiled pleasantly, and glanced up. "Excuse me. Jeb?" She twitched her head.

"Sure." He put down his napkin and rose.

Greek lifted his hand. "Nothing important, just need to talk to them. Go on. Enjoy the food."

Robi and Jeb left with Greek. Everyone knew, with Greek buried away all evening at the computer, it certainly was important and not a passive as it was made out to be.

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Just following Robi's question of, 'what do you got?', a blink of a computer window brought up a chat box.

Greek typed: Back.

Jeb leaned over his shoulder. "GreekGeek?"

"My screen name." Greek replied. "Anyhow, writerG logged on. Says

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there's about fifteen of them."

"Not bad." Jeb replied.

WriterG: Have your people there?

GreekGeek: Yep. Right here. Now, tell us. What's going on?

There was a pause; assumingly the writer person was typing his or her saga.

Again, Robi asked, "What's going on?"

"From what I gathered, they were all there." Greek said. "In Utopia, So-Cal. They packed up and left."

"Why?" Jeb asked.

"He was about to get into a long explanation, and I asked him to wait until you guys were here."

A chime of a bell caught their attention, and the three of them looked at the little chat square.

A huge paragraph appeared.

WriterG: We thought everything was fine when we first met up with them. They had big plans. How to house themselves, feed themselves. But the three who were running things were flighty. Next thing you know they start talking to people on the net. People who were telling them they were from another country, and they were bring help. So, the Utopian Society just decided that they would wait. A group us didn't trust this 'country' and we booked fro Nevada.

GreekGeek: What country? What people?

WriterG: They didn't say. That's why were left.

GreekGeek typed: Where in Nevada?

WriterG: We are settled about fifteen miles from the California border at a farmer market and diner. We're camping out. Actually searching.

For?

A lengthy pause.

GreekGeek: Still there?

WriterG: Yes. Don't laugh.

GreekGeek: Go on.

WriterG: Area 51.

The conversation continued, with WriterG informing them that in theory, Area 51 is equipped to be a livable society incase of alien take over. They just need to find it. Secondly, they warned not to go to Utopia.

In order to decrease any chance of communication interception,



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WriterG ended the transmission. But not before giving approximate coordinates, and a name for the group to locate them.

Final words.

WriterG: With the right people, the right group, we can prepare to defend our homeland. Something is coming. Avoid Utopia. See you tomorrow.

In a blip they were gone.

Greek turned in his chair. "Should we go there?"

"Most definitely," Jeb answered.

Robi asked, "What do you make of Area 51?"

Jeb shook his head. "No one knows for sure about the place. But it may be worth looking into if something is wrong with So-Cal."

Greek said, "Doc is convinced So-Cal is a wrong move."

Jeb nodded. "It could be. But we aren't gonna know until we get there. I don't want to join up with a bunch of people that are unorganized, or flighty. But we need numbers right now. And who they were communicating with baffles me. People promising them things."

A simple knock on the door caught their attention, and all three turned to see Parker.

"Sorry to bother you folks. But I wanted to catch you alone," Parker said. "I think you need to come with me."

Robi asked, "What's up? What's going on?"

Parker replied, "I've been holding off all night. But ... it's time."

The journey with Parker took them to the top floor of the hotel, where Sam and Mas sat outside a stairwell door.

"This afternoon," Parker explained. "Doc spotted those two about a mile away, hooking up a satellite."

Sam explained. "We used a simple television satellite. Transmission is good."

Parker nodded "Confirmed, now tell them what you told me."

Sam raised his eyes. "Do you not think it is best to show them first?"

"Tell them first."

"We have communicated with our people. Mas has also had visions."

Mas sobbed.

Robi shifted her eyes; the sound of his sob drew a chill to her. "Mas?"

As couldn't speak.

"Death," Sam said. "To many of us."

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“Our group?” Robi quizzed.

“All groups. Only those who dwell alone, or o\with one other are safe. Groups are at risk. Mas has seen it.”

Jeb asked. “Seen what?”

Sam explained. “Are we to go so a desert town? A farmer market? Diner?”

“Why?” Jeb asked.

“Mas has seen your death there.”

Robi’s heart dropped to her stomach. She immediately looked at Jeb for a reaction.

Jeb’s jaw twitched. “These are your visions. Like psychic visions?”

Mas nodded.

Sam responded. “Forewarnings. They can be changed. Perhaps. Almost in stone. We can change by not going. Do not go Jeb. We are not to go. Let those at the Market, allow them to perish. If we go there to meet with them, Mas’ vision will surely come rue and you, along with those others will die.”

Jeb scoffed. “I’m supposed to believe a psychic vision. How do I know you two didn’t tap into the computer line? How?”

Sam pointed to Parker.

Parker asked. “When did you decide you were going to go to this desert Farmer market diner?”

“Tonight.” Jeb replied. “Just now.”

“I was there when they communicated. I heard the alien voices. I heard a language I didn’t understand. I was there when Mas interpreted it all.”

Sam spoke, “Our people said the best choice its to keep moving. We will walk into confrontation in the desert town.”

Jeb just shook his head ad looked to Robi. “Are you buying this?”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

Parker reached for the stairwell door. “How about believing this.”

He led them up the two flights of stairs and brought them on to the roof. They all stood as Parker pointed west. The sky in the distance, the dark evening sky was light up bright with colors of Red and yellow.

Robi’s eyes widened. “What is that.”

Sam turned to her. “The arrival. At Dawn they land.” He paused, and then stared out to the light show. “The second wave.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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*July 10<sup>th</sup>*

*Las Vegas, NV*

Since West was the way they were headed they had to bring the tour bus through the sand. Jeb and Tate made the trek to retrieve both vehicles, which were left behind at the end of the strip.

Minnie and Millie were as excited about the trip as two college girls readying for spring break.

They neared 'ready' to leave. I was merely only six hours away. Six hours to reach So-Cal, or as they found out, Edwards Air force base.

"Did you tell him?" Robi bantered Jeb as she followed him to the side of the truck.

"Robi, please drop it."

"No, you didn't tell your brother."

"Tell me what?" Tate asked.

As Robi opened her mouth, Jeb's hand covered it.

"Nothing," Jeb said.

Robi gasped. "How dare you do that to me. Asshole. Tate, the second wave has arrived."

"I know that."

"If we go to this town, Jeb will die."

"What?" Tate asked in shock.

Jeb's hand cut through the air. "Fuck."

"No," Robi continued. "Tell him we are not going. We are going straight to So-Cal."

"Robi," Jeb was firm. "We told those survivors we'd stop by. It is worth seeing what's going on."

"You heard Mas."

"Yep." Jeb nodded. "I heard Mas and his psychic fuckin' vision. And right now you are acting so female."

"I am not."

"Yeah, you are. Female. Scared. Running away. Where's the guts. Where are the balls you so often display."

"I can't believe you're talking to me like that," Robi said. "Tell him Tate. We can't go."

Tate shrugged. "I don't my brother to die either Robi. But .... I'll

respect anything he wants to do.”

“There.” Jeb threw a bag in the side of the bus.

“What am I supposed to do?” Robi asked. “BE OK with this? Be OK taking a chance of you dying. You’re pissed because I wouldn’t marry you last night.”

“I’m not pissed about that.” Jeb said. “It has nothing to do with it. Avoiding the town is avoiding a problem that will still be there. Avoiding a battle we will eventually have to fight anyhow. I don’t run away from my fights. This is our destiny now, and we will face it. I will face it. And I’ll be damned if I am gonna let some two bit, fuckin’ henchman alien take my life. It ain’t gonna happen. I’m not gonna die. Mark my words.” Jeb slammed the hatch of the bus and walked off.

\*\*\*

Just on the outskirts of Pahrump Nevada—the location of the diner—Jeb ordered the convoy to stop.

Everyone unloaded.

Robi expected as much. They needed a plan of action if they were rolling into the town.

“Listen up,” Jeb called for attention. “We’re about five miles out. We have to come back this way, and I’d rather be safe than sorry. We know it might be dangerous, and I don’t want to risk the entire group. Because of that, I want all the kids and women to stay put. Parker, Bishop, Greek, Doc, Mas. You four will stay behind as well. I’ll take Sam as the understandable alien. Everyone else, arm up with the revamped weapons and let’s head out.”

Robi flared. She fueled even more as she saw the men head to the first Humvee. “Wait.” She charged for Jeb. “I am not understanding why I can’t go.”

Annoyed, Jeb looked off.

“Because I’m a woman. You know my shot ...”

“No.” Jeb halted her. “You being a woman has nothing to do with it. You’re being a great shot is needed here as well. Two reasons, Robi you must stay behind. One .... Your son. You are a mother. Two ... you are a leader. If something happens to us, you have to lead these people the rest of the way. You’ve taken them this far, you’ll bring them home.”

“Parker can lead everyone.”

“Parker is not you.” Jeb said. “He can not be a mother and a leader.

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Sometimes, Robi ... sometimes, being a good leader is knowing when to put yourself in harms way, and when to stay back. Ask yourself what is best for those who depend on you? As yourself." He leaned down and kissed her. "I'll be back."

"Jeb ..."

"I'll be back." He turned.

Robi looked down to her weapon. A special handgun made for her by Mas. One specially designed to fight the second wave.

She kept hearing Jeb's words to her, 'being a good leader is knowing when to put yourself in harms way, and when to stay back.' Those words played over in her mind as the crew of men drove off.

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## *Pabrump, NV*

Quiet.

Not a sound, bird, nothing.

As if a movie, the three buildings were set on a deserted road. Two armored vehicles parked right out front of the diner. A run down fruit stand was off by the gas pumps.

A slight warm breeze had kicked up, tossing sand out, and Tate made reference about likening it to a blow dryer.

Hot. Dry.

"Weapons, ready." Jeb said. The parked the Humvee a safe distance and planned to walk the measly fifty feet.

"Mas I am not." Sam stated. "You must understand. I don't feel the impending. I only can advise on what to do."

"We don't need a psychic." Jeb replied. "If these things are gonna hit as bad as you say, then we'll see them." He led the way to the diner.

Bishop, who had been quiet, spoke up. "Looks fine. Nothing."

"I know." Jeb said.

Tate spoke, "You think maybe it will be coming while we're here?"

"Probably." Jeb kept walking. "If that's the case, we need to get these people out of here, right?"

"I don't hear anything." Tate said.

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Travis added, "I got a freaky feeling."

"Yeah," Jeb mumbled. "Me too." H was closest to the diner door. "Ok. Hang back. I'll go in first."

Tate stepped forward. "How 'bout I get your back."

"Sounds good." Jeb gave a snap of his finger. "Everyone else back up. Stay in formation. Be ready for anything." He reached for the door and paused. "Did you hear that."

Tate shook his head.

"Ready little brother."

"Ready, big brother."

Jeb opened the wooden, squeaky screen door. "Hello." He called out.

The sound was not normal. It was at a higher volume level than the still-playing jukebox. A combination click-hiss rang out, and it drew Jeb's attention to his right.

The sight could have taken him aback, but somehow in the hidden science fiction corner of his mind, Jeb expected a much.

A hole in the ceiling foretold of their entrance in. There were two of them. Black large, ten feet tall. They propped up on the insect like hind legs. In fact, it looked like a cross between a cockroach and scorpion. Four arms, wired about, each arm had a claw, pointed, and oblong. Their mouths were sharp shelled, with protruding fangs.

"Fuck me," Jeb stepped back.

"We can't shoot hem in here Jeb," Tate said.

"They're watching us."

"I know."

"We have to draw them out, into the range of the gas pumps," Jeb suggested as he stepped further back.

Hiss

Tate turned. One was to the left.

With another loud cackling, and angry hiss, one of the creatures lifted its claw. He had speared a man, and the bloodied body was attached to the creature like a shish kabob.

That creature revved back and tossed the body of the man Jeb and Tate's way, just as the remaining two creatures lunged.

"Out!" Jeb ordered, and he and Tate flew out. "Back it up! Back it up!" Jeb ordered. "Toward the truck. Now! Move it. Weapons ready!"

Barely did Bishop even get to question, when the building bursts into splinters and the three creatures plowed out.

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He raced backwards to join up with Tae and Jeb.

With a mighty roar, a creature pulled back its claw and swept down fast and hard at Ben, spearing him through the chest and lifting him high.

"Fuck!" Jeb shouted. "You fuckin' got my guitar player, asshole!" he pumped and fired. Her ignored the warning call of Tate about the gas pumps, and lucked out.

The shot landed dead center of the creature's chest, sending the alien flayi8ng high and backwards. It crashed into the adjacent building, and when it did, it was like opening Pandora's box.

From that building and the third, crawled multitudes of the second wave.

Twenty, thirty of them. Their arms swung out fast and furiously, hitting the ground with a vengeance.

"Fire at will, but make sure you hit them. Back it up!" Jeb ordered. "Sam! Will fire do anything to hem?"

Frightened, Sam replied as he ran. "Yes. It will slow them." He watched as the others fired, hitting some. Missing some. The weapons definitely worked on the ones that were hit. Grey blood showered out in each blasts.

"Quick. What else can you tell me." Jeb requested.

"They will not send more than thirty-five creature to a site. They are laboratory grown. Kill these, we are good to the next hit."

"Excellent." Jeb charged. "Tate. Manny, hit those pumps. Bishop, you, Tate, and me will aim for these assholes. Ready? Let's build a wall of fire to slow these bastards down!"

They neared the Humvee. And Jeb ordered Sam inside to paper for a quick take off. He did.

Manny and Travis fired at the gas pumps. The explosion and fireball rocked the earth, flames shot upward.

The creatures pursued. Tromping through the flames, pausing when stung, squealing in pain, and continuing on at a slower pace, despite their injuries.

Travis ran to the safety of the truck, firing at a close proximity to his escape vehicle.

They were hitting them, if the shot landed correctly, the creature would die. If not, it would continue.

Manny injured one, it swung out at him, sailing him fifteen feet to the side, and leaving Bishop open and vulnerable for the descending spearing claw.

## A Path to Utopia

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Inches from Bishop, Jeb fired, hitting the creature, and sending it back.

Even though there were killing many of them, they were still outnumbered, and losing ground. They couldn't fire as much as they wanted; they were jumping and diving to avoid being speared.

Jeb rushed to Manny's body, and swept him up, tossing him over his shoulder. "Everyone near the tuck!" he ordered. "We're gonna use one ace."

Everyone knew what that meant. One full powered shot, another fireball of explosion.

A last resort like Mas had suggested. It was tricky but if they pulled back far enough, stayed under cover of the Humvee, they should be fine.

Bishop lagged behind. Just as Jeb set an unconscious Manny into the Humvee, ordered Tate, and Travis inside, he saw Bishop go down. The foot of the best pinned him to the ground as the creature readied to claw him.

Jeb fired. The creature flew back. "Cover me." He raced to Bishop. When he arrived, Bishop moaned. "Get up! Can you."

Bishop nodded.

Jeb yanked him to his feet by his collar. "Run."

"I can't," Bishop cringed. "I can barely move"

"Fuck." With a heave, he tossed Bishop over his shoulder, dove to the left to avoid a claw, nearly tripped in his turn, and raced to the Humvee.

Tate manned the vehicle and was the last inside as Jeb tossed Bishop in.

"Drive, back it up." Jeb ordered.

Tate paused. His eyes shifted. The creatures moved slow, but kept coming. "Jeb. No. Get in."

"Go!"

"Fuck." Tate slammed the Humvee in reverse and kept peeling backwards.

Jeb backed up. he knew he had one shot to do it and had to be quick about clearing the blast wave.

A little further back, Jeb shifted the weapon for that one deadly, shot, pumped the chamber, fired at his best accuracy, and spun hard, racing with everything he had.

The 'boom' rattled the ground, but Jeb kept charging. he ran until the blast of the explosion, knocked him forward. he was ready for it. He felt the heat of it.

Winds of destruction carried not only heat and power, but also the painful screams of dying creatures.

A rain of debris lanced around him to the ground, then ... silence.



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“Jeb!” Tate called. “You OK?”

Jeb shook his head to clear the dirt. He fluttered the dust from his lips. “Yeah.” He coughed and rose up some from the ground. With a twist of his body, he peered behind to see the carnage.

Creatures were in bits. Some burned, releasing a horrendous stench. Some cried out.

Another cough, and Jeb stood. he saw his brother in the distance. He waved then yelled. “Was that fuckin’ awesome or what?” chuckling, he stepped forward.

“Jeb, watch out!” Tate warned.

No one was ready. Not even Jeb.

Full speed, as if the last resort, a huge creature raged from the inferno, lunged out, and with a sweep of his arm, clutch Jeb into the jaw of his claw.

Jeb’s weapon fell as he was lifted high in the air. The creature swung him about, as if protection from any shots.

“Someone shoot!” Sam ordered.

Tate aimed. “I can’t get a clear shot.”

“Me either,” Bishop cried.

Jeb fought and struggled.

If it could be called a smile, then that was what the creature did. He smiled, hissed. Clutching Jeb, he raised another claw to end the battle.

The spear ended, prong of death careened down at Jeb ... but never made it.

A single shot fired out, nailing the creature in the neck area.

It dropped Jeb to the ground, then spun and fell to its side.

Tate, Bishop, and Travis turned. Neither of them fired. Who did?

Robi.

She was standing by the other Humvee, weapon still in hand, breathing heavily.

“Robi,” Tate smiled. “Excellent shot.”

“Jeb!” She cried out in horror then raced full speed to him.

She saw what the others did not. Too engrossed in watching her, the failed to see, the creature twitch in its last leg of life.

Twitch to this death and roll over one more time. Only as it did, it’s claw fell forward, straight down into Jeb, through his back and into the ground.

“No!” Her scream carried as she ran all the way to him. “No!” She dropped to her knees. There was no blood. The tubular claw created a vacuum seal. She reached for the claw. It was in good. “Someone!” She cried

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out. "Hold on, Jeb."

Tate arrived first.

Robi stood, "Someone help me get this out of him. Get this out of him!" She screamed.

Tate gulped; he winced at first at the sight of his brother then waved Bishop and Travis forward. They all gripped the claw. "On three," he ordered.

Robi dropped once again to her knees. "Jeb."

"Robi," he called out weakly.

She released a simple sob, trying desperately to hold back. She saw the huge object and how badly it had impaled him.

"Three." Tate ordered.

Jeb grunted painfully, as the claw had lifted with a suction from his body.

Like a fountain, blood shot forward.

Robi rolled him onto this back, "Jeb."

His eyes fluttered. "Rob ... Robi." His words breathy. "I'm ... I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry." She laid her hand on his face. "I'm sorry I didn't have faith in you. I'm sorry I didn't believe you. I'm sorry for doubting you. You won't die. I won't let you die."

"Things," Jeb swallowed hard. "Things aren't looking too ...too good."

"Sure, they are," Robi wiped a tear from here eye. "You were right. You aren't gonna die. Look who I brought." From the baby carrier strapped to her back, Robi reached and lifted Martha. "Look who's here."

"Dudday!" Martha cried out as she extended her arms. "Dudday!" She crawled on Jeb, laying her chest to his chest.

"Hold her, Jeb." Robi lifted his arms and put them on Martha. "Hold your daughter tight."

Jeb did.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### *25 miles East Of San Diego, CA*

‘What made you come?’ was the question asked of Robi a half dozen times. Why and what made her follow the crew of men at that exact time, she did.

She responded with Jeb’s own words, ‘... sometimes, being a good leader is knowing when to put yourself in harms way, and when to stay back’

Her instincts told her to move forward, plus she admitted that her instincts were aided by Mas who kept crying out, ‘Jeb of Death.’

What would stop Jeb’s death even in the most crucial of moments, even after the deaths sentence was delivered. Either stopping it, or reversing it.

“How does it happen, Mas?” she asked. “How? Can you see it? How does he die? Does he die right away?”

When she heard how, she knew she had to high tail her way there.

Bishop had a broken rib, and Robi was pretty certain Manny fractured his skull. After Martha woke, she’d have to get her to work on Manny. He was in and out of consciousness and incoherent.

Manny worried Robi. She only hopped and prayed that perhaps there was a doctor or medication in So Cal.

Jeb healed.

Tate was beside himself after witnessing the horror of what happened to his brother.

But one thing was never made clear to Robi, the closer a person is to death when healed, the less they would remember of the incident.

Jeb was sore, and weak from loss of blood, but he was better and unable to remember anything beyond lifting Bishop over his shoulder.

He knew something happened though. No one told him what.

The remaining few hours of the trip was a cautious one and a quiet one. The loss of Ben, even though a newcomer, was a hard hit to take.

Tate positioned himself on the roof of the lead Humvee all the way to Sand Diego. Fasten by a bungee chord he was the look out for any more second wave creatures.

There were no encounters.

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As Mas and Sam both said, the second wave would strike where groups of people resided.

Which brought them fear about So-Cal.

However, they all kept reasoning, that although wide range communication was lost a while before hand. Folks like Minnie and Millie were in contact with them for some time.

The utopians had taken residence at Andrews Air force base. A highly secured, and bunkered area.

Utopia had to be there and intact. It had to be. And the three vehicles consisting of survivors gathered throughout the barren land rolled with hope into the city limits of San Diego.

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### ***Edwards Air Force Base***

It was seen as a dark black cloud in the distance, and the closer they drew, the more they knew, that it was smoke that encompassed the area surrounding Edwards Air Force Base.

Destination ... Utopia.

About a half of a mile from the gates of the base, they halted the convoy.

“No!” Tate shouted as he stepped out of the Humvee. “No. Fuck!”

Robi closed her eyes. Even at a distance, flames smoldered through out the base, and black smoke billowed out. Fires never extinguished, only left to burn out themselves.

Days? Hours? No one knew.

With another ‘Fuck’, Tate moved to the bus.

“What are you doing?” Robi asked.

“Keep watch.” Tate ordered and climbed up on the roof of the bus. Once there he pulled out the binoculars.

“What do you see?” Robi asked.

Tate examined for a while, and not half-heartedly. He climbed down. “It doesn’t take an Einstein to figure out they battled there. I don’t see any of those things< But we can’t be sure. We have to go in. Let me take the Humvee in alone.”

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“No,” Robi shook her head. “No. I will not let you go alone.”

“Who else is can watch my back. Manny is down, Bishop is down ...”

“Me.”

“No.” Tate was adamant. “No. My brother would kill me.”

“Your bother has no choice. You go with me or you go with Travis.”

Tate sighed out. “Fine.”

Robi nodded. “Grab the specials, and reload. I’ll go get the radios, OK?”

Tate agreed.

At this time, the others began to gather outside. They wanted answers.

Robi went to Mas. “Do you sense them? So you see anything?”

Mas shook his head.

Sam added, “The second wav has already been here. Damage done. Mission accomplished. Can you see this.”

“I can, but we’re still going to go in and take a look.” Robi passed a weapon to Travis. “Keep watch.” She passed another to Greek. “One of you take the roof. We’ll be back. Mas, are we safe?”

“Safe,” Mas said. “Not ...” he stopped and closed his eyes.

“What?” Robi asked.

Mas didn’t answer.

Tate tried. “What?”

Mas opened his eyes. “Died have not all. Hiding.”

Tate knew what this meant and looked at Robi. “They’re hunkered.”

Robi gave a twitch of her head. “Let’s go.” Before taking off with Tate, she approached her son, laid a hand on Nick’s cheek, and kissed him. “I’ll be back.”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand. “I also know it isn’t good news.”

“We’ll see.” She backed up, and then as she turned, she secured her own weapon, and boarded the Humvee with Tate.

The smoke thickened along with the stench as they pulled in through the destroyed gates of the base.

Robi coughed the gag in her throat. “What now?”

“The main building will have access to the bunker.”

“There’s nothing left.”

“I know.”

They drove slowly through the wreckage. Bodies were everywhere.

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Bodies of people, and second weave creatures. Everything burned.

"Maybe we should stop," Robi suggested. "It might be easier on foot."

"You might be right." Tate stopped the Humvee. "They fought hard."

Robi opened the door, and stepped out. She covered her mouth and fought the nausea that formed from the horrendous smell of simmering flesh.

"To even begin," Tate began to scan left and right.

Walking backwards, Robi kept her eyes peered about. "There's no direction."

"Is this even worth it?"

"Who knows."

"I can't fuckin' believe this. You know that don't you? Al this way. All this way and it's gone. Fuck."

"Didn't we all kind of know that? But we had to ..." Robi's head cocked and jolted at the sound of falling debris. She quickly raised her weapon. "Where?"

"There." Tate nodded a direction. "The noise came from over ..."

"There." Robi pointed. A figure of a man, stumbled through the smoke. "Some one is a live. Now it is worth it."

Together they hurried to the man.

"Hey," Tate called out. "Hey."

He coughed. "Thank God. Help me. Help."

Arriving at the man, Robi saw that he was injured. He bled from his side. "Here. Let me help you." She reached for him.

"I'm OK, I'll be OK." He said. "Are you two alone?"

Tate replied, "There are more. Mister you need medical attention."

"I'll .. I'll be OK. It's the others I'm worried about. They've been down there. Stuck. I can't .. I'm not strong enough alone to move the debris."

Robi asked. "What happened here?"

"We've been fighting these things for a day straight. But a week ago, we went under fire. We don't know where it came from, it seemed the sky. That's .. That's when we moved below." He explained. "We fought. But ..." His eyes closed. "We lost mostly everyone. Only about thirty of us are left."

Tate asked, "And they're below?"

The man nodded.

Tate tossed his weapon behind his shoulder. "Let's clear that debris."

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Nick had just unraveled the can of Spam. He was getting quite used to it, and actually, feared being borderline Bishop addicted. He was saving the turn keys and popped the one in his back pocket when he saw his mom. Nick rose slowly to his feet. "Parker," he called out.

Parker came from the bus. "What's up?"

Nick pointed.

With a smoke backdrop, Robi led an enormous group of people. While Tate drove the Humvee along side at a slow pace.

"Mom!" Nick called to her and then ran.

Parker followed suit.

"Mom?" Nick asked. "What ... what's going on?"

Robi stopped walking.

Parker questioned, "It's no where near inhabitable is it?"

Robi shook her head.

"Mom? What are we gonna do?"

Exhaling, Robi said, "I'm not quite sure. We may have hit the last mile of this trip, but definitely not the last mile of it all." She inched toward Parker. "This is what remains out of three hundred."

"Jesus." He gasped out.

From out of the Humvee Tate approached and lowered his lips to Robi's ear. "I'm gonna rustle up Greek and Travis. We'll head to town, get transport. Keep watch, OK. It's still might not be safe."

"OK." Robi gave a nod.

"Transport?" Parker asked. "God, Robi, are we taking on all these people? We can't take on all these people."

"What choice do we have?" Robi asked. "We came all this way to find civilization. To find people. Why? Nick tell me why."

"We have to join forces. We have to prepare." Nick replied.

"Exactly." Robi stated. "We came all this way for people, and we found people. It isn't exactly what we expected or hoped for. But we did. Now we have to come up with a plan. We have to forge ahead. We have to find protection, sanctuary, shelter, and get our act together and fast."

Robi saw the look on Parker's face, it wreaked disappointment. "What? What is it?"

"Robi," Parker whispered. "We came for an army of fighters. We need an army of fighters, you know that."

"Nah," Robi shook her head. "We need an army of hope. This may be it. We may or may not be all that's left. But I'm not giving up. You're not

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giving up. I bet none of them are willing to give up either. As long as there is one of us standing, then we have to believe man has a standing chance. Because this is far from over,” She took a moment to study the faces of the newcomers. Dirty, scared, inured. “This is only the Beginning.”