

Stand or Sand is a story about corruption, evil, viruses, zombies, hope, and doing the right thing. I truly hope everyone enjoys this book and can take something positive away from it. God bless you, our brave men and women of the armed services, and all the first responders.

I also personally want to thank my family for all their help and support with this book. In particular, my wife, children, and mother. Thank you for encouraging me, helping me, and giving me ideas. I love you all.

Tony.

Chapter 1

Curtin County Sheriff's Sergeant Thomas Cable sat in his cruiser while tapping the fingers of his right hand on the cruiser's center console. Doing this to let out his stress, he also tensely ran his left hand through his hair while waiting for Greta LaRuse at a local gas station parking lot. Ms. LaRuse was a nationally known independent journalist best known for her unbiased reports and corruption exposure stories.

Speaking to a reporter was something new for the Sergeant which gave him anxiety for several reasons. First was simply the information he wanted to leak and the feeling of having to do so. Second was the unknown factor of if she might expose or turn on him as her source. Finally the last but most important reason for his edginess was because he knew he had used a ruse to secure the meeting with her.

To add to his angst, Ms. LaRuse was late. This caused Sergeant Cable's mind to wander in several different directions of theory and conjecture. Was she stringing him along? Did she notify his superiors? Are they going to pull up next to him instead? With each passing moment, Sergeant Cable's worries ever increased.

To deal with all this fluster, Thomas reverted to an old self-soothing technique he had used since childhood. Sergeant Cable had grown up in the country where starry skies and moonlit nights were nothing new. Whenever he wasn't able to sleep, Thomas would stare out his window and look upon the stars. Counting sheep had never worked as a relaxing mechanism for him, but looking at the stars always had.

As a boy, Thomas would let his mind wander in the stars with all the ideas the sky could bring. How many galaxies could there be, how did the Greeks and Romans form a constellation? Frequently drawing the constellations out with his finger, he would make up his own if a familiar one could not be seen from his bed.

Watching car after car pass by without seeing the red sport utility vehicle Greta advised she had, the Sergeant took in a deep soothing breath and looked upon the sky to relax himself. On this particular night the sky, sadly, was not ideal for star gazing, but a few stars were still prevalent between the few clouds that quickly passed by.

Having been some time since he had done this, his mind fell more towards recognizing known constellations rather than drawing them out. However with the shifting clouds and the lights from the nearby city dimming what a country sky would normally show, finding anything other than the brightest of stars swiftly turned eye-straining.

While still concentrating for these familiar signs, a bright beam of lights swept across his face. This beam blinded him for a moment and took his focus from the sky and back towards the street. Blinking the light away, Thomas noticed that this ray of light came from the headlights of a red SUV which had pulled into his lot.

This sight gave Sergeant Cable some relief, however, his fearful thoughts of betrayal and whistle-blower exposure quickly crept back into his mind. As the vehicle slowly made its way over, the closer it got, the more features and characteristics he was able to discern of the driver. These details put part of his worries to rest as he soon noticed the driver's long curly hair and trademark spiral loop earrings which confirmed to him, it was Greta LaRuse.

Sergeant Cable lowered his window as Ms. LaRuse's vehicle pulled up next to his. Ms. LaRuse did exactly the same as she placed her vehicle in park and looked his way.

“Sergeant Cable?” she said with slight inquiry in her voice.

“Yes ma'am.” he replied as his eyes searched her vehicle to see if anyone else was inside.

Greta noticed this wary action and quickly responded in kind to try and alleviate his concerns.

“Sergeant Cable, I'm alone as we agreed upon. I do not have any wires or recording devices. All I brought was a notepad, an open mind, and an open hand for any evidence you can give me.” She said with a straight and routine voice as if she had said this to many people before.

Sergeant Cable shook his head in understanding of this.

“So, time is money, what can you tell me about your department?” she said still under the guise of their original discussion.

Sergeant Cable smiled but remained silent for a few moments as he contemplated how he would break his real reason for their meeting.

Greta was polite with the Sergeant about his silence and tried to give him some reassurance in coming forward.

“I know some of these people are more than likely your friends. You hang out with them, you have good laughs with them, your kids probably even see each other on the weekends. So I know it is hard to come forward and reveal some things about them, but remember this is for the greater good. If they are doing something wrong, they need to be exposed so that proper justice can be given to the people.”

Sergeant Cable shook his head in agreement but not to what Greta meant. He felt exactly the same way but about what he was going to reveal instead. Hoping he picked the right journalist and hoping his information would not lead them all to danger, he spoke up as she asked.

“You’re right.” He said to Greta as he stared at his steering wheel while grinding his teeth.

Greta remained quiet, knowing what she had said had pushed him enough. However to seal his disclosure, she opened her eyes and looked upon him with compassion and empathy in order to help him open up.

“Ms. LaRuse,” He said still staring down at his steering wheel.

“Do you know why I picked you?”

“I do not,” Greta said, still trying not to scare him away from revealing his information.

“I picked you because you seem the most honest in the media world.”

“Well thank you,” Greta replied with a little bit of curiosity in where he was going with this.

“I’m no fan of the national media, so I wanted someone who was independent. I can kind of tell which way you politically lean. However, you always seem to write up your stories fairly and go after both sides regardless of what I’m assuming you politically or personally believe.”

Greta smiled to this and agreed with him.

“Yes, I try hard to be fair about what I do. I think my audience respects that. I’m hyper-sensitive about being bipartisan in order to keep my readers satisfied with the quality of my work.”

Sergeant Cable smiled to this comment and then became quiet again. Noticing that whatever he was about to say was difficult for him, she likewise stayed quiet and allowed the Sergeant to take his time in what he was going to reveal.

After a few seconds, Sergeant Cable grabbed his steering wheel with both of his hands and took in a deep breath.

“I did call you here for a reason, but not the reason I told you.” He said with an uncomfortable look on his face.

Greta’s eyes first got large then went tight as her comforting look turned to a more judging gaze.

“Okay...” She said with obvious disdain, but knowing he might still have something of use.

“So why are we here then tonight?”

Sergeant Cable’s guilt spread across his body as he quickly followed her question up with a fast reply. This he did in the hopes of pushing past the awkwardness of his lie and to hopefully replace his dishonesty with interest instead.

“I called you here because I and a few other of our deputies think something is going on at the Bradford State Sanatorium and Refuge.”

Greta didn’t reply to this statement and instead waited for more. Thomas, feeling as if he better get into his story quickly, rapidly continued after seeing Greta’s look of disfavor grow.

“The Refuge is in our county, so we handle calls and work with the staff at the Sanatorium. Over the last few months, our deputies have received several different objects turned over to us from the groundskeepers.”

“What kind of objects?” Greta sharply asked.

“Well, as odd as it sounds, generally they are golf balls, tennis balls

or baseballs.... but really anything that seemingly can make it over the Refuges wall.”

Greta rolled her eyes to this and clearly looked disappointed in the Sergeant’s revelation.

“Just give me a second to explain,” Sergeant Cable said passionately as he gestured his hands back and forth for her not to leave.

“Okay I get it, that sounds dumb. But it’s not so much the balls themselves as to what’s written on them and the secrecy of everything. Every time the groundskeepers or my deputies say something, we are all shut up.”

Greta kept her eyes squinted while faintly shaking her head and motioning for him to carry on. Not wasting any time, Sergeant Cable swiftly plunged into his story, talking so fast that Greta had a hard time keeping up.

“So as you know the Refuge was built a little over ten years ago for those who contracted the Nz4 virus in order to separate them from the general population. About a year ago, the groundskeepers kept finding various balls and items just outside the walls as they mowed. At first they just ran them over but after continually finding them, they started picking them up and noticed they had messages written on them.”

Greta’s critical gaze lightened a bit as Sergeant Cable went along.

“At first the grounds crew turned them in to their supervisors who told them it was probably a prank and to forget about it. However, the crew continued finding more and kept bringing up the issue to their supervisors. This led to some of the groundskeepers being released and one now being officially listed as missing.” Sergeant Cable said while handing over a copy of the Sheriff’s Departments missing persons flyer.

“For the groundskeepers that remained, they felt intimidated and mostly shut up. Still a few of them have been turning over whatever they find secretly to us. Usually this is my crew since we work the night shift.”

“What was on these items and do you have any for me?” Greta asked with a small amount of interest in her voice.

Sergeant Cable reached over to his passenger seat and picked up a plastic grocery bag which had several lumps inside of it.

“This is what I currently have.” He said as he reached out his window and turned the bag over to her.

Greta, a little surprised in the amount of items that had been turned over to her, started sorting through the bag to see what was inside.

“Most of them are golf balls. But a few of them are the baseballs and tennis balls I was telling you about.”

Greta shuffled through the various balls and picked up a few in which she noticed the messages the Sergeant had advised. As she picked up another to look it over, the Sergeant briefly spoke up.

“I don’t know what that one has on it but you will see that most of them have the same social security number or name written across them.”

Most of the writing was hard to read. However it was indeed correct that most of the balls seemed to have the same series of numbers while others had the name “Marcus Scone” written on them. As she looked through the rest of them, only a few said anything other than Marcus Scone or the same series of numbers. Those that said anything else had only a short simple message saying “Help Us” or “Please Say Something.”

“Who’s social security number is this and who is Marcus Scone?” Greta asked as she routed through the last few.

“Well technically I’m not legally allowed to give away personal information. That said, since that social security number now returns to nothing, I guess I’m not really breaking the law in telling you,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“When these balls first started being found we were surprised to find that the social security number returned to Mr. Scone. We were only able to run that information when we first started getting them. Since then, if you run that number now, it will come up blank.”

With Greta’s attention grasped, she pushed away from her perturbed feelings and instead turned to her reporting mindset which triggered more and more questions.

“So someone deleted Mr. Scone’s record?” She asked looking up at him.

“It would seem that way. I really don’t have any other explanation for you. We don’t control the records department, we only run people’s social security or driver’s license numbers and find out what it returns driving-wise. Whatever the BMV has on record is what we get shown when we run someone.”

“When you had access, what were you able to find out about Mr. Scone?”

“Just the basic stuff,” Sergeant Cable said.

“We did what we normally would do when we look into someone. We ran his stuff, found out he lives in Woods County, and sent out one of their deputies to check on him. The deputy reported back that a younger couple was living in the house and didn’t know Mr. Scone. However they did say that they had only lived there for a little while and that when they purchased the house it had been vacant for some time. Housing records from Woods County showed he purchased the house about fifteen years ago but the house was turned over to the bank about nine years ago for lack of payment.”

“Does he have any family or anything like that?”

“Not that I know of. We really couldn’t find much on him other than the location of his house and those bank records. The house was in the country, so he didn’t really have neighbors to ask questions. We couldn’t find a car registered to him or anyone else with the last name of Scone in Woods or any other nearby county. He had to have some wealth because the house is pretty nice. It sits on about thirty acres of land and has two separate garages. But we also couldn’t find any work records for him either.”

“What about tax records?” Greta abruptly asked while Sergeant Cable was talking.

“Nope, nothing. We treated this like a missing persons case at first. Every which way we looked we got little to nothing. In fact, the amount of nothing we got raised flags for me. After a while, it really felt like his records were being scrubbed. Most of these records requests we do return something. They are all basic things that aren’t generally allusive but his were.”

“Why did you say you did... treat this like a missing persons case at first?” Greta asked picking apart the Sergeant’s words.

“Yeah well that’s really where the idea of this being something more than a prank started to hit home,” Thomas said looking around.

“Like I said, at first it was odd to find these balls and stranger yet that we couldn’t find much about Mr. Scone. All of that investigation took a day or two, we did that on our own per normal policies and procedures. We didn’t have a need to notify the Captain or the Sheriff at that point so early on in an investigation. It was just normal investigative stuff at that point,” he said as he refocused on her.

“However after we exhausted our preliminary investigative stuff, we moved to the more serious steps of officially labeling him as missing. This meant we had to put him in the missing persons database. When we went to do that, things started to get strange.”

Sergeant Cable paused for a brief moment and rubbed his head before continuing. The brief pause in the Sergeants story combined with his obvious physical gestures of stress lent more credence to what he was about to say.

“So as we would do for any other case where we can’t locate someone, I started filling out the missing persons report but was soon stopped by our Captain. He gave me the explanation of “His last known residence was in Woods County so their Sheriff’s Department has to do the report, not ours.”

“So…” The Sergeant said while tossing his hands up in the air.

“I took him at his word and turned over the information we had to Woods County.”

“How was that out of the ordinary?” Greta asked to further along his story.

“Well I guess you can go either way with who had jurisdiction but the next day Woods County said they weren’t going to take the report. They bounced it back to us which left me to again start filling out the missing persons report. I was a little perturbed since I had to re-do the paperwork but went back to the Sergeants office and started over again. When I went to do that, that’s when I started to find things missing. I thought at first I had misplaced them. So I tried to run Mr. Scone’s information again. When I did that it came back NIF no matter which way I tried to run him.”

Greta spoke up briefly to make sure she understood what he was saying.

“NIF? What does that mean?” She asked as she jotted down certain bits of information onto her notepad.

“Yeah sorry, NIF just means nothing in file. So pretty much when we run him, his information just comes back blank.”

“And you had no problems running him just a few days prior? Could this maybe be a computer glitch or some sort of system update?”

“Yeah so the system does update every now and again. We generally get notified that the system is going to update and what time it will happen. This wasn't that. We didn't get any notification or anything like that. I just ran him and nothing was there.”

“Okay so how did you do the missing persons report then?” She asked looking up at him from her notepad.

“Well I was a little stuck with some of his specifics but I still had some of his stuff written down from the prior day. So I filled in what I could and took it over to the Captain. I needed to notify him it wasn't one hundred percent complete because I couldn't get his information to come back.”

The Sergeant then suddenly paused in his story which was a pronounced change from his quite open chatter. After a few deep breaths and a somewhat covert glance looking around, the Sergeant continued.

“So I told him I was going to enter him in as missing but the Captain then told me not to. He said there was no need, this was just a prank and we were done with the matter. I thought he was joking at first and half laughed it off until he said with a little stronger voice that I was simply done. Him telling me that for a second time kind of hung me up for a second. I politely told him this guy was missing and that we had to enter him in since the other county wouldn't.” The Sergeant said shaking his head side to side slightly.

“He then stood up from his desk, pointed his finger at me, and told me it was over. He said he wanted me to tell anyone on my shift it was a prank, not to talk about it anymore, and to turn in to him any other objects we might find.”

The Sergeant stopped again and looked off into the sky with a troubled look upon his face. Not waiting this time for the Sergeant, Greta jumped into her questions based off what he had said and what came to her mind.

“What’s this Captain’s name and was that all you heard from him?”

“The Captain’s name is Andrew Archabald, and no he actually also told me I’d be wrote up if I questioned him about his decision.”

“So he threatened you?” Greta asked eagerly getting to some of the juicier material that reporters like.

“I don’t know, I guess. I shut up after that and did what he said.”

“Does your supervisor normally tell you to handle things this way or have you ever been threatened like this before?” She continued.

“I mean, we disagree from time to time on interpretations of laws or other stuff like that but I didn’t think I did anything wrong. I guess I was jostled a bit with the thought that he had obviously either spoken to someone or looked into the case... he doesn’t look over our shoulders like that. To be frank, he’s lazy and usually rubber stamps whatever comes his way. The only time he might look into something is if it’s a high-profile person or if it’s something like a murder case. Definitely not a random unknown missing person case.”

Greta, feeling a story may be in what the Sergeant was saying, now frantically tried to keep pace while also still coming up with questions to pick the Sergeant’s mind.

“So tell me your interpretation of all this?”

The Sergeant hesitated for a moment in thought. Then just as quickly as he had advised her what was known, he tried to communicate his perspective in what came across as a sincere and honest way.

“Well honestly I’m just seeing too many red flags. That’s why I contacted you. The Captain doesn’t investigate these types of things. The entire department knows that. He seemingly had to have done some digging into the matter to come to the conclusion it was a prank. He wasn’t interested in the fact the guy no longer comes up in our system. He didn’t care the printouts we had were gone. The evidence we did have is now gone. If this was a prank, we haven’t looked into who was doing the prank

or how this prankster knew Mr. Scone would be missing. It would have been a little more believable as a prank if it just happened to be a random guy. But a guy who was missing and whose house strangely went vacant for years?”

The Sergeant again shook his head in frustration as he continued sharing his thoughts.

“Then you have the State Refuges groundskeepers being told not to turn anything over to us. Plus me being told to tell my shift not to look into the matter. And...” He said with another thought suddenly popping into his mind.

“You have the records that we should have been able to find but couldn’t. Plus two departments refusing to follow what I thought would be normal procedure for a missing person. I know he’s saying it’s a prank, but even if it was a prank, how come I can’t locate this guy? How come his stuff is coming up missing?”

“I agree,” Greta said as she jotted more notes down.

“It does sound off. Do you have any other names of people I can talk to or places I should look into?”

“A few of the groundskeepers have tightened up but a couple of them still give me those balls you have. Those two don’t want to be known.” He said tilting his head back in thought of anyone else.

“It’s the same with the guys on my shift. They will speak up if you find anything, but they are afraid of losing their jobs and would rather stay in the background. I’d say about the best places to start would be the BMV, the construction company that built and maintains the walls, and maybe someone in the records department for housing or medical records. But I wouldn’t ask about Mr. Scone directly. I’d only bring him up if you have an in at one of those places.”

“So it’s obvious everyone is scared about something. What exactly do you feel is going on? I likewise don’t want to put myself into a spot without knowing what I need to watch out for or who I should be staying away from.” She said after writing down her last note.

“I honestly don’t know.” The Sergeant said.

“Just none of this is normal or feels normal. I don’t want to accuse

someone of anything, but I also have a hard time turning a blind eye to something that is raising so many questions.”

“You have to give me something,” Greta said forcing the Sergeant a bit in his speculation.

“You said accuse someone. Who might you be accusing and for what?”

The Sergeant grumbled, his face tightening up and both his hands clinched tightly together.

“This is a little harder than I thought.” He said while closing his eyes.

Then before opening them, he blurted out his suspicion.

“It just feels like the Captain knows more and we have a missing person. Why wouldn’t he want us looking into it?” he asked while looking at her.

“I don’t want to say the Captain got rid of someone or something like that. I don’t have any evidence of that. But if this was not the Captain, I’d definitely want to be looking into him. He feels connected to this guy in some way.”

“If this was not the Captain, what would you feel right now?” Greta said in a soft voice to try and ease the question a bit.

The Sergeant looked down and stared blankly at the ground for a moment.

“Again, I have no evidence of this, but it really feels like the Captain knows why this guy is missing. Is he missing? Is he dead? I don’t know. But that’s where my mind steers me with all of this.”

“So you’re suggesting Captain Archabald is related to Mr. Scone’s disappearance and even possibly up to his death?” Greta said wide-eyed and with her interest completely piqued.

“I don’t know.” The Sergeant said again to Greta’s frustration.

“It all just seems off and goes against what we do.”

Trying to hide her irritation with the Sergeant for not being definitive in his suspicions, Ms. LaRuse moved on from the accusatory and back to something else he had mentioned.

“Okay so you also mentioned talking to the company that built and maintains the wall around the State Refuge. Why did you say that?”

Sergeant Cable shook his head to this and explained his thinking this time.

“Yeah so there are only a few ways those golf balls can get to where they are at. If we were allowed to investigate, I could have better narrowed this down for you. But since we weren’t, those balls only get there by about three ways. One, by someone throwing them from or near the state route that runs by the Refuge. Two, by either one of the groundskeepers or guards leaving them there. Three, from within the Refuge coming out.”

“Wait... so you said from within the State Refuge?” Greta said suspiciously.

“You know the only people inside there are those who contracted the virus. As sad as that is, they are zombies. They don’t think, they don’t write down social security numbers on golf balls. It’s sad what that virus does to them, but they don’t function like us. Once they catch the virus, they lose their humanity and become basic instinct animals. It’s been proven time and time again they can’t think or reason. That’s why the place was built. Too many families couldn’t put down a loved one, so they made a place to put them. Those people in there can’t function in society without mass violence or spreading the disease. There’s no way those balls came from inside the Refuge.” Greta said almost completely dismissive of the idea.

“I know, I know.” The Sergeant said in agreement.

“I’m just giving you all the options we could come up with. However, I do find it odd that the Refuge has almost completely cut off communication with us since the Captain and I talked. Very strange timing.”

“What do you mean?” Greta asked.

“Well the Refuge is a federally run facility. They have their own specially trained guards in order to deal with any issues that may come up. These guards do double duty if something happens around the perimeter, but up until the meeting I had with the Captain, they called us for issues on

the outside and disorderly visitors on the inside. Now they're quieter than a church mouse. They even had a pretty serious accident concerning a truck pulling out of their facility recently. They never called us to handle it. I didn't even know they handled traffic accidents until then."

"Okay, well, I'll keep all of that in mind." Greta said with a little bit of a dismissive tone.

"Is that it Sergeant Cable?" she then asked.

The Sergeant nodded but again asked her to not bring up where she had come across this information. Greta and Sergeant Cable then both turned on their vehicles one after the other. Greta put her SUV into gear and then asked one final question.

"Are your gut feelings ever wrong Sergeant Cable?"

Sergeant Cable finally smiled and replied.

"Only if you ask my wife." He said with a chuckle before continuing.

"Coincidences do happen. But I'm of the mindset that things like this are like those high school combination locks you have for your locker. If the lock was only one or two numbers, you could randomly guess it even on the first try. However, the more and more numbers and sequences you add to it, the more and more likely the person who figures it out, either knew or had some knowledge of the answers beforehand. So one or two things could be a coincidence but if you have several, it becomes more and more likely someone has knowledge of something."

Greta shook her head in agreement with this assessment and then thanked the Sergeant for his time.

"I'll be in touch." She said as she pulled away.

Chapter 2

Greta poured the bag of various balls onto her floor and sat down beside them. She separated them first by type and then by what they had on them. The sounds of the emptying of her bag and everything rolling around on her floor, caught the attention of Greta's cat. Nacho, who was resting in Greta's room, quickly wandered over to the scene to investigate the strange new sounds.

"Nacho!" Greta said as she tried to scurry away her orange-faced inquisitive cat from playing with her work.

"These aren't yours. If you want a ball, play with that fish ball I got you last week." She said pointing to the corner of the room that had Nachos toys.

"Get now." She said again as the cat licked its paw and batted down its fur just under his ear.

Greta smiled at her cat's cheeky and dismissive attitude then refocused her attention onto what she was doing. Altogether she had fifteen different sports balls. Three tennis balls, two baseballs, and ten golf balls. Both baseballs had the clearest and most writing on them with both Marcus Scone's name and social security number on them. Two of the three tennis balls simply had the word "Help" written on them with permanent marker. The final tennis ball had something different written on it, but it must have landed in some mud which made it difficult to read.

Half of the ten golf balls had the same social security number written on them as the baseballs. The other half had the words "Help Us" or "Please say something" instead. Troubling but not seeing any particular trend she could use, Greta decided to try and clean off the one tennis ball that was illegible.

Attempting to be as careful as possible, Greta only used soap while holding the ball under her kitchen sink. Lightly scratching at the mud that covered the wording, slowly the mud flushed away, revealing more writing.

This time the ball didn't say something she had already seen but rather something slightly different. The writing started with the letter H and appeared to only be four letters long. Unfortunately the remaining letters

were too distorted for her to discern. She could tell it was not the word “Help” as the letters L and P were clearly not used. Not wanting to waste too much time, Greta took a photo of it and decided to focus on it more at a later point.

“It might not even be a word,” she muttered to herself while tossing the ball over to the rest.

Nacho liked this and pounced on the ball in the middle of the room. Then just as fast as he had pounced, he jumped away finding out it was wet. This time Greta did not scold him for his failed attack but rather badgered him for his swift retreat.

“Serves you right.” She said watching him act like he was the victim.

Greta giggled to herself then sat down with her notepad and thought to herself, running through her head what the Sergeant had said with any other ideas she might have to add.

Greta didn’t know anyone she felt comfortable with at the BMV. Nor did she feel comfortable with anyone at Sergeant Cable’s particular Sheriff’s Department. But she did know a former police officer she had used in the past who had been reliable and trustworthy.

She also decided to trust Sergeant Cable’s intuition about construction companies. So Greta thought to herself who she might know that might have some construction information? What company built the Refuge, and maybe some financial paperwork, which always seems to help when looking into topics of mystery.

After thinking a little bit more and thumbing through her cell phone, Greta came across a friend’s number she felt might be able to help. Her friend once was a journalist who she thought might now work for the Curtin County Zoning and Building Department. If right, this would hopefully be an in for her.

At about this time Greta’s phone rang. To her surprise it wasn’t her cell phone but her landline phone, which was odd. She never used this phone and only had it because it came with her cable package. Even more strange, now being a little after two in the morning, the timing for a call was quite odd.

Nonetheless, Greta walked over to her nightstand in the living room

and picked it up.

“Hello?” She said with a little bit of amused interest.

Unfortunately, the novelty of her landline ringing was met with nothing. No sound, no clicking, and no background noise as if someone had accidentally dialed her. Just nothing.

“Hello?” She said again as most would do to make sure her first greeting wasn’t missed. This though was again met with nothing.

Greta hung up the phone a little disappointed in the fact her first use of it turned out to be a glitch.

“Oh well,” she thought to herself.

Greta decided to use this distraction from her work to take a nap. She took a glance at her clock and noticed that she had five hours until Nacho would demand his breakfast. Thinking of Nacho, she looked around and found him already asleep on the jacket she had just taken off. Shaking her head to this, she wondered why she even purchased him beds, then fell asleep herself.

A little sooner than she thought, Nacho woke Greta up just before seven. As he normally did, he pulled at her sheet and relentlessly cried until she got up to fill his bowl.

“Nacho!” Greta said, wishing he came with a snooze button.

Persistent when hungry, Nacho stuck to his plan and kept irritating her until she relented and finally got up.

Still tired, Greta stumbled into the kitchen and grabbed up some moist cat food for her pesky little friend. After stirring it up, as Nacho insists, she placed it on the ground where he gobbled it up as soon as her hand was clear.

Greta herself felt this early morning called for a cup of coffee. Scanning her cupboard she decided french roast would be her pick of the day. After pouring some water into her machine, she walked about the house waiting for it to get hot. Stepping into her living room, she looked out her window to see what the new day was like.

As usual for her area, cars passed, kids walked to school and her

retired neighbor was already outside messing with his garden. Greta smiled at the simplistic routine of it all while now enjoying the smell of her brewing coffee.

Walking back into her kitchen she noticed something near her front door. Upon a little closer look it turned out to be a folded manila envelope. The location of the envelope seemed odd to her. She did not have a mail slot nor had she ever had someone push a letter under the door before. Greta wondered if she might have dropped it, but remembered she only received two regular letters the day before.

Upon picking it up and flipping it over, she noticed the letter was blank. No name, no address, and no stamp. This helped her figure out it had not gone through the mail, but not how it was on the inside of her door. She hadn't seen it when she returned home so she concluded it must have been pushed through her door while she slept.

Curious about her mystery letter, Greta opened the letter which was licked closed. Inside the letter was a single piece of paper. The paper was almost completely blank with the exception of the page number "1" at the bottom. This oddity of someone taking the time to put a blank letter into an envelope and deliver it was strange but not particularly distressing for her. Instead, Greta chalked it up to some local kid playing a prank or even Nacho doing the same.

"Nacho, what are you trying to tell me?" she said waving the envelope at him as he ate.

"If you want to be my pen pal you left out something very important... the words and letters!" she said with a little grin.

"It's okay though," She said as she tossed the envelope into the trash and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"It's still better than a bill."

Greta then sat down in her favorite coffee chair. Kicking her feet up and taking a sip, she went back to thinking about who she should call. After a semi-night's rest, the idea of thinking a bag of golf balls was anything more than a prank started to seem more realistic. Although the Sergeant was convincing, she started to think she might have bought into his story too much. Thomas didn't seem to have anything to gain, but Greta had worked several odd cases before. Most of these cases ended with the discovery that someone had misheard or assumed too much. Almost

none had turned true or led to a decent story. Still, with her other stories on hold, she decided some phone calls really wouldn't hurt.

The first person she wanted to call was her police officer friend Adam Seville. Being a police officer, this she felt he would be the best place for her to start. Calling Adam at seven o'clock, Adam picked up with a little test in his voice.

"Why is my phone ringing this early in the morning?" was the first thing he said to Greta.

Neglecting the fact she had just woke him up, Greta told him her entire story without skipping a beat.

"So that's what I have so far, what do you think?" She said after talking for roughly ten minutes.

"Boy I don't know," Adam said still waking up.

"I would say that does sound strange and out of character for what normal police procedures would be. However, we don't know the Captain's reasoning. I found out early on as a police officer, not to assume. It sounds like a lot of assuming is going on towards the Captain's actions. Did you ask or do we know if the Captain has been known for any sort of nefarious actions in the past?"

"The Sergeant did say his actions were out of character from the known. But no he didn't say anything about the Captain's past and I didn't think to ask." She said feeling a little embarrassed to have missed such a basic question.

"Hmmm..." Adam said in thought.

"If you do feel you have something here, I would say you can't talk to the Captain until you have exhausted every other source you can think of. The thing I would do first is work with what you have. You do have physical evidence with those balls. However I doubt fingerprints at this point will be possible. Without a suspect or someone to compare them to, I think you would be wasting your time and money with prints."

"Do you think a handwriting expert might help?" Greta asked trying to think of another way to come up with some answers.

"Yes I think that is an avenue to explore. Do you have any sample

writings from this missing guy?”

“No, but I will make a note to see if I can come up with anything that might have his known handwriting.”

“Yeah I think that would be one way to work this case. You could confirm that this mystery guy was or was not writing this stuff on the balls. Or, if you can’t find a writing sample for him, you could hopefully at least see if each ball was written by maybe one or more people.” Adam said feeling this might be a good idea.

“That in the least would give you a better idea of if this is a hoax or not. If the handwriting expert finds two or three different writing styles, then I’d say the arrows start to point to this being a prank.”

“Any other ideas?” Greta asked while jotting down the handwriting one.

“Well, if you’re not talking to direct witnesses because they want to remain silent, then work your way down the line of who else they might have talked to. Family, friends, social media posts, that sort of thing. See if any information, one way or another, leaked out. People in general don’t like to hold things in. People like to talk and have a back and forth about things they are concerned about or going on in their life. So the people that are closest to your witnesses may have information, even if they don’t realize they do.”

“I like that.” Greta said writing down social media and friends.

“Boy, I kind of hope there is something to this story. This is sounding like a lot of research and interviews. If I do all of this and find out this is nothing but a prank, I’m almost leaning towards talking to Captain Archabald about Sergeant Cable.”

Adam then spoke up about something he felt was important concerning those two.

“I definitely would not bring up either of those two when you are talking to anyone. Poke your nose around maybe a different story and see if you can wiggle some information out indirectly. If the Sergeant is right, and something bad is going on, you don’t want people saying so and so was asking questions about you. Also, maybe lean on your notoriety a little bit.” Adam said with emphasis.

“People will naturally believe you just because you’re a known news figure. People overall don’t look for hidden motives. They have a tendency, and I guess you could even say gullibility to take things at face value. People trust too much, especially when information is coming from a well-known person like yourself. So make up a cover story and indirectly back door your way into what you really want.”

Greta paused and shook her head in agreement thinking about this.

“I get what you’re saying but I feel like that could backfire.”

“It’s up to you,” Adam said directly.

“I just heavily caution you about taking this on directly if by chance what Sergeant Cable is insinuating is in some way true. Think about it, if the Sergeant is right, then you have maybe a murder victim, a high-up Captain that’s involved, and who all else knows how far it goes or what it’s originally about. The tentacles of this, if true, could be very large and wide.”

“Okay.” Greta said now with some concern and hesitancy in her mind.

“And if this is some sort of cover-up. A person with that high of position would almost certainly need help along the way,” Adam said with a pause in thought.

“You said this Mr. Scone’s personal information was not coming back when the Sergeant ran him, correct?”

“Yeah that’s what he said,” Greta replied.

“Well that wouldn’t be something the Captain would have control over. So there’s at least one other person involved. He would have had to have help from someone at the BMV in order to get that changed.”

Adam stopped again in thought of what all else Greta had advised.

“I would also think some sort of conservation would have had to have taken place between the Captain and someone else high up at the other Sheriff’s Department. Not doing a missing persons report isn’t a throwaway thing. So that makes me think maybe even two higher-ups are involved at that S.O.”

Greta cringed a bit thinking how many layers this story might have. If it wasn't a prank, she agreed with Adam that it probably did then involve several other people.

“I would also think there would have to be at least one, if not more in whatever records departments the Sergeant was looking up. That's not counting if you think a construction company or the employees at The Bradford State Sanatorium are involved in some way.”

Both Greta and Adam went silent for a second.

“Just be careful,” Adam said.

“If you see this is not looking like a prank, then I'd say this will end up being a big cover-up with lots of people involved. Probably even a few of them having some power.”

“Okay,” Greta said wondering if this does get big, if it might be too big for her.

“Alright Greta, I've got to go. If you need whatever, let me know, okay?”

“Okay Adam, thank you for the insight!”

Chapter 3

After getting off the phone with a sports memorabilia authenticator, Greta formulated a few cover stories involving forged autographs she felt would satisfactorily hide her true intent. Greta agreed with the idea she should start with a handwriting expert. The best she could come up with in which she could go in person was a sports authenticator who advised he was a certified graphologist. If he seemed to think the writing was coming from one person, she would then put more time into the case.

However she didn't feel she should reveal the full name of Marcus Scone to the graphologist. Greta didn't know of a sports athlete named Marcus Scone and felt a sports guy wouldn't find her story or autograph believable. So Greta decided to carefully erase the last name and social security numbers from a couple of the balls so each would simply be left with the name "Marcus" on them. She also felt this would hopefully cut off a possible future connection. If by chance someone came snooping, the full name of Marcus Scone would not be known.

Greta then selected the four best golf balls out of the bunch along with the clearest baseball of the two. Next, she took these five balls over to her kitchen and placed them inside her sink. Rummaging through some of her painting supplies, Greta grabbed up a half-full bottle of lacquer thinner. She then gently poured a little bit of it onto a scrap towel she didn't want to keep.

With the towel moistened, she picked up the baseball and carefully brushed away the name "Scone" from the ball. Doing this, she carefully made sure to push away from the first name so as to not accidentally blemish or disturb it. This same method was then used to completely remove his social security number.

With the baseball going the way she wanted, she placed it down and then did each of the four golf balls, carefully repeating the same process. When each ball was satisfactorily altered, Greta mildly ran each under the kitchen facet to remove the odor. After this Greta then went outside and softly scuffed each ball against some dirt and grass. She did this so each ball didn't have an obvious clean spot on them.

To help mask the odor of the lacquer thinner, Greta decided to dab the balls with an air freshener. She didn't want the odor to be too strong

either way, but felt an air freshener was more explainable than the thinner.

Finished with her adjustments, Greta gathered everything she felt she needed and tossed it into her SUV. Driving an hour to the largest mall in her state, Greta found herself a parking spot and hurried on in. Once inside, Greta followed the expert's directions past the clothing stores and into the food court. The gentleman she had spoken with on the phone advised "The Good Old Days" would then be next to a pizza shop on the south side of the court.

The store was indeed where he had said, but was much smaller than she thought. The store only had a single aisle which was very narrow. To maximize space, the store hung items from the ceiling, had rotating cases, and didn't leave one piece of wall uncovered by a poster or jersey.

Walking in, Greta squeezed her way past a few customers and made her way towards the register which was in the very back.

"Is Bob Sterling here?" she asked the young man working the register. He politely nodded and excused himself as he went into the employee's room to retrieve him.

"Greta LaRuse," Bob said upon coming out from the back room.

"I wish I had something for you to sign. It's like the opposite of what I'm used to. I generally need to seek out celebrities for autographs, not have them come to me." He said with a smile.

"Well if you can crack this case for me and give me a few nuggets of information, maybe I'll come back with an autographed article or two although I doubt anyone would want them." Greta said in reply.

"Oh don't be silly. You write great stories. I bet I could get a good rate for an autographed article that's framed well. It would be a nice conversation piece in the very least. But enough of that, come back here so we can talk and you can show me what you have." He said as he opened the "employees only" door and let her in.

"So what do you got?" he asked as he sat down in his doctor's swivel chair and put on his glasses.

"Four golf balls and one baseball." She said pulling them from a bag she had been carrying.

“And what seems to be the problem?” he said as he swiveled around in his chair, placing the balls onto his desktop and looking them over.

“Well I received these from a reliable source. This source advised these are I guess what are called “practice balls.” Maybe you know this already, but I guess forgers use these practice ones to get good before switching over to the real balls.” She explained trying to speak with confidence, knowing this was all a ruse.

“This person practiced using just the name Marcus for whatever reason.”

Bob looked up at her a little confused. Not saying a word, he then refocused his eyes on the balls which he had rolled so that each had its autograph pointing up.

“No last name?” He asked as he removed his glasses and pulled up a magnified glass that was attached to the wall via a flexible arm.

Greta completely ignored this question because she did not have a good answer.

“Kind of seems like a waste,” Bob said after not getting a reply.

“So what are you wanting me to look for here?” he asked as he closely looked at each one, sometimes changing their rotation to get a little better light onto a specific spot.

“A couple things, but really two main ones,” Greta swiftly replied.

“I want to see how many people I am dealing with. I don’t know if you can tell that or not, but it would help me if I knew how many people I might be looking into. Second, and this would somewhat depend upon if we are dealing with one or more than one person, but it would really help me if you might have or could direct me to somewhere for a comparable. I’m guessing the name Marcus is a throwaway name, but have you seen anything like this before?”

“Easy enough,” Bob said, now picking up two of the balls and comparing them side by side.

“Just give me a little bit.”

After comparing the first two he chose, Bob did the same with

another, and another and another. After this visual comparison, Bob opened up his drawer and pulled out a small precise silver ruler. He used this ruler to measure each signature, writing down whatever number he came up with on a sticky note. This too was done with each ball and then affixed to it as to not get each one mixed up.

“Uh-huh,” Bob said as he again grabbed for his magnifying glass and looked at a certain letter.

“Well...” He said as he thumbed through each one over and over.

“You might be getting your chain pulled a bit by your insider.”

“Why’s that?” Greta said, hoping Bob wasn’t onto her or somehow noticed some leftover marker.

“Well, in my experience, most forgers tend to do autographs right-handed. Each of these was done left-handed.”

“So is that a problem?” Greta said not being sure if that was good or not.

“Ummm... No but it’s just not very common. Most people are right-handed which means to make an accurate copy of that person, you also have to do it right-handed. If this guy is practicing left-handed, he either doesn’t know that can be noticed or he is practicing to fake a left-handed athlete.”

“So does that mean you think this was all done by one person?” Greta said with some excitement hidden in her mind.

“I’m leaning towards yes. The fact that they are all left-handed helps. They are all smooth meaning, they don’t look to have lots of stops and stutters where they shouldn’t be. In particular in the “S” and “R” a lot of what I would call personality, appears similar in each of these balls.”

“Like similarity?” Greta asked.

“Yeah so everyone has a particular style, speed, tempo, and whatnot. You can see it in an entire sentence, an entire word, or in just one letter. Whoever signed this makes their R look almost like an N which is pretty specific. The S is also very sharp and flat instead of curved like a snake.” He said pointing to a few of the letters.

“So for me it’s always an adding thing. The more things add up the more and more they are from the same person, or genuine in my field. Left-handed, same tempo, similar size, similar length, specific personal traits, I’d feel confident this was done by one person.” He said as he put down the baseball and rolled away from his desk.

“But if this person may incur charges later on, I’m not a forensic examiner for court. This is just my opinion to help you out.” He said putting his hands up in a stopping motion signaling he didn’t want anything to do with a court case.

“No I understand,” Greta replied

“I’m just looking for answers and direction. Once I’m confident in a story, I’ll publish it... you obviously listed as simply a confidential source. I’ll let the police take over from there if that is necessary.”

“Sounds good to me.” Bob said with a half smile.

“Now what all else did you need help with, comparisons?”

“Yes,” Greta replied pulling out her notepad and noting what Bob had said.

“Well short answer, no,” Bob said kind of glancing at Greta’s notes to make sure he didn’t see his name getting written down.

“As I said, left-handers are something like ten percent of the population to begin with. So that makes these signatures rare off the bat. Second, I see what you’re saying about the name Marcus just being random and these balls being probably more for exercise. However, trying to look at this with a blank slate, I can only think of a few athletes even named Marcus. I don’t recall if they are left-handed or not, but that might be something for you to look into.” Bob said giving what he felt was a good lead to Greta.

“I would lean towards baseball pitchers if that helps. Baseball is a sport that prizes a difference like a person being right or left-handed. The ratio in baseball is way off the ten percent for any other profession or sport. That might be an idea as well.”

“But no comparables?” Greta said acting a little distraught in an attempt to further sell her story.

“No, sorry. If I see anything pass by me with that name or left-handed style, I’ll let you know.” He said trying to help out.

Greta then thanked him, reiterated that she would not name him if something came of her story, and then admired some of his pieces before leaving his store.

“You owe me an autographed article!” he called out to her just before she walked into the food court.

Greta gave him a thumbs up and then quickly made her way back to her SUV. Once there she glanced over her list of contacts for her old friend Ruby. Greta was pretty sure Ruby now worked for the Curtin County zoning and building department. If she did, this might help her with the construction lead. Upon finding Ruby’s number, she tried calling her to see what she may say.

Her initial call went unanswered but when Greta was about halfway home, Ruby returned her call, excited to hear from her old friend.

“Greta, how are you?” She said with a delighted voice.

Greta and Ruby first caught up on old times, family, and other miscellaneous topics including if she currently was working at the zoning department. All this back-and-forth small talk lasted Greta all the way home and onto her couch. Stretching out on her couch, Nacho ran over to pester her for pets.

“Well I’m glad you and the family are doing well,” Greta said before changing the topic to business.

“So on another note, I was wondering if you could get me some information at the zoning department.”

“Sure, what are you looking for?” Ruby asked.

“Well I’m getting quite a bit of information about some construction companies under-reporting items and not paying proper taxes. The more and more I look into this, the more and more I find that this or that company seems to be involved. So I was hoping for a lump of permits and documents during about a seven-year stretch for some larger construction companies.” Greta said hoping Ruby wouldn’t ask too many questions.

“Okay,” Ruby said, realizing this would be a larger request.

“Can you narrow it down a bit? Are you looking for certain areas, certain cities? Can I ask what companies in particular you might want me to flag?”

“Honestly I’m leaving my options open because this has continually branched out so much. It started with one company then I found another was doing the same thing, then another. So I’m just going at it as if every company may be doing something along these lines. So I’ll just take whatever you can give me. I know it will take some time to thumb through everything, but just larger companies starting about fifteen years ago and then ending about eight to nine years after that.”

“Okay,” Ruby said with a little exasperation.

“Give me a couple days to work on it. It will take me some time to dig it all up. I’ll also have to redact some things because some information doesn’t fall under public record.”

“I understand... but if you have any wiggle room in those redaction’s I would appreciate it,” Greta said in a winking voice.

Ruby laughed at Greta’s suggestion.

“I’ll do what I can. There are a few things that our office has discretion over, so I’ll see what I can do.”

Greta then thanked her for her time, agreed that they needed to talk more often, and advised Ruby she would pick up whatever cost the zoning department might charge.

After her phone call Greta stretched a little more on her couch. Nacho had long since left finding Greta had largely ignored him. But Nacho got over this and started to goof around in front of Greta.

Nacho first goofed by chasing around a fly that must have snuck its way in. Nacho had always been a little awkward for a cat and routinely leapt over the fly in his attempts to catch it. Undeterred by this, Nacho picked himself up and continued his pursuit into the corner by Greta’s coat rack.

Thump, crash went Nacho and the coat rack as he attempted to detain and interrogate the fly as to why he was flying in his house.

Probably laughing, the fly simply flew off as Nacho came out from under a coat. Determined to find this intruder, Nacho ran off into the kitchen thinking the fly went in there.

Greta could almost sense the fly was now only messing with Nacho for good sport. Smiling at this, she went over to her coat rack and picked up Nacho's mess. In doing so, Greta noticed something yellow stuck in the seam of the doorway near the hinge. Pulling it through the closed door she discovered it was another letter. Greta stared at it for a bit, then straightened up and looked outside to see if maybe someone had just pushed it through.

Not seeing anyone, she looked it over to notice it again was blank with no stamp, no sender or receiver. She flipped the envelope over to see that this package was also sealed. Looking to be the same style as the previous envelope she opened it to once again find a blank note. This note however was slightly different in saying "Pg 2." instead of just the number "1".

This second note was a little more puzzling. Not that it revealed anything more, but that it happened again. Yes, it could still be a prank by one of her local neighbor kids, but this just didn't have the feel of that. Puzzled and with slight concern, Greta decided to call her police officer friend Adam to seek his advice.

Greta returned to her couch and dialed him up. Trying a couple of times, Greta unfortunately only heard the phone continually ring. Eventually, Greta decided to just leave him a message and advised him to please call, although it was not a rush.

Chapter 4

A couple of days went by with no return call from Adam and no update from Ruby. Although a little distressed over the envelope, the failed returned call wasn't one hundred percent out of the ordinary for Adam. Adam didn't really like cell phones and was often busy playing catch-up at work.

Instead of bothering both of them again, Greta decided to let it go and to focus on one of her other cases which she had let slip a bit in memory and in work.

For this, Greta went into her little home office and picked up a stack of papers she had in a bin. It wasn't uncommon for her to work more than one case at a time. Whenever Greta might hit a pause in one, she would simply place what she had into one of these bins and look into another.

Sorting through her personal notes and any documents she had for the first report she pulled out, she started to remind herself where she was at and what specifically she was waiting on or had yet to do.

This particular case was about suspected booking errors which were causing investors in a certain company to continually lose money. This case, however, although important especially to the people potentially being victimized, wasn't as exciting and was also hemmed up due to a waiting period on a few freedom of information acts.

At about the time she realized she really couldn't do anything with her paused cases, her phone rang. Eager to get away from the old cases, Greta leapt up and hurried over to her phone. The phone vibrated on the table as it rang twice before she was able to pick it up.

"Hello?" She said eagerly, hoping the call was not spam.

"Hi." Ruby replied to Greta's delight.

Ruby not knowing Greta had been waiting with such readiness, was surprised by how excited Greta's welcome was. Finding it funny, Ruby laughed it off and started with what she had found.

"So I don't know if you're going to be happy with me or not," Ruby

said, causing Greta to worry.

“But you should be getting a large package, probably today, with a ton of paperwork in it.”

Delighted to hear this, Greta went straight to the door to see if maybe she had missed the package.

“No, no... whatever you sent me I’m more than happy to have. You said it might get here today?” She said not seeing it no matter what angle she looked out her window.

“Yes I’m thinking today, but if not today then tomorrow.”

“Okay. So what’s the bad news then?” Greta said, knowing what she would be doing for the rest of the day.

“The bad news is that inside the package is a bill as well.”

“About how much is it?” Greta asked.

“Well I pulled a lot of reports over the time frame you gave me and it ended up being a little over twelve hundred pages worth of stuff. At ten cents a piece, that equaled out to a little over a hundred and twenty dollars plus shipping. So the cost along with however many reports you now need to thumb through is the bad news.”

“Oh no, that’s okay.” Greta said knowing she only actually wanted one of those reports.

“I actually expected more.”

“I did do you a favor though and left some of the contact information within each report. I know you would have figured those little tidbits out anyways, so I really didn’t see a need to redact any of it. However, there were a few things I needed to redact that I just couldn’t get around.”

“No I understand.” Greta said positioning herself by the door.

“When I get it, I’ll cut you a check for the amount I owe and will send it out right away.”

“Thank you,” Ruby replied.

“Well I hope all that helps you. Good luck with the case and let me know if I can be of any other help.”

Greta said she would, thanked her again, and then let her go. Greta then waited attentively at her door, feeling a little like a pet waiting for its owner to arrive home. She even found herself visually chasing cars like a dog might, hoping to see a shipping carrier or post office truck.

After about an hour of this, her phone became more interesting and she found herself scrolling through the day’s blogs and chatter. This celebrity did this, that politician argued that, a local restaurant was offering free sliders after six o’clock, nothing, nothing, nothing. Her boredom even left her to search for Halloween outfits for Nacho.

The time moved much quicker with her focus on her phone rather than her front door. After a while of searching, she had almost lost herself in browsing. Looking at another cat outfit, Greta had forgotten about her expected package until she heard some footsteps and a knock on her door.

Greta leapt up and opened the door as soon as her excited hands could do so. Hoping this was her package and not another mystery letter, Greta swung open the door and looked around. Not seeing a package truck dropped her hopes a bit until she saw a brown box off to the side of her porch.

Greta wasted no time in swooping the package up and taking it to her couch. Excited to see what Rudy had got her, she opened it up and discarded her bill. Pulling the pages from the box she noticed they were stacked by date. Knowing about when the Refuge was built, she backtracked until she started to see a series of papers labeled “The Bradford State Sanatorium and Refuge.”

Out of the twelve hundred some-odd papers she had Ruby pull, only five of them were for the Refuge. That wasn’t actually factual either because the first page was merely a cover sheet with mostly zoning information.

It was hard for Greta not to think about how this should have cost her basically nothing, but the few forms she had ended up being well worth the cost. Looking them over she noticed the forms had several names, numbers, and addresses. This made the bill she didn’t want to see worth every penny regardless of the waste.

The construction company that was responsible for doing the

majority of the work on the Refuge was the Waterton Corporation, run by R.M. Pierce. Greta was familiar with him and the company. The Waterton Corporation was well known for its out-of-the-box architectural designs which often won them contracts when a fashionable look was desired. However, because of their creative designs, they were also known for being expensive.

True to Ruby's word, not only was the public phone number for R.M. Pierce on the paperwork but two of his private numbers were also on the forms, not redacted.

Knowing R.M. Pierce would probably be a little bit harder of an interview, Greta prepared for a while before dialing him up. Planning out both her real and side stories, Greta figured the one thing that would always be on her side was the fact he wasn't prepared for any line of questions.

As she dialed him up and heard the phone ring, Greta sorted out her paperwork the way she wanted it. Tearing out her question page, she flipped to a page that was blank in order to have plenty of room for her notes. Greta also wanted the page of questions she wrote nearby, so she tucked it by her leg if by chance she stumbled.

The phone rang about four times before a tired-sounding male voice picked up.

"Hello?" Mr. Pierce said obviously being awakened from a nap.

"Hello, my name is Greta LaRuse. I'm an independent journalist. Is this R.M. Pierce?" She asked quickly.

"It is. Who did you say you are?" He replied sluggishly.

"Greta LaRuse. I'm an independent journalist. I have been researching some of your buildings in the Curtin County area and was hoping to do a short Sunday morning featurette on them if you have a few minutes you could spare?"

Greta felt this was a great cover story because she actually did do some Sunday morning stories every now and again. Additionally, she felt she could pretty much get two for the price of one with this idea. She could interview Mr. Pierce about his buildings and write a short fluff piece that would make him happy. Then while doing this, she could secretly get the information she needed.

“Ha Ha Ha,” laughed Mr. Pierce to Greta’s surprise.

“Ms. LaRuse I have learned there are two people you don’t trust in life. Politicians are by far number one. But make no mistake Ms. LaRuse, the media is and always will be number two.” He said to Greta’s dismay.

“You didn’t call me for a featurette. Why are you really calling me today Ms. LaRuse?”

Greta was stumbled a bit by all her planning being tossed out the window so quickly. With the tables being turned on her so fast, she decided to speak plainly.

“Alright, Mr. Pierce.” Greta said, knowing she had one chance to be honest or else he would probably hang up on her.

“I’m calling about your work on the Bradford State Sanatorium and Refuge,” she said, almost holding her breath.

“Ah yes.” Mr. Pierces replied.

“I did do that, didn’t I.”

“Yes you did sir, and I was wondering if I could talk to you a little bit about it.”

“Ms. LaRuse, you now know I don’t care for the media. I’m not interested in doing an interview. The only thing I am interested in is how you got my number.”

Hearing this, Greta felt trapped. Her planning had gone out the window and Mr. Pierce was unwilling to talk. Being uncomfortably quiet for a second, Greta decided to simply push out her best question, hoping he would feel forced to answer.

“With all due respect Mr. Pierce, I’m just wondering why a builder like yourself, someone known not to be cheap and known for building alluring and grandiose custom works, would agree to do such a bland and plain wall that any start-up company could do?”

“I see.” Mr. Pierce said, not shying away from the question.

“Interesting right? Why do you think that may be?”

Ecstatic he didn't hang up on her, Greta fumbled through her thoughts as to why this may be. He was independently wealthy, so it wasn't for money. He always seemed to have new buildings, so she didn't feel it was for work. Drawing a blank, Greta spoke candidly to him about the question, hoping he might help her out.

"I honestly don't know Mr. Pierce. I don't think it's money and I don't think you needed the work. I don't know and I was hoping you could tell me."

Instead of answering this directly, Mr. Pierce compared it to a prior experience.

"Once I asked my dad for help with my math when I was a little boy. I was terrible with math and he was a cost estimator for a large shipping company, so I knew he knew math. However, after I asked him, I quickly found out my dad wasn't going to simply give me the answer. He made me work the math problem in more ways than the teacher did until I figured it out." Mr. Pierce said, chuckling about the memory.

"He was able to teach me how to do this or that mathematical problem by turning and bending it in different ways until I found what best showed me how to get the problem done. Now Ms. LaRuse." He said speaking up a bit.

"I can't give you the answer I think you might be looking for. That said, maybe I can turn it in a way that will help you figure it out."

Mr. Pierce then cleared his throat and continued.

"I can't give you the answer because I don't know the answer. I only suspect I know. But a piece I can give you that might help is what your question asks. Why was I picked? Your right, the wall itself is too simple for what I do."

Greta listened intently as he carried on.

"I wondered at first the same thing and am a little surprised this is just now being asked of me... why did they want someone who was known for being an innovative designer? Like you said, my talents are wasted on what you see... but maybe what they wanted my talents for was something you don't see?"

Mr. Pierce let that idea sink in for Greta.

“Have you seen any of the blueprints for the wall Ms. LaRuse?”

“No I have not,” she replied.

“They weren’t in with the zoning paperwork I requested.” She said, revealing how she got his phone number.

“Well there’s probably a reason for that,” he said with a little bit of jest.

“You see Ms. LaRuse, only one-third of the wall is visible to you. So if you can only see one-third, where are the other two-thirds you can’t see?”

Thinking the answer was obvious but not wanting to sound dumb, Greta thought about it for a bit before saying anything. Was the wall very thick? Did it contain something inside besides concrete and rebar? Maybe there was a part of the wall that she hadn’t seen that might require architectural design?

“Is it underground?” she said hesitantly feeling this still had to be it.

“Good.” He said liking that she was connecting the dots.

“So if the wall is like thirty feet high, you’re telling me it goes underground for about sixty feet? Why did they want that?” Greta asked with interest.

“I asked the same thing when they told me what they wanted, but they said it was classified. So I don’t know. I could only speculate for myself.”

“Well could you tell me what you are thinking and was anything else considered “Classified?” Greta asked, writing note after note.

“On what I was contracted to do, only that one thing was flagged as “Classified.” Besides that, I don’t know. They already had the halfway ward built prior to my company making the wall, so maybe the ward did but nothing was disclosed to me. We just did the wall and connected it to the ward.”

“So is what you told me classified?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he said in a somewhat unsure voice.

“The only part that was classified that I wasn’t supposed to talk about was “How” it’s built underground. They wanted me as the builder to bring my unique touch to this underground portion... and I’m sorry, I can’t talk about that. But originally the blueprints mentioned it being extra thick, sixty feet deep, and reinforced with metal inside. I never agreed to not disclose that, so I’m going to say I’m fine.”

“So if the depth of it wasn’t originally classified, then why are the blueprints missing?” She said flipping her notebook over to the next page.

“Well I’m guessing so people like yourself don’t show up here and start to ask questions. That would be my guess.”

“So you said you had speculated to yourself as to why it was built so deep. Can you tell me what you’re thinking?”

“Let me flip that back onto you Ms. LaRuse with the information you currently know. What do walls do? Why would it need to be substantially larger underground than above ground? What do you think answers those questions?”

Greta thought to herself for a moment about what Mr. Pierce said. The only logical thing she could come up with was for whatever reason, the government was more concerned about something going underneath the wall than over top of it.

“Is someone afraid people are going to try and dig in?”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Pierce said in a way Greta knew she got the answer wrong.

“Remember, the Refuge was built to separate those who contracted the Nz4 virus from those who haven’t. The idea had almost a ninety percent public backing. People who don’t have it don’t want it.”

“So you’re thinking the barrier was built to keep the people who caught the virus from getting out?”

“Ms. LaRuse, I told you I’d bend your mind a little bit and let you figure out the answers.” Mr. Pierce said referencing how his dad taught him.

“I have no proof of anything and nothing tangible to give you. But those who want the truth will dig for it and are the most likely to do something with it once they find it.”

Greta thought about this for a second and realized their conversation was most likely over.

“Okay Mr. Pierce. Thank you for your insights.”

Before ending his conversation with Greta, Mr. Pierce ended with one last curled thought.

“Ms. LaRuse, being a journalist, think back to what the media was supposed to be. The inception of journalism wasn’t to be footmen or presenters of false colors... Be careful Ms. LaRuse. Lots have lost confidence in this idea which is very dangerous for those who do not walk the same path as they.”

Chapter 5

Greta watched Nacho as he milled around the house looking for a good resting place. Nacho generally had two go-to spots. Each of these indicated to Greta what his intent was, a nap or he was really going to bed. If he laid down on the extended window sill above the gas heater, he was just taking a nap. If he went in circles just to the right of the window, he was calling it a night.

Watching Nacho jump up on the sill and then back down to the ground was a welcomed distraction. Seeing him think it out was fun and less stressful than thinking about the Sheriff's department. The thought of her story though still tickled the back of her mind as more and more it started to look like there was a possible cover-up by the Sheriff's Department and maybe even the Refuge.

Nacho looked at Greta as she thought, almost judging if she would be working or not. Then making his decision, he walked over to some blankets near the window and started messing with them. Eventually, Nacho walked in circles until he finally had the blankets just the way he wanted.

Unlike Nacho, Greta was not tired and instead decided to go for a night's drive. Driving for her was always relaxing and seemed to help her focus her mind. So whenever she came across something that was making her stumble, a country drive would soon follow. Night driving on top of this was especially helpful because it was more calming. The traffic was much lighter and if she so desired, a pause and a walk was also relaxing.

On this night, Greta thought driving around the area of the Refuge would also be helpful. She personally had never purposely driven around the entire facility. Not ever having a reason to, she instead had only driven past the main parts that were on the main roads.

For her little adventure, she grabbed four things. Her notebook was first as she tried to always have it on her for any random thoughts. A flashlight and a snack were second and third, both just in case. Finally her camera was fourth. With a special zoom, it somewhat doubled as a pair of binoculars if she noticed something far away.

The drive to the Refuge was just under twenty miles from her house. Being a quiet night, she figured she could maybe make it in about fifteen minutes. Along her trip, she fiddled with her radio and passed only the occasional truck and patrol car. Grabbing her snack and listening to talk radio for a change, the night's air and quiet breeze brought her the alleviation she desired.

Upon entering eyesight of the Refuge, she had forgotten that the Refuge was not lit up like a normal prison. This was done so because the light disturbed the individuals inside who were much more active at night as opposed to the day. The Refuge even got the county to limit its street lights for this reason. This made the Refuges wall harder to see at night but unique in the lighting they did have. Around the base of the entire wall were very dim spotlights that focused mainly on the base of the wall instead of its peaks.

Along her drive around the complex, which she knew would be time-consuming, she spotted the occasional security guard who conducted foot patrols similar to that of the old constables of the late nineteenth century. Each had an assigned area they would walk which stretched for about a mile before they doubled back.

All of these guard were only armed with flashlights and radios. Most could be seen listening to personal radios on their own headset devices. This left Greta to believe their jobs were no more than walking security cameras than anything else.

The wall itself was steady and similar in appearance and height along the entire route. If you were to close your eyes and move fifteen minutes in any direction, the wall would look exactly the same. Thus, the drive around the complex became boring fairly quickly.

However, about halfway around the complex, her driving plan paid off as the thought of talking to a physician she knew came into her mind. Greta didn't know much about the Nz4 virus other than what everyone else knew. It was contagious, it was degenerative and it would change you both physically and mentally in only a few weeks.

Greta stopped her vehicle along the side of the road to write down this idea. While stopped she pulled out her camera to snap a few photos. This allowed her to use the zoom to see if she might be able to get another perspective. This normally beneficial tool ended up being for not as the Refuges lights were too dim to make out anything of note.

Just before putting her car into gear one of the guards approached her stopping about thirty feet away. Looking like he might be calling her plate out over his radio, Greta put the car back into park. When Greta got out of her car in an attempt to talk to the guard, he turned around and went back to his normal patrol. Greta did try calling out to him but decided against chasing him down. This she felt would create more of a scene than she wanted to attract.

After spending a good two hours driving around the facility, Greta finally reached the road she started on. Not having any more ideas come to mind, Greta decided this little venture was good enough and drove home.

When Greta got home, she noticed a note stuck to her garage door as it started up. Greta quickly stopped the door before it went up, then lowered it so she could grab it. Taking it down and looking it over, the note was simple and to the point.

“Please meet me at the gas station at four o’clock. Thomas.” The single note read, completely typed with only his name underlined.

Looking at her phone, she noticed it was now almost four. This made her plan out her drive in which she realized that even if she hurried, she would be late. Rushing to her vehicle Greta still felt that even if she was late, Thomas probably wouldn’t leave right away. Since he asked for this meeting, he would probably be more than likely to wait a little past four. With this in mind, she pulled out of her driveway and hoped the only police car she might see was the Sergeant’s.

About two miles away from the gas station, she passed a patrol car which turned on its headlights and followed her. This to her was a mix of emotions because she didn’t know if it was Sergeant Cable or maybe someone else.

Not expecting a patrol car to follow her gave her a problem. If it was not the Sergeant, should she still pull into the gas station? If it was the Sergeant, might he think she was ditching him? These types of scenarios played through her head until she decided to pass the gas station unless his cruiser was already there.

As she came within sight of the gas station, another patrol car could be seen parked across the street in an empty lot. Looking over to the station’s employee and regular parking spaces, no patrol cars were evident, to Greta’s dismay.

As she had decided, Greta passed by the gas station as if it was never on her mind. Just after she passed it, the patrol car which had been following her turned on its traffic lights. Greta hesitated a bit upon seeing this but knew she needed to stop. Finding a level place for herself, she pulled over there, then lowered her window.

After a few tense moments, Greta spotted a tall thin man walking up to her vehicle. The officer did as many officers do, shining his light into her eyes and resting his hand on his gun.

“Driver’s license and insurance please.” Said the young man as he shined his light around the inside of her vehicle.

Greta reached over to her purse and produced the items he requested. The young deputy looked at them and then looked back at her.

“Are you the owner of this vehicle?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” Greta replied.

“May I ask why you stopped me tonight sir?” Greta politely tried to ask.

The deputy dismissed her question and continued asking his own.

“Where you going tonight?”

On the fly, Greta quickly fabricated a story that was half true.

“I’m a night owl and like to drive around at night to clear my thoughts. Did I do something wrong officer?” She asked again trying to dodge any further questions about why she was out.

“I see.” He said looking into her back seat.

“I’m gonna have to ask you to step out of the vehicle mam.” He then said refocusing his sights on her.

“Get out?” Greta said confused and slightly alarmed.

“Yes mam, we got a call of a suspicious vehicle matching yours being driven by a female.” He replied and then again asked for her to step out of the vehicle.

Greta complied with the deputy's orders, turning off her vehicle and stepping out. As she did this, the deputy instructed her to walk with him to his cruiser. Not wanting to question the deputy, she walked with him until she was told to stop.

When she got back to his car, she noticed another stocky deputy standing at about the corner of the cruiser. Greta squinted at him but couldn't quite see this deputy because of the cruiser's flashing lights. Raising her hand just above her eyes, Greta tried to focus on him before he spoke out.

"Are you Greta LaRuse?" he asked.

"I am," she replied trying to position herself better to focus in on him more.

"What are you doing out here tonight Greta?"

Wanting her story to match, Greta quickly reverted back to the answer she had given the tall deputy.

"I'm just taking a midnight drive."

"Unlikely." This new deputy said almost rudely.

"Are you here to meet someone?"

"No of course not. What are you talking about?" Greta said trying to keep up her story while becoming very alarmed.

"I don't think you're being honest with me, Ms. LaRuse." He said while instructing the taller deputy to turn down his lights.

Upon doing this, Greta got her first look at this deputy. He was a seniored officer with a well-kept uniform and more than the normal amount of awarded insignia's on his chest.

"I think you're here to meet someone at this gas station." He stated, pointing back to it.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Greta slightly chuckled as if he was way off.

After saying this, the older deputy looked over to the younger deputy

and motioned to him. When he did this, Greta took a second to see if she could see the older deputy's name plate.

“Captain Archabald.” He said, noticing Greta was looking.

Greta's heart sunk upon hearing the Captain's name and then seeing it for herself imprinted on his tag.

“I think you're here to meet Sergeant Cable aren't you?”

Greta ignored this question and asked one of her own.

“Captain, do you often work third shift and make traffic stops?” She asked with some obvious disdain.

“Nope.”

Chapter 6

Greta woke up in a dark cold room with an immense headache. Feeling the back of her head to see what was wrong, she felt a rather large lump that was very tender.

“What happened?” She thought to herself as she tried to stand, but decided against it as her legs teetered beneath her.

Greta tried to remember what had occurred but had a considerable blank in her memory. She recalled talking to Mr. Pierce and driving around the Refuge, but couldn't recall anything after that.

Looking around the room, Greta saw nothing that indicated where she was. The room itself was simply one big box made of concrete. The room had no chairs, no benches, no windows, and even no toilet. The room was simply plain, damp, and cold.

What the little room did have was as basic as it could get. The room had one light, two solid steel doors, and a bubble camera. Both steel doors looked fit for a vault, had large metal hinges, and were positioned opposed from one another.

The only difference she saw in anything in the room was between the two doors. One door was blank while the other had what looked like a very heavy latch.

Eventually Greta's legs seemed a little more sure of themselves. Standing up, she slowly walked over to the latch and tried to lift it. As she gave it a tug, she started to hear a slight motor sound coming from above. Focusing in on the sound, she concluded it was the security camera following her around.

No more had she determined the camera had been making the noise, another noise rang out to her surprise. This time it was some sort of siren that was muffled by the room. This siren went off three times before everything went back to silence. Although muffled from inside the room, Greta didn't appreciate the screeching sound which only agitated her headache more.

Greta now having her wits about her a little more, patted herself down to see if she had her phone or anything else on her. Not finding anything, Greta almost wondered if she was in a dream and called out for help.

“Hello... Can anyone hear me?” She said a couple of times.

Following her second call for help, another motor sound started up. This time it sounded much more powerful and shook the room slightly. Hearing this coming from behind her, Greta spun around towards the door with the latch and noticed it was starting to rise. Alarmed, Greta stepped backwards and retreated to a corner, sinking herself into it as much as she could.

Rotating upward from one end, The latch rose to what appeared to be its maximum height. Once the latch was clear from the door the motor sound stopped. Not knowing what was going on, Greta was startled by the door that suddenly flung open by itself.

Very concerned with the combination of her injury, the room, and the door opening by itself, Greta grimaced and curled up in the corner to protect herself.

Greta stayed motionless in her corner with her eyes closed and hands over her head for what felt like an eternity. Not hearing anything more happen, Greta eventually looked up and towards the door.

While the oversized door and its manual opening was scary, what the door revealed was not. Getting a glimpse, Greta noticed a normal starry night with a nice fall-feeling breeze that was taking over the room.

Seeing nothing negative happening and with no other present options, Greta eventually got up. Both tentatively and vigilantly still unsure, Greta walked over to the door and peeked outside. Looking left then looking right with her head barely outside, she again saw nothing alarming. Although dark, everything she saw seemed like what one would typically expect to see on a moonlight night.

Greta could see the tops of the trees against the sky and some bushes that grew by their sides. A clearing seemed to be made between her and the trees. This open space was overgrown with grass and had clearly gone unattended for a long time. The only thing that looked alarming on the outside was what was attached to the cell she had just looked out of.

Attached to the enclosure and stretching as far as she could see was a large wall on either side. The wall was only lit by the moon so the make and detail of it were still unknown. Seeing this was not entirely upsetting but it did leave her with the feeling she might be on the inside of an enclosure.

“Hello.” She called out to anyone who might hear her as she took a step outside the cell.

“Can anyone hear me?” She said, then went quiet awaiting a reply.

Hearing nothing but the occasional hoot or chirp, Greta called out again a little louder this time.

“Hey this isn’t too funny... is anyone out there?” Greta yelled taking a few more steps outside.

Upon this call, the door which had let her out suddenly closed, freezing Greta in her spot. Startled, Greta decided against any further calls and slowly backpedaled towards the wall.

Around the time she reached the wall, Greta started to hear the cracking of twigs and the rustling of leaves. These universal sounds of something moving in the distance had never been so terrifyingly loud as it was at this moment.

Not knowing what she should do, she slowly knelt down and picked up the closest branch she could. Tensely scrutinizing every sound that was made, Greta felt like a cornered animal about to be attacked.

When Greta felt her nerves had reached their summit, another more disturbing sound made itself known. It first started as a muddled gasp which was soon followed by the shuffling of feet towards her direction. No words were spoken nor were any indications given that whatever was approaching had gentle intent.

In an attempt to hide herself, Greta slowed her breathing and sank into the wall as much as she could. At this moment when whatever was approaching her was on the cusp of revealing itself, a faint voice spoke to her in no more than a whisper.

“As soon as you hear rocks hitting the wall, you need to run to my voice as fast as you can.” The whispering voice said from her left.

Not two seconds later, several dings and cracking could be heard of rocks hitting the wall. This sound caught the attention of whatever was shuffling its feet, which revealed itself to be in the form of a man, limping and slumped over.

This apparently injured man ran to the sound of the rocks along with two others that Greta had been unaware of.

“Now!” the whispering voice said.

“Now! What are you doing?”

Greta not purposely ignoring what this entity was trying to tell her, simply fell into a mesmerized fixation of both her fear and fascination. Trying to figure out what was going on, Greta watched the injured man run towards the portion of the wall that was struck by the stones.

To Greta’s chilling awe, once the three individuals reached the wall, all three started to ravage the area. They attacked the wall, pulling plants from the ground and heaving first fist and eventually mouth fulls of dirt this way and that.

This inhuman response to the simple striking of rocks was without a doubt the most petrifying thing Greta had ever seen. These actions were even beyond animalistic and somewhere in the area of unhinged and unstable.

As soon as this thought passed through her mind a hand grabbed her and pulled her aside.

“Now, Now.” The voice said pulling her away from what she had just witnessed.

“There are more coming. We can not stay here.”

Going based off more reaction than anything else, Greta followed the individual who pulled her deep into the woods. Every so often this individual stopped, hunkered down, and became quiet.

“Shhhh.” He said, pushing her behind a tree on one occasion or below a grass line on another.

Greta didn’t ask any questions during all this. Not that she didn’t want to, but rather because she simply couldn’t. This individual apparently

helping her demanded silence even if nobody was around.

The constant running and hiding didn't give Greta much time to see this man. However, every now and again, Greta still caught a glimpse of him from the side or while standing still. She already knew he was a man based on his voice but eventually noticed he was thin, wore tattered clothes, and had a somewhat tangled beard.

Eventually, after running and hiding for about twenty minutes, they came to a four-wheeler that was covered in sheets.

"Get on." He said as he jumped on and started it.

Feeling that if he was going to hurt her, he probably would have by now, Greta got on the ATV and held on tight. Her confidence in getting on was soon tested as this ride also became nerve-wracking.

First, although it was dark, the thin man drove the four-wheeler through the woods without his headlights on. Using only the moon and his personal knowledge, the man whizzed past downed trees and large boulders without hesitation.

Second, more of these brutish animals appeared out of nowhere. Every time they did, they either chased after or lunged at the four-wheeler if they got close.

After almost an hour of this, they reached another forest which was extremely dense. The thin man abruptly stopped, asked Greta to get off the ATV and then covered it up with large branches and leaves which were nearby.

"There, come on. We need to go this way about a mile." The man said not wasting any time.

He led Greta on a fast walk through the thick forest until they came to a dilapidated road which cut through the woods. They followed this road until they came to a damaged mail box which was about fifty yards from where they had emerged.

"Stop." He said in a low voice, holding his hand up.

The man likewise froze and looked around in each direction before proceeding down a gravel driveway that led to a shadowy house. It wasn't until they reached the house did the man say anything other than a

direction.

“I’m Grant.” He said shaking her hand and leading her up the front porch.

“You will be safe here tonight but we will need to remain quiet so that they don’t hear us and try to get in.”

Grant opened the door to the lightless house and guided her through one room and into another. Greta’s eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but since the house had no light, it was still difficult for her to see any detail in the house or make out much more of him.

“Here.” He said after guiding her to one corner of a large room.

“Here is a couch and here is a blanket. You can rest here for the night and we can talk when you get up.” He said as he handed the blanket over to her.

“But you must stay in this house, don’t answer the door or make any sounds until I come get you in the morning. Okay?”

These instructions weren’t very reassuring for her but she didn’t argue with him about them. Instead, she laid down on the somewhat lumpy couch and covered herself with the blanket Grant had provided her.

Chapter 7

Greta awoke in the morning to the sound of at least two people walking around in the room above her. Neither seemed to be in a hurry and would occasionally move from time to time.

Listening to the moans and groans the wooden floors made, Greta sat up from the couch and looked around. The first thing she looked for was a clock to see what time it was. During her visual search for a clock, Greta was surprised to see what was or was not in the room. Her couch was the only piece of furniture in the room other than a single wooden chair. The room had no tables or stands but did have two wooden crates. Each crate supported several candles that had been clearly used with some melting down the side.

Nothing hung from the walls, the carpet was very worn, and although the room she was in only had two windows, each was crudely boarded up.

Just after Greta had a look around, Grant came into the room.

“Good morning, or maybe I should say afternoon. The girls are cutting up some vegetables and will be in here soon.” He said with a smile.

Being daylight, Grant was completely visible for her to see. He was indeed a thin man, bordering on the level of starvation. He had a beard which was more kept than she thought but not evenly trimmed. He was about six feet tall, worn as if he worked long days, had pale skin, and wore a pair of sunglasses.

“Oh thank you.” She said as a polite reply before diving into the prior night’s issues.

“I appreciate the hospitality but...” she said before being cut off by Grant.

“I know you have lots of questions but let’s hold off on those until you get some food in you. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day they say.... although it’s actually lunchtime now.” He said with a little humor in his voice.

“Okay.” She replied, not quite thinking food trumped her attempted assault or their midnight ride.

Still, being that he had clearly helped her, she respectfully complied and waited for the girls Grant had mentioned. Greta didn’t need to wait long. About a minute after Grant asked for her to wait, two little girls walked into the room holding a plate of freshly cut vegetables and a glass of water. Both girls were young, not toddlers or adolescents but not yet teenagers either. Both had brown curly hair, brown eyes, and big dimples when they smiled. Both wore similar dresses that appeared homemade but done very well.

“Here you go.” The older girl said with a hint of shyness to herself as she passed the plate to Greta.

“Oh thank you.” Greta replied as both girls quickly retreated to Grant after the plate had been turned over.

Grant then introduced both the girls as he gently put his hand behind each of their backs.

“This is Harriet.” He said motioning to the older girl.

“And this is Nanny.” He said motioning to the younger girl.

Both girls smiled upon hearing their name but didn’t say a word.

“And your name is?” Grant asked as an introduction for Greta to the girls.

“Yes of course, My name is Greta LaRuse. I’m happy to meet the two of you.”

Both girl’s smiles remained on their faces as their shyness showed through a little more.

“Thank you, girls, that will be it for now. Please go back upstairs for me for a bit while I talk to Greta for a little while.” He said as he motioned for both girls to leave the room.

Both girls promptly did as they were told without a word or argument. They both swiftly left the room and could be heard going up the stairs and into another room.

“Very pretty little girls.” Greta said of them.

“Yes, yes they are. They are also very kind and both have big hearts.” Grant said before pulling up the lone chair in the room and sitting on it in front of the couch.

“So I would imagine you have a question or two for me, correct?” He said with a smile.

“Yes, I do.” Greta said sitting back on the couch.

Having a good idea of what she would say, Grant gave her the answer before she could ask.

“The easiest way to explain everything is to say you are in the Bradford Refuge.”

Greta’s face quickly switched from inquisitiveness to befuddlement.

“I’ve had this conversation now with a few people over the years. I know it’s hard to swallow and only leads to more questions, but try to save yourself some time, and trust me when I say, this is where you are. Now, why you are here is the interesting part. Even though you might not know, you actually do know this more than I. However, the reasons are usually about the same. You probably found something out, were a political problem, or just rubbed someone the wrong way. Do either of these sound right? Were you running for office by chance?” He said deducing she was one of these based on his prior experience.

“Wow.” Greta said not answering his question.

“You have been nice to me and all but you want me to believe I’m in the zombie jail?” She said with her eyebrows raised.

“Yep. What do you think was chasing you last night?” Grant answered in regards to the many inhuman creatures they dodged all night.

“I don’t know, I was hoping this bump on my head may have contributed to something but I’m not in the Refuge. You’re going to have to give me a lot more to believe that.”

Grant sat quietly for a moment and didn’t verbally combat her. As he mentioned to Greta, he had been down this road before and understood her skepticism.

“Okay, you know what, let me start over.” He said, trying a slightly different approach.

“My name is Grant Kennel. I was a biochemist who worked for a relatively smaller company that really doesn’t matter anymore. I was married for a couple years but my wife and I didn’t yet have any children. My team made a name for ourselves in the chemical world by constructing a compound that assisted the body in the thawing process. This was obviously for people that had been cryogenically frozen although you wouldn’t have heard of that because it was classified at the time.” Grant said matter of factly.

“Because of this and other breakthroughs my team and I were making, we were approached by the Backnumb-Laramy Corporation which made my team a, probably should have been, unbelievable offer.” He said with a pause in his story.

“The offer was twofold. First monetarily, they offered us all more money than we could ever know what to do with. In retrospect, that probably should have been a red flag. Second, we were told what we would be working on was a cure for a new devastating virus. They told us this virus was top secret and that one country was already suffering bubonic plague-type casualties. This plague was supposedly being kept quiet by the governments around the world to prevent panic. So, in addition to the monetary offer, they said we would be working on something that might save who knows how many lives.” Grant added before moving on with his story.

“To cut to the chase, obviously we were duped. We signed on to help but before we got a chance to do anything, we all got arrested and put into jail. Unknown to us at the time, we were supposed to be one of a three-part plan. The first part of this was to introduce a mild virus onto the public. The media outlets that were controlled would then exaggerate the severity of the virus to create concern. After enough time had passed, they would move to phase two which was a cure for the virus. This cure was designed to be a double-edged sword which led to phase three. This phase was the introduction of a very strong virus they were making.” Grant said, seeing Greta shaking her head indicating to him she was already doubting what he was saying.

“The catch to all of this was during phase two. If you decided to get the cure, you would have in you the cure for phase three but would have unknowingly become mortally dependent upon another drug that they

controlled. If from that point forward you did not comply with what they wanted, they could simply cut off your medications and you would pass away. If you didn't take their cure to begin with, the stronger virus was going to be designed to eliminate this group. So either way, regardless of if you went left or right, the road still leads everyone down their desired path." Grant said trying to explain the sinister plan.

"So wait." Greta said turning to her journalistic background.

"You said they wanted you to make a cure but then you said it would hurt people. Which one was it?"

"Well none of this happened, but what they wanted from us was a cure for the stronger virus they were making. Once they had our cure, they could take it to save themselves while also having another team add onto our pill after the fact. What this other team supposedly developed, we wouldn't have done, which was what was going to make whoever took it chemically dependent."

"So why are we talking about this? None of this happened, you said it yourself." Greta said losing her patients.

"You said you needed more so I'm giving you everything I know. This is how it started. This is how it got broken down. This is where they wanted to go and where they ended up. This is why I am in here and why you are too. You said you wanted more, right?"

"Okay, fine." Greta said putting her head in her hands but letting him continue.

"So as I was saying, this original plan went south. They messed up on the virus they wanted us to make a cure for. It ended up being way less infectious and didn't exactly kill people. However, seeing what it did do, they changed all their plans and used it anyways. This is where the Nz4 virus came from. They then told everyone it was contagious, showed them what would happen if you caught it, and eventually made the "zombie jail" as you called it."

"Grant. I'm really trying to give you a chance but this sounds pretty made up. Who, Why? I'm sorry, but the more and more you talk, the more and more I don't believe you."

"Alright. No I don't have all the details for you. I largely only have the "How" and I'm sure I'm missing parts of that as well. The who and the

why, I honestly don't know. I could tell you who hired us. That I do know. But as for who was pulling the strings above them, I don't know. I would guess some politicians or world leaders are behind everything, but that's just a guess. Why? Power, money, and control probably. Maybe someone was tired of the democratic process. I'm not sure. I didn't get that far."

"So mild virus, cure, strong virus equaling either government dependency or death. But all that went wrong and we have zombies now. You go to jail, I go to jail. Is that about right?" Greta said mockingly.

"Yes, I guess in a nutshell. My team wasn't needed once they decided to go with the Nz4 virus plan. Once the Refuge was built, they tossed us in here to make sure we didn't talk."

"Okay, you have to give me something else. What you are saying is too far-fetched." Greta said, not buying anything he was saying.

"Okay so that was the short version of it. There were a lot of subsets to the original plan and even a backup plan that involved mosquitoes. The end goal was to divide people with the cure, get rid of the resisters, and gain permanent control. They still got that with this here. That's the proof I'm trying to show you that we are in the Refuge. You either got in the way, resisted, found something out, or whatever. They then simply pointed their finger and put you in here. That's what happened to you and what happened to me."

"How would a cure divide people? People do and don't get whatever they want medically all the time. Nobody really cares." Greta said.

"No, you're right. But pushing fear was going to be the difference this time around. Normally people aren't pushed to that point. When people are afraid they will do lots of things they normally wouldn't. Take the witch trials that went on so long ago. People feared an unknown, invisible entity was harming people. Now just swap out witch, with virus. Invisible, harm, what do you think people might do to protect themselves if they believe it. Then on the other side, for those that didn't buy in, they would equally be just as passionate which would create a divide. Division is a very useful and powerful tool to wield against people, pitting one against the other and taking their focus away from other things."

"Grant, I'm sorry but something of the size you are talking about would be too big to cover up."

"I agree one hundred percent." Grant replied shaking his head.

“But the thing I think you are leaving out is that if someone finds out, they don’t or can’t leak information for long. They either get tossed into here right away or get called crazy and then get tossed in here. The nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Haven’t you noticed that politicians who say the wrong thing go away... and I don’t mean that they fade from public view. They literally go away by being put in here. This is across the board. You either go with and profit from the program or you end up in here.”

“Enough, I’m done.” Greta said while standing up and walking towards the rooms doorway.

“The majority of what you were saying was a little more than incredible to begin with. But I personally am a journalist and have never heard of anything like that.” She said as she left the room and actively looked for a way out.

“It’s all hogwash. I thank you for any help you gave me last night but I’m not listening to any more of this nonsense.” She added walking in and out of each room until she found the front door.

“I’ll help myself out thank you.”

Greta walked off the houses porch and quickly chose a random direction to go in. Grant tried to stop her but also didn’t want to make her feel as if he was in some way abducting her.

“I totally get what you’re thinking but you really need to come back inside with me.” He said pointing back to the house.

“We can talk about something else.”

“Please Mr. Kennel.” She said as she quickened her pace.

“Again, I appreciate whatever you did but please leave me alone. All I want is for you to tell me if this road takes me to a gas station or some sort of civilization.”

Grant stopped and relented in his pursuit. Without saying a word, he pointed in the direction she was already going and shook his head in the affirmative.

“Thank you,” Greta replied ending the conversation, although she

wanted to ask him where and what she was walking to.

Chapter 8

For the first fifteen to twenty minutes of her walk, Greta had been so angry at Grant that she didn't really think about anything other than finding a place with a phone. It wasn't until about the half-hour mark in her walk that she realized she hadn't seen one person or a single running car. She did however notice a random truck or car here or there, always off to the side of the road and always in poor shape.

The life Greta did notice was only your common everyday creatures. Every now and again Greta would see a squirrel scurry up a tree or some birds play around in a puddle. About the biggest animal she could remember seeing once she started to think about it was a mangy cat that hissed at her before running away.

This all said, the opposite was the case when it came to plant life. Plants seemed to have free rein growing in whatever direction they seemed fit or to whatever length they wanted. This was the case not only off the road but on it. Greta had noticed the night before that the road they had walked across seemed irregular and uneven. However during the day, she could see that plants sprouted here too. So much so in some spots that the road almost looked cut in two by families of trees claiming a lot.

All of this was very unexpected and indeed bizarre but reminded her of an article she had done before. The short, which was featured nationally, covered rural areas where the cattle outnumbered the communities by about a hundred to one. Rationalizing this neglect as the result of her location, Greta continued on, undeterred in finding a way of calling a friend or colleague.

Greta continued her walk until she finally noticed a large family diner sign high above the tree line. Unlike everything else she had seen, this sign looked clear and unmarred. Rejuvenated upon this sight Greta quickened her step, hoping for a phone and a reasonable mind.

Greta covered the short distance in mere minutes, even deciding to jog a little bit since there was no one to notice. Upon reaching the sign, the driveway similarly looked new which was another good sight for her. Smiling at this glimpse back into civilization Greta happily turned off the roadway and into the restaurant's parking lot.

This happiness though was short-lived once the restaurant itself became visible. Tucked about thirty yards off the roadway was indeed a restaurant, but this restaurant didn't match the condition of the sign or its parking lot.

The restaurant itself was half collapsed under the weight of a fallen tree. Clearly left to fend for itself, vines and other vegetation grew from several broken windows and its doorways.

Greta's heart sunk to the sight of this dilapidated structure. With her hopes of making a call or washing up a bit now gone, Greta walked around its side and towards the rear. Along the way, she again noticed several vehicles which all looked pulled apart and dismantled.

Greta shook her head to this but was frozen in her steps upon hearing a loud cracking sound come from within the restaurant. The rear door to the restaurant was open and from the best she could make of it, the sound had come from there. Greta moved slowly towards the door where she then heard a couple more random noises. Hearing what sounded like glass being walked on, Greta decided to say something.

"Hello?" She said feeling confident there was a person inside.

Greta's call went unanswered minus the fact the random sounds she had heard abruptly stopped.

"Hello?" She called out again.

"My name is Greta LaRuse. Is anyone in there?"

Greta continued to hear nothing as she carefully approached the door which she could see was half hanging off its hinges.

"I'm sorry to bother anyone but I'm just looking for a phone."

This again went unanswered minus the much slower and renewed sound of someone walking on broken glass. At about arm's length of the door, Greta peered inside to see if she could identify anyone.

"Hello?" She said one more time wanting to hear a reply.

Not seeing or hearing anything further, Greta brushed the sounds off as no more than an animal of the four-legged sort. Having already decided she was not getting any closer or going in, Greta instead turned around and

walked over to a couple of vehicles in hopes of finding maybe a misplaced cell phone.

Looking into each was roughly the same. All were in junkyard shape and in no condition to drive. Undeterred by this fact, Greta still gave one car a chance. Opening the door of a little coupe, animal feces, and other muck fell onto her feet. Disgusted to the point of nauseousness, Greta pushed past this sight for at least a quick look. Not touching anything, Greta gazed over its interior until she could no longer take its smell.

Backing away as fast as she could, Greta gasped for air as she bumped into a truck. Regaining her breath but losing her hope in her search, Greta decided not to bother with the other vehicles in the lot. Looking around for anything else worthy of attention, she spun around to get a complete view of the area. While doing this she eventually looked back at the restaurant and was startled to see a person in its doorway.

The idea she didn't know how long he had been watching her was eerie enough, but his look also didn't inspire much trust. This man was tall, gangly, and leaned heavily to his right. He wore a baggy tee shirt that was frayed in several spots and had on a pair of pants that were extremely dirty and worn.

Although his appearance was unsettling, Greta still felt she could at least ask him for directions or a phone.

"Excuse me sir?" She said calling out to him but keeping her distance.

"Do you have a phone I could use or know someone who does?"

The man snapped his head to the side of this calling, but did not reply or move a smidge.

Greta debated if it was worth trying to talk to him again. His reaction was not comforting but she also knew there might be an unknown reason for this. Thinking he might be deaf or even might speak a foreign language, Greta moved a little closer and tried again.

"DO, YOU, HAVE, A, PHONE?" She said slowly while using her hand as a phone against her ear.

As Greta said the word "phone," the gangly man suddenly sprung towards her. As if he were a wild animal released from a cage, he flailed

about charging her like a wild animal that had just chosen its most opportune moment to catch its prey.

Greta retreated quickly, falling between the vehicle she searched and the truck. Picking herself up she frantically ran in the opposite direction towards some woods. Incredibly fast for someone who had an obvious limp, this man continued to say nothing but did have a distinct raspy cough as he pursued her.

“Help!” Greta screamed as she continued to run, often asking him to stop and while changing directions as a rabbit might do from a wolf.

After a hard five minutes of running, Greta began to worry feeling her breath and legs starting to give. Not seeing the disturbing man give in his pursuit, Greta looked for anything that might give her a chance to get away. Seeing the man not bother to duck for any branches or sidestep any tree, Greta felt his madness was too much to run from and climbed up a tree.

Scampering up the tree as if she were a squirrel, Greta didn't look down until she reached the highest point she could. Once there Greta looked back at the man and noticed his arm seemed to be injured which was causing him problems climbing the tree.

Greta took this moment to catch her breath and to look for help. Taking advantage of her high vantage point, Greta was disappointed to see only more overgrown roads and ravaged homes. Not seeing anything that might help her, Greta looked back at the man who was still at the tree's base.

While looking down at him through the several leaves and branches Greta could now see why he was not climbing the tree. Looking at his injured arm, Greta could see his arm had not been just scratched or cut but had been totally lost from the elbow down.

This though did not seem to faze him in the least. Even without the arm, he made attempt after attempt to grab a branch or pull himself up. Failing every time, the man got back up and tried again.

This endless loop of failed attempts over and over never ceased until he collapsed. Panting with a loud wheeze Greta felt he had stopped not because of exhaustion but rather overheating. Looking more like a spent dog under a shaded tree, the man didn't move an inch and appeared dead but not for his wheeze.

Not taking any chances, Greta stayed in the tree. Feeling the time to reason with him had passed, Greta felt her best option for the moment was to wait the guy out and to see if someone else might come by.

Darkness soon crept in as the moon swiftly took over for the night. Although still scared, Greta was amazed by how dark it got. The stars above her almost pulsed with brightness and were more pronounced than she could ever remember. In addition to that, no matter which direction she looked, she could not see the glow of a single town's lights

Her awareness in the glittery sky was short-lived as the night seemed to bring more commotion than the day. Rustling became more and more common with the occasional shadow of something passing underneath her being only visible thanks to the moonlit night.

The sounds she heard almost seemed to be zeroing in on something as with each pass they got closer and closer. Then, with zero hesitancy one of these shadows seemed to locate the wheezing man and attacked him with great fury.

This attack created great noise, not from the attacked but from the attacker who ferociously tore apart the one-armed man who put up no defense. The attack was so brutal and loud that the noise looked to attract even more of these shadowy figures who each did the same as the first. Before long Greta figured four to five of them were below her and reassembled a school of Piranha devouring a snack.

Greta was thankful she could not see what was going on but wished the same could be said for the sounds they made. Bones crunched and crackled, fluids jammed and squished and every now and again a thud could be heard from who knows what. The sounds were so offensive and so grotesque Greta became nauseous and almost vomited if it weren't for the fact she didn't want them to find her.

The attack carried on like this for a while but gradually dissipated as the night went on. One by one each of these creatures eventually left by simply walking away without a word, and as if nothing so awful had ever occurred.

Chapter 9

The next morning Greta was awakened by a curious bird which must have felt she looked out of place asleep in a tree. It whistled at her a few times almost as if to ask her what was she doing. Greta half asleep, swatted at the bird but was restricted in her movement due to the use of her shoelaces as an anchor to the tree.

The tightening of the laces upon her movement towards the bird instantly reminded her she was in a tree. Gradually loosening the laces, Greta pulled herself up and sat straight up. Waiting for her body to fully rouse, she was surprised at how well she slept considering the events from the night before.

After a few more birds came to see what the first bird must have told them, Greta finished untying herself and looked in every direction except straight down. Not wanting to see what might have been left behind, Greta took the chance there was nothing there rather than what the obvious alternative would have revealed.

Greta took her time scouting the terrain as best she could not wanting another chase to occur. Seeing a family of chipmunks brave the land along with several other woodland creatures move freely about gave Greta a strong feeling she could now let herself down.

Greta clumsily shimmied and jostled her way downwards which resulted in enough racket that if anything were in the area, it definitely would have come. The thought of not seeing something uplifted her ever so much as to muster up some courage to jump to the ground.

“Thump, crack.” She went landing on a branch that sprung up towards her.

Greta froze and surveyed every area to see if anything threatening had noticed her. When she saw nothing, heard nothing, and noticed the animals had gone back to their daily routines, Greta felt confident in moving on, taking the broken branch as her weapon of choice.

Now Greta had a little bit more time to think about what her plan was. The prior day’s events rattled her confidence in searching alone and in if at least part of what Grant had told her might be true.

She had left the attack during the four-wheeler ride as maybe some sort of dazed hallucination. She also could talk away some of the remoteness as the rural lands she had seen before. Although she didn't buy the political junk Grant had told her, the more she went on, the more she couldn't account for what was probably a zombie attack.

The thought of turning back crossed her mind. She could listen to trash as long as she was safe and had time to come up with another plan. But in her haste of running from the scraggly man, she didn't exactly pay attention to which direction she went and how to get back.

With these thoughts holding her still, she decided to admit to herself she was lost. To right herself and not knowing how long she might be alone, she decided to follow the only fixed object she could think of being the sun. This little plan was a nice morale booster from her feeling of being adrift. Yes, she knew she didn't know where she was going but at least she knew she had a plan which was more than she had.

The next decision she made was to which way she should go. To sunrise or sunset? Thinking back to her childhood years in the Girl Scouts, sunrise seemed to be east while sunset seemed to be west. Feeling west somehow felt more relaxing, and knowing her choice was nothing more than a coin flip, she settled on west until she could find something more concrete.

"Welp, looks like it's this way." She said to herself following the path she thought the sun would go.

During this second walk, Greta was not so bold. She greatly slowed her pace, tried not to make any sounds, and constantly examined the distance to see if anything dangerous might be around. While doing all of this, Greta also fashioned her branch, trimming off all the leaves and little sprouting branches to make more of a bat that doubled as a walking stick.

As the day went on she made slow but steady progress, eventually finding her way out of the woods and into an overgrown field. With a familiar smell of Timothy and what she visibly knew to be alfalfa, Greta figured this field was once used for hay.

Walking to a clearing in the field, Greta was able to see the meadow was much bigger than any she thought. Seeing it extended far beyond her sight, Greta decided to make for higher elevation to survey her surroundings. This was a nearby hillside which shaded the field and looked

like a safe spot.

At the top of the hill next to a pair of growing trees, Greta pulled herself up ever so much to see what may lay below. From this spot, Greta could see that the other side of the hill had a small creek that wended around several trees and past a farmhouse. Beginning to darken, the farmhouse looked calm which gave her hope she might be able to shelter there and quench her thirst.

Greta cautiously made her way towards the house, constantly on the lookout for any sign of life. Half of her desperately wanted to see a family playing games or repairing a vehicle in the garage. While the other half almost forbid her legs from moving, certain something of concern might be inside.

The closer she got the more of the house she could see. Similar to Grant's house, all the windows were boarded and one of the doors looked to be nailed shut. However, the door that faced the stream had only one board that was merely resting beside it. Although this door was shut, Greta figured if anyone friendly was inside, this would have to be the door they would use.

Greta positioned herself in what she felt was a concealed location and watched the door to see if anything might happen. Knowing it was only getting darker, Greta hoped that either way something would happen to let her know if it was safe or not.

After only a few minutes of waiting, Greta noticed some movement through one of the boarded windows on the second floor. This movement was brief but was clearly not from drapes or curtains. Focusing in on the window she eventually saw something make several passes back and forth. These more calculated movements seemed more decided and thought out.

Before long these movements switched to the front door as it slowly opened and a middle-aged man stepped out. Holding a pair of pitchers, the man was quick in his actions and made a straight line to the stream. Once there, he filled up both pitchers and hurried back to the house just as briskly as he had left.

Greta took careful notice of the man and made her own judgment on whether she felt he was trustworthy or not. Two big factors that assisted her in her decision were both based upon his appearance. First, he somewhat reminded her of her father when she was young. This, although nothing solid, made her feel at ease. Second, he obviously had control of himself

and was not thrashing around wildly like the beasts she dealt with before. These two things along with the night giving her very few options caused her to slowly approach the man before he returned to his house.

“Sir.” She said while trying to make her voice show she needed help and was not a threat.

“Sir, I’m sorry to bother you but could I trouble you for a place to stay tonight.”

The man was at first startled by Greta spilling some of his water as he reacted to her voice. Then without hesitation and little conversation, he waved her over towards his door.

“Come on, we will talk inside.”

Greta followed his lead up his porch and through his door. As soon as they both walked in, he put down his pitchers, turned around, and boarded the door from the inside. For this, he used two large pieces of wood that he hooked onto the doors frame. With one at the top and one at the bottom, these two boards effectively locked them in although Greta didn’t feel this action was done in a threatening way.

“Excuse me.” He said as he walked past her and grabbed a candle and some matches. With care to only use one, he lit the candle and then asked her to come upstairs to talk.

Greta followed the man up some squeaky stairs, down a hallway, and into the most boarded-up room she had seen yet. Inside the room were three other people. A young boy and a young girl were both on a small damaged bed and a middle-aged lady who sat on the floor in front of them. Greta instantly took them to be his family and felt comforted by their presence although they looked surprised to see her.

The man grabbed a few handfuls of clothes, balled them up, and put them on the ground.

“Forgive the crudeness but this will be your spot.” He said as he put the bundles of clothes on the ground opposite that of the kids.

After he did this, he picked up the candle, went downstairs, and returned soon after. In his hand was a basket with some apples and pears. He handed them to the woman on the floor, put the candle in the center of the room, and then boarded this bedroom’s door in the same way he had

done the downstairs door.

Before he said anything, he went to the corner of the room and picked up a large black clothed item that he used as a shade over the candle to dim the light.

“There, I’m sorry for rushing around but we are running out of time.” He said pointing outside at the fading light.

He then walked over to the woman on the floor and formally introduced her and the kids.

“This is my wife Mary, my son Mitch, and my daughter Gabby.” He said pointing to each.

“And my name is Bennett Hayes but everyone just calls me Ben.”

Ben then sat down on the floor next to his wife who handed a pistol over to him she had hidden up until that point. Greta noticed the transfer looked to be flashy-discrete in which Mary seemingly wanted it to look subtle but also wanted the weapon to be known.

“A few things first.” Ben said calmly and quietly.

“No matter what you hear outside, do not say anything and try not to move any more than is necessary. However, if you need to say something, please whisper.” He said while handing out the apples.

“We have about fifteen more minutes until there is no more light outside which is what they prefer.”

Greta tried to ask a question but Ben politely halted her question by putting his hand up.

“We will get to that in a second, just let me get a few more things out.”

Greta nodded to this and he then continued.

“If you didn’t know, they are the people who are infected with the Nz4 virus. They are beyond reasoning with, so don’t try. They prefer coming out at night since it’s cooler. Their bodies don’t work the same as ours. They overheat in the daylight pretty quickly, although don’t think they won’t try from time to time. They sometimes will take a chance if they

think it will pay off or are forced. So they will go out in the daytime but they don't last long. They overheat and generally collapse. However, day or not, if they come after you, they will run or fight you with everything they have. That's why they are so dangerous, they don't know when their body is tired or injured, so they simply go until they have nothing left."

These details explained to Greta why the day prior, the person that attacked her had so much stamina, had waited to attack her and had collapsed out of nowhere. He must have been a zombie and he must have completely burnt himself out.

"So don't try to fight them unless you have to. If you do, you need to go for their head... but you also can't let them bite you. If that happens and they don't outright kill you, you will be infected and will eventually become one of them."

Ben paused after saying this which led Greta to believe he was done.

"How did you know I wasn't one?" Greta asked.

"You talked to me." He said pretty plainly.

"They don't talk. They only grunt and groan. Now the people who are infected but haven't fully lost it yet can still talk but will show signs they are infected. The main one is they lose the coloring in their eyes... which I noticed you still had when you got closer."

Greta tried asking another question but Ben then continued.

"Now like I said, they like sounds and light for whatever reason. I don't know if it's a sensory overload thing or what, but they will seek both out and attack aggressively. That's why we only have one candle and we shade it."

"I'm sorry." Greta said not waiting any longer to ask her question.

"But I just want to back the train up a bit. I've been going through some pretty deep life-changing things the past few days. Most of it seems beyond belief and I honestly wonder if I'm in the middle of the worst nightmare anyone has ever had. Please, I'm trying to grasp..." She said with a laugh that turned into a cry.

"I'm just trying to grasp what I assumed was firm. Everything seems upside down right now. Up seems down, left seems right, wet seems dry. I

kind of feel like crazy talk almost seems more stable than what I know as reality. Like yesterday's world isn't today's. Why are we talking about hiding from zombies? Why is there nobody around? I just need a straight answer so I can build what's what from there.”

Ben understood the difficult situation she was in and gave her a minute.

“Well I can't give you what I think you want but I can tell you the truth. We were in your shoes four years ago. It's... heavy... very heavy, I guess you could say in trying to understand what's what. It's actually probably normal as well, being confused. We lived one way, and now we live another. That's hard and not a simple thing to grasp or transition from. The best I can tell you is you, I, and everyone else have been fooled. It's not our fault other than maybe some of us willingly had our heads in the sand. But now that you see for yourself, you need to understand that what your eyes see is the truth and what you knew was the dream that everyone else accepts.”

Greta stopped crying but felt sick with all the directions her mind was going. Wanting a break and wanting to put everything off for a day, Greta asked Ben if she could just sleep before she thought and talked anymore.

Chapter 10

Ben and his family woke much earlier than Greta. Their bodies had adjusted to life in the Refuge and an early rise was part of it. Each person, even the kids, had a chore which was to be done every day before they would have to board themselves back up for the night.

Ben typically fixed the house. This maintenance really depended from day to day based on how bad the zombies were. Ben could go weeks with little to no damage or be under pressure to simply reach a minimum level of security. If what Ben wanted to fix was quickly done, he would change his focus to a nearby fence. This fence was no more than an obstacle for the zombies and only got fixed when time allowed.

Mary and the kid's daily routine consisted of foraging, gardening, and checking traps. Each day several traps were checked, set, and moved if they didn't produce. Generally, they could count on at least one of the traps to have worked, but this was rarely anything bigger than a rabbit or squirrel.

Supplies were always scarce so the family always improvised with whatever they could. It wasn't unusual for them to pull nails from wood for later use. This same idea was prevalent with anything in their life. Clothes got recycled, food was never left on the plate and objects that might be useful were always saved for later use.

Depending on what was found, grown, or caught, all three would help in cleaning and preparing the day's catch for a later meal. Everything found went into the meal and very little, if any, was wasted.

After a lunch break, if Ben had finished his maintenance, he generally would take one of the kids on a scavenging trip. This job was highly desired by the kids as it gave them a break from their daily lives. Unfortunately though for them, after their many years of exploring little was left for them to find.

Because the local houses were mainly used for nails and wood, far trips were saved for maintenance-free days. Like Grant, the Hayes family had also found a serviceable four-wheeler and would use this for their longer trips. To assist them with further travel, Ben slightly modified the four-wheeler to hold more gas.

Every morning Mary was given the gun by Ben. The gun Greta had seen the night before was the only one they had. Since Mary always had the kids with her so far from home, the gun was the only way to give them added protection. This was done every day except on the days Ben would go on his long searches.

The gun however was only to be used in a last-case scenario. Each in the family instead had several wooden swords or pikes, they carried or spread throughout the house. The family also had three makeshift metal swords which were no more than sharpened pieces of steel they had found and filed down over time.

On this day, Ben skipped scavenging for the day and instead just worked on the house until Greta woke up. Eventually waking due to Ben's hammering, Greta made her way downstairs and sat down.

"Sorry if I woke you." Ben said as he came in and saw Greta on his old wooden rocker that faced the home's fireplace.

"It's okay. Do you guys use this?" Noticing it looked maintained.

"We do during the winter sometimes but the winters aren't too bad around here, so not too often."

"Is the light or smoke from the chimney an issue?"

"Light-wise, you just need to prepare. You obviously can't put a shade over a full fire, so this room is the most boarded-up room in the house. Smoke-wise, that hasn't been an issue. I guess they kind of treat smoke like fog." Ben said answering her questions but feeling she was just making small talk, working her way up to the questions she wanted to ask.

Greta rocked on the rocker a little more admiring the house's wooden floors and stone-worked fireplace. To Greta, this look seemed like something you might find in a rural century home.

"So how did you find yourself in here?" She said after some time thinking to herself.

"Welp." He said pulling up another wooden chair to sit on next to her.

"I used to be the owner of a successful mattress company. I did my

own commercials, I was pretty public and well-known. Eventually, a few people asked if I would run for office. I honestly didn't have any plans to do that but enough people liked my positions and encouraged me to take a shot." He said somewhat shaking his head in a way that made Greta feel he regretted it.

"One idea I had proposed while running was a new voter ID law I thought would help. Almost universally regardless of what the media and politicians said, the vast majority of the public supported what I was saying. So I proposed two options that I thought solved any issues the naysayers brought up. The first was to treat an ID in the same way our public defender's office works. If you can't afford an attorney, one is appointed to you. I felt this made sense for anyone who said they couldn't afford an ID. However, I understood some people might not want their tax dollars spent this way, so my other idea was to have an optional tax bracket where the money only went to these ID's. Then anyone could simply opt in or out depending on how they felt."

Greta thought both these ideas made simple enough sense and nodded her head in agreement to the suggestions.

"But once I brought up these ideas my house started getting vandalized and I received death threats both at my house and at my business. I'm guessing this was done to intimidate me but when I didn't change my stance, my family and I found ourselves in here."

"How did someone do that without noticing your whole family was missing?" Greta asked.

"Well, I came home one day to find several men with my family in our living room. They simply told me it was time to go. I would presume the cover story they used so that nobody asked any questions was that we all caught the virus. That way the police didn't need to do an investigation and the public got an openly accepted reason for us going away. That would be my guess based on this place and what others in here have said."

"How many other people are in here that don't have the virus?"

"I honestly don't know. We are pretty spaced out in here to conserve resources and so we don't get overrun by the zombies. So your guess is as good as mine. Plus, whenever someone gets attacked and bitten, we lose one or two more. I've seen a couple people in here that weren't infected when they came in, but were zombies after some time."

“Do you know anyone around here that might be able to help us get out of here?” She asked hoping that someone had a plan or was maybe already in the middle of a plan to get out.

“We are so spread out, I don’t have regular contact with everyone. When they built this place they made sure to clear out anything that might be used to communicate with anyone. You won’t find any phones, computers, radios, or anything that might be used to speak with the outside world. So the only time we really talk is when one group might need something the other can’t find.”

With her hopes dashed a bit, Greta started to think of ideas of her own to get out.

“Well, I saw you had a gun. Has anyone tried to fight their way out?”

“I’m sure people would do that but like the phones and radios, they also took all the guns so they didn’t need to worry about an armed resistance.”

“But you have a gun?” Greta said looking about his person to see if he had it on him.

“I do, but guns are few and far between in here. The only thing probably more scarce is a communication device. They literally searched and destroyed anything in this place they thought could be used to communicate or escape. The only reason anyone in here has a gun is because it was either overlooked or someone came across a prepper’s hidden stash. Besides that, it’s all gone. Speech and weapons keep people free. They didn’t want that in here.”

“What about a ladder to scale the wall? You could make one of them.”

“Your right. It’s been tried. The wall has motion detectors, is electrified, and has barbed wire. If you don’t get shocked or stuck, the detectors will give you away... that is if a zombie also doesn’t get you. You’re going to make some noise doing all that.”

Greta skipped a tunnel knowing what she had been told about the wall already.

“What about smoke signals or a bird that can carry a message.”

“If you want to try and catch a bird, please feel free. I wouldn’t know how to train it, but you can try if you want. Smoke, fireworks, a kite, this spot was chosen for a reason. It’s remote and not a lot of people live nearby which takes away from someone seeing and reporting something. Plus if someone did see one of those things, I’m sure they would just come up with a cover story for why that might be.”

“Or.” He said with reminded emphasis.

“As lots of us have found out. If you say something, you end up in here. So someone might report seeing smoke, but all of a sudden they come down with the virus and end up in here.”

“Have you heard of that?”

“No, not directly.” Ben replied.

“But that is the trend of what happens. I haven’t met a lot of people in here, but all of their stories have a pretty similar narrative. Plus, X amount of people don’t even get past the cell once the door opens.” He said referring to the room Greta was in before entering the Refuge.

“They always release you into the Refuge at night when the zombies are at their most active. How did you manage to get this far?” He asked with curiosity.

“Well I woke up, the door opened and a guy whispered for me to come with him.” Greta replied.

“He seemed to be trying to help so I went with him. He drove me to his house, fed me, and introduced me to his girls.”

“I’m guessing that was either Grant or Marcus.” Ben said in thought of who would have done this.

“Yeah, Grant. He was the one who drove me. But nobody said anything about a Marcus. Do you know a Marcus? I was actually looking into a Marcus Scone before I ended up in here.”

“Yeah, Marcus Scone and Grant Kennel are old lab buddies. You sure there was no Marcus?” Ben said a little worried.

“No, Just a thin guy named Grant with two young girls.”

“So even after you got to Grant’s house, you never saw another guy?”

“No.”

“And neither Grant nor the girls said anything about Marcus or another guy that lived there?”

“No, it was just those three people.”

“Grant wore shades correct?” Ben asked persisting on the topic.

“He did.”

“Did the girls?”

“No just Grant.” Greta responded trying to think where Ben was going with this.

Ben again went silent for a little longer.

“Well I can’t say for sure, but if Grant didn’t introduce or say anything about Marcus. I’d guess Marcus probably got to the point with the virus that Grant probably had to put him down.”

“So you think Marcus is dead and had the virus?” Greta said surprised.

“Both Grant and Marcus have or had it. That’s why Grant had sunglasses on. They have to wear them during the day to help their eyes against the light. But yes, I think if Grant didn’t say anything about Marcus, then he is probably dead... Why were you looking into Marcus anyway?”

“I’m an independent investigative journalist and was approached by a deputy sheriff who said their department was getting various types of balls that were found on the outside of the Refuge. The deputy asked me to look into it because his office more less shut his investigation down.”

“So how did you tie Marcus into this?”

“His name and social security number were written on some of the balls. The Sheriff’s Department refused to look into him and even had paperwork about Marcus disappear. I was in the beginning stages of

looking into it. I had just verified the writing on the balls was all from one person before I ended up in here.”

“Interesting.” Ben said of Marcus’s idea.

“I guess Marcus beat you to the punch with your messenger pigeons but used sporting goods instead. That’s fascinating. It makes sense. You can hit a ball pretty far from a good distance away. Although you’re stuck once it lands unlike with a pigeon.”

“Yeah, and it worked to a degree. Some of the groundskeepers kept finding them and turned them over to the Sheriff’s Department. They eventually found their way to me.”

“So did you find anything else out that was noteworthy?” Ben asked of her investigation.

“Yes and no. Like I said I verified the signatures, I spoke to the architect of the Refuge, got some paperwork from the county’s office but nothing solid other than everything being suspicious.”

“I see.” Ben said hoping she might have a piece he himself could use.

At about this time, they both heard Mary and the kids returning from the day’s forage. They were still outside and off in the distance, but both could hear small chatter heading their way.

“Well I don’t know what you’re thinking or if I helped at all but you’re more than welcome to stay as long as you want.” Ben said offering a place to her.

“That’s very nice of you.” Greta said in reply.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to think about it for a day or so, to think a little more. I’ll admit I really didn’t believe Grant and didn’t want to believe you last night. But this morning I just couldn’t come up with anything else to explain what’s been going on and what I’m seeing.”

“Feel free to stay as long as you want.” He said with a smile.

“I completely understand. Everything here isn’t easy to swallow. The few times we have had guests like you, the same kind of questions come up and I just try to be as honest and straightforward with them as I can be.

Whatever they do with that information is up to them. It's very stressful for people when something new and in the now contradicts things they thought were originally true. Sometimes people accept it, other times they try to explain it off in some other way they feel comfortable with. All I can do is be fair to them and give them the facts as I know them."

Chapter 11

Greta spent the next two days with the Hayes family, getting to know them and talking to each. As she already knew, the family was very friendly, hospitable, and gracious with their meager means.

Occasionally, she did think of a question or two for Ben, and each time he answered it as best he could. Greta did try to space her questions out as not to annoy Ben, although he always told her he didn't mind.

On Greta's third day with the Hayes, she decided she would ask Ben if he knew how to get back to Grant's house. Greta wanted to maybe piece more of the puzzle together and though he might have some answer Ben did not. Additionally, in talking with Ben and his family, it didn't seem as if they were trying to leave the Refuge.

Although she had no doubt he would in a heartbeat, Ben and Mary struck her as accepting their situation rather than still pushing to get out. With the way Grant acted and with the fact Marcus was still trying to reach out for help. Greta felt that regardless of if Marcus was alive or not, that this might be the best option for her since she hadn't even tried yet.

"Ben." Greta said helping with his daily routine of fixing the damage left by the zombies.

"What do you think about me trying to make it back to Grant's house if you know the way?"

Ben stopped hammering in a board and looked at her.

"Well, you're free to do whatever you want. But like I mentioned before, even in the daylight you're not safe from all attacks."

"I know." Greta replied

"I think I'm just still in that searching stage. I would like to apologize to Grant and also would like to ask him some questions. Maybe even find out if Marcus is alive if that's not too much of an awkward question."

"Well if that's what you want," Ben said putting down his hammer.

“I do.” She replied.

“Were you thinking today or what kind of time frame did you have in mind?”

“I was. I was thinking maybe when your wife and kids come back for lunch, I could say bye to them and be off... if you know how to get me there of course.”

“I do,” Ben said with some uneasiness in his voice.

“But you know I can’t take you. I could go a little ways with you but after that, I could only tell you the rest.”

“I know, I didn’t even plan on asking you to do that for me. Just the best directions you could give me, preferably written down if that’s okay.” Greta said with a bit of a smirk.

“Oh sure. But maybe one little twist to your plans. I’d suggest either going right now or waiting until tomorrow morning. Grants place is probably a good four-hour walk from here and you will want to leave time for mistakes, something happening, and so on. So although you could definitely make it in less than a day, I wouldn’t chance it and would leave with as much sunlight with you as you can.”

Greta had already set it in her mind that she was going to leave today and wasn’t the type of person who liked to change her plans. However, she understood and agreed with what Ben said. Still, Greta couldn’t leave without saying bye to Mary and the kids, regardless of if it took away an hour or so of her time.

“Alright, well I’ll help you finish this window and then I really wouldn’t feel right stepping away without saying something to your family. Their really great and I just don’t think it would be right to leave without doing so. I agree with you about the time, but I already regret walking away from Grant. Although I’m sure they would understand, I just don’t want that feeling twice... walking away from someone who has been helping you.”

Ben knew he was being over guarded with Greta. He understood the little bit of time it would take for Greta to say her goodbyes wouldn’t be much. Knowing it might also upset his kids, Ben agreed and gave her a hug.

“Okay, let’s finish this off and we can get to going.”

Once they were done with the window, Ben insisted on getting her a couple things for her trip. Ben jumped inside his house and stayed in there for a few minutes. Ben didn’t mention what he wanted to get her, but Greta assumed it was probably food.

As Greta suspected, when Ben came back he was holding a little basket. Covering the basket was a yellow towel that blew slightly in the breeze. This little lift betrayed Ben’s secret and revealed to her a basket of apples.

Although Greta was right about the apples, she hadn’t thought about his other gift. In his left hand, he held one of his three homemade metal swords. This was a surprise to see since she realized, although it didn’t look flashy, it must have taken days if not weeks to make.

“Here.” Ben said handing over the apples and the sword which was shaped in the style of a Katana.

“There are some apples in here and you can use the sword to cut them if you want. Just be careful, it’s sharp.” He said trying to give them to her.

Greta backed away from Ben, not because she was afraid of him but to show him she thought he was giving her too much.

“Ben I can’t take that. That’s too much. You need this for your family.” She said trying to change his mind.

Ben clearly disagreed with her and quickly made it impossible for her to refuse him.

“Either you take it or you better come up with a good explanation for my kids. They asked me the other day if you were staying or not. They said if you did go that you needed this sword for protection. So…” He said smugly, knowing he was going to get his way.

“Either you take the sword or when you see them, their hearts will be broken. They know how dangerous it is in here and they really like you. Plus, Mary and I think you should have something as well.”

“Mary mentioned this to you as well?”

“No, but I know her. She’s more cautious than I am and I think you should take it.”

Hesitantly, but feeling compelled to take the sword, she did so with a grateful look on her face.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Oh it’s not a problem, but thank the kids. I could tell it meant a lot to them.”

Greta and Ben then walked south from his home into a wooded area near what used to be the farms field. The wooded area was not very big but was dense and was where Mary and the kids had gone to pick berries.

Ben and the family knew this area well. It wasn’t very big but was surrounded by mostly fields which made it pretty safe from zombies. Still, to be on the safe side, any time the Hayes family went anywhere, they would always scout out the area first. Being that Ben knew they would have already done this, he and Greta didn’t worry so much about the noise they made upon their approach.

Two main spots grew berries that the Hayes family alternated in picking. Since Ben usually wasn’t the one who did this, they needed to check both patches to see where they were. Ben chose to check the closer of the two patches first which was in a clearing about fifty feet just into the woods.

Once there, they noticed none of the berries left on the bushes were ripe. This told Ben and Greta this was the patch they picked and they didn’t need to check the other one. However, since they didn’t see or hear them, Ben wondered if they might have wandered over to a nearby walnut tree for an added bonus on the day. Ben felt this walnut tree was their most likely destination since it wasn’t far and they had not passed them yet.

When Ben and Greta got closer to the walnut tree they saw a basket on its side. The baskets berries had been spilled all over the forests floor which immediately told the two something was wrong.

Both Ben and Greta crouched to the ground and started surveying the area. After a few moments of remaining motionless, Ben lightly whispered to Greta to stay where she was while he slowly went over to the basket. Ben stayed very low to the ground and was very careful in his

attempts not to disturb any branches or brush along the way.

When Ben got within arms reach of the basket he looked around again. This time, instead of looking into the distance, he looked at the ground in an attempt to determine which way Mary and the kids may have gone.

Looking almost like a hunting dog, Ben noticed something in the grass and took off in its direction. This left Greta unsure of what to do. Greta wanted to help but also didn't know if she should still sit tight. Thinking about it for a few minutes, Greta then noticed Ben had made his way to a tree and was now looking up.

Looking up herself, she noticed Mary and the kids clinging to some of the higher branches. From her distant location, everyone seemed to be okay although Mary was plainly pointing to an open field which was only yards away. With the memory of her own treeing still fresh in her mind combined with how silent everyone was, Greta knew a zombie must be near.

Although still light out, Greta had quickly learned that this lone fact didn't guarantee a zombie couldn't be near. Slowly looking over to the area Mary was still pointing towards, Greta eventually noticed something hobbling beside an old piece of farm equipment. This something seemed distracted and was mostly behind the equipment which prevented her from getting a clear view.

Looking back over to Ben, she noticed he was now looking at her. Once he saw he had her attention, he motioned for her to come over to him. Greta complied with his gestures and slowly made her way overall while keeping a very heavy eye on the field.

Once she had reached their location, Greta could now see with this better vantage point that there were not one but two zombies. This thought was just her first surprise. The second came when she noticed the distracted movements she had noticed before were because one was eating the other.

“Greta, give me the sword.” Ben said softly.

“What are you going to do?” Greta asked handing it over.

“Stay here with the kids and be quiet.” Ben said in reply.

Ben then cautiously made his way over to the zombies being careful

to stay out of sight by using the farm equipment as cover. Ben moved as to position himself behind the equipment and thusly out of the zombie's sight. When Ben got over to the equipment he slowly moved to the side which put the sun at his back. When he felt he was as close as he could get, Ben leapt at the two as fast as he could.

Ben first attacked the zombie that was eating the other. Catching him by surprise, Ben swung his sword quickly which removed its head. After this, Ben refocused his aim and looked down on the other zombie which was trying to get up. Ben reset his attack and with just one more swing also downed the second zombie as fast as the first. Ben remained vigilant after neutralizing the second zombie by taking up a defensive stance before relaxing and resting his sword.

Upon seeing this, Mary turned to her kids and told them they could open their eyes. Seeing everything was okay, they all worked their way down the tree with Greta's help.

"Thank you." Mary said being the last one down.

"Are you guys okay?" Greta asked while looking them over.

"We are. Those were the only two we saw and we got up the tree before they saw us."

"What happened, where did they come from?" Greta then asked.

"We were trying to get a couple walnuts and heard the one grunt. Soon after, the other one ran over to it and you saw the rest. I'm glad you brought that sword with you. I didn't want to use the gun because I was afraid it would attract more."

Greta nodded to this and looked over to Ben to see if he was still okay. To her surprise, instead of still being out in the field, Ben was already near them wiping the sword off in the grass.

"The one was injured." Ben said to Mary.

Acknowledging what this meant, Mary turned to her kids who had already started to pick up the berries that had spilled, and told them it was time to go. Ben likewise wasted no time and started back towards their house while also calling Greta over to him.

"We need to go back to the house." He said with a little charge to his

voice.

“The older or injured ones don’t go out in the light much, but the healthy ones almost never do.”

“What does that mean?” Greta asked while trying to keep up with him.

“It means there is a pack of them nearby. The injured one got flushed out from somewhere and got picked off by the other one you saw. I don’t see any others, so that healthy one must have broken from the pack and chased the injured one down... But there almost has to be a pack around here somewhere.”

Without hesitation, all five of them cut through the woods as quickly but as quietly as they could. Upon leaving the woods, Mary and the kids started in the direction of the house.

“Mary!” Ben said in as loud a voice as he felt he could get away with.

“I’ll catch up. Keep going.”

Instantly Mary and the kids hurried off to the farmhouse while Ben turned in the opposite direction and stopped.

“That pack of zombies is more than likely that way.” He said pointing back from the area they had just come.

“You’re more than welcome to come back with us and wait a few days for them to pass or I can point you in the direction of Grant’s house now.” He said with a hurried and serious face.

“If you stay, you’re going to probably have to wait two, three, or maybe even four days to be sure the pack has passed. Again, you’re more than welcome. But if you want to go, you have to do it now.”

Greta thought to herself for a second about the rushed choice.

“If it makes you feel better, it’s a good sign to a degree that they are moving this way and we know they are coming. That means the likelihood of any being in Grant’s direction is much lower.”

Greta recognized what Ben was trying to tell her and decided to go

forward with her trip to Grant's.

“Okay. I think I'll still go if you can tell me how to get there.”

Wasting no time, Ben handed the sword over to Greta and then reached into his pocket. Pulling out a folded piece of paper, Ben opened it and handed it over.

“Here.” He said.

“You're going to want to follow that tree line over there until it runs into a collapsed barn. Once you see the barn, you will see a gravel driveway that leads to old state route seventeen. It will be labeled so you can't miss it. Once you are on seventeen, follow these directions and they will get you there.”

Ben then gave her a sincere smile and a warm hug.

“I'm sorry you didn't get a chance to say bye to the kids but I'll tell them you send your best.”

“Please do.” Greta said welling up a little but understanding the rush of the matter.

“And thank your wife for me, she is so nice. You have such a beautiful family.”

Ben gave her another hug.

“Good luck Greta.”

Chapter 12

Just as Ben had said, State Route Seventeen was past the fallen barn. This route was similar to the route she had been on in looks and condition. The road was dilapidated and unkempt, but was still easier to walk on than the wooded areas or in the overgrown fields.

With the knowledge of the zombies being on the move and not too far off, Greta's journey wasn't a sightseeing trip. Although along her way she passed by a few gas stations and farmhouses, she did not stop to see if further help might be present. Instead, she kept to her mission of simply getting to Grant's.

For all her hurry and resistance to distractions, Greta was met by a heavy rainstorm that caught her two hours after she started. The storm was fast but very powerful which forced her to seek out some sort of shelter.

Not trusting buildings anymore, Greta looked for something else that gave shelter but wasn't a restaurant, home, or gas station. This proved to be a difficult task which was compounded by the fact the storm was soaking both her and the ground rapidly. The combination of being picky in location but trying to get out of the cold rain, led her to finally choose a small hidden shed which seemed to be her best option.

The shed itself Greta had almost missed if it hadn't been for the sound the rain made against its tin roof. The shed was small and tucked behind some pine trees to the rear of a cemetery. Pushing past the television idea of zombies coming out of the ground, Greta ran to the shed which had two sliding doors. These sliding doors had a lock connecting them that was open. The sight of the open lock was comforting in that it told her nothing would be inside.

Taking off the lock her suspicions were correct, the insides were empty of life and actually looked to have not been disturbed in some time. Space inside the teeny shed was at a premium as just about every inch was stuffed with something. Each of the three walls had a metal shelf with different supplies on them. Some were gardening tools like sheers and plant killers. While others were your more standard tools probably used to fix the two mowers that were in the middle of the room. The first mower was a standard push mower which had its handle folded up to save space. The second was a smaller riding mower that had part of its deck removed to

save room and allow it to fit inside.

Both were cobwebby and dirty but still looked in serviceable condition. To have somewhere to sit to wait out the storm, Greta dusted off the riding mower's seat and took a break on it. Sitting down Greta at first had the idea of trying to use it as a ride. However this thought never fully materialized because she knew how loud and slow riding mowers were.

Further looking around the shed, she also noticed various other gardening chemicals, a can of WD-40, several quarts of motor oil, and two cans of gasoline. One can was smaller with a spout and the other was a large five-gallon can that was about three-fourths full. The gardening chemicals in the shed were your standard weed and feed, hornet killers, some insect repellent, and a couple bottles of ammonia, one of which was in diluted form.

The diluted mixture was a welcoming sight which gave her the idea that maybe a jug of purified water might be nearby. Greta looked intently on the ground and behind some of the items but was not able to locate any. Not finding this and not finding a weed wacker was a little bit of a surprise to Greta. Figuring one would clearly be needed for the weeds while the other would be needed to dilute the ammonia.

Without the water, Greta had to relent in sticking her head back outside into the rain for a few mouthfuls of water. She ended up drinking more than she wanted just because she didn't know when the next time she might have the advantage of clean water.

Greta did get lucky in the area of paper towels which the shed contained an unopened pack of four. Greta opened the pack and used one of the rolls to dry herself off. She did this though with the thought of still conserving the pack as maybe a little bit of a present to Grant and the girls.

After her drink and drying, Greta had to wait almost an hour for the storm to pass. During this time, Greta looked at the closer tombstones and dates to pass the time. Reading all she could Greta eventually had the idea of cleaning the sword Ben had given her with the can of WD-40. This would both clean the sword and hopefully help prevent against rust.

To save the towels, Greta decided to use the dryer of the towels she had just used. In wiping it down, Greta had already realized it was made out of scrap metal but hadn't really stopped to appreciate how much work it must have taken Ben and Mary to make. Being limited in what they had, the curve of the sword was more of a trick in sight. The metal appeared to

originally be only about two inches wide, straight, and probably from a fence pole that had been flattened out. The trick Ben and Mary did was to taper the metal towards the handle to help give it a slightly curved look instead of being just straight.

Although it was apparently made to look like a Katana, the metal used made it too thick to act in the same way. The metal was only sharpened on one side leaving the back of the blade dull and untouched. The sharpened side of the sword was done so without any proper tools. Being done this way, the edge on the sword was simply worn into the metal instead of it being a triangular wedge as a regular Katana would. Since this was so, the blade could cut through some things but needed more force to do so.

The handle for the sword was also handmade. The metal that connected the handle and the blade was tightly wrapped first by cloth and then by very compacted twine. The twine gave it a little bit of an itchy grip but was still much better than holding jagged metal.

One thing that the Katana did lack that a traditional one would have was a guard. The sword simply went from blade to handle without protection between the two. However, Ben must have noticed this and tried his best to have something. Balling up some of the cloth near the top gave the handler at least a little warning as to where the blade began.

Greta wondered to herself while cleaning it just how long it must have taken the Hayes family to have made it. This gift also gave her much more perspective as to what giving and receiving something meant. It clearly must have had hours and hours of labor poured into it. The sword wasn't a simple ten-dollar pickup while going down your local store's aisle. Yes, receiving or giving anything is meaningful, but this gift, as crude as it was to the eyes, must have been a highly valued item to the Hayes family. To give it up had to have been akin to giving one of someone's most valued belongings.

At about the time Greta finished cleaning the sword, the rain lightened and then stopped. With the end of the rain, the sun popped back out and birds began to sing and find worms on the ground. Not wanting to waste any time, Greta got off the tractor and decided to continue in her journey to Grants.

Before leaving though, she felt some of the items in the shed were useful. Although she thought taking the gas would be beneficial, she also felt it was too big and heavy to carry for an unknown amount of time. So

instead she grabbed only a couple of small things and the pack of paper towels. Using the paper towel packaging as her bag she put in it the WD-40, bug spray, and a utility knife she noticed on one of the shelves. After packing these items and balling the end of the plastic into a handle, Greta took off again for Grant's house.

This second stint of walking was much calmer and more enjoyable than her first. Ben's map kept her on main roads for almost the entire trip minus a few shortcuts. These shortcuts were always crop fields of various types. This gave Greta a chance to pick some wild snacks if she wanted while also giving her much better sight if the field was hay or something of this nature.

Ben also did one last thing that was helpful for Greta. On his little map, he also wrote down approximate times each section might take. These little notes gave Greta a rough idea of what time it currently was and how much longer she had to walk.

Greta got excited when she reached a point on the map that indicated she only had about another ten minutes before reaching Grant's house. Along with this, another sign that let Greta know she was getting closer were worn areas in the ground left behind by Grant's four-wheeler. Seeing this tempted Greta to follow them and maybe save some time, but she thought better of this just in case the tracks led out instead of in.

Following the map, Greta soon found the road Grant had originally directed her to. At this point, she felt confident in not even needing the map and slipped it into her pocket. Doing this Greta also gave herself a minute in putting the towels down. The towels and other items originally seemed like they wouldn't be a bother but by now after almost two hours of walking, had started to cramp her hands.

Picking the towels up after the minute to herself, Greta caught sight of one of the girls in the woods with a bucket and a fishing pole. Thinking it was Harriet, she looked alone but didn't seem to mind. Greta's first desire was to call out to her, but knowing her situation more, she decided to lightly jog over to her to make up the ground. Greta covered the distance pretty quickly but noticed early on that her bag jiggled, making a wrapping sound for each step. This sound caught Harriet's attention which immediately froze her into a defensive position. Scanning her surroundings, Harriet eventually noticed Greta.

To her relief, when Harriet noticed her, Greta could tell she knew who she was and didn't run away. Although she initially hesitated, she soon

loosened up her stance and smiled, giving Greta the feeling of both greeting and welcome.

Chapter 13

When Greta and Harriet got back to Grant's house, he was not home. This was not surprising because he had told Harriet he would be checking their traps as he usually did. Nevertheless, Nanny was still home, using some scrap material as clothing for her doll. Greta took up this time to get to know and talk with the girls while also helping them with a few of the chores they still had to do.

Initially, both Harriet and Nanny reverted to their shyer states. Any reply they gave was short and they asked only one question. But the longer the girls stayed around Greta and the more she joked and teased, they slowly opened up and became more chatty and open.

Kind of reverting back to her journalistic style, Greta's questions picked apart their early life, how they came into the Refuge, and what they thought of it. Both girls had never really talked to a grown woman before which seemed to actually make them more comfortable and Greta felt made them more open.

"I didn't catch your last names when I was here last. What is your last name?" Greta asked as a typical getting-to-know-someone starting point.

Both girls didn't reply to this and sheepishly looked at each other a couple of times to see who might respond first. Without a reply, Greta continued this line of questioning but in a different way.

"Is it Scone by chance?" She said wondering if maybe the girls were the daughters of Marcus Scone. But again the girls remained silent.

Not wanting to rock the boat too much, Greta moved to another line of questions feeling if things went right, she might be able to circle back to these questions later.

"How long have you girls been here?"

"Nanny was born here and I was three when we came here." Harriet said.

"Okay." Greta said.

“So your mom was here too. What was her name?”

Harriet about answered but then looked past Greta indicating to her someone was now behind her. Greta turned her head to see what Harriet was looking at. Seeing Grant in the doorway, he was holding three dead animals by their tails and had a shiny silver shotgun slung behind his shoulder.

“Well, you picked a good day to join us for dinner. It’s not often I catch three critters.” Grant said acknowledging Greta and then walking into the kitchen.

“Excuse me girls. I’d like to talk to Grant for a minute if that’s okay with you two?”

Both girls gave their now normal smile along with an affirmative shake of the head as their reply.

Greta kindly excused herself and followed in Grant’s direction. Greta wanted to explain herself a little bit and also wanted to advise Grant about the pack of zombies that might be in the area.

Upon her walking into the kitchen, Grant had already started to clean and butcher the animals for the night’s meal. This was the first time Greta had ever seen anything of this nature which was nauseating and repelling to her. Still, pushing past her queasy feelings, Greta stomached the sight and brought up the topics she wanted to talk about... Although she did so usually looking up and sometimes covering her nose and ears.

“I wanted to apologize for how I handled myself around you. I don’t think the way I went about things was very respectful or kind for someone who was trying to help me and I’m sorry for that.”

“No apologies needed,” he said.

“I deal with my fair share of people coming from the outside world. The stuff you said and did really wasn’t that out of the ordinary. Some people believe some people deny, some people don’t know how to take it. I just try to help and let them do what they want from there.”

“Why do you do it?” Greta then asked.

“Well, I do want to help first off. Especially the people like yourself

who get the quick release. You got tossed in here without explanation. It's very confusing. To top that off, you're set up to fail. They know the zombies will be waiting for you." He said trying to save as much of the animal's fur as he could for clothing later on.

"That's the other reason I do it. I'm trying to figure out how to end this. How to get out and inform people. The people who are released the way you were are still of sound mind and were clearly picked for a reason. So I want to know that reason. If it's nothing, that's fine. I can still ask a noninfected person questions and still get sound information. The people who are released through the temporary infected cells are sometimes too far gone for me to talk to."

"So they release people from the halfway ward early?" Greta said still not one hundred percent understand what the people in control were doing.

"Oh yeah. It's not what they tell you out there. First, you don't just get the virus and have a set two-month period before you're too far gone and get kicked into here. That's what they want you to think but it's not true. The virus is different in everyone. Some people change rapidly. Others take years. If you're someone who takes years, that doesn't fit their narrative. So they just put you in here anyways and just tell your family it was your time. Who's there to refute it? You need to remember, the majority of what they say about the virus and this place isn't true, let alone other political things they have been feeding you for years."

"What's the second reason?" Greta asked having to use her shirt as a mask to help repel the smell being given off from the animals.

"Some people figure it out. The people who get put into the temporary section are in there for a plethora of reasons. Some are there just because they are randomly given the virus just to make the general population see that people can still catch it. They need people to think they can get it by means other than the truth... it's only by bite or injection. Also, they can't have every person who opposes X ending up with the virus, that would be too obvious. So they do infect people randomly just to skew the numbers and to throw off anyone who might notice a pattern. Some others are political hit jobs done covertly that didn't need urgency." Grant said.

"So, for those people who get put inside and figure it out, they get pitched in here in a hurry. They don't want those people causing a riot over the fact it's all a lie. They need compliance." He said letting the animals

down into the sink and turning to her.

“It’s all about compliance and power. That’s how they can do all this.”

“Okay, so have you figured a way to get out?” She said hoping he had something in the works.

“No.” Grant said quickly shooting down her hopes.

“We have tried pretty much everything, and have come up empty-handed each time.”

Greta caught that he said “we” and felt this was how she might be able to bring up Marcus.

“So someone else has been helping you?”

Grant turned private for a moment and returned to his animals, making sure what was inside them was clearing out.

“Yes. I had a long-time partner named Marcus. We both got put in here. We both eventually got bitten and the virus finally caught up to him. He passed a couple weeks ago.” Grant said skipping the idea that people infected don’t just pass, they turn into zombies and will remain that way until killed.

Greta however didn’t question him further in this regard knowing he probably put his friend down and knowing that had to have been hard.

“Was by chance Marcus’s last name Scone?” She asked after giving him some time.

“By chance yes. How did you know? Did someone tell you?”

“Yes kind of to both,” Greta said, pulling up the lone chair in the kitchen and strategically placing it away from the sink.

“The Hayes family sheltered me after I left here and filled in some gaps. Ben advised you and Marcus were friends.”

“Wow, you made it pretty far,” Grant said of the distance between him and Ben’s family.

“Yeah so Marcus, our team, and I were the ones who were going to work on that cure. We were all deemed threats and tossed into here like I was telling you. Three out of our team of nine made it to this house originally. The third, Another really good guy named Ernie Edwards only made it about a year. When he passed, that left just me and Marcus here to figure things out.”

“So how did Harriet and Nanny get here?” Greta asked, deducing Marcus wasn’t the father either.

“Harriet and her parents came in the same way you did. Marcus and I brought them here. Nanny actually wasn’t even born yet. She has never seen the outside world.” He said, disappointed for her.

“About four months after Nanny was born, we got overrun by zombies. We all got injured and bit protecting the girls. Harriet and Nanny’s parents didn’t take the virus well and only lasted a few months after that.”

“You got overrun?” Greta said thinking.

“Yeah, usually the zombies are just random loners. At night we generally only need to contend with one or two, sometimes maybe three. That’s normal and they typically only cause minor house damage. But every now and again they seem to group up and can be pretty devastating.”

Greta’s mind went back to what Ben had told her about the pack that was in the area. Greta felt this was what Grant meant by group. Just as she was about to tell him about the pack Grant grabbed his shotgun off the table and charged into the living room. This action happens so fast, Greta’s startled surprise was soon after escalated by the sound of Grant firing a round in the adjacent room.

Greta didn’t know what was going on and fell to the ground. The action by Grant was out of nowhere and had no explanation. Soon following the shot, a large thud hit the ground. This was followed by the girls apparently being just as surprised in which they both started to scream and could be heard running up the stairs.

“Go!” Grant said, coming back into the kitchen momentarily.

“Go upstairs with the girls. They both have a gun.”

Greta did as Grant asked her and ran up the stairs. However, as she

left the kitchen to make her way up the stairs, she had to pass by the front door. While doing this, she noticed the door was open but blocked by a body.

While Greta ran to the stairs, Grant went over to the body and tried to move it. Struggling to do so, Greta stopped and came back to assist him.

Without a word between the two, Greta quickly saw why Grant wanted to move the body from the doorway. Outside were at least five more zombies that were rapidly approaching.

Seeing Greta was helping, Grant grabbed the shoulder area of the body while Greta grabbed his legs. They then lifted the body enough as to move it from the doorway and tossed it onto the porch.

Just as they did this, two zombies reached the porch's stairs which prompted Grant to shoot them. The first zombie fell slowing the second. However, Grant didn't strike the second zombie in the head which forced him to shoot again in order to stop it. After the second one fell, Grant hurriedly closed the door and propped it closed with one of the several large pieces of wood which rested nearby.

"Go upstairs," he said locking a second board in place.

"I can get this. Just tell the girls you're coming so they don't shoot you."

Greta went up the stairs, announced herself, and looked into several different rooms until she noticed a room that had its door shut.

"Harriet!" She yelled to let them know it was her.

Soon after yelling, she heard the sliding of a bolt which was followed by a chain being wiggled and unfastened. The door then opened up and Harriet let Greta in.

"Thank you. Everything is going to be okay." She said trying to give assurance to the kids. This though ended up being more so for her than for the girls. Once inside and as Grant had advised, both girls had a gun, which was an odd sight to see. On top of that, other guns sat at the ready on the floor along with what appeared to be a handmade bow.

"Here is some water," Nanny said sitting on the floor next to a bottle.

Seeing this made her both relieved and sad. The girls had noticeably been through this before, and minus their initial scream, were quite tempered for their age and situation. On the other hand, the preparedness and the lack of worry from the adolescent girls calmed Greta down substantially.

Only moments after Greta got into the room and had this interaction with the girls, Grant came upstairs and knocked on the door.

“It’s me,” he said.

Harriet did as she did for Greta and unlocked the door, allowing him in.

Just as measured as the girls were, Grant calmly picked up the bow and a handful of homemade arrows. He then calmly went from window to window, peeking out the gaps in the boards to see where the zombies were and how many they were dealing with.

Greta didn’t want to bother him but felt she better at least let him know what Ben had said about the pack.

“Grant!” she said, trying to get his attention.

“I’m sorry if I didn’t tell you fast enough but when I was at the Hayes’s, Ben was worried about a pack of zombies before I left. I don’t know if that helps, but I thought I should say.”

Grant didn’t reply or even look at her, rather he merely nodded his head to this information while continuing to look out the windows.

After he looked out all four and seemingly double-checked his numbers, Grant put down all but one of the arrows. With the one remaining arrow, he strung it to the bow, pulled it back, and took a long aim between a set of boards. Without hesitation, he let the arrow go but didn’t give a reaction to what the arrow might have done.

He again did this process a couple more times out each window until he had fired eight total. Grant then took in a deep breath as if he was done and then turned to her and finally spoke.

“We still need to be quiet and on guard, but I think we are going to be alright.”

Chapter 14

Greta woke to the sound of a woodpecker attacking a nearby tree. The bird had unmistakably found something yummy, as it continually pecked at the tree not caring who heard him doing so. Hearing this and coming to, Greta didn't quite know when she had fallen asleep but was surprised at how well she had slept after the prior day's events.

When Greta opened her eyes and looked around, she was a little embarrassed that the girls and Grant had already started their day and had left the room.

Greta stretched and cracked her back before standing up. While doing so she heard a few thumps come from outside and below one of the rooms windows. Upon looking through one of the cracks Grant had used to fire his arrows, she noticed Grant outside putting a leg into a wheelbarrow which was full of other parts.

The sight of this quickly eroded her desire for breakfast but let her know she was free to walk about the house with little concern.

Walking down the stairs, she spotted both Harriet and Nanny. Through the open front door, Greta could see both girls walking back and forth stacking wood onto a wagon. The girls picked from a nicely stacked pile of older wood and took whatever amount they felt was necessary for each window.

Walking outside and looking around, she noticed the damage left behind. Besides each window needing at least one board fixed, several floorboards from the porch had been ripped off. Additionally, One of the window frames looked to have been mauled by a bear and the overhang to the unattached garage had fallen leaving a huge hole in the roof and building.

"Morning." Grant said coming back with a now empty wheelbarrow.

"If you're up, I'm going to start on the windows," he said revealing they were not hammering anything on until she woke up.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked as if everything was normal.

“Actually good.” She replied walking over with him to one of the windows.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention the zombie pack sooner.” Greta said feeling if she had it might have helped things and not put them in so much danger.

“No worries. That wasn’t a pack,” he said to Greta’s surprise.

“If it would have been, they would have gotten in and we would have had a pretty heated exchange at the bedroom doorway. Last night there were only about eight of them. That’s definitely a lot but just coincidental to what you said.”

Relieved but surprised that a pack was more than eight, Greta asked about the issue.

“How many would a pack be?”

“Oh, anything over twenty-five I’d say. And they are the newer aggressive ones. The older ones generally have injuries, can’t keep up, or are eaten by the younger ones.”

“So the ones that got in last night were old and less aggressive?”

“Yeah some of them. The first one had to have been an old one or else we probably would have been attacked sooner. Some of the others I shot with the arrows were younger, so I’d say fifty-fifty last night.”

“How’d we not hear him break in?” Greta wandered in, not hearing boards breaking beforehand.

“Yeah that was my fault,” he said, now nailing in a board to a window.

“You threw me off my routine when I came in and saw you talking to the girls. I normally shut and lock it behind me but I saw you, got distracted, and walked into the kitchen with the animals. So that one is on me. When it got dark, the zombies came out like they usually do and that one got lucky with an open door. I bet we would have only had the four or five I originally saw banging at the doors if I didn’t use the shotgun which attracted the others.”

Greta helped him finish off the window and they moved on to

another one.

“So how do you have so many guns and was that a homemade bow?”

“Yep, I’m pretty proud of that bow. You wouldn’t believe how long it took me to figure out how to make it, make arrows that shot straight, and also train to be good enough to use it with confidence. The bad thing though is that I’m gonna now need to make more arrows. The ones I hit ran off.”

“You didn’t kill them?”

“Oh no. I wouldn’t even say I wounded them. They don’t feel it. But it does slow them down and sometimes enough so that one will attack the other. My arrows are not strong enough to penetrate their skull. So unless I get lucky and hit them in the eye, my best hope is to either slow them or to get one to attack the other. Besides that, they are kind of like a fish with a hook stuck in its mouth. They just go around with the arrow in them until it comes out or breaks off. But the bow is useful in being able to attack from a distance quietly or if I’m good enough, to hunt a squirrel or so.”

“Have you hit a squirrel yet with it?” Greta asked as a side question.

“No. They are fast. But Harriet has. She ain’t bad with a bow.” He said with a smile.

“Yeah, about that. I don’t want to judge, but they both have guns. Are they real?”

“Yeah they are real, but both have a safety switch,” Grant replied, moving again to another window.

“I can’t be with them all the time to protect them from the zombies,” he said before stopping.

“They also have the gun just in case I change,” he added referring to the fact he had the virus and what he eluded to earlier about being bitten.

“I’ve been lucky so far that my body has been able to hold it off this long, but I know I can’t forever. So they need something for that day.” Grant said somberly then continuing with his work.

“How far along do you think you are?” Greta then asked.

“Boy, I’m not sure. Probably not too far off. Marcus got bad when he lost all feeling in his body. I lost my smell and taste a long time ago. I can still feel some but it’s kind of like having lots of pads on. If I were to hit my hand with this hammer.” He said putting his left hand against the house and cocking back the hammer in his right.

“I’d feel it but not enough for me to react to. I wouldn’t scream and shake it off like I once would have. But yeah just guessing, I’d say I have about a year left.”

“So what about the girls then?” Greta asked, wanting to see if he had a plan for them.

“I’ve had that talk with them a couple of times... that they might have to shoot me. But they have wanted to stay with me so far,” Grant replied, looking around to see if he could see the girls.

“I know they aren’t mine, but they are. I’d do anything for them.”

Grant stopped for a second as if he was about to cry.

“That’s one thing that doesn’t go away. I still have my personal feelings.”

Grant lowered his head then snapped it back up and changed the subject.

“Yeah so we got lucky with the guns. I found this shotgun in a boat. It’s a marine shotgun, so it’s made out of stainless steel, it’s really a good gun to have out here. We found the antique double-barrel shotgun you might have seen in the bedroom last night hanging above a fireplace as a display gun. I guess the guys who searched and cleared that home of weapons and radios must have missed the gun in plain sight. Then we have the pistols the girls have, a three fifty-seven revolver, a thirty-eight special, and a rifle. Unfortunately though, we only have a few rounds for the rifle and the three fifty-seven. So both of them are for emergency use only. Those all were found together in what I’d assume was a preppers stash in a hidden compartment.”

Finishing up the window, Grant was left with two things he wanted to try and get done during the day. The first was something he felt he could somewhat put off, but always felt a need to do and check. This was making and re-checking one of his main zombie traps, small barbed-wired fences

that were only about three feet long. Grant had these scattered about a mile away from his house to tangle up any zombies that may be in the area. Once a week he liked to check on them to make sure they were still there and to see if he needed to make any more.

The other task he had on his checklist was to figure out what to do with the garage. Feeling this was the more pressing issue for safety reasons, he decided to go with this and asked Greta to help.

“Feeling strong?” he asked, pointing at the garage.

“Sure,” Greta replied, not knowing exactly what he meant.

Grant then walked over to the large beam that was half on the ground and braced himself for a heavy lift.

“I’m gonna need you to pick up that end and put it on that stud temporarily.”

Greta’s eyes widened as she doubted she could lift the beam that also had other materials still attached.

“Okay get ready,” Grant said, putting his hands under the beam.

“Now!” He then called out, telling her to lift.

Greta closed her eyes and gave it her best try but couldn’t budge the beam. Not wanting to give up, Greta gave several heaves and even repositioned herself to get a better stance, but nothing worked. Then as she opened her eyes and tried again, Grant tapped her on the shoulder, smiled, and started to laugh.

“I was just joking with you. There’s no way we could pick that up. Here, let’s just pull on it and let it fall down the rest of the way. We’ll clean up afterwards.”

Chapter 15

Same as she had done with Ben, Greta kept plugging away with idea after idea on how to either get out of the Refuge or to be able to get someone on the outside's notice. Regardless of what she heard or saw, she always thought to herself there had to be a way. Unfortunately for Greta, every time she mentioned a new idea, Marcus or Grant had already tried something similar.

“What about a balloon or something that can lift you over the wall? Has anyone tried that?”

“Balloons pop.” He replied bluntly. Referring to how he felt the guards would handle that situation.

After two days of almost non-stop ideas, Grant's entertainment of her ideas had worn out. Simple replies that quickly struck down her ideas were, as he found out, the best way for him to answer.

“Maybe we could do it at night so they couldn't see the balloon... Or maybe we could just put a note in a balloon. Has anyone tried that?”

“Go for it, find some helium.” He said hoping she might venture off for a bit and give him a break.

As the day rolled on, Greta had so many ideas that she scouted Grant's house for a piece of paper and something to write with. The list consisted of both ideas she had and items she wanted Grant to look for when he left to explore. Grant saw this as almost a honey-do list and rolled his eyes to her growing list.

“I'm always looking for things that might be useful in some way. I'll keep it in mind.” He said respectfully turning her down but also annoyed.

Greta, thinking he might be just giving her a line, pushed things a bit about coming along.

“How about today? You checked your traps and we didn't have anything to fix today. I don't know how far we'd need to go, but it's only noon. With your four-wheeler, we could make it pretty far.”

“I heard a “we” in there,” Grant said of her suggestion.

“Yeah, I’d like to go along too,” she said with a sizable smile and a little batting of her eyes.

Grant sat for a second and looked over at the girls who were playing and had no more chores left for the day.

“Alright, but let me talk to the girls.”

“Okay.”

Grant went over to the girls and had a brief chat with them. Although they were playing, both girls gave no fuss to Grant asking them to go inside while they went on a search. Harriet then picked up the ball they had and walked with Nanny into the house, stopping to say something to Greta along the way.

“Grant said to get a backpack and to meet him over there,” she said pointing to a lone tree in the distance.

“He will pick you up once he gets the four-wheeler.”

Greta agreed and went inside with the girls who found the backpack he went out with. Greta, thinking it didn’t look big enough and already having a few things inside, also grabbed a nearby bag plus her sword in which she felt she could carry herself.

“Alright girls, lock up. We will be back soon enough.”

Both girls waved to her as she went towards the tree, before closing and securing the door.

The tree Harriet had pointed out was only about six hundred feet away. Greta had a straight walk to it with little obstructions in between. As she got closer, Greta eventually heard a four-wheeler coming towards her from out in the distance.

When Greta was about thirty feet from the tree, Grant emerged from a thick wooded area. The four-wheeler he was on was a little larger than Ben’s but was not as nice. It was light blue, had torn seats, and looked like it was probably forty years old.

“Need a helmet?” He said not wearing one himself.

Greta noticed pretty quickly this must have been a joke. Seeing he had no helmets and only a sword, Greta replied to this in kind.

“If you’re driving, probably,” she said, countering his joke then handing over his backpack.

Grant smiled to her quick comeback and then handed her a pair of goggles.

“Here. Put these on and give me your sword,” he said, wedging her sword next to his.

“The bugs get a little thick around here. You will want these.”

Greta slung her bags strap around her shoulder and put the goggles on. The goggles were an ugly green and looked to have been the bottom of the barrel of what someone would select.

“Fit okay?” Grant asked once she adjusted them to herself.

“Yep.”

“Alright then. We are going to go about ten minutes that way to fill up. Then we will head north. There are a few trailers over there I haven’t looked in yet.”

Greta shook her head to this not trying to outshout the loud four-wheeler.

“The four-wheeler will attract zombies, even in the day. Keep your eyes open. When we stop, get off quickly and ready yourself. Any attack will occur not too long after we stop.”

Greta shook her head in acknowledgment and grabbed onto Grant, trying to get into a position where the shotgun he had slung around his back was not pointing at her. Once she was on Grant took off. With the four-wheeler running, he didn’t like to linger for long. Grant personally had a constant clock in his head during the daylight. If he ever ventured far from home, he always felt conserving time was an absolute.

As he said, they first went to the place Grant used as a gas station which was only a short ride from the tree. Along the way, Greta did as Grant said, keeping a lookout for zombies or anything at all moving.

Driving through a couple fields and over a little creek, they finally arrived at Grant's gas station. Looking at it, Greta assumed it was an old school building which had about twenty abandoned cars in the parking lot.

Grant drove by several of the cars in the parking lot and pulled up to an old red truck. The way he went straight to the truck, indicated to Greta this must have been a vehicle he knew had gas and had probably used before.

As Grant said, as soon as he pulled up to the truck, he cut the engine and took up a fighting stance, whipping his shotgun around his shoulder when Greta was at a safe distance. Grant became almost like a rotating statue in his defensive stance, unbothered by anything else other than focusing on the distance to see if anything might run their way.

After waiting a long three minutes, he felt the coast was clear, put his shotgun back around his back, and turned to his backpack.

"I'm going to get gas out of this truck. Stay on the lookout. If you see something, stay as still as you can and whisper to me what you see."

Greta gave Grant the thumbs up then turned around with her sword at the ready. While Greta stayed on the lookout, Grant pulled a large hose from his bag. Unraveling it, Grant then took the gas caps off both the four-wheeler and the truck. Sticking one end into the truck, Grant sucked on the other end until gas started to come out. Having a good flow of fuel, Grant quickly put the hose into his four-wheeler and filled up his tank.

A slight modification that Grant did do to his four-wheeler was to add a few hidden bottles for extra gas. These bottles were not originally meant for gas but rather were just something small that Grant could tuck into an unused cavity under a panel. The bottles themselves were only old water or sports drinks which gave him about an extra twenty ounces each.

Once he had filled his tank and his little bottles, Grant pulled the hose from the truck and held it vertically for a minute, making sure everything had run out. When this was done, Grant wrapped the hose back up and placed it back into his bag.

"Alright. Hop on," he said after screwing the gas cap back onto the four-wheeler.

"This section we're going to I've only seen, I haven't searched yet. I can't guarantee it's safe or even if one of the other clans hasn't already

picked it over. So don't get your hopes up too much." He said before taking off.

Along the way, they passed by mainly farmhouses and barns. The only town they went through was the minute town of Polking. Greta knew this by reading the town's bent-over sign which advertised it once having a population of three hundred and sixty.

About three miles past this town was the area Grant had only seen. It was a row of about five mobile homes flanked by yet another farmhouse and a collapsed barn. As Grant had done before, when he stopped the four-wheeler he quickly got off and took up a defensive stance. Seeing nothing coming towards them, he straightened up and grabbed his bag.

"It's not likely there will be any zombies in these trailers. Their doors look closed and they didn't come out when we showed up. Do you want to search these together or do you want to search some of them by yourself?"

Greta felt confident in what Grant had said and felt she could do a couple on her own.

"I can do it. Is there anything in particular I should be on the lookout for?"

"Matches, lighters, a toy for the girls if you see one, weapons, clean clothing, pillows or blankets, fishing or trap equipment, nails, that kind of stuff. Don't worry about the food, it will have expired or been eaten by animals by now."

"Okay," Greta replied making a mental note of it all plus trying to remember the stuff she was looking for.

"First go around the house to make sure there are no openings in it. An opening might mean a zombie or other kinds of animals might be inside. Either way, when you open the door, make a lot of noise and get ready. If there is a zombie inside, he will come to you." He said making Greta kind of think twice about doing this by herself.

"Okay. If one does come out, I just hit it in the head right?"

"Kind of. Sometimes just hitting them in the head will work. Other times you need to cut the head off. Either way, just don't let one bite you. They can hit or scratch you but biting is the only thing that will get you

infected.”

“Okay,” Greta said to this while grabbing her bag.

“You’ll be fine,” Grant said, sensing she was nervous.

“I highly doubt one will be in here after none came out for the four-wheeler. I think the biggest thing we might need to contend with is one coming from off in the distance.”

Grant’s little pep talk was somewhat comforting but Greta still left her defenses up regardless of his well intent. Grant then went silent and pointed to the three trailers he was going to look into. All three were next to each other making it a simple search for him. Greta got the two nicer of the bunch which were each on double lots and had their own car ports.

Greta was much slower than Grant in her approach to her first trailer. Before she had even completely walked around it, she heard Grant make the noise he had advised, letting her know he was already inside trailer number one.

After walking around her first trailer, Greta slowly went up to the front door and found it was locked. This wasn’t what she expected but did give her comfort in the fact it had no holes and was probably empty.

For whatever reason, expecting it to be unlocked, the door being secure gave her the new problem of how to get in. While thinking this through, Greta heard Grant again make noise telling her he was in trailer number two.

This made Greta feel as if she was falling behind. With this feeling in her head and with the knowledge there probably wasn’t anything inside, Greta decided to boot the door. Placing her sword on a porch chair, Greta gave the door the best kick she could. This did nothing but did get Greta over her hump of nervousness. Past this point and not hearing anything coming her way, Greta gave the door several more kicks, each time trying harder and harder.

After about her sixth kick, the door finally opened some but not all the way. Seeing she was almost there, Greta gave it one more big kick which sprung the door open.

As exciting as it was to get the door open, Greta still had some nervousness going inside and checking over the trailer. Slowly

picking up her sword and seeing nothing come to the door, she cautiously went inside ready to attack the slightest noise or shadow.

As she walked into the trailer, a musky smell struck her nose. This was an unpleasant discovery but wasn't the only discovery she made. As soon as she breached the doorway, she noticed that as nice as the trailer was on the outside, it was countered by being hollowed out and ragged on the inside. At first sight, it looked as if some sort of animals had burrowed their way in and had made a mess of just about everything the trailer had.

Her final discovery before even searching was that the trailer must have once been used by a non-infected person. She came to this conclusion by seeing that just as Ben and Grant had done, whoever had lived here had also boarded and blocked all the windows and doors. This as it turned out, was why it was so difficult for her to kick in the door. On the inside of the doorway, she noticed several objects both blocking and locking it in place.

Seeing all of this, her hopes of making a big discovery or finding anything of use were quickly dashed. Briefly looking in the cupboards and drawers revealed next to nothing of use. Moving onto the bathroom and bedrooms, she again found little which was greatly disheartening. Finally, she looked in the master bedroom which turned up one thing she didn't want to find.

On the bed holding a sword was part of a skeleton. It appeared to have been there a while as the absence of flesh and the apparent kidnapping of parts from creatures suggested.

"You find these every now and then." Grant said startling her from behind.

"He or she probably starved to death or had some disease which got to them. There's no doctors in here." He mentioned while turning from the room and walking away.

"Come on," he said almost to the doorway.

"Anything good in a place like this won't be hidden." Referring to the fact a survivor had been here and would have used up anything beneficial already.

"I went ahead and checked your last one, there wasn't much in any of them."

Being religious and feeling she should do something, Greta said a few things to herself before quietly closing the bedrooms door behind her as she left. Grant patiently waited for her outside, looking around as he always did to make sure nothing was coming.

“You don’t get much if someone was living in the area,” he said as she walked outside.

“Anything good will be at the ready, like the sword you saw. You almost want to find a place where nobody has lived. Those places aren’t picked over.”

“I see,” Greta replied now walking over to her other trailer.

“I already got that one,” Grant said, echoing what he had just told her.

“The only thing left is that farmhouse.”

With the farmhouse only being about a hundred yards away, they both decided to walk over to it instead of riding the four-wheeler.

“I’m guessing this one was probably the original house of the guy you just had and it was overrun. So I’m guessing there won’t be anything in this one either,” Grant said before reaching the house.

As they did with the trailers, they both walked around the outside of it before attempting to enter. This house, as Grant predicted, had been clearly used as was evident by multiple windows having been boarded up at one point or another. As Grant also thought and predicted, the main entryway was open, meaning anything could come or go at its own leisure.

“Stay behind me.” Grant said as he approached the doorway and drew his shotgun.

Upon reaching the door frame, Grant did as he had done with the other trailers and made a bunch of racket to flush out anything inside. Waiting and not hearing anything, Grant loosened up his stance and walked inside.

“Come on,” he said to Greta.

“I don’t think this will take long.”

Following Grant inside, this house had also been lived in by various animals but was not as disgusting as the trailer. In fact, each room had little of anything inside equating little to search.

Grant casually strolled through the house as if he were a prospective buyer looking into a vacant home. Every now and again he would double-check something or look into a creaky floor, but found nothing as he thought.

Moving to the upstairs rooms wasn't much better. Each room still had a bed and a dresser or two, but nothing usable or unsoiled. Dejected in the time spent getting to this location, Grant kicked an overturned box that laid on the floor.

"I guess that's that," he said to Greta a little discouraged.

Perhaps being her first time or being a little stubborn, Greta didn't give in as easily, feeling that if a family had been flushed from the house, that maybe they had left something in their hasty retreat. With this in mind, Greta continued to look under or on top of things that Grant had passed up.

While Greta was doing this, Grant went downstairs and onto the porch, taking a seat on the stairs. Grant didn't rush Greta and instead looked through his backpack at the little amount of things he did decide to keep.

Working her way from room to room and eventually downstairs, Greta continued looking over places Grant had dismissed. Greta looked under a chair that had been knocked over and behind a small shelf that was in a corner. Greta even pulled over the fallen chair and looked on top of a grandfather clock which was still upright and beside a window.

With this little bit of nosiness and rooting around, her patience paid off. Above the grandfather clock with layers of dust protecting it, a small handgun could be seen, pointing her way. Greta gasped upon the sight of it then laughed and called out to Grant.

"I found something!" She said with excitement.

"Sure." Grant replied, trying on a new pair of sunglasses he had found.

"No really, I did. Come in here." Greta promptly countered feeling proud of herself.

Grant put his items back in his bag and walked back into the house. Feeling Greta was getting him back for his garage joke, he carelessly strolled into the room she was in and noticed her standing atop the chair. Greta herself resembled a dog that had trapped its prey, not taking her eyes off of the gun.

“What did you find?” he questioned, suspicious of a forthcoming joke.

“A gun. Look!” she said, pointing at it.

Grant didn’t believe her but nonetheless entertained her joke and likewise got on the chair when she got off.

“The guy in the trailer would have had the gun instead of the sword if there were one.” He said trying to show he wasn’t going to be fooled.

But to Grant’s surprise, Greta was right, on top of the clock there was a gun that must have gone missed.

“Wow!” Grant said upon its sight.

“Good job.”

Grant grabbed the gun carefully, cleared the chamber, and dropped the gun’s magazine before dusting it off.

“That’s a nice little gun.” He said, revealing it to be a small black semiautomatic pistol.

As he got off the chair, he picked up the round that had ejected then talked out loud of his suspicions.

“There’s no way that guy wouldn’t have taken this gun with him. I bet this was overlooked not only by him but the government officials that cleared the house when they first made the Refuge.”

“You too,” Greta said with some pleasure.

“Yeah, I guess so. Well congratulations, you have a nice little three-eighty.” He said as he reloaded it and handed it over to her.

Greta, never being a gun owner or being a gun fan, initially rejected

it.

“No, it’s yours. You and the girls helped me out so much. Take it as a thank you from me.”

Grant acknowledged the nice offer but refused.

“Finders keepers in here,” he said, insisting she take it.

Greta felt odd taking the gun. She had only ever shot a gun once. So besides the obvious gun facts, she really didn’t know a lot about them. She also didn’t know what she would do with it or where to put it. Since both of the girl’s guns were stored in a secret place purposefully, they both had their carrying cases and a little holster. This gun had none of that. This gun was most likely placed here long ago and mistakenly forgotten. So unfortunately for Greta, it had none of the extra stuff the girl’s guns had. Nevertheless, Greta knew Grant wouldn’t budge and that it was an extremely valuable item, just as the sword from Ben was.

“Thank you,” she said not one hundred percent knowing how she should grab it.

Grant recognized this and gave the gun to her with the barrel facing towards him, making sure the safety was on.

“The safety is on, you will be fine putting it in your bag like this. If we end up needing it, then we will get into the safety stuff.”

Trusting Grant and what he said, Greta awkwardly grabbed it and put it into her bag.

“Well that’s about it,” Grant then said.

“We better get going. I’m going to take a little bit of a detour just to scout out this area for the future. But we will work our way back to downtown Polking and then make another stop at the school for a top-off.”

Greta agreed with this and walked with him back to the four-wheeler. Along their detoured ride they passed pretty much what they had already. Grant took note of a couple more trailers, a gas station, and an ice cream stand before turning back towards the water tower that said Polking across it.

Before reaching the small town, they also passed by the communities

baseball field. Greta looked over to this and noticed a shed nearby. Remembering the success she had at the cemetery, Greta pulled on Grant's shirt and asked him to check it out. Not seeing the harm in a small shed, Grant turned off the road they were on and drove over to it. As Greta now had gotten used to, Grant again did his defensive check before messing with the shed.

"It's not locked," Grant said as he went around it.

"I think you're good if you want to check."

Feeling a little confident, Greta opened the doors and gasped at what was inside. Hearing this, Grant readied his shotgun and charged by Greta to cut off any attack. However her astonishment of what was inside was not something bad, but good. Inside looking right back at them was a brand new four-wheeler covered only in dust and attached to a drag for the field.

Grant was shocked at this and didn't say anything while Greta did a little dance in celebration.

"Finders keepers right Grant!" she said while laughing.

Grant could only shake his head to Greta's luck in getting a four-wheeler and a gun on her first search.

"Well don't get too excited," he retorted, half hoping the thing didn't work.

Grant then went over to the four-wheeler and tried to turn it on.

"Click," it went, this time giving him a smile and Greta a frown.

Being nice Grant didn't rub it in and instead cut her dismay short by telling her there were jumper cables in the corner near some gas cans and a field line stripper.

"Hold on a second. Let me see what I can do."

Grant filled it up and positioned his four-wheeler to be able to jump the new one and tried again. After a few labored cranks, the four-wheeler popped off, blew out a little black smoke, and started to purr. Grant could only shake his head to this but was happy for Greta.

"Alright." He said.

“Let’s fill mine up and strap what’s left onto it while yours warms up.”

Greta happily did so while treating the four-wheeler like a new car, dusting it off and admiring its red paint. After Grant had disconnected the drag and felt it was warmed up enough he asked Greta if she felt comfortable enough to drive it.

“Heck Yeah!” she said uncharacteristically of herself.

“I’ll lead the way!”

“Let’s take it back a notch.” Grant said, holding up his hands and trying to calm her down.

“Follow me and take it easy. We only know it runs, not if something might be wrong with the shocks, brakes, or anything else.”

Chapter 16

Grant woke up the next day a little more drained than he usually was after going on a search. Thinking about it, he couldn't figure out why since they didn't do anything more than what he normally would do. This drain actually led to Greta and the girls waking up before Grant, which was a first for Greta and very rare for the girls.

When he got up Grant went downstairs and walked onto the porch to see the girls playing ball with Greta. They seemed happy for the playtime and giggled more loudly than he could remember. Grant didn't interrupt them and let them play until Nanny finally noticed he was up.

"Grant!" She said with a big smile.

"We made you breakfast. It's in the kitchen."

Not being able to smell, Grant missed this polite gesture but turned for the door to investigate. Inside the kitchen was some crisp potatoes sprinkled with a green vegetable. Next to the potatoes was a piece of cooked meat and a glass of water. Although he didn't know what kind of vegetable they used, what kind of meat he had, or that he couldn't taste any of it anyway, he still was very appreciative of the offer.

While Grant ate the meal, he tried to remember what each item tasted like. It had been some time since he had been able to do so, and out of the bunch, buttery potatoes were the easiest to remember. After that, the meat was much harder. Not knowing exactly what he had in front of him, and figuring it was probably opossum, he decided to pretend it was cow. This sparked memories of old Sunday afternoon cookouts before he was in the Refuge.

Losing his smell and taste though was not too big of a deal for Grant. Although he would much rather have his senses back, he had long since gotten used to the fact they were gone. Grant actually turned lemons into lemonade with the problem and treated it as an extended diet in which a solid tomato tasted the same as a chocolate candy bar would.

After eating his meal he surveyed the damage to the house and noticed it needed little repair. With this extra time, he decided to call a break to the girl's games and sat next to them in the field with the book bag

he had taken with him the day prior.

Something fun Grant liked to do for the girls was to go over each item as he pulled them out. A bonus for the girls and in this present bag was whenever he did find something he thought the girls would like, he would save it for last... but tell them ahead of time to keep them in suspense.

Grant's first item was the sunglasses he had tried on the day prior. He did this first so he could quickly swap them out for the pair he had on.

The second item he found was an unopened pack of band-aids which were rare and something new to the girls. To make things more interesting for the girls, the band-aids were for kids and had different caricatures and animals on them which they found funny.

The third item he had was a triple pack of cheap rain jackets. This pack was already open and had one jacket missing. Still this was a good find regardless of if it were the dollar style or not.

The next few items he found were all clothing or towel-related. These items, if clean, were always taken and used from clothing to blankets. Grant specifically tried to find anything that he felt the girls would favor, over plain colors and patterns, if the option ever presented itself.

Finally, what the girls had been waiting for, the final find was revealed. Grant did this with some dramatization, but eventually pulled out a few notepads and some pens. Of note with these items was a blue pen which gave the girls an additional option of color in their play.

Although the girls gleamed with excitement over the paper and pens, the simplicity of the items reminded Greta where she was. In riding the new four-wheeler and playing with the girls, some of the reality of the situation had vanished for her for a bit.

Greta smiled to the girl's happiness but internally remembered their plight and gave a blank stare to Grant as he asked her a question.

"Greta," he said for the second time.

"Do you want to show the girls your finds?"

Greta came to the second time around and asked if they would really care to see what she had found.

“Oh sure,” he said, dismissing her skepticism.

“Especially the second one.”

“Okay.” Greta said seeing the girls bounce and cheer for more surprises.

Greta then went inside the house and found her bag. She checked the bag to make sure the gun was still within and then went back outside to sit with the girls.

While she went over to them, a wailing sound started from the distance. The sound seemed to wind its way up both in intensity and direction before slowly working itself down.

“What was that?” Greta asked as she sat near the girls again.

“I’m sure on the outside they tell everyone it’s a tornado siren or something like that. In here that means someone tonight will be released from the holding cell you came out of.” Grant said as he ended their day of play and told the girls to go inside.

“They do that siren on purpose to attract zombies. This time was especially loud, so I’m guessing it’s probably someone of importance. We can not stay outside. That sound is too attractive to the zombies. The injured ones will be coming through soon followed at sundown by the regular ones which will flood the area.”

Grant gathered up the items he had in his bag, the balls Greta and the girls had been playing with then scurried everyone inside.

Once inside, Grant barred the doors but didn’t prepare anything else other than a few easy meals. Instead, to Greta’s surprise, after the meals he sat down with the girls and started to practice some spelling and grammar with the new items he had acquired.

“If more zombies are going to be in the area, shouldn’t we get ready a little more?” Greta asked thinking they should move upstairs and maybe reinforce some of the windows.

“Nope,” Grant said directly.

“They’ll keep tooting that horn throughout the day which will take

any attention away from us. So today and tonight we are fine. Tomorrow and the next couple of days after that we will have to be on our toes, but today besides staying inside, we're fine."

Nanny chuckled to the word "tooting" before getting a fatherly look from Grant to keep working.

"So what's your plan then?" Greta asked concerning if he might try to rescue the person or persons inside the cell.

"I don't know. Let me think." Grant said nonchalantly as he continued with the girl's education, seemingly unconcerned that someone of great importance may be coming.

"Grant you said that was louder than normal right?"

"Yep, sure was."

"How often do they change the volume from what you're used to?"

"That would be the first time." He said writing a few words down to have Harriet say aloud.

"So obviously we need to have a game plan to get whoever is in there. They might be able to help us out or know something!" She said a little animated.

Feeling that maybe, if whoever was being released into the Refuge was important, this could be a shot at getting some information, Greta continued to push Grant to an irritating level.

"Greta." Grant finally said trying to keep himself calm around the girls.

"I'm going to do what I always do. I want what you want. But there is nothing else I can do other than what I did for you. The doors aren't going to open until after dark. I can't "prep" anything when I get there. All I can do is show up, try to create a distraction, and see if I can convince whoever to come with me before we get overrun by zombies."

"Well I want to go with you then," Greta insisted.

"Two can do more than one and if there are several people in the cell, then we will need more than one four-wheeler."

Harriet, not ignoring what was being said, then chimed in.

“We only have one four-wheeler. We can attach a sled to it to pull more people if you want.”

“We did find another four-wheeler.” Grant said, knowing both girls were still unaware of its presence.

“But Harriet is right. It might get dicey, I can attach a sled to mine just in case more than one person comes out.”

“You have another four-wheeler!” Nanny said excitedly.

“Yes, that was something Greta found. We can show you it another day.” He said trying to hold back her excitement.

Greta then pulled out the four-wheelers keys to show them this indeed was true which brought up another question.

“What color is it?” Nanny asked, wanting to know everything about it.

“Nanny... later please.” Grant replied in a dad’s voice, telling Nanny and everyone else that was enough for now.

Grant then turned the conversation back to Greta and what he felt.

“Greta, I’ve been doing this for a while and would rather you stay with the kids and look after them. I appreciate that you want to help, but please let me handle it. In the least, I’ve already been bitten. I can’t re-get the virus. If this is an “important person” I don’t want my focus cut in half. Let me do what I’ve done for years now.”

“But you said the zombies won’t be an issue here tonight. If that’s true, I don’t need to stay. I can help,” Greta said, pleading her case.

“Greta please,” Grant said, trying to end the back and forth.

“Let me just do this. I have a system down. If something does go wrong, I’d rather someone be here with the girls instead of all our chips being put on a first-time job that might be more tricky than normal.”

Greta upset he was rejecting her attempts to help, spun around and

walked out of the room. Seeing this, Grant and the girls looked at each other without saying a word and then eventually went back to the education Grant was trying to provide them.

Greta, on the other hand, paced the kitchen upset with his verdict. Moving back and forth pondering to herself, she decided she would bypass his decision and simply track his tracks to find her way to the cell. Coming to this conclusion and wanting to rest up, Greta composed herself and told the group she wanted to take a nap.

Grant and the girls acknowledged her decision and moved to a further room so as to not disturb her. This was a welcome sign to Greta. It indicated to her they weren't suspicious of her plan.

Quietly upstairs, Greta furthered her plan along. She indeed did plan on taking a nap but placed a piece of wood against their door so it would fall when Grant and the girls came to bed. This in effect would be her alarm to wake up, fake resting, and then wait for the girls to fall asleep.

The only hiccup in her plan was remembering how to get back to where they had parked the four-wheelers. This on a dark night she felt would be hard. Unlike following Grant's tracks once she had the four-wheeler, following his foottracks to the four-wheeler had to be done without light.

This was a problem she spent some time thinking about. Grant didn't park the four-wheeler near the house because he feared the sound they gave off would be too close to their home. Greta agreed with this but now needed to get back without him.

Greta figured the four-wheelers were about a mile away. She knew the general direction they were in but didn't want to wander in the dark. Her wide and stretched thoughts cover several different approaches, but only one ever seemed to safely get her from point A to point B without the help of Grant.

At sundown, as they always had, Grant came upstairs with the girls. Greta, having finally fallen asleep after hours of planning, was awoken by the wood she had planted.

Thinking of sleep and trying to be quiet, Grant paused for a second before doing anything further. Following what he felt was a sufficient wait-and-see with Greta, he then knelt down next to both of them by the doorway, gave them a hug, and whispered to them.

“I’ll be back later. Lock up and get some sleep. Everything will be fine,” he said, then gave both a kiss.

Both girls were brave. Although Greta could hear the apprehension in their replies, neither cried or gave Grant a bit of worry.

Without pause, Grant promptly left and could be heard closing the door and walking in the direction of the four-wheelers outside.

Greta then listened for his four-wheeler to start and for him to drive off to the cell. When this occurred, Greta made a note to herself as to where he was and what direction he went.

This though wasn’t Greta’s plan. Greta knew just the assumption of direction wouldn’t be good enough. So when she could no longer hear the four-wheelers rev, she sat up and went over to the girls with necessary reluctance.

“Girls.” She said, whispering without cause.

“I need your help. Can you tell me where Grant parks his four-wheeler?”

“Yes.” Harriet said, not wanting to lie.

“But Grant told us we shouldn’t if you asked.”

“I know.” Greta said, now having to counter this direction.

“But he said he had never heard such a loud siren before and that that might mean something of importance.” She said pausing to see what the girl’s thoughts might be.

Without a yeah or nah, she continued in her persuasion.

“I know you’re just doing what Grant asked you to, but if lots of zombies are there and he needs to help several people, this might be more than he can handle alone. If he doesn’t get all the help he can, he or anyone in the cell might be outnumbered. He needs all the help he can get.”

Harriet turned to Nanny who had a distraught look upon her face. They both then seemed to visually exchange thoughts before Harriet spoke up.

“But Grant said you might get bit,” she said with worry.

“Is that why you’re not telling me.” Greta replied.

Both girls nodded their heads with obvious concern.

“Oh girls.” Greta said, knowing they had lost everyone close to them in similar fashion.

“If I promise you I won’t let that happen, would you tell me how to get to the four-wheeler?”

Both girls’ worry cleared for a bit as they shook their heads yes.

“Okay. If I come close to a zombie, I will stay on my four-wheeler and drive away.” She reassured the girls.

“The four-wheeler is faster than them. I will be safe and I’ll come back to you.”

Harriet and Nanny liked what she said and gave her the directions she needed to get to her ATV. To further help her and without prompting, the girls also gave some tips on how to get to the cell.

“Thank you girls.” Greta said while giving them a hug and walking to the door.

“Now lock this up and I promise you I will see you in the morning.”

Both girls smiled to this assurance and did as they were asked.

Before leaving, Greta grabbed her sword and her new gun. Not having a holster, Greta stuffed it into her waistband as securely as she could. Before walking to the points the girls had advised, she double-checked if she still had her keys and left the house as quietly as she could.

In what took longer than expected, Greta found her way to the four-wheeler using the information the girls had advised. Although she didn’t know a ton about vehicles, Grant’s only barrier in keeping her from riding seemed to be only the girls. Looking over the four-wheeler to see if Grant had tampered with it, Greta did not see any missing parts or any obvious impairment.

Still, as Greta went to turn the key, she still wondered if it would start. The thought of the battery issue was one of her worries, along with something Grant might have done that she herself couldn't see.

With a prayer and a hold of her breath, Greta turned the key.

“Vrrrooommm” The engine went to Greta's delight.

However, this pleasure was short-lived knowing following the girls' directions and watching for Grant's tracks was much more of a challenge than the simple turn of a key.

Greta wasted no time in driving off, initially following what the girls had told her. They gave Greta several good landmarks to follow which were all large and visible even in the dark.

Another comforting sight along the way was what she had expected. Since nobody mowed and all the areas were either overgrown or required a disturbance to pass, Grant's tracks were rarely hard to find. In fact, besides the times he traveled along a road, Greta rarely needed the girl's directions past the first three to four miles.

During the drive and the closer and closer she got to the wall, she did start to notice zombies. As she had told the girls, Greta simply drove away from them with little cause to worry. Only a couple of times during her drive did any get close and those were the ones which turned around after already being ahead of her.

It also helped that her four-wheeler was much newer and had much more speed and agility. Greta did give Grant's four-wheeler some wiggle room being that two people on it did slow it down. However, the difference between the two four-wheelers' performance was night and day.

When the wall came into sight, Greta reverted back to what the girls had told her to do. Driving parallel to the wall with about a fifty-yard cushion, she continued on this route until she saw a large pole in the air. This pole had mounted on it a large siren which the girls told her would be her stopping point.

Just as Grant had been doing, when she reached her area, she cut the engine and got off in a defensive position holding her sword. This however wasn't like her other outing with Grant. In her other outing, zombies were random. In this outing, due to the keepers of the Refuge's purposeful noise, the zombies were not random and had massed near the wall.

Still in her stance, it wasn't long before a zombie came running at her. Greta first heard, then saw the woman zombie who was somewhat hissing as she approached.

Greta's eyes got bigger as her stance became more pronounced and dug in. As this zombie approached, another zombie also appeared from her side, bashing its way past a few trees, yet undeterred directly towards her.

Not feeling she had enough time to do as she had told the girls she would, Greta rounded the four-wheeler and used it as a barrier between her and her attackers.

At the moment the female zombie reached her, Grant, crouched behind some nearby ferns, sprung up and swiftly struck the girl in the head with his sword. He then rapidly turned his attention to the second zombie which had tripped near them and was on the ground. Grant took advantage of this and likewise dispatched the zombie as quickly as he could.

Grant then instantly turned to Greta and told her to get down and crawl away. Greta did as she was asked and slithered away as fast but discretely as she could. Grant on the other hand froze to see if a third zombie might be coming.

Greta instantly regretted her decision as she made her way over to a fallen tree. In the distance, she heard more noise which she interpreted as Grant dealing with another attack. Greta wedged herself as deeply as she could between the tree and the ground and waited to see when, hopefully, she might hear a friendly sound.

Instead of this friendly sound, the siren wailed as if it were a warning to the zombies the cell was about to open. This, although not what she wanted, did turn any zombie's attention away from them and towards the wall.

Remaining still, Greta had one zombie run past her as a second zombie could be seen doing the same in the distance. This was followed by Grants whispering to her.

"Crawl back to your four-wheeler and lay down next to it until I say so." She heard him say.

At about this time, the cell door flew open which attracted the attention of the zombies that had just gone by her. They first ran over to the

door and eventually went inside the cell.

A tussle then could be heard inside the cell as a couple of men yelled to each other.

“Help.”

“I’m coming.”

“Get it off me.”

The tussle and distressing sounds the people inside made were not the worst of the incident. A third, then fourth zombie soon appeared, also running into the cell which only created more noise from within.

The sounds emitted from the cell were horrifying to Greta. Not just because of its nature but also in the fact she felt somewhat responsible for what was going on.

As a fifth zombie limped its way inside, a younger man soon emerged from the doorway breaking free from a zombie’s grip. The man stumbled to the ground but quickly got up and ran unwittingly towards Greta at a desperate pace.

Seeing this, Greta jumped onto her four-wheeler, turned it on, and waved for the man to jump on. Without hesitation, the assaulted man jumped on and Greta took off.

Greta immediately cut the wheel and turned back in the direction she came. The man that she now carried with her, gasped for air and winced in pain. Greta could only think to say “Hold on” as she tried to put her focus mainly on her path and to avoid the emerging zombies.

The first two to three miles were the worst since zombies were still heading in the direction of the cell. However, the kind they encountered generally were the slower type which made it much easier for her to avoid.

After about fifteen minutes of driving, the zombies almost went away. Greta then reduced her speed which allowed her rider to loosen his grip. Doing this, the man gave off a deep moan and seemed to favor his right side.

“Are you okay?” Greta asked not knowing what else to say.

“My arm’s broken,” the man replied in discomfort.

“Did you get bitten?” Greta asked hoping to hear a no.

“Ummm, no I don’t think so. Why?”

“Good. Just hang on. We can’t stop here. We will talk more when we get to a safe place.”

Chapter 17

When Greta and the man got about a mile from the house, she parked and turned off the four-wheeler in a random place. She didn't care where she was, other than the fact she knew she wasn't close to the house. She did however purposely park it next to a lump of trees so that Grant would not accidentally crash into it in the dark.

The injured man gingerly got off the four-wheeler and favored his right side.

"We need to walk about a mile. Can you make it?" Greta asked grimacing as she saw his arm.

"Yeah I'll be fine," he said, following her lead.

"Okay, but stay as quiet as possible."

Along the way, Greta's nerves calmed down and she relaxed some knowing that Grant had said they would be fine at the house tonight. With this, she still was cautious but paid more attention to the man than she did during the frantic moments that led up to their escape.

Looking back at him in between frequent zombie pauses, Greta noticed he was young, had a blond crew cut, and looked to have a badge on. The closer they got to the house, the more she paid attention and finally did see the shin of a badge that was now attached to a flap of his ripped-apart uniform.

Before formal introductions, Greta wanted to get inside. As they made their way up the stairs of the porch, Harriet opened the door and quietly whisked them in.

"Harriet, Why are you awake?" Greta asked as she gave her a hug.

"There was a lot of noise tonight so I stayed up," she replied.

"Okay," Greta said.

"I'll lock this up, can you help this young man? He has a broken arm."

Harriet did so with the care of a professional nurse, putting his good arm around her, walking him up the stairs, and assisting him to the ground.

In the meantime, Greta locked and bared the door but did so in a way she could easily reopen it for when Grant returned. Following this, Greta likewise went upstairs and did her best to tend to the man.

“What’s your name?” Greta finally asked as she knelt next to him to check his arm.

“Clark. Clark Dent.” He replied holding back his pain.

“Are you an officer?” She asked as she continued to look him over for other injuries and signs of bites.

“Deputy. Yes.” He replied, now starting to feel the pain grow with his adrenalin wearing off.

Besides the broken arm, Deputy Dent had several scratches, abrasions, and a broken finger. But as much as Greta looked, he didn’t seem to have any bites.

“No bites,” Greta said to Harriet who was getting some soap and putting it into a pitcher of water.

Nanny, although shy to newcomers, also pitched in by sheepishly getting some towels and tossing them over to Greta and Harriet before retreating behind the bed.

“We are going to wait on that arm a bit. I’m first going to try and clean you off.” Greta said as Harriet dropped the soap into the pitcher and stirred it up with a towel.

“I can’t help that this is cold.” She said before rubbing it over his cuts.

The young Deputy faintly twitched when Greta applied the towel to clean his wounds. Greta did this several times at each spot she noticed before also clearing his face of dirt.

“What was all that?” He asked as Greta finished up.

“Zombies.” She said not knowing how else to answer his question.

Deputy Dent took the news better than she had and quickly put two and two together.

“So are we in the Refuge?”

“Yes.” Greta replied.

“We are in the Refuge.”

The Deputy didn't look as surprised as she had been but was also distracted by his arm which was bent in a spot it shouldn't be.

At this time, Greta then heard a noise come from the porch.

“Wait here,” she said turning from them while hearing Grant call out to open the door.

Greta hurried down the stairs and undid the locks and boards she had set. Grant and an older man immediately fell into the house upon the doors opening. They both made a hefty thud against the wooden floor, in which Grant then got up but the older man did not.

“Help me pull him in.” Grant said once to his feet.

With each pulling one of the older man's arms, they dragged him into the room the girls had been practicing their grammar, flipped him over, and checked his wounds. At the moment the older man was put onto his back, Greta recognized the man as Sergeant Cable. Grant also recognized something, but far more solemn. Across his body and on his arms, Sergeant Cable had several bite marks, some of which looked very deep. Grant then knelt down next to him and checked for breathing.

“He's alive,” he said looking back to Greta.

“But he's been bitten. Are you okay?”

Greta said she was then Grant asked for soap and water which an overhearing Harriet came down the stairs with. Harriet handed the pitcher and a towel over to Grant with a smile of comfort seeing him again before going back upstairs.

Greta then grabbed for the towel but was rejected by Grant from doing so.

“Let me do it,” he said calmly.

“I know getting bitten will surely contaminate you but I don’t want to take the chance of something in the wounds contaminating you.”

“Well is there anything I can do to help?” She said wanting to do so.

“Yes. Secure the door and guard the girls.” He replied as he started to tend to the Sergeant.

Greta respected his wishes and did as he asked. Once upstairs, Greta noticed Harriet had wrapped Deputy Dent in a blanket and was trying to distract him from his arm.

Greta, seeing Harriet was doing a good job tending to the Deputy, then went to the windows to see if any dangers lurked outside. Greta went from window to window as Grant had done, looking through the cracks for any movement she could discern.

Watching out each window for several minutes a piece, Greta saw nothing of alarm so she turned her focus back inside. In doing this, she noticed she had missed Grant coming up the stairs who was now next to Clark, looking him over.

Seeing the deputy’s injuries, he asked Greta to get three or four small straight pieces of wood and some rope. Greta quickly went downstairs and grabbed up a few smaller branches next to Grant’s fireplace, finding the straightest she could.

Finding some rope in the kitchen, Greta went back upstairs and noticed Grant trying to divert Clark’s attention away from his injuries.

“What’s your name? How long have you been a deputy?” Grant asked.

When Greta entered the room, she handed the branches and rope to Grant who measured and picked the pieces he liked the best. Then before setting it, he warned Clark the best he could.

“I’m sorry old sport,” he said deciding to be blunt.

“I’m sure you know, this is going to hurt.”

The Deputy took a deep breath and shook his head indicating he was ready.

The girls now in a lesser-used bedroom, heard a loud cry, followed by a few shouts of pain before silence. The girls waited in the other room for about ten minutes before Greta came over and told them they could come back in.

Upon reentering the main bedroom, they noticed Clark had passed out and was being tended to by Grant. Greta walked them over to the rooms bed, thanked them for their help, and told them they needed to rest. The girls, never giving anyone any grief, both complied with this request, gave Greta their nighttime hugs, and closed their eyes for the night.

When Grant was done wrapping both Clark's arm and finger, he propped him in a corner, draped him in the blanket Harriet had provided then left the room.

"Coming?" He said to Greta as he walked out.

At the bottom of the steps, Greta saw Grant had gone back into the room to check on the Sergeant. The Sergeant was still in the same place he was, but with various spots obviously washed.

"Are you okay?" She asked Grant slowly walking into the room.

"I'll check myself over in the morning, but I think I'm fine." He said, reminding Greta he couldn't feel if he was or was not hurt anyways.

"You said you were okay?" He re-asked.

"Yes... Thanks to you," she said as her way of thanking him.

"Grant I'm sorry. I really messed up. I thought..." She said before Grant cut her off.

"Greta, who knows which way whatever would have went anyways. It's spilled milk now. I know you just want out of here. So go ahead and drop it."

Greta greatly appreciated what he said but still felt bad over her actions.

"I pulled directions out of the girls," she said, figuring Grant would

know how she got to him.

“I told them I wouldn’t get hurt and would just drive off if I was in trouble. I didn’t do that. I’m letting everyone down.”

“Did you tell the girls what happened?” Grant asked.

“No, I didn’t have the time. We helped the Deputy as soon as I got back.”

“You left and you returned. Leave it at that. Don’t worry about whatever else. Again Greta, I... we need you to move on, Okay?” he said, not judging her like she thought he would.

Listening to what he said, Greta changed the topic and asked about what else happened at the cell.

“So after you left I waited to see what I could from the outside. I try not to go into the cell because you are kind of trapping yourself like I’m sure the people running the show want.” he said, now taking the time to clean his sword.

“This guy,” he said, pointing to Sergeant Cable.

“Must have gotten a chance to run outside and took it. I would imagine there were more still inside but no others came out and I was able to lure him to me.”

“I know him,” Greta then said to Grant’s surprise.

“He was the Deputy that turned the golf balls over to me and started me into this investigation.”

“What’s his name?” Grant asked.

“Thomas Cable, although I’m sure he probably goes by Tom.”

Grant then started to speculate as to how Thomas got caught and released into the Refuge.

“I bet after you ended up in here they looked through your stuff and backtracked how you got your information. Did you meet with more than one Deputy?” He said of Deputy Dent upstairs.

“No I only met with the one but he did say that there were others on his shift who found the balls and were also suspicious.”

“I betcha that’s it,” Grant said.

“They probably backtracked it to Thomas and watched to see who was in his circle. Or they might have just tossed the Sergeants entire shift into the cell and just said heck with it to cover their end. Did you take notes or write anyone else’s name down?”

Greta thought to herself a bit and tried to remember.

“I do take notes but I honestly don’t recall if I wrote names down next to my findings. It’s a mix. Sometimes I write nothing, sometimes I’ll write the name of who I spoke to. Sometimes I just write the initials of the person. I honestly forget what I did.”

“Okay,” Grant said while thinking.

“It’s hard for me to think there weren’t more people in that cell tonight. I wonder if they rounded up the people you spoke with and dumped them off for one big removal.”

Greta’s thoughts quickly turned to everyone she spoke with including her older friend Ruby who worked at the zoning department.

“Did you see anyone else in there?” Greta asked trying to catch maybe a little nugget Grant might have missed.

“No. I only saw what came out. Although there was a ton of action going on even after the Sergeant got out. I would have to think more than one other person was in there.”

Sergeant Cable then moved a little, grumbling as he did so. This changed Greta’s focus from her friend and whom she had spoken with, to Thomas.

“Is he going to get the virus?”

“More than likely,” Grant said seeing if Thomas might wake up.

“Time will tell but he definitely got bit. Just one will do the trick. He has at least six that I can see. I honestly don’t see how he won’t get it.”

“Will we know by the morning?” Greta asked, wondering how fast the symptoms might kick in.

“More than likely, no. He should feel the same as if he were just in a regular knockdown drag-out fight. Stiff, sore. He probably will find an extra injury or two we don’t see. But I’ve never seen someone change that fast.”

“Do you know when we might know?”

“Ummm, yes. As long as he doesn’t lie to us, he eventually will start to get numb. You and I won’t be able to tell this, but he will feel it. Then his eyes will first get bloodshot before eventually turning to grey. He then will become light-sensitive like me. At that point, if he is hiding it, he won’t be able to anymore. But again, each person is different, so it’s hard to say.”

“Have you seen anyone else last as long as you?”

“No. Not that I’m aware of. Marcus lasted a long time as well, but besides him, not that I know of.”

“Well if you have lasted the longest in changing over, how fast before you knew you had it for sure?”

“For sure, for sure, a little less than a week. I figured I had it right away and gave my numbness the benefit of the doubt. But when my eyes turned red, then eventually turned grey, I knew I had it for sure.”

“Did the numbness start quickly?”

“For me, no. I made it to day three before that kicked in. However, Marcus and almost everyone else feels some sort of numbness generally on the second day. That seems more the normal time frame although some do right away. So Thomas will probably know within two days.”

“Okay.” Greta said as she yawned and started to feel tired herself, now coming down from her stress.

“I think I’m going to go up. Can I get anything for you before I do?”

Grant shook his head no and leaned back against the wall before answering.

“No. I’ll be fine. I’m going to stay down here with him until he wakes up. He will be pretty confused whenever he comes to.”

“Okay.” Greta said, then walked to the stairs.

“Grant,” she said before she went up,

“Thank you again for what you did tonight... and for not judging me throughout all of this.”

Grant smiled as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“You’re welcome, Greta. Get some sleep.”

Chapter 18

The next morning the young deputy was the first to wake. He himself was woken by the pain in his arm more than his body getting enough rest. Although he tried to be quiet, it was hard for him to get up and not feel something in or on his body that caused a reflexive yelp.

Greta was the second to wake, hearing his pain, and then seeing him stagger towards the doorway.

“Do you need any help?” She asked as she got up from her makeshift-clothed mattress.

“No. I’ll be fine,” he said, trying to be strong and not show his discomfort.

“Okay. I’ll be down shortly. Until then, stay in the house and try to make as little noise as possible.”

Deputy Dent acknowledged this and then continued out the doorway and towards the stairs.

Greta herself was still tired and didn’t want to get up. However, still feeling responsible and wanting to be a good host, she stretched out her back and got up.

Going down the stairs herself, she felt bad that Clark had only made it four steps down.

“You sure you don’t want any help?” She asked again, letting him know it was not a problem.

“No mam. I think doing it myself will help in the long run.”

Greta agreed with his reasoning and let him take as much time as he needed to make it the rest of the way down.

While walking down, Greta looked over to the room Grant and Thomas were in to see if they might have woken. Seeing Thomas’s feet still lying in the same place as the night prior, she imagined Grant was still resting as well.

As Clark made it the rest of the way down, Greta got a better look into the room and noticed Grant was awake but was near a corner facing away from them. From what Greta could see and the actions Grant gave off, he appeared to be writing something while using a crate as his desk next to a window.

When Grant noticed the two had walked downstairs, he discreetly closed the binder and slid it and a pen through a crack in the crate. He then casually stood up and walked over to Clark.

“How you doing, Clark? Right?” he said looking at the arm he set.

“Yep, that’s it. I’ve definitely had better days,” he said as a way to joke around.

Grant smiled at his little jest and then walked with Clark over to Thomas to check on him.

“How is he doing?” Clark asked, seeing his injuries for the first time.

“I think he’s had better days as well,” Grant said also trying to lighten the mood.

“So what can you tell me about what is going on?” Clark asked, having skipped that the day before.

Greta smiled to this thinking when she had asked the same thing and wondered how Clark would react. As he did with Greta, Grant laid out what he knew and how they came to find him. Clark took the news well, but asked a lot of the same questions Greta had about getting out. When Grant got done explaining everything he could, Thomas woke up and the entire process started over again.

When both were up to date, Grant started to ask some of his own questions.

“I’m assuming you know Greta.” Grant said to both, but more so to Thomas.

“But can either of you fill in the gaps a bit and also let us know who all else was in the cell with you?”

“Clark and the rest of my crew were in that room,” Thomas said

feeling he should answer the questions since he was the supervisor.

“Was anyone else inside?”

“No, not that I remember. I didn’t wake up until a siren went off. But I don’t recall seeing anyone else.”

“It was just me, him, Patrick, and Mark,” Clark then said, remembering a little more of that aspect.

“How did they manage to get your entire crew at once?” Greta asked, thinking four armed Deputies would have been a task.

“The Captain assigned us taser training. For the training and for safety, you have to remove your duty belt. Then the training officer said he wanted us to do a new technique for riot control. He wanted us to both conduct it and have a practical experience which meant we personally would get tasered. We all lined up and when we were being tased, they cuffed us, hit us over the head, and then we were in that cell.”

Grant looked over to Clark to see if he might remember anymore.

“Yep, that’s the way I remember it as well.”

“So besides the four of you, no other people were in the cell?” Greta said double checking the story.

“When I woke up, that’s all I remember seeing. If someone was in there beforehand and left, I don’t know. But the siren blared, there were four of us in there until the door opened and the zombies attacked us.”

“Since we talked, Did anyone ask either of you about anything related to me or what we talked about?” Greta asked.

“No. It was a quiet topic unless someone said something to you, Clark?”

“No, the only person I talked to about it was you,” Clark said in reply to the Sergeant.

“Greta, who else did you say you talked to?” Grant asked, turning to her.

“Thomas, my friend Ruby, the designer of the Refuge, a police

officer friend of mine, and an autograph guy at the mall. That was as far as I got.”

“Well I wouldn’t be surprised if they all pay us a visit as well,” Grant then said, disheartening Greta about her friend.

With all the talk coming from downstairs, at about this time the girls woke up and had made their way down. Clark remembered the girls from the night before, but Thomas had yet to meet them.

“These are the girls,” Grant then said, introducing them by name and giving each a chance to say hi to Thomas and Clark. Both girls remained shy but did give details about themselves upon Grant’s prompting.

After their greeting, Grant asked the girls to start their morning chores while also asking Greta if she could take over for him while he stayed with Thomas. Greta agreed and Clark offered to help in any way he could.

When everyone had left to do the day’s duties, Grant took on the undesirable task of filling Thomas in on what he feared would happen to him. Upsetting to him, the news didn’t deter him from also wanting to either get out or expose the truth, just as his original desire led him to seek out Greta.

After probing Grant about his personal medical knowledge and what the government had wanted him and Marcus to work on, Thomas tried to put some of his police tactical knowledge to use.

Being very forward and also feeling if he did have the virus, his time was running out, Thomas inquired into some key aspects of possibly being able to work their way out. A couple of things he wondered about was if any guards used force against them, what type of weapons Grant may have seen them carry over the years, and about how many people may be on their staff.

Having worked beside them with the Sheriff’s Department, he already knew a portion of these questions. He knew they had some long guns but not how many. He knew about how many guards were in the control room and patrolled on the outside wall per shift, but not if they had some sort of job or crew on the inside.

He then moved to trends and possible weaknesses in and around the Refuge. Thomas was surprised to learn of all the other attempts he and

Marcus had made over the years, but tried to take any information Grant could provide and turn it into a positive at least from an intelligence standpoint.

As Thomas and Grant bounced information back and forth, Greta and Clark came back inside, finished with the basic morning chores.

“You were right,” Greta said to Grant upon walking in.

“No zombies bothered the house last night. We couldn’t find any damage.”

The only thing left unless they wanted to search a new area was to check the animal traps. Grant decided against this because he liked what Thomas was working on. He hadn’t had someone with any police training before, let alone what Thomas had. So to take advantage of this, he felt they should share ideas while Thomas still could.

“Greta, you said you talked to the guy who designed the wall?” Grant asked after talking about it to Thomas.

“I did.”

“What did he say? Did he give you anything that sounded odd, maybe wasn’t on the plans or did you think he was hiding anything?”

“So right away one thing that made me scratch my head was the specific guy that was chosen to do the project. He’s not a wall guy, he was known for other architectural stuff. So I did mention this to him and he did give me some information I wasn’t expecting.”

“About the wall or about inside?” Grant asked.

“Some of both. One actually leads to the other. He said one plan that didn’t sit right with him was that they built underneath the ground almost twice the depth as the wall is high. He insinuated they did that to try to keep people in.”

“He guessed right,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, that kind of sounds like it takes away tunneling. Did he say anything about the wall itself? What it was made of, how thick it is, if it’s reinforced?”

“He did mention it was abnormally thick for a wall. I forget his exacts, but I think he also said they used metal inside it as well. So I’d say the wall itself, going over it or through it will be tough. He did mention that he didn’t build it all. He said he connected to the temporary holding cell, so maybe that might not be as thick or deep, maybe.”

“Okay so maybe something with the holding cell area but the rest sounds like a strike out unless someone in here has some really big weapons or some heavy equipment,” Thomas said, coming to the same conclusion the architect probably came to. They wanted no breakouts and took no chances in allowing any possibilities.

“No. Like I was telling you, they stripped the land of guns, ammo, black powder, anything like that that could be used against them. We only generally find small stuff if even that. Anyone who had anything big, a big collection or Polkings old police station’s stuff, it’s all gone. They also went through and destroyed, disabled, or towed out pretty much anything that had a motor. So if you could find a bulldozer or something like that, it would be rigged in a way that you couldn’t use it,” Grant replied.

“Well, you still have gas somewhere for that four-wheeler. So I guess that’s better than nothing.”

“That is one thing we do have. I have to siphon it out of the old cars, but gas isn’t an issue.” Grant told Thomas.

“A little something then,” Thomas half smirked.

“But that’s not going to dent that wall. Do you have anything else explosive by chance? Dynamite, something big?”

“Road flairs,” Grant said as a joke.

“No, no big stuff. I’m sure something could be mixed. There are a lot of leftover chemicals in some of these abandoned houses. But that’s not my area of expertise. I can make a baking soda volcano, that’s about it.”

“Now wait,” Thomas said with an idea.

“That could be something. I bet some of the things that were left, or I guess overlooked, were probably your normal kitchen chemicals. Ammonia is a good one. If we made a bomb out of them and focused it on the part of the wall the architect didn’t build. Maybe it won’t be extra thick, giving us a weak spot we might be able to exploit.”

“I saw some Ammonia!” Greta said excitedly.

“The shed where I found the bug spray and WD-40 had a few bottles of Ammonia in it!”

“Okay, that’s a start then. Could you re-find it?”

“Yeah. It’s not, too far from here. I could probably have it for you by the end of the day if you wanted?”

“Well let’s just think some more for now,” Thomas said, trying to calm her down a bit.

“Grant, the more the merrier. Do you know where any ammonia is?”

“No, I can’t say I do. That’s not saying there isn’t any in the houses I looked through. It just wasn’t on my list of things I looked for.”

“Then it will be now.”

Thomas then asked for some paper and started to write down things he could think of off the top of his head that could be useful but might also be found in someone’s house. Once he had the list complete, he made a few copies so Grant, Clark, and Greta could each have one.

All three looked it over with Grant thinking the deepest in what all he had seen in his year at the Refuge.

“Do we need to worry about any of these things blowing up?” Clark asked being cautious.

“Most of these things are regular stuff you’ve probably purchased already. But if you happen to find them, just don’t mix them.”

“Brake fluid? Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Greta asked suspiciously.

“It’s been a while, but when I worked with the drug task force they gave us lists of things to be on the lookout for. The list was things for drug manufacturing, stuff people might sell or stuff criminals might use as booby traps for police. I thought the same thing when I saw brake fluid, but it reacts with chemicals and can be dangerous. I forget what, but that’s not the point.”

“You forget?” Greta said with more alarm.

“Yes and no. I remember a good deal, not necessarily brake fluid, but I remember it was on the list. One that I do remember is ammonia. Ammonia in part is used to make meth or bombs if you have the right stuff to work with.”

“So do you remember how to use ammonia and what to mix it with?”

“Kind of. I believe fertilizer bombs need ammonia. Not the ammonia in the store, but something you can turn that into. Ammonia acid, Ammonia nitrate, Ammonia bicarbonate, something like that. I do know it’s needed. We can experiment,” Thomas said with a foolish grin.

“Wow, okay. This isn’t going the way I thought. We? Experiment? Bombs? Those three words sound like a recipe for disaster.”

“If Grant’s right and I have N_2 , then I might as well go out with a bang right?” Thomas said as a crude joke.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll do the experimenting and it’s just an idea. Maybe we can come up with something better, but let’s just keep at it. My dad used to always say, “You can’t plow a field by looking at it.” The same thing goes here. They aren’t just going to let you out, right? They haven’t done that yet, I’m assuming. So you can’t get out of here unless you try something they didn’t plan for. They planned for normal weapons. They planned for us to go over or under the wall. They planned on bulldozers or someone calling for help. But maybe overlooking chemicals combined with a section of the wall that might be weaker, might give us a chance,” Thomas said as a pep talk.

“But if strung-out meth dealers can figure these things out, I think we can too. No, we probably won’t use most of these things, and most probably don’t even go together or blow up. But they are things I remember being on our list and is a starting point.”

“Good enough for me,” Grant said.

“He’s right, we might as well have it and not need it. We can brainstorm or even see if we can find a book or two on chemistry when we look for these other things. I like the idea.”

Greta and Clark relented in their caution as long as Thomas was okay with any mixing and testing. The idea of mass gas storing was also brought up. This was something Grant had passed on in the past. All he really had ever needed gas for before was for the four-wheeler or the occasional fire starter. But if it might be beneficial in a breakout, he agreed to take on the task of gathering more as long as they stored it away from the house.

Deciding against searching for the supplies until tomorrow, Grant instead showed them around, started making more arrows, and eventually relaxed, each taking turns telling the girls stories for the night.

Chapter 19

Both Thomas and Clark slept downstairs and were the first to wake up the next morning, both for their own reasons. Clark's arm still hurt and didn't allow him very much comfort throughout the night. Thomas on the other hand tried not to think of the virus, but couldn't help himself from doing so.

Thomas' worries didn't concern him as much as it did his family. Thomas had a son who was in the fourth grade and a wife who only worked part-time at a local bakery. Thomas now had almost fully accepted his fate but was a mix of inward emotions about his family and their future.

"Thomas!" Clark said, catching him staring at a window that had been attacked overnight.

"Greta said they repair the windows daily and showed me where the supplies are. Let's see if we can get a head start on it for them before they wake."

Thomas gave a slight jump upon hearing his name, then looked over to Clark upon his jibbering.

"What was that?" Thomas said, hearing the words but not taking them in.

Although the room was mildly shaded due to the boarded windows, when Thomas looked over to Clark, Clark knew Thomas had changed. Over the night Thomas' eyes must have inflamed and turned red. His pigment still remained, but the warning signs of the Nz4 virus were now apparent.

Clark knew this was probably going to happen, but still stumbled on his words upon the sight.

"Ummm, The windows need fixed. With one arm I can't do much. Can you help?" He said, without pointing out what he had noticed.

"Yeah sure. Give me a second and I'll be right out. But we can't make too much noise. They are still sleeping and we don't want to attract zombies."

Clark went outside without bringing up what he noticed and instead examined the house for damage. Thomas soon after also staggered his way out and met Clark about halfway around the house.

“How are you feeling today?” Thomas asked Clark, now waking up a bit and forcing himself to set aside his personal worries.

“I’m on this side of the dirt, right,” Clark said jokingly

“Yeah, I guess in the future if we can get out, we could change that a little bit from dirt to wall. What do you think? New trend?”

Clark pretended it was a good idea but personally didn’t feel right laughing about it. With his eyes now red, he knew if that ever did happen, Thomas now wouldn’t be on the other side.

“Yeah good one,” Clark said before quickly asking a question of his own.

“How about you, how do you feel today?” he said, immediately thinking he shouldn’t have asked that question.

“I actually physically feel better. I’m not really sore today. I can’t say I feel like a million bucks, but for being bit up as much as I was, I’m not bad.”

Grinding his teeth in thinking how bad of a question that was, Clark instantly reasoned that Thomas’ body probably felt better because his body was probably starting to go numb.

Feeling he better just stop talking, Clark quickened his survey and started to clear away any of the debris the zombies had left behind. Thomas on the other hand, shrugged off Clark’s silence and went to do the more laborious work of carrying the wood that would be required.

As they cleared away and prepared the windows, Grant woke up and appeared outside. Upon walking over to them, Grant picked up on the same thing Clark had. This to Grant was expected, but not as accelerated as it was. Grant knew there was no official timeline for how fast the change would occur, but two days was unheard of.

“Thomas,” Grant said, taking the task of informing him of his condition.

“How do you feel today?” he asked when he looked over.

“Fine. Actually a lot better than yesterday. I was just telling Clark that I wasn’t so sore anymore.”

Grant shook his head to this and then gave it to him straight as to what he was seeing.

“Thomas. I know we talked about there being a slight chance you wouldn’t get the virus... but your eyes are red today.”

Thomas looked over to Clark for his confirmation and received it with Clark’s speechless downward gaze.

“I see,” Thomas said with some vocal strain.

“Well, this was expected. Let’s just let this be a reminder we need to hurry up, okay.” He said as he began picking up some wood, pretending it didn’t affect him.

“What are you guys waiting for? The sun is already two hours into the sky.”

Neither Clark nor Grant brought it up again. Both felt that if he wanted to talk about it, he would bring it up on his own. However, to allow it to be on Thomas’ terms, Grant casually removed himself from the outdoor chores and warned Greta and the girls before they too said something.

Thomas continued to pretend to take the news well as he worked harder than he had in a while, giving off the illusion he was fine. Before long the windows were fixed in record time and step two of their day came into focus.

“I think since we are more familiar with the area, Greta and I will take the four-wheelers out to scavenge some of the further houses while you and Clark can go to the closer ones.”

“Works for me,” Thomas said, still trying to give off an air of ease.

They all then went back inside. Grant drew up a map of a few nearby houses and buildings he felt might be beneficial. Knowing they didn’t have the benefit of transportation and were down Clark’s arm, Grant offered

Thomas his silver shotgun since he felt it was his best defensive weapon.

“Thank you,” Thomas said, feeling this was probably the first time he had ever given it up.

“I like these pistol grip shotguns. I have one of my own. It’s in good hands,” he said as reassurance to Grant’s decision.

Grant once again reminded them not to let the daytime give them false confidence about the zombies. This went double with defending themselves unless under direct attack. Shooting a zombie from a distance could sometimes be more harmful than remaining silent and not drawing attention.

He also went on to advise them that if by chance they did lose the map, to follow an old creek that would eventually get them back in the area. Although it would also make for a much longer walk.

When Thomas and Clark were sent on their way, Grant and Greta made some preparations for themselves. Grant attached a few boxes to both the front and rear rack of his four-wheeler to increase his carrying ability. Greta’s four-wheeler, already having a custom basket attached, didn’t need this, so she instead went inside to replace his shotgun.

Thinking of the ammo shortage Grant had mentioned, she skipped over the last-resort weapons and selected the thirty-eight special with a handful of extra rounds. Greta herself stuck with the pistol she had found but knew she would lean on Grant if something went wrong.

Grant and Greta then grabbed a couple of empty gas cans and took off for their first stop, the school Grant used as a gas station. This trip was now a little more familiar to Greta even to the degree she sometimes messed with Grant, passing him and showing off her four-wheelers speed. Greta enjoyed this little bit of fun and was actually able to forget a little bit about what they were doing and where she was. This amusement eventually ended as the school came into sight and she would now need to be on her guard.

“We’re only going to fill up and leave the cans here. They would splash too much if we took them with us.”

Grant once again filled them up while Greta kept an eye out for anything moving. While he was filling up, Greta remembered middle school chemistry.

“I bet they have an old lab in there,” Greta said of the school.

“There might be some stuff we could use.”

Grant finished filling his four-wheeler up then switched to hers.

“Yes, but let’s first try to see what we can find elsewhere. Big buildings can sometimes be like poking a bee hive. You irritate them a little bit and they just seem to pop out of nowhere. Let’s wait and see before we do that.”

Grant then finished both her ATV and the extra gas cans he brought along. Then, before heading out, he gave Greta a crude idea of where he wanted to try before turning back.

All the houses he picked he had searched before. However, some of them he thought might have a few of the items Thomas had written down. Although most of the houses turned up nothing, they were still able to find six half-full bottles of different liquids and some of the other items Thomas wanted.

After their fifth house checked, Grant felt they had done enough in the area, wanting more to get to Greta’s cemetery before calling it a day. However, upon exiting this last house, they noticed several zombies lurking around their four-wheelers. The sounds the four-wheeler made finally caught up to Grant and Greta by attracting these few zombies that must have been in the area.

Seeing this, both ducked back inside the house and peered through a window to see how many there were.

“I see three,” Grant softly said.

“Nope, I see another one,” Greta said correcting him.

“He’s over by that car.”

Grant looked in the direction Greta had mentioned and noticed a limper, struggling to make his way up the hill to where they had parked their four-wheelers.

“Welp, looks like we’re sitting tight for a little bit,” Grant said slowly going back to the main door and shutting it.

As the day wore on, Grant periodically peered out the window to see if any of the zombies had left. Between peeks, both Greta and Grant sat quietly, knowing their best bet was to stay inside.

After about an hour, Greta became a little bored and started to whisper to Grant to pass the time.

“What would you say you miss the most besides the obvious friends and family answer?” she asked, seeing what a decade of being inside the Refuge would result in.

“A large chocolate peanut butter and banana milkshake,” Grant said looking up and thinking about it.

“There was this place near where I grew up called Fluffies Freezer that would toss in anything you wanted. Candy, cherries, extra caramel, whatever. It could be as unhealthy as you wanted it to be. I don’t know why, but I often think about that chocolate peanut butter and banana shake, maybe with a couple of cherries on top since I haven’t had one in so long.”

“Fluffies Freezer?” she said holding back her laughter over the name.

“Yeah, I get it. Kind of a funny name. The lady who was the original owner liked cats. So not only did she name the ice cream shop after her cat, but the big sign outside was of a cat licking an ice cream cone. It was a little much, but she had great ice cream.”

Greta continued to laugh internally on what this might look like but had another question come to mind.

“Have you seen many household or farm animals running around loose in here?”

“I’ve seen cats. No dogs. Not that there isn’t any. I just think most dogs probably get eaten by the zombies. They probably approached them thinking they were friends. There’s that constant debate about cats’ independence versus dogs’ loyalty. I guess in this case, the loyalty and friendliness hurt them. Besides that, I have seen a flock of horses running around loose, some pigs every now and again, and some sheep. So yeah, you do still see some from time to time.”

“Flock?” Greta said of his incorrect verbiage of a group of horses.

“Don’t you mean a herd?”

“Yes, you know what I meant. A horse group. There’s at least one “herd” of about eight running around in here. I’ve seen them a couple of times but you more often see their tracks than anything else.”

Greta kept asking random questions as Grant continually checked on the four-wheelers to see if the zombies had left. During her aimless questioning, her mind eventually wandered back to what she thought of the most, the Refuge and getting out.

“Has anyone tried to break in or get you guys out before?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but this is a pretty big place. If someone was doing something on the other side, I probably wouldn’t know about it. So I personally don’t think so, but I guess I can’t positively say that for sure.”

“Do you think anyone else knows about what is going on in here?” she said, hoping maybe someone might be thinking of a way to get people out.

“I’m sure people know. You obviously have the people that run and put people in here. It would take a lot to keep things as covered up as it is. You need lots of people from several different angles to be able to sell this as something that it isn’t. Think about yourself only a few weeks ago. I bet you had no idea and followed or thought the same as everyone else. It was even hard for you to believe even after it was right in front of you. To be able to make the masses buy in so hard like that, you need to have constant public pressure put on them. Media, movies, the justice system, people who rise up with other ideas being called kooks or debunked. If all that doesn’t work, whoever simply gets tossed into here while whatever they were saying fades away.”

“How could someone just not care and ignore something like this if they knew?”

“I guess that depends on a lot of things,” he said looking back at the zombies.

“If they benefit from this place, financially, politically, or whatever, then that’s their motive and I guess they are fine with it. Others like yourself just didn’t know. They had little to no information to go on. That’s the majority of people. The majority simply go with the flow of life and got

the wool pulled over their eyes or didn't see enough of the puzzle to get the big picture. It's easy to have happen when most people are good trusting people. I don't blame them, I was there once myself. It's just so easy to do this to people when you have so much pushing against them. Yes, we could have a debate about how many signs someone might need before they should know. But again it's hard for people to go against the grain even if something isn't making sense. Then you have the people who do have enough of the puzzle but choose not to say or do anything," Grant said getting a little ruffled.

"This group gets me probably the maddest. People who do see enough or even have some sort of proof but decide to look the other way. This is the type that sees Grandma getting attacked and simply turn around and walk away. They don't intervene, they don't call for help, they just pretend nothing happened. They care more about themselves, their stuff, their job, or what people might think of them rather than doing the right thing. Although the people who thought this place up and kept it secret are monsters, I can't help but be more angry at the people who look the other way. I think that's where the saying of evil triumphs when good men do nothing comes from. Once you do understand something is going on this falls to you. You can stand up to evil or you can put your head in the sand. Now this doesn't mean you have to physically get involved in everything, or even should," Grant said waving his hands back and forth.

"People should always try to peacefully work whatever out without it getting physical. Physically fighting is an utter breakdown. But nothing does mean nothing. You can do something by simply calling, saying something, or trying to get help. There's a reason the pen is considered mightier than the sword."

This little ramble of Grants gave Greta a different insight into him. She could tell Grant somewhat felt like he was the grandma and everyone was looking away. This left-behind feeling was sad to realize but was understandable to have. Still, seeing she had struck a nerve with Grant, Greta didn't know how to touch on the topic and instead moved to something else.

"I know you said Marcus tried this or that to get out, did you ever come up with something?"

"Marcus was the main person, but not because I didn't want out, but rather the girls were younger and needed someone to watch over them. Now the girls are older and know what to look for and how to protect themselves. When Marcus was doing his things, I supported him, but one

of us had to watch the girls. I felt fatherly towards them, so I did. Not that Marcus didn't, but he was the one with the ideas so he schemed it out while I watched the girls."

"Did you ever come up with an idea?"

"Of course," he said, seeing that almost all the zombies had now lost interest in the four-wheelers.

"Especially early on. I can tell you what has been tried, but when we got here, there was nobody to ask. So we tried everything we could think of until the girls came along. Then Marcus took over. We tried ladders over the wall but found out the tops were electrified pretty quickly. I came up with maybe the precursor to Marcus's golfing idea, which were those Chinese lantern things, crudely made of course. That idea literally flamed out quickly. We didn't know how to make them so almost all of them caught fire and burned up before reaching the wall. Marcus's idea of writing little messages on balls at least got the word out."

Grant said all of this while watching the last zombie, the limping one, stroll away. It did so by slowly going towards and into a nearby barn which Grant felt gave them ample time to drive away.

"Alright. Be quiet but I think this is our chance."

Both Greta and Grant made it to the four-wheelers safely. Along their cautious approach, Grant told Greta they didn't have time to look into her shed and would have to leave the gas cans at the school for later pickup. Thusly, both Greta and Grant drove back to their house with only the items they had in their baskets, leaving them with the four-wheelers when they got home.

Chapter 20

Since they arrived home late the night before, both groups were only able to talk about what they had found. Thomas and Clark had found all the brake fluid anyone could want along with several gas cans, an empty half bottle of ammonia, and a few other smaller things which included a couple of shotgun shells.

To Greta and Grant's surprise, they had actually found more than this. They had felt with the delay they incurred due to the zombies and missing their main location, they would have the least amount of items. However, when Grant checked off the items they found, even if most things were only half full, they still managed to get almost eighty percent of what Thomas had wanted.

This was a pleasant thought for Grant who woke early to help Thomas. This thought though was dashed when he went downstairs and noticed Thomas was missing. Clark himself was only just waking up and wasn't able to help or direct Grant in a certain direction.

"You didn't hear him at all?" Grant said, thinking he must have gotten up even before the sun rose.

"No. I heard a few rustlings outside last night, but he was always in the same spot regardless of how loud they banged around."

Knowing he had made it clear several times not to go outside until sunup, Thomas missing was a concern. Grant felt the most logical thing he might have done was to probably start whatever experiments he had planned. Checking the location where Clark and Thomas had put their findings the day before, Grant found that all the gas cans were still there but that the rest of their supplies were now gone.

"I bet he went out searching for the four-wheelers in order to get the supplies we left there last night." Grant told Clark.

"I'm going to go after him to make sure. Have Greta and everyone else just do their normal morning stuff until I get back. We don't need everyone all over the place."

Grant then went directly to the four-wheelers. They did end up

parking a little closer than they normally would, so the walk to them was a little shorter. When Grant reached the four-wheelers, his suspicions were confirmed. Thomas had not messed with the four-wheelers themselves but did take everything they had.

Grant wasn't one hundred percent sure how he managed to carry everything without a bag or an ATV but still felt he needed to find him to make sure he was okay. Not knowing how much of a head start Thomas had, he canvased the nearby area in a snake-like pattern. After about an hour, he expanded his search both in distance and in how wide each turnaround was.

During his search, two thoughts came into his mind. The first was that he probably put some distance between where he wanted to experiment and the house. The sound of a bomb or any chemical reactions he might make would surely attract any zombies in the area. After all Grant's warnings, Thomas had to of known this which more than likely made him go much further away than Grant had originally thought.

His second thought along his search was a little more hypothetical. He couldn't explain off Thomas' bites, but the more and more he looked without finding him, the more and more the thought crept into his mind that maybe Thomas was a mole. Maybe he had set up Greta from the beginning and was just information-seeking as to what was going on inside. Now that he had some information, he ran off and took the materials they acquired so they couldn't blow anything up. This thought though always fell short based on the amount of bites Thomas sustained and the redness in his eyes. The bites were real which made this thought more of a back-of-the-mind idea than solid speculation.

On about his third or fourth time thinking about the mole plot he noticed a little bit of smoke rising just at the outermost range of his sight. Not close to any of his known neighbors, Grant figured it had to be Thomas.

When Grant reached the area where the smoke was coming from he noticed a small fire. Near the fire were the remains of an old barn. The remains predated the Refuge itself, leaving only the stone walls to mark its prior existence. Looking at these remains, Grant eventually noticed something moving around. Figuring it was Thomas, he remained still until he could confirm it was him and not just a daytime zombie.

Before long Grant got his confirmation when he saw Thomas walk over to the fire, set a small piece of wood on it then walk over to a distant

wall. Vanishing only for a moment, he suddenly popped up and quickly ran behind another wall, peeking over it from time to time. Grant took this as Thomas testing out some of his ideas. Feeling confident, Grant walked over to him, keeping his distance from the fire.

“Thomas?” Grant called out when he got close enough.

“Yes.” Thomas replied peaking his head over the wall and looking in his direction.

“Are you okay? You left very early. We didn’t know where you went or what you were doing.”

“Get behind the wall.” Thomas said after ducking back down.

Grant didn’t need to be told twice and hurried over to him, ducking himself when the wall sufficiently covered him. After a few minutes of this, Grant uncovered his ears and opened his eyes. Looking over to Thomas he noticed he was still hunched over, almost in a ball waiting for something to happen. Feeling the time frame they covered up was sufficient, he made his way over to Thomas hunkering down along the way.

“Thomas,” he said, poking him when he was close enough.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?”

Thomas didn’t respond to his poking but did respond when he heard Grant speak. Hearing him, he uncoiled himself a little bit and looked towards him. Before Thomas had a chance to speak, Grant saw why Thomas had probably left so early... his eyes were now grey.

“Hey Grant,” he said surprisingly carefree.

“Did you hear my explosion?”

“No, I can’t say I did. What did you mix?” He asked, looking Thomas in the eyes but trying to not make it obvious he saw something different.

“I forget. I was just mixing stuff and one of my cocktails exploded.” He said while laughing, thinking it was funny.

“I have to re-engineer it myself now.”

“Well I guess that’s good, just be careful.”

Thomas seemed to somewhat dismiss Grant’s caution and went back over to whatever he had made and kicked at it a little bit.

“I guess this one was a dud.”

Thomas then came back over, uncovered the materials he had placed an old piece of tin roof on top of, and started mixing things again.

“Thomas, I’m sure you know more than I do, but I can get you my extra pair of shades, some gloves, and some small cups so you can test small amounts if you want,” he said, thinking Thomas would take him up on the offer.

“Maybe later.” He said pouring a little more of some yellow colored liquid into an empty soda bottle.

Other than being pesky, Grant really had nothing else he could say to him that wasn’t repetitive. Then, thinking what to say next, Thomas took his bottle over to the fire, grabbed a branch that had a nice flame to it, and then took both to the same spot where he had his dud. Before long Thomas turned around rapidly and ran towards Grant, sliding next to him like he was stealing second base.

“Cover your ears,” he said along the way.

Grant didn’t ask any questions and did as he was told. Another long silence went by without any action. Grant and Thomas eventually relaxed themselves and looked at each other again.

“Your turn to poke it,” Thomas said with a big toothy smile.

“Yeah right,” Grant instantly replied, to Thomas’s delight.

At that moment, a slight whistling sound started up followed by a sizzle and some off-colored smoke.

“Good thing you didn’t go over there.” Thomas said still holding his smile.

Grant looked at the off-colored smoke and worried it might be toxic.

“Is that a problem?” He said using his shirt as a mask.

“Maybe. I dunno. We will give it some more time and stay upwind.”

Grant feeling a little worried and sensing that maybe Thomas, feeling the effects of the Nz4 virus taking over his body, had let his normal attentiveness take a back seat, asked him again if everything was alright.

“Grant, I have always tried to be a straight shooter. I think now more than ever I shouldn’t beat around the bush. I know what’s happening to me. I couldn’t sleep last night, I kept having nightmares. Everything seems louder and my eyes hurt. It’s getting hard for me to hold my thoughts for long. I don’t think my body is taking this virus well. I think I only have a few days before I’m done. So I figured I’d better make the most of my time and test a few things out while I still can.”

Grant knowing his pain better than anyone else could, didn’t try to change his mind. Instead, he offered his help in any way that he could.

“How can I help you then? Do you need me to look for anything else? Do you want me to be on the lookout for zombies? What can I do to help?”

Thomas thought about it for a moment before answering.

“You said you didn’t make it to that shed yesterday. Could you try again today? I could use that ammonia and anything else that might be of use in there. Besides that, standing guard probably would help. But first I think the most important thing is what’s in the shed. I want to get as much testing in as possible before I transform into one of them.”

“Done,” Grant said without hesitation.

“I’ll head back right now and get Greta to find the shed again.”

With that, Grant turned around and started to lightly jog back to the house. Before he got too far, Thomas had one more thing to say.

“Grant,” he said, halting him for a second.

“When it’s about to happen. Let me stay human.”

Grant nodded knowing what he meant and continued his jog home.

Chapter 21

Due to how fast Thomas was declining, Grant advised every one of his condition when they woke up. Everyone understood and took the news well. Grant also made sure everyone also knew that since he was deteriorating so fast, they needed to be cautious around him from here on out. They all knew Thomas would not hurt them if he had all his faculties, but since the virus strips you of them, he would soon be just as much a threat as any of the zombies running around in the Refuge.

Trying to not always be negative around the girls and to give them something to look forward to, Grant promised them something if they agreed to stay with Clark while he and Greta tried for the shed. Both girls were thrilled to hear this and clung to Clark to show their excitement. This gave Grant some relief if Thomas did progress too fast and somehow remembered his way back.

With all their baskets still attached from the day prior, Greta and Grant wasted no time in heading in the direction Greta remembered. Grant yielded to Greta in terms of leading the way. A choice that was necessary but also annoying. As Greta had done the day before, she goofed with Grant, speeding off and reveling in the faces Grant made trying to keep up.

The trip on the four-wheelers almost took an hour to get to. To Grant's surprise, Greta was able to find the shed with almost no detours or double-backs. The shed itself was as Greta had left it. Inside the ammonia was still present along with a few other things Thomas had wanted. In addition to these items, Grant snagged up a pair of gloves and a funnel he felt would help Thomas pour.

Although he kind of wanted to see if the tractor itself would run, Grant thought better of it, knowing Thomas himself was pressing the time issue.

"I think we will be fine when we get there, but let's still be mindful of Thomas' condition when we arrive."

Greta agreed and this time yielded to Grant in finding Thomas. Grant felt confident he knew the approximate way and also felt the smoke would eventually be as useful as it had before. Still, with all his years wandering the Refuge, Grant turned out to be the one who had to double back or make

a few “shortcuts” as he called them.

The two-hour trek pushed Grant to the point of wanting to look for gas before he finally saw some smoke in the distance. Same as he did before, Grant approached cautiously to protect them from any zombies and to keep them safe from the bombs Thomas was trying to make.

Grant ended up being so cautious, the various items they carried began to wear on their arms. Then upon sight of the stone wall, Thomas could be seen doing the same thing he had been before, setting something behind a wall and running away. Although this was funny to watch, Thomas must have made a discovery while Grant was away. Waiting for a good time to talk, Grant finally opened up to Thomas after he again must have had a dud.

“I see you got part of the wall over there,” Grant mentioned of a small chunk that appeared damaged.

“Yeah,” he said, walking over to them excited to see what goodies they might have.

“I wrote it down this time so I wouldn’t forget. I did have some success, although this last little blend I made up seems to be nothing. I was hoping it would have more power. I guessed wrong.”

Thomas then looked over the items they brought, setting aside some while opening up others.

“I got you a pair of gloves and some more brake fluid.” Grant jokingly said knowing he had all the brake fluid anyone could want.

“Fabulous,” Thomas replied sarcastically.

“Yeah, I thought you would like that. If you want I can go back...”

“No, this will be fine, thank you,” Thomas said, cutting him off.

“Well, what can we do to help now that we’re here?”

Losing his personal filter a little bit now that he felt his time was running out, Thomas was blunt and to the point.

“To be frank, sounds are really starting to bother me so if you could be quiet that would be great.”

Greta and Grant didn't feel slighted by this remark but did do as he asked and backed away from saying anything they felt wasn't necessary. Thomas kept at what he was doing at almost a reckless rate. The pace he went was actually so fast, it eventually made Greta and Grant feel uncomfortable.

Grant and Greta watched Thomas make attempt after attempt after attempt with little to no results, causing them to question if he really did have any luck. Most of his concoctions did nothing or fizzled. Occasionally, one would whistle as Grant had seen before, but nothing exploded or caused them to feel they would be getting out anytime soon.

At around noon hunger struck Greta. This hunger was the tipping point for them to do something other than watch. Deciding to break the news that they could either help or would need to go, Grant went over to Thomas who was again mixing things a normal person probably wouldn't.

"Hey Thomas, Greta said she is hungry. If there is anything we can do, we are more than willing to stay. But just watching you doesn't feel like we are doing much."

Thomas looked up at him mid-pour and tried to be polite considering the patience and distance they gave.

"I do appreciate it Grant but I think I'm okay," he said squinting at him.

"If you want to search for more stuff I can experiment with, that's fine. Or, if you want to stand guard for me that's fine as well. But this is kind of a one-man show right now. I honestly think I will be fine. I haven't attracted a zombie yet, and I'm not really hungry. So feel free to go if you need to, I will seek you guys out and tell you otherwise if I do come to a point I need something."

"Okay," Grant said, feeling bad and as if he was leaving Thomas to do all the work.

"Well at least take these, they will help with the light," he said, taking off his newly found shades and giving them to Thomas.

Thomas finally paused for a moment and broke a smile, giving a glimpse of his normal self if only for a little bit.

“Thank you, and forgive me Grant. I’m just really pushing myself to do good. To make something happen.”

“Please don’t apologize. I know what you’re trying to do. We can’t thank you enough.”

Thomas stopped for another moment to give Greta a hug and to shake Grant’s hand.

“I’m going to do my best, I promise you that. Don’t wait up for me, and if I don’t come back, you don’t need to send out the cavalry to find me. That said though, If I do come back tonight, I don’t want to put you guys in an awkward spot. So I will find a covered spot in your collapsed garage. If you would be so kind, just leave a pillow and a couple blankets out there for me.”

“I think we can manage that. I’ll even make it a five-star night for you and dig up a goodie to place on your pillow.” Grant said trying to lighten the mood.

“Alright guys, enough talk. If I make it back, great. If not, Greta, I am sorry I got you into this.”

“Thomas, you warned me. What else can I say. You were just trying to find a way to get the information out. You did nothing wrong.”

“Alright, enough of the mushy stuff.” Thomas said, not wanting to get emotional.

“I’ll do my best here and hopefully see you guys in the morning with some good news.”

Seeing Thomas turn and head back to the chemicals signaled to Grant and Greta he was done talking. Not wanting to insult him by watching a little longer, both went back to their four-wheelers and drove to Grant’s gas station.

After picking up the gas, both continued home. However, this ride was not enjoyable. Both Greta and Grant took the alone time to think about Thomas. Feeling bad and thinking about him almost the entire ride, made the trip rather somber until a storm blew in.

The storm wasn’t a good sign for several reasons. Besides the fact it would probably delay Thomas, the main issue for everyone was the

increased risk. The clouds naturally would block the sun. This in turn would be a trigger for the zombies to come out. To further the problem, the zombies would also benefit from the rain which assisted them in lowering their body temperature if they exerted any effort.

Almost home, Grant was still tempted to turn around to warn Thomas but knew the storm would probably beat him there anyways. Grant also felt with the now decent drizzle, the likelihood of the zombies having a prolonged assault on their house had drastically risen. So although he felt bad about not turning back, he felt all parties would choose to protect the girls over a probably fruitless warning.

The weather continued to grow as they got closer to their house, now blowing in strong with slanted sheets of rain which stung to ride through. Thankfully when this started they were almost within sight of the house. Feeling the sound of the storm was just as loud as the four-wheelers, Greta and Grant decided there was no use in parking far away and drove up to the house instead.

Since his garage was already partially collapsed, Greta and Grant didn't have a good place to park the four-wheelers out of the rain. Figuring the best alternative would be the side of the house which faced away from the storm, both made their way around the house and parked there. Parking as close as they could to the porch, both turned off their four-wheelers and got off quickly.

Hearing the four-wheelers, Harriet went to the door and opened it so they wouldn't get as wet. Harriet was always excited to see Grant return, but this time went double because she knew she would be getting a present. With her excitement elevated, she shouted out to Grant.

"What did you get us?" She exclaimed, with beaming eagerness shown upon her face.

This shout was not typical of her because of the always looming possibility of zombies around. But with her excitement combined with the wind and rain, she felt more relaxed and became a little more vocal than normal. Unfortunately though, Harriet's call wasn't protected by the weather and wasn't just heard by Greta and Grant. A zombie had been near and took interest in the four-wheelers as they parked.

Harriet's shouting distracted the zombie's original interest and caused it to run towards her instead. The zombie was slower but was still fast enough to reach Harriet before Clark or Grant could stop it. To

everyone's horror, the zombie gave Harriet no mercy and swiftly bit into her as Harriet screamed and tried to get away.

Clark being the closest to her, was the first to defend her. He tackled the zombie, breaking it free from Harriet and causing the two of them to roll onto the porch and at the feet of Grant.

Clark, reacting to the situation without thought, instantly re-broke his arm but didn't feel it at this point. Clark personally was so set on helping Harriet and stopping the zombie, that he unknowingly blocked out the pain while continuing on with his fight.

Grant now right next to the scuffle, slung his shotgun towards the two and told Clark to break free. This was more difficult than said but was accomplished enough to give Grant a shot without hitting anything unintended.

Grant only needed one shot to put the zombie down. Ever vigilant, after shooting the zombie Grant took up a defensive posture on the porch to see if any others were approaching. Grant held this position, watching the distance while at the same time instructing Clark to go inside. With Clark clear, Grant then backed into the house himself while Greta secured the door.

Both Grant and Greta instantly turned their attention to Harriet as Nanny, seeing everything, got scared and hid in a corner of the main room.

"Where did it bite you?" Grant questioned, looking her over, wanting to wash out the wound immediately.

Both Harriet and Nanny knew exactly what a bite meant, zombie-ism with no turning back. Harriet, always strong, tried to fight back her tears as she slowly comprehended what Grant had asked, and pointed to her right shoulder which was where the zombie had attacked.

"Greta, get some soap and water," he tried to say calmly, wanting to control the situation.

Grant then pushed back her sleeve and examined where Harriet said it hurt. Seeing the bite take place, Grant expected the worst, some blood and possibly even a missing piece. Being dark, Grant struggled to see anything and ran his hand along her neck in an attempt to locate the spot.

Feeling a distortion near her shoulder, Grant focused in on the spot

but only saw a deep compression mark. Quickly checking both sides, the area was very red and swollen but no skin appeared to be broken.

“Is this where he bit you?” Grant asked, touching the tender spot.

“Yes,” Harriet responded, closing her eyes.

“Anywhere else? Did it bite you anywhere else?”

“No. It bit me there and I fell to the ground.”

Greta returned with the soap and water and likewise helped Grant check over Harriet to make sure they didn’t miss a spot.

Seeing only a couple small scrapes from the fall, Grant felt she had a chance. Without any broken skin from the bite, Grant asked for Greta to take Harriet to the corner room, bathe her thoroughly, and to put all her clothes in a corner for burning. Greta did so with no hesitation, taking her off to the room along with her water and soap.

Grant then picked up his shotgun and turned to the door. Seeing Clark had re-broken his arm but was still trying to comfort Nanny, Grant decided to go outside to look at the zombie. He wanted to be absolutely satisfied he didn’t miss anything.

Cautiously stepping outside for a moment, Grant scanned the distance with his gun while slowly making his way over to the zombie’s body. Seeing nothing, he slung his shotgun over his shoulder and dragged the body inside for inspection.

Once inside, although he knew Clark was hurt, he asked for him to take Nanny upstairs while he took up the disgusting task of looking over what remained of the zombie’s head.

Being a rushed shot, Grant did not strike the zombie in the center of the head but much higher and from the side. Carefully opening the zombie’s limp jaw, he looked inside and examined his mouth. Rubbing his fingers along its gum line, Grant felt nothing. Both top and bottom, he obsessively searched but could only feel or see the zombie’s tongue, no teeth.

Grant’s heart turned with hope, changing from pure despair to overwhelming elation. Not seeing or feeling any teeth and not seeing anything other than a compression mark, Grant felt confident the zombie

didn't pass the virus to Harriet.

After his inspection, Grant pushed the zombie back outside and took off his shirt, throwing it into the yard for later destruction. Grant then went back inside, shut the door without using his hands, and ran to the kitchen to wash himself of any bodily fluids he might have gotten on him.

Knowing Clark and Nanny would be fine, Grant found the room Greta and Harriet had gone, to see if anything else had been found.

"Did you find anything?" Grant asked, seeing Greta had already washed her down and had given her some new clothes.

"No." Greta said, still spinning her around, also being obsessive in her inspection.

"Harriet, do you feel anything else?" Grant asked.

Harriet was still scared and a little teary-eyed but bravely thought it over and shook her head no.

"Okay. You're going to be fine Harriet, don't you worry. The zombie had no teeth!" Grant said cheerfully while giving her a hug.

Grant then looked at Greta who visually indicated they were fine. Seeing nothing else he could do, Grant returned to Clark and Nanny to see how he could best assist them. To Grant's amazement, when he got to Clark and Nanny, he was surprised to see Nanny helping Clark with his arm.

"She said she wanted to help me," Clark said, in pain but letting her help him find items for a new splint.

Grant knelt beside him and carefully looked over his arm.

"How is Harriet?" Clark asked as he held his arm which was no longer bent.

"I think she will be fine. Did you set your arm?"

"Yes, when Nanny got me a branch from the wood pile I pulled on it a bit while she was distracted. I think it did the trick," he said holding his arm tightly.

Still trying to help, Nanny grabbed a few sheets and some more wood just in case the pieces she found were not good enough.

Using a sharp kitchen knife, Grant trimmed a couple of the branches to length and measured it against his arm. After doing this, Grant cut a couple pieces of the sheets Nanny had found and wrapped Clark's arm as carefully as he could.

"I'm sorry I can't help you with the pain," Grant said, trying to be ginger in his actions.

"That's okay. Harriet didn't get bit then?"

"No. The zombie didn't have any teeth. She has a couple of scratches but I don't think the zombie's saliva got into her."

Clark put his head back in relief.

"I'm sorry I wasn't closer." Clark said with his eyes closed.

"Forget about it Clark. That was unexpected. I was probably more to blame. I don't usually bring the four-wheelers that close. You did more than I could have asked for. Thank you Clark."

Clark took a deep breath in and then signaled for Grant to come close.

"All the girls did was talk about what their present was. If you have something, I think it would help them out," he said whispering into Grant's ear.

Grant did in fact have some things, but it wasn't from his time away. Grant had a few items secretly stashed under a loose board for a special event or rainy day. Agreeing with Clark, he patted Nanny on the head, told her to close her eyes, and went to his secret spot.

Under a board near the stairs were about six toys he had found over the years. Each were still in their boxes which was exceptionally rare after a decade of animals, weather, or zombies trashing everything. Grant picked the two he felt the girls would like the most and handed them over to each.

Both girls, although in different rooms, had never received a new toy before and looked upon it with amazed hesitation.

“It’s yours,” he told them both individually.

“I promised you a gift didn’t I.”

Both girls somewhat awkwardly opened their toy boxes with Christmas day thrill. Harriet’s present was a doll that came with two dresses and had the same eye and hair color as she did. Nanny’s present was a flexible horse that came with a saddle and brush for its tail and mane.

“Nanny, I think Harriet’s girl can ride your horse,” Grant said when both girls saw each other again.

Chapter 22

Grant tried to sleep in a different room but got no rest. He cried silently to himself not wanting anyone to know what he was thinking or going through, especially the girls. After years of living in the Refuge, the only thing he had left and loved was Harriet and Nanny. The feeling and thought of losing either of them stung him in a way he had never felt before.

Not being able to sleep and trying to take his mind off of what happened, Grant occasionally peeked out of one of the bedroom windows. Being boarded up made it difficult, but he still tried to use the thin cracks to see whatever he could. Doing this, Grant remembered what he had told Thomas. Since one of the windows in the room faced the collapsed garage, Grant found himself looking out this window the most.

The storm from the day continued throughout the night but at a much lesser pace. This left questions in Grant's head. Did Thomas succumb to the virus? If he hadn't, did he wait out the storm where he was or did he make it to the garage? Did he figure out anything with the chemicals he had or might he need more? If he did figure something out, did the storm destroy his notes? These questions kept him busy until the sun started to rise which allowed him to be able to investigate for himself.

Being aware of Thomas's changing condition, Grant vigilantly approached the garage being mindful in this regard. Grant checked the few areas the garage still had and called out to Thomas to be sure he didn't miss him.

Not finding him there, Grant's next logical place to check was the barn ruins. For this, Grant checked in with Clark to make him aware of his destination, then headed for the barn. The drive itself took him a bit longer than the day before due to the now wet conditions. These conditions made hills and low-lying spots especially tricky for Grant and his four-wheeler's old tires.

Eventually reaching Thomas' last known location, he approached the area with the same awareness as an area with a known zombie. Seeing the ruins, Grant quickly determined Thomas must have stayed the night there. The piece of tin roofing that was used before, was now propped against a wall forming a small tent-like spot. However, although it was easy to see

through when he knelt down to do so, he did not see Thomas.

Still approaching with caution, Grant slowly walked forward and noticed that the fire had long since gone out. Circling around to check behind the wall, he thought about calling for Thomas but soon heard a noise come from behind a pile of rubble.

The noise was loud but wasn't a bomb about to go off or an explosion. The sound was more like movement atop metal in which something was unaware it was on noisy footing. Upon Grant's clear attention, whatever seemed to notice it had been found and jumped out at him in full charge.

Grant retreated behind one of the walls Thomas used and took up as best a defensive position as he could. Expecting something to round the corner, Grant pointed his shotgun in the direction he had come but saw nothing. This delay was very frightening to Grant. Normally in the case of a zombie attack, the zombie continues, but this one did not. Feeling his position was about as good as he was going to get, Grant stayed still with his head on a swivel.

Wide-eyed and waiting, Grant slowed his breathing in an attempt to better hear around him. Used to normal zombie tactics being direct frontal assaults, Grant's unfamiliarity with this style of action made him nervous and not quite sure what to do.

Then, after waiting a long three to four minutes, he heard someone call out to him.

"Grant!" A jagged voice said.

"Grant!"

Grant did not recognize the voice as Thomas' but didn't know why anyone else in the area would know it was him.

"Who is that?" Grant said, staying where he was.

Grant waited for a reply but the voice didn't immediately come, making him wait several more minutes before hearing back.

"Grant!" He heard again but with more strain.

"Hurry!"

Grant wasn't a hundred percent sure what to do but decided to go with his intuition that the voice was probably Thomas. Even so, Grant still gently rounded the corner of the ruins just to be sure.

Seeing nothing at first, Grant took two steps and heard a grumbling noise followed by the sight of a man lying on his back. Grant paused for a second then noticed the sunglasses he had given Thomas on this person. Now feeling the threat was over, Grant lowered his gun and went over to him to find out it was indeed Thomas.

"I can't stop..." Thomas said in pain.

"I can't stop it."

Grant knelt next to him, putting his hand on Thomas' chest.

"I don't feel I'm awake. Take my pocket." Thomas said, mixing his words.

Grant checked his pocket to see a couple hand written notes. Although a little damp, the notes were not runny and still legible.

"End. End me." Thomas said, taking off the shades and giving them back to Grant.

"My time. May it happen."

Grant remembered Marcus at this stage. The pain, the look, the shaking Thomas had, Marcus also had before he could no longer fight off the virus.

"May God be with you Sergeant Thomas Cable," Grant said, standing up and readying his gun.

Thomas briefly lost himself and bit at the air before coming back to say one more thing.

"My family... I law...ve my family," he said as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 23

Grant looked over the four pieces of paper Thomas had given him as Clark rested and Greta took the girls for a fishing trip. Two of the letters were to his personal family. One to his wife and the other to his son. The other two letters were a list of directions and ingredients with a few personal notes in between.

Thomas' directions covered topics like what was needed, how much of each was required, when to mix an ingredient, how hot or how long to brew an item, and in what order things needed to be done. These were all headed by several warnings and a few of his personal thoughts concerning what he found.

All of his warnings and disclaimers aside, Thomas' work was overall encouraging if they could find more chemicals. Grant noticed very little of the items they collected remained, along with none of Thomas' final brew. Grant carefully carried off what he could, but realized they would have to have at least one more search to replenish what Thomas had on his instructions.

Two of the items Thomas had listed they either didn't need or Grant knew exactly where to find them. Gas was one of the items listed and wouldn't be a problem. Glass jars used as beakers and his utensils were also mostly covered although strewn about because of the storm. Thankfully though, one thing the storm did do which was a positive for Grant was a free wash of these items. Although some did get knocked over and broken, most were rinsed off or were full of rainwater which was easy enough to dump out.

Thinking about each item and step, Grant decided to take advantage of the girls' fishing trip with an exploration of his own. Grant thought to himself where he could go and quickly remembered what Greta had mentioned about the school's science room.

This search though would be difficult since the school was big and he would inevitably run into zombies inside. Making his mind up to do this, Grant made sure his shotgun's sling was completely full. Wanting to be safe, Grant decided to give the small revolver he had to Clark since it was lighter and had more bullets and to take the three fifty-seven with him although it only had four rounds.

To give himself a moral boost, and for the fun of it, Grant decided to take advantage of Greta's departure by using her four-wheeler. This was strangely exciting for him, having not ridden anything other than his for years.

After again informing Clark of what he was doing and affixing his sword to Greta's four-wheeler, Grant took off for the school, peeling out a little bit and popping a wheelie, which his older four-wheeler could no longer do.

Grant pushed the four-wheeler for his fun and reached the school faster than he'd ever done. When he arrived and as he always did, Grant took caution as he got close and stopped goofing around about a mile from the school.

Drawing his sword and having the two guns at his side, Grant was slightly sidetracked with what he must look like. Of all the times he had encounters with zombies, this time in particular would test just how much reason they truly had left.

Even though he figured he looked like an action hero, Grant had no delusions that the zombies wouldn't care. With this thought, Grant took a breath and patiently walked through the dark hallways. Stopping before each turn and peeking around each doorway, Grant was given a little break by finding an old fire evacuation map on a wall in one of the hallways.

The map gave evacuation plans for his area along with the locations of all the fire extinguishers and rooms to stay away from in case of an incident. These rooms each contained something that was not safe to be around in case of an emergency, like the school's boiler room that contained the main gas lines and the science room Grant wanted to find.

The luck Grant felt in finding the map was soon stamped out just around a nearby corner. Finding his first zombie, Grant readied his sword as it staggered his way. Allowing it to come to him, Grant raised his sword when it got close and swung quickly as soon as it passed by the wall he hid behind.

This elimination was quick but was followed by the zombie's uncontrollable collapse. The sound it made echoed down the halls and gave Grant an inner clock until his inevitable next encounter.

With this, Grant now brushed some of his caution aside and made

for the science room which was only three rooms away. Unfortunately finding the door locked, Grant was forced to break the door's vertical window to open it from inside.

Once in, Grant felt comfortable that nothing was inside. Instead of immediately looking for what chemicals might be there, Grant first re-locked the door and pushed several of the class's desks up against it.

Once this was done, Grant put down his sword and checked where the teacher's room was finding several of the chemicals he needed, this time in non-janitorial form. Grant then moved to the cupboards and desks to check each for anything else that might have been stored. This too was fruitful but only contained diluted samples or less reactive substances.

One bonus he found was a stash of bunsen burners along with a couple small propane tanks and a stockpile of six-ounce butane cans. This extra find was pleasing but also short-lived with the sound of zombies running his way.

Wishing he had more time, Grant frantically grabbed up the main items he needed, putting them in a few boxes he found in the room. With what remaining time he had, he topped off the boxes with as many of the bonus items that he could. Being a little fortunate that the zombies only knew the general location the noise had come from, his time soon ran out as a couple of the zombies heard the clattering of objects Grant had grabbed.

Two zombies reached his door at the same time, shaking the desks and door in their attempts to get in. A third zombie added weight to the door which caused loud cracking sounds to come from the door's lock and handle.

Out of time, Grant threw caution to the wind and smashed out one of the room's windows. Putting his supplies on a desk next to the window, Grant jumped out just as the zombies overpowered the lock and broke down the door. Now with only the desks slowing them up, Grant reached back in, grabbed his boxes, and ran for Greta's four-wheeler.

Losing butane cans along the way, the two boxes slowed him up as he hurriedly rounded the building's corner. Grant never looked back as he ran as fast as he could, knowing he wouldn't have much time once he got to the four-wheeler. Reaching it, Grant placed his boxes on the ground and started the ATV. As he did this, one of several zombies got within a distance he didn't feel confident he could simply drive away from.

Grabbing for his sword, Grant was immediately reminded he had left it inside the science room. Promptly progressed to the next weapon he could grab, the three fifty-seven revolver, he drew it and aimed at this zombie. Grant shot quickly and used three of his four shots on it, striking it down on the third try. With this zombie down, Grant somewhat gently put his boxes on the four-wheeler and spent his last shot on a second zombie which was getting close. Striking the shoulder of the zombie, Grant wasted no time in hopping back on the four-wheeler, giving it as much gas as he could.

Only spinning the zombie around, the shot merely slowed up the zombie ever so much as to give Grant enough time to take off. However, this delay still wasn't enough to completely keep the zombie from catching up to Grant. As Grant was trying to accelerate away the zombie dove for him, catching the rear of his seat instead.

Clinging onto the four-wheeler as Grant tried to escape, the zombie used its good arm to swipe at Grant while managing to hold on with his other. With an empty gun, Grant used the revolver as a hammer, bashing at the zombie's hand as much as he could. Dodging bushes and trees, Grant whacked the zombie's hand so much its fingers broke, causing the zombie to lose its grip and roll away.

Not skipping a beat, Grant refocused himself and sped off until he felt the rest of the zombies could not catch up. When Grant got to this spot, he briefly stopped the four-wheeler to secure his findings. In the chaos of his flight, Grant lost half his butane cans along with several of the beakers breaking because they bounced around. Even with the loss, Grant still felt the stop was a success although he also noticed he both broke and twisted his revolver's stock.

The rest of the ride home was routine. Grant was able to calm down a bit from the chase and actually got to relax some before stopping at his normal spot.

Carrying his findings back to the house, Greta and the girls noticed Grant. They too were also on their way home and laughed when they noticed Grant had Greta's ATV. Before long, Greta found herself holding not just their catch of the day, but also the girls' poles, boxes, and a cup of worms.

"Grant!" The girls called out running over to him.

“We caught a lot of fish. Do you want to see?”

“Sure.” Grant replied, putting down his boxes while also trying to get the girls to be a little more quiet.

After the girls got to Grant, they motioned to Greta to catch up, excited to show off what they got.

“Greta can really fish! She taught us some new tricks. We caught a lot!” Harriet said while they both gave him a hug.

“I caught a bass!” Nanny then chimed in.

Greta eventually caught up and showed the bucket to Grant.

“Wow. You did catch a lot. Are you guys going to treat us out tonight?” he said, having to take a knee feeling a little flush.

“Did you get us anything?” The girls then asked, seeing the boxes he had been carrying.

Greta also asked a question while keeping the girls from touching what she assumed were probably chemicals.

“You okay?” she asked, holding the giggling girls back.

“Oh yeah. I had a nice run with this stuff from some zombies. It took me a little more than I thought. But I got to use your four-wheeler if you didn’t notice,” Grant said, finding it funny.

“Yeah, the girls were quick to point that out. So I think you owe me. I say since you stole my four-wheeler, you get the job of cleaning the fish. Right girls?” she said playing to the girls.

Both girls jumped up and down agreeing with Greta, finding it fun to tease him. Grant could never turn down the girls and agreed to do the yucky job when they got back.

“How do you want your fish?” he said, putting his boxes down when they got home.

Chapter 24

Everyone was full after dinner. Grant especially ate too much trying to refresh his spent body after his zombie run. The girls volunteered to clean up after the meal while the adults went into the main room to talk about Thomas' directions.

"Do you think you can figure these out?" Clark asked, looking them over.

"I'm sure going to try," Grant replied.

"But I think we shouldn't bet the farm that we get it right off the bat. I think we probably should practice a little bit in small portions to make sure we don't end up with one big smoke bomb."

"Yeah, I agree. If we do it and get it wrong, we will have wasted all of it. We need to make sure when we do do it, it goes off. Plus, it needs to be a surprise. If we have a dud, they will see what we are trying and prepare for it the next time around," Greta said.

"I agree but I was thinking of something a little different today," Clark spoke out.

"If this does work, this is only going to be step one of getting out. We hopefully will have a hole, but a hole into the holding cells. We don't know if the people being held in there will help us or not. Then, that's also in conjunction with the guards. We can pretty well guarantee they aren't going to side with us and simply open the doors. I don't think two adults, one injured person, and two children are going to overcome all of that without getting insanely lucky with the bomb, armed or not."

"Correct," Grant said.

"I was thinking along those lines as well and was also worried about being attacked from behind. If we do it during the day, we can probably get away with the four-wheelers sound getting there. But, if we do it at night we are going to start to have problems with the zombies. Then, once that bomb goes off, we will be guaranteed to have a problem on our hands."

Clark and Grant thought about how outnumbered they would be. If

they got through with just three adults, although armed, they would still be at a heavy disadvantage. The holding cells could have anywhere between fifty to one hundred people inside. Then, you could probably count on another ten to twenty armed guards in the immediate area. Three against the best odds still made for slim chances. Not to mention having a possible battle on two fronts from the zombies in the Refuge.

Both Grant and Clark thought about how to deal with this. Each time they came up with another problem. One new thought they hadn't contemplated was needing an additional bomb to get through the inner cell. The wall they were thinking about only held the people with a virus in from the Refuge itself. The guards inside would also have a wall keeping them from those with the virus. So two bombs would now be on the menu.

The problems quickly started stacking up, discouraging both Grant and Clark until Greta had an idea.

"It sounds like we need to recruit. I'm sure there are more people inside the Refuge that also want out. If we tell them we have a plan, we could pool our numbers and weapons together. I don't know if they would do it but if they did, Ben and his family would be a good example."

"You're right," Grant said, having overlooked the thought.

"I know everyone wants the same thing. If we could get enough people to come together, we might just have enough to overcome the guards and the other obstacles. I also think we will probably end up with at least a little help from those inside the holding cells. It will probably end up being a little bit of a mixed lot. Some will be confused and do nothing. Some will probably get scared and fight back while others might see what's happening and help out. We shouldn't count on it but I do think it will happen like that," Grant added.

"I'm liking it... As long as we can get enough people," Clark said while going along with their thoughts.

"So how about this? Clark, the girls, and I will come up with and make stuff that will slow up any zombies. You can test Thomas' instructions and see if we can make more than one bomb... maybe one big one and a few smaller ones, something like that. If and when you feel you have it down, we can then go out and advise people of our plan. Sound okay?" Greta asked them both.

"That sounds fine," Grant said looking over to Clark.

“Hey, if he is willing to make the bombs, then yeah, making little traps at this stage is probably the easy part.”

“Okay, then let’s start on all that tomorrow,” Grant said.

“Let’s rest up tonight and start on all this bright and early.”

Clark then injected a question in, playing some of the ideas out in his head.

“How many people do you think are in here and how many do you know where to find?”

“As Greta said, we both know Ben. He is probably the closest. There are the Landry brothers who are in the opposite direction and a little farther away than Ben is. So that’s four adults right there. Further out, I can think of about five more families. So times that by two as a guess and that brings us up to seventeen counting us. Now I do know there are more than that but I haven’t explored this place end to end. I’m sure when we talk to each family, especially the further ones, they will probably know even more groups we might be able to recruit.”

“We are going to probably have to subtract a few though to protect the children. We can’t have kids charging in after an explosion. Plus, I’m already thinking of a few distractions that will take some people as well. So we will definitely have to stress to all these groups that if they desire to get out, they can’t wait around. We might only get one shot and we need everyone to come together to have a chance of pulling this off,” Greta said, thinking out loud.

“Okay, when you guys get all your stuff ready, let’s try to come up with exactly how many people we think we will need. If you need X amount for traps, if we need Y amount to protect the kids, that kind of thing. The numbers will be in flux because we probably won’t know exactly how many kids we will have until groups start showing up,” Grant said.

“Alright then, it’s a plan,” Grant finished with after waiting a bit to see if anyone else had something to add.

Chapter 25

Greta had mentioned to Clark the night prior that she might get an early start. Greta wanted to make some traps and needed more supplies than they had. So when Clark got up in the morning, he was not surprised to see she was nowhere to be found.

Greta found some wire cutters Grant had in his makeshift toolbox before setting out on foot for a nearby cow farm. Greta felt the first thing she could do was to make more of the barbed wire traps Grant had already made.

The wire setup was simple enough and only required strands of barbed wire, some wood, and a bell if one was available. The cow farm was only about a mile away and had a field's worth of barbed wire she could cut and use. Reaching it without a problem, Greta snipped strands that reached from post to post. Following these cuts, Greta then wrapped each strand around a three-foot-long log for later use and easier carry.

All of this took time and caution while winding the lines around the log. Greta collected these strands for about two hours before she noticed people walking her way from the distance. As these people got closer, she soon realized it was Clark and the girls.

"Just wanted to see if you needed any help?" Clark said the closer he got while holding an extra log in his good arm.

"Ummm... Grant only had the one pair of snips. But if you want, it would help if you could carry these back and get me maybe a couple more logs. That's really all I can think of right now. If you would like to do that I would appreciate it, although don't feel like you have to."

"We can do that," Clark said, carefully picking up a finished roll by the wires with his good hand.

"Finish that one off and we will go back, drop them off, and cut you some more wood. Then I was thinking about heading out for an idea I had that isn't as laborious and that the girls might like helping with."

"Okay, I feel bad in asking you to take these back, but that really is all I have right now," Greta said, feeling like she was giving him the

newbie job.

“No, not a problem. We were actually ready to do more.”

Clark and the girls did as they said, taking the logs back and cutting Greta some new ones. When they returned to Greta they brought with them a pitcher of water, the freshly cut logs, and some ripped-up fabric from the inside of a couple nearby cars.

“Here you go,” Nanny said handing over the pitcher to Greta.

Greta gave her a big smile and gladly took a nice-size drink from it.

“Wow. Nice and cold! What’s the material for?”

“Well, Grant said the zombies like sound and movement. So I thought a simple thing that would be distracting to a zombie might be strips of this stuff flapping like a flag in a tree. Some may be reachable and then others progressing upwards to take their attention away from us.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea,” Greta said.

“Anything that can distract or delay will help.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. It’s something and if it can do that for even a couple, it makes things that much more helpful for us. So the girls said there were a few more local cars in the area. I was thinking we could pull the seat covers off and cut off their seat belts for a bunch of these streamer kind of things.”

“You might also be able to booby trap them as well.” Greta said.

“I don’t have any experience in that, but if you could get something to swing down when they pull on it, that might be something as well.”

“No, you’re right. I’ll think about it but I don’t have training in that area either. But I bet we can come up with something. You know I did have another idea the girls said to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“Did you see any more fishing line in Grant’s stuff? I was thinking we could tie that at about chest level between two trees. That could also be an obstacle that could cause them some problems.”

“Yeah, there was some. That’s a good idea to. I’ll set it aside when I get back. Do you know how Grant’s doing today by chance?”

“I haven’t heard any explosions yet,” Clark said.

“But I haven’t talked to him since this morning. He was a little slow to get up but said to stay far away from the area where you guys parked the four-wheelers. He was going to make that his testing spot for Thomas’ instructions.”

“Okay, good to know.”

Clark and the girls then went off in search of more materials while Greta finished off her spools. This took her another couple of hours. By the end of it, Greta felt they could make dozens of traps that the zombies might get hung up on.

She also took her alone time to think about how she could make some rudimentary bells. Knowing this probably would be a hard thing to find, she felt making them would have to be second best. Her first construction idea was to make the bells in the same fashion as a typical cow or sleigh bell. This idea though was tampered by the time it would take and the tools that were needed. She then thought of other things that made sounds when shook. The first thing that came to her mind was car keys. This thought opened her mind to having simple metal objects that would jiggle together when something got hung up on the barbed wire. The sound made then would hopefully sidetrack and draw away maybe another zombie or two.

Chapter 26

Greta, Clark, and the girls all worked together on the three ideas they had. The girls enjoyed making strips out of the fabric, even sometimes getting creative and making designs for fun.

Greta and Clark worked on the sharper and more dangerous barbed wire. Clark only having the one hand, pulled on and held the lines steady while Greta tied off and secured them. This process took much more time than the girls' streamers. So, when the girls got done, their next task was to search the house's basement, garage, and nearby vehicles for any little pieces of metal they could use as a bell.

Just as the fabric cutting turned into a game, the metal finding likewise turned into a game. Becoming a giant game of hide and go seek, it was decided whoever found the most items would be the winner.

Nanny struck first, finding actual bells.

"Look!" she said happily ringing two sleigh bells back and forth, annoying Harriet.

"I'm winning!"

This made Harriet search harder, sometimes passing up usable pieces of metal in an attempt to find a bell herself. For this, Harriet fell further behind Nanny and ended up only finding five pieces to Nanny's twelve.

Harriet became even more competitive and rushed over to the garage, taking advantage of her age and size. Both girls searched meticulously but were also alert and put caution above winning as Grant would have asked of them.

The garage was more picked over than the basement. It did have a few goodies but most things that could be used were. Harriet did feel she made up a little ground by finding two sets of keys and an empty soda pop can that she felt she could put a rock in to make some noise.

Now closing the gap, Harriet relaxed a bit, walking with Nanny to a group of vehicles that were about a mile from their fishing pond. Each girl made a deal before searching and divided the vehicles up evenly, two a

piece. Harriet chose the truck and van while Nanny wanted both of the cars.

Harriet picked the van to search first and got a pleasant surprise upon opening it. Inside the van was a baby raccoon which spooked upon Harriet opening of the door. The raccoon, not wasting time, hastily jumped onto the rear bench and out a broken window.

This startled Harriet as much as it did the baby raccoon but also focused her eyes on a can it had knocked over. Harriet watchfully reached for it being mindful more critters could be inside. In doing so, Harriet had to reach low under a seat and noticed several objects that could also be useful.

One of the objects she recognized was a child's spoon. The rest of the objects she did not. The first of these objects were several small flat plates, each of which had a hole in the middle. When Harriet picked one up, it was much lighter than she thought and very flat. Something Harriet found neat about the item was that on one side she could see her reflection, almost as if it were a mirror. Harriet grabbed up all these items and picked two of them to tap together. Pleased that they made a noise, Harriet felt these items were good to collect as possible bells for Greta's and Clark's traps.

The second of these objects wasn't metal but rather two small boxes about the size of Nanny's shoe. Seeing no metal, she immediately felt she couldn't use them as a bell but still felt they were something she should take. Similar to the wrap on the new present Grant had given her, these were also wrapped together but with what looked like one missing. On the boxes were blue, yellow, pink, and red circles along with some glass. Both boxes looked to be in good condition so she grabbed up both and put them in her bag.

Feeling the van was giving her good finds, she searched even more diligently and got a pleasant surprise. Reaching under the front driver's seat she felt an item and pulled it out. Upon seeing it, Greta became half excited and half worried, quickly putting the item down not wanting to touch it. The item she found was clearly a gun but not like one she had seen before. Unlike the guns Grant had, this gun was red and completely clear. The only other color the gun had on it was an orange tip, orange trigger, and an orange button on the back. Excited but unsure what to do, Harriet called for Nanny who had finished and was almost behind her.

"I'm right here," Nanny said, holding a half-full bag.

“Look at this Nanny... but don’t touch it,” Harriet said pointing the gun out.

Nanny didn’t have the best view from where she stood so she got a little closer and took a peek.

“Wow! You found a gun! Grant’s going to be super excited!” she said looking at it.

“But Grant said to never touch a gun without his permission. We are going to have to leave it here for Clark or Greta to get later,” Nanny said, sticking with what she was told to do.

“Nanny, we both have guns right now. This gun was very light when I picked it up and you can see through it. It doesn’t have any bullets in it. I think it’s safe. I think we can hold it very carefully, point it towards the ground and we will be okay.”

“But it doesn’t look like it has a safety switch. How can you be sure it’s okay?” Nanny said concerned.

“Nanny, it doesn’t need one. It has no bullets in it. It will be fine,” she said as she picked it up.

Nanny then started to cry feeling they should leave it there and not mess with it. Harriet, feeling bad her actions sparked this emotion, carefully put it back down and gave Nanny a hug.

“Grant told us not to. He said we could get hurt. Please don’t take it,” Nanny said, crying into Harriet’s shirt.

“Okay,” Harriet said, patting Nanny on the back.

“We’ll leave it. But let’s try to block the doors and windows a bit to be sure nobody else gets it, okay?”

Nanny shook her head to this and helped Harriet put some random things against the van, both inside and out. This they felt would help to keep the gun safe while also keeping both animals and zombies out.

Once they felt they had blocked the windows and doors sufficiently, they picked up their bags and made their way back to the house. Along the way, each girl talked about what they had found and judged who had found

the most. Nanny had found the most items with a total of twenty-seven, but Harriet countered this number with the idea her finds were more unique, not to mention the addition of a gun.

Both girls argued who should be deemed the winner for the majority of their walk back. This argument got so heated at times, that they didn't always pay attention to where they were going. That was until they came across a limping zombie about two hundred yards in front of them. Upon this sight, both girls froze and instantly stopped their bickering.

Harriet being the older sibling and feeling responsible for Nanny, slowly moved in front of her in case the zombie turned and noticed them. At this same time she also slowly lowered her bag and pulled out the gun Grant had given her, turning the safety off just in case.

In this standstill, Harriet thought of what she should do and tried to remember what Grant had told her about the gun. Since they didn't have many bullets, she had never actually shot the gun, but rather had just practiced with Grant in play-like situations.

She did remember though to not touch the trigger unless she was sure she was going to shoot. Grant had always harped on the fact that this was how a gun went off and you never wanted an accident if you weren't sure.

Being not sure what to do, Harriet kept the gun at her side with her finger off the trigger. One thing she remember Grant told her to do was to look around, when safe, to see what else might be near. This, he told her, was because of the sound the gun made and the problem it could present if another zombie was near. Seeing that the zombie was laboring heavily on its right leg, Harriet did this slowly and saw nothing on either side or behind them.

Harriet refocused her attention on the zombie and felt their best chance was to slowly back away and either find some cover or climb a tree to be safe.

“Nanny,” Harriet whispered in as low of a voice as she could.

“We are going to start walking backwards. Stay behind me and follow me wherever I go.”

Nanny and Harriet then slowly backed off, taking steps in unison while keeping a constant eye on the zombie. At first, this plan worked fine

but after about seven feet into their retreat, Nanny accidentally stepped in a slight hole which caused her to fall to the ground. With her nerves on edge already, this fall scared her, making her let out a slight yelp. Both girls knew this was not good but tried to stay still, not wanting to draw any more attention. This pause was not enough as they immediately saw the zombie turn and look in their direction.

Upon this action, Harriet felt it was their best choice to run to the nearest tree to climb up it. Without hesitation, both girls ran to a large pine tree that had some lower-lying limbs. Doing this, Harriet holstered her gun and looked back at the zombie which was now chasing them. Seeing that this particular zombie was slow and by itself gave Harriet some relief but she still felt it was best for them to climb the tree instead of trying to make it back to the house.

Harriet reached the tree first and gave Nanny a boost who swiftly scampered up the tree as fast as she could. Looking back at the zombie again, Harriet wasted little time and also went up the tree like a little chipmunk.

Once they reached a high enough branch, both girls looked down and noticed the zombie had reached the base of the tree but was not climbing up. Nanny, trying to both hurt the zombie and get it to leave, dropped her bag of metal on its head which knocked it to the ground.

The zombie grumbled to this and laid on the ground for a few seconds before trying to get up. Looking down at it, Harriet caught a glimpse of its face which looked an awful lot like Grant. With this curious moment, Harriet looked a little more and tried calling out.

“Grant?” she said, not quite sure.

The creature didn’t respond but did get up.

“Yes. It’s me. You can come down.”

Both girls were greatly relieved but felt bad they had run from Grant. Nanny felt especially bad after also dropping her bag on his head. Both girls scurried down the tree and went to give Grant a hug. In doing this, Grant stopped them because of his several severe burns that went up his right arm and leg.

“What happened?” Harriet asked, worried for him.

“I got a little too confident in my bomb-making,” he said with a chuckle.

Nanny hid behind Harriet and started to cry seeing how bad his injuries were. Seeing her reaction, Grant tried to calm her down by reminding her of his condition.

“It’s okay Nanny, I’ll be fine. I know it looks bad but remember I can’t feel anything. If it was going to happen to anyone, it was best to happen to me,” he said, giving her a little smile while peeking around Harriet.

“What did you drop on my head anyways, that was loud!” He said trying to distract her a bit and help her relax.

Nanny bit on his joke and peeked her head around Harriet. Grant smiled back to her to show her it was okay.

“Well... what was that?” Grant said, again giving her a teasing smile.

Nanny shyly went over to the bag and picked it up.

“It’s our bell material,” she said holding it up.

“I picked twenty-seven items. I won! Harriet only had twenty-two.”

Harriet let this go not starting back up the argument they were having on who had won. Yet, this did remind her of the gun she had found. Since they were still somewhat close to the van, she thought this was a good time to bring it up.

“I found a gun!” she said to Grant’s surprise.

Grant instantly reverted back to his dad self and checked to see if they followed his directions.

“You didn’t touch it did you?”

“Only for a second,” Harriet said.

“I did think about bringing it back home with us but Nanny didn’t want to, so we left it in the van.”

“Good,” Grant said, happy to hear they made the right decision.

“You never want to mess with a gun.”

“It’s only a little ways over there, did you want to get it? It’s a strange one,” Nanny said, excited she was right about not touching it.

“What do you mean strange? Is it big?”

“No, it’s small but you don’t have anything like this one. It’s clear, red and has an orange trigger and button on it. But there’s no bullets in it, we could see right in,” Nanny said, now back to her old self.

Knowing what they had found, Grant snickered a little bit before telling them what it was.

“You did find a gun but it’s not an adult gun. It’s a kid’s gun. It’s called a water gun. You fill it up with water and when you pull the trigger, water comes out,” he said to the girls’ amazement.

“Is it safe?” Nanny asked, still not one hundred percent sure what he meant.

“Oh yes. I played with them all the time when I was a kid. If you get two of them you and Harriet can have a water gun fight. The only thing that happens is you get wet. It won’t hurt you.”

“Can we go get it?” Harriet asked, excited to have a new toy.

“Yes but not right now. I think we had enough excitement for today. Plus I think you guys probably should help me get back to the house. I’m not moving all that well right now to go back and forth.” Grant said, feeling it was fortunate it was only him they ran from.

Respecting what Grant asked, both girls didn’t fuss and instead picked up their bags of metal and helped Grant walk the rest of the way home.

Chapter 27

Greta tended to Grant's wounds as well as she could. She wasn't especially knowledgeable about explosions or burns but did know the basics of keeping a wound clean. Fortunately for both Grant and Greta, she had a free hand in doing whatever she felt was right. With Grant's condition, even if she did something wrong or pushed in the wrong place, Grant just sat there and gave no mind.

"What goodies did you get?" Clark asked the girls, waiting to ask Grant about the bomb.

"I won!" Nanny instantly said, showing off a bit.

Giving in and letting it go, Harriet ignored their competition and answered his question.

"I found a few cans, a spoon, these shiny plates, some pieces of scrap metal, and these two boxes. They're not really for the bells but they looked new and are wrapped. Is there a toy in them?"

Each adult paid attention to the boxes when Harriet handed them over to Clark. Grant quickly noticed they were not toys and asked for both.

"Let me see those," he said a little excited.

Clark passed them over to Grant who seemed overly excited. Examining them and reading the label, Grant felt both were indeed new and usable.

"Do you know what these are?" Grant asked the girls, although Clark also seemed a little unsure.

"They're old disposable cameras and they should still work!" He said with maybe one of the biggest smiles the girls had ever seen on his face.

Grant was overly excited about this not because they did anything special inside the Refuge but what they might be able to do outside the Refuge. One problem he felt they would run into, even if they got out, was the media cover-up. It would be word against word, and the powers that be

have control over almost all the news.

Grant was not sure how to overcome this, but did feel film or pictures showing what was inside the Refuge would help. However, until now, he didn't have anything that could do that.

"Here, girls, get together, I'll see if the flash still works and take a picture of you."

The girls were not too sure of this but saw how excited this made Grant and trusted he wouldn't lead them the wrong way. Both girls then got close and looked over in Grant's general direction.

"You want to look right here and smile. It will capture a picture of you two just like you see in your books." Grant said, knowing Harriet had probably forgotten and Nanny had never had her picture taken before.

Both girls thought of the pictures in their books and thought it was neat they too could be in a book.

"Smile!" Grant said again, holding down the flash button to see if the small battery inside still worked.

Then, upon seeing a flashing signal light up on the camera just as the directions said, Grant snapped a photo.

This to Grant was wonderful but was scary to the girls. Upon seeing the flash, both girls didn't know what to do and ran from the room. Grant instantly felt bad, forgetting to warn them this would happen.

"Girls come back, it's okay. It just lights up so that it can get a clear picture of you. Everything is fine."

"My eyes hurt," Harriet said from the other room.

"I see something. Don't do that again!"

These little remarks only worsened Grant's guilt in not preparing them enough.

"Girls, I'm sorry. It honestly does not hurt you. That flash is bright just to get a clear picture of you. That little bright spot in your vision will go away."

By this time what Grant had said was happening. The slight blip in their sight was fading and their vision was going back to normal. Having this confirmation, both girls slowly walked back into the room Grant was in, holding each other's hands.

"I'm sorry girls," Grant said with a sad face.

"Here, to show you it goes away, you can take a picture of us. How's that?" Grant said, holding the camera out to them.

Physically feeling nothing and with the blip now gone, both girls' excitement started to return. Looking at each other both girls then asked to try at the same time.

"Sure!" Grant said happy to see their joyful looks back on their faces.

Both girls walked over as Grant spun the camera, getting it ready for another picture. Grant then showed both girls how it worked and what they had to do to take a picture. Harriet being nice, let Nanny decide if she wanted to go first or not.

"First!" Nanny said, being spunky again.

"Alright, Harriet come over here and sit with us while Nanny takes our picture."

Harriet sat next to Grant and started to smile immediately, even though Nanny wasn't ready yet. Both Clark and Greta smiled at this as they also got close and looked at Nanny, who was peering through the peephole.

"Now it's all ready. All you need to do is get us in that window, hold the camera steady, and tell us to say whatever you think is funny."

"Why?" Nanny said, lowering the camera.

"Don't worry about it. When you're ready, go ahead and take your picture." Grant replied skipping over picture-taking etiquette.

"Toots!" Nanny said, trying to say something funny before raising the camera for the picture.

Although the timing was off, this certainly brought a smile to everyone's face and also caused everyone to laugh once they were sure the

picture was taken.

“Good job!” Grant said, having a good laugh.

Nanny happily handed it over to him, proud she had done a good job. Grant then winded it up again and told Harriet to do the same thing. With Nanny snuggling close and still smiling from her funny, Harriet readied for her own shot.

“Toot Toot!” she said, one-upping Nanny before taking her picture.

Everyone got a good laugh out of this and a much-needed break from the day. After they calmed down a bit, Harriet asked Grant another question.

“Can I see the pictures now?” she asked, looking down at the camera, expecting it to be somehow inside.

“I’m sorry Harriet. It doesn’t work like that. A person who knows how to get the pictures out will have to do that later. We are going to have to wait a bit before you can see them. But I guarantee you, whatever you had in that little window will be exactly what you will see later... just like in your books.”

Greta then nudged Grant, tilting her head towards the window indicating it was getting late. Grant picked this up and agreed they needed to go to bed so that he, Greta, and Clark could talk about his progress with the bomb.

“Alright girls, it’s that time. I’d tuck you in but I’m a little crispy today. Give me a hug and I’ll see you two in the morning.”

Both girls did as Grant asked, giving him an extra squeeze before running up the stairs for the night. When Grant heard the door shut, he started to talk to Greta and Clark about what he had figured out.

“So I guess for anyone else this wouldn’t be a successful day, but I had a successful day,” he said, referring to the wounds he incurred.

“I followed what Thomas’ instructions said and I got it pretty quickly. My mistake was going too big too fast. His directions didn’t say what amount makes what size bomb.”

“Do you remember how to make it and do you think you have

enough to make more? Or do we need to look for more supplies?” Greta asked.

“No, I think we have plenty. I brought down a tree today with only a little bit of it. I would imagine with what we have left, it will make for a pretty big boom. If you saw what was left of the tree, I think you would agree with me that it might not matter how thick the wall is. However, it’s probably best that we stay with the possibility the halfway ward isn’t as thick and double up on that by also bringing some sledgehammers. But, I guess being sure is always the safer route. So if you guys want to go out tomorrow to recruit, ask them if they have some of the stuff we were looking for. I can always make more. Just don’t mix anything.”

“Sledgehammers?” Clark said, happy he felt confident enough they could recruit but was curious as to what he meant.

“Yeah as long as everything works right, we might need to clear some rubble or knock some of the blocks out of the way if the hole is not big enough. I have one in the garage, but that’s something else to ask if anyone else has.”

“So what all did you want us to ask for just to make sure I’ve got it?” Clark asked, picking up a pen and a piece of paper to be sure he didn’t have any memory slips.

“People,” Grant said point blankly.

“People are the most important thing. Everything we did recently doesn’t matter if we don’t have support. Everyone needs to come and work together. So however you try to sell this to everyone, we need their backing. We can’t do this by ourselves. So make sure you explain that urgency plus how we really do have a chance of getting out. If that doesn’t work or they are hesitant, remind them that more and more people are going to have the same fate as us. Good people, innocent people, women, and children. People who don’t deserve what we are going through. If we have this chance and don’t take it, then we can’t be upset with people who don’t help us get out.”

“Good point,” Clark said, unsure how to write that down.

“Do you think you can make one big bomb along with maybe a few smaller ones if we do make it inside?” Greta asked.

“Yeah, I don’t think that will be a problem. I think the main thing

now will just be having enough people.”

Chapter 28

Everyone but the girls woke up early the next morning wanting to get a head start and to cover as much distance as they could. Grant, feeling that some of the new people might take his zombie-like state wrong, decided to stay behind. He gave his shotgun to Greta and a light revolver to Clark, as well as his four-wheeler and a makeshift white flag he knew would show to anyone that they were not zombies.

Clark though wasn't so comfortable with this idea, not having much use in his right hand and not knowing how he would work the gas.

"It's going to be a little tough but I'll draw out a map of the closer and more level places for you to go to. I think you can steer and gas it with your left as long as you go slower and stick to the map. You're just going to have to remember that if a zombie does come at you, you're going to have to make a quick choice in whether to fight or not."

Clark said okay to this and practiced holding up the revolver with his left hand. This was difficult for him but wasn't completely foreign either. As a deputy, they had to practice shooting with both hands. So although he was not as good with his left, he did feel he could use the gun if it came to it.

Greta got the more numerous, difficult, and further map of the two. Although she understood why, she half wanted to add Ben onto her map just to be able to say hi. But Greta knew this wasn't the time for things like that and felt strongly she would see him and his family again.

Grant and the girls took up the task of making some bells while Clark and Greta took off for the day with maps in hand and a day's worth of extra gas, food, and water.

As she thought, Greta's trek was much more difficult. Her map forced her to drive over creeks, through thick woods, and even occasionally up or down some steep hills. In spite of this, she knew and agreed with what Grant had said, that people would be the most important thing to be able to get out.

After about an hour she came across the first house Grant had on her map. Grant knew this family and wrote down both their names along with

some details he felt would help them trust Greta.

Parking far away and raising her flag, she walked slowly towards the house, trying to make herself as visible as possible and not to scare anyone away. Upon seeing an older man, Greta called out to him only once, then rapidly waved her flag to show her innocent intent.

The older man did as Grant would have, immediately taking up a defensive position and drawing his gun. However, when Greta saw him straighten up and relax, she knew she had been seen.

While walking the remaining distance to him, she saw two teenaged boys appear. This was not unexpected as Grant had written down three boys' names along with a woman's, advising this was a family of five. These two young men had a similar look as their father and walked with him but distantly spread apart. This was done, as Greta reasoned, as a defensive strategy to better their chances in case of a fight.

“Wade Venger?” Greta said when she got close enough.

Mr. Venger looked surprised to hear his name from someone he didn't know and countered this with a question of his own.

“I don't know you. How do you know me?” he said with a grizzled voice and a hand on his now-holstered gun.

Mr. Venger was in his late fifties, bald, and had a long beard that seemed to fit his deep voice. Both boys had the same facial structure as he did but with lighter teenage beards and a bit taller. Neither said a word as they waited for her response.

“Well first off, awesome name!” she said, trying to break the ice.

Unfortunately for her, her awkward attempt at a funny greeting fell on still faces as none of them moved a muscle or cracked a smile.

“So Grant Kennel sent me to recruit you to hopefully get out of here,” she said, trying to move on from her failed greeting.

Wade looked at her suspiciously and took his time to answer while both boys looked to him for what to do next.

“I know Grant. I know that's his shotgun. I don't know you. Who are you? Why didn't he come?” he said not threateningly, but still

intimidatingly.

The boys both looked back at her, each just as suspicious as their father. This time though, the young boys showed their more wary and vigilant nature by slowly putting their hands near their weapons. One putting his hand on his gun while the other put his hand on his knife. The sight of this, although she knew it was not in aggression, made Greta both nervous and mindful to not put her hands anywhere near the shotgun.

“My name is Greta LaRuse. I am an independent journalist who got put in here just as you did. Grant saved me and took me back to his house. Grant didn’t come today not because of you but because of the rest of the people I’m going to try to talk to. He was afraid they would see his eyes and not give him a chance to talk. I understand your hesitancy, so I’ll tell you what. You can look at this map that Grant wrote out for yourselves. If you know what his handwriting looks like, you will see it’s his. I’m also going to turn around, take the shotgun off, and put it on the ground. I’ll also put the map and the four-wheelers keys on the ground with it. If you don’t believe me, take it all.” Greta said, skipping over Grant’s talking points for her personal and direct approach.

The Venger family didn’t respond to this and watched as Greta did what she said she would. Putting the gun, keys, and map down while walking away. The boys again looked at their father to see what his decision was. Wade waited a bit then signaled to his sons to stay put while he walked over to her and the map to look it over. He did this for a few moments then looked at her.

“I can’t say I exactly remember what his handwriting looks like, but I believe what you’re saying. Follow us inside. We can talk there.” Wade said before turning around and signaling for his boys to go inside.

Greta gave a sigh of relief, picked up her items, and walked behind Wade, giving him some space for comfort. When the two boys went into the house, Wade stood next to the door and waited for Greta to catch up.

“Go ahead and have a seat with the boys. I’ll get you a glass of water,” he said in a much less intimidating fashion.

Greta did as he asked, sitting next to the two boys at a small kitchen table.

“Do you want me to take the shotgun off?” she asked the boys to

show them trust.

“No mam,” One replied without introducing himself.

Feeling more and more at ease, Greta relaxed a bit until Wade came back into the room with the glass of water. Wade handed it to her and then introduced himself and the boys before having a seat himself.

“You know me apparently. These are my sons, Bobby and Brian,” he said, pointing to each then having a seat.

“I’ll save you some time and awkwardness. I saw on the map it says Wade, Alma, Bobby, Brian and William. My wife Alma and youngest son Billy were both bitten about two years ago. They are no longer with us. Thank you in advance for your sympathies. Now, tell me what you want,” he said, putting his left elbow on the table and resting his head in that hand.

Catching the hint he didn’t want to talk about his family, Greta instead explained who Clark and Thomas were and laid out the plan they had come up with. She then asked if they knew of anyone else not on the map, explained why she needed their help and as Grant had pointed out, what would continue to happen to innocent women and children if she was not able to get enough people.

Wade didn’t ask many questions during her pitch while the boys asked none. Each looked to their father after Greta was done to see what he thought and what he might say. Wade took in a deep breath to the plans then sunk his chin deeper into his hand before saying something.

“I’m willing to give my life up to get my boys out of here. The same goes to save any other life from this horrid fate. You have my promise I will be there and do what I can... but I can not make the call for my boys. They are men now and they should decide for themselves,” he said, looking at them knowing he had never told them before he felt this way.

Both boys looked their proud father in the eyes and then gave Greta their reply.

“Yes mam.” The older brother said, very to the point, replying for both.

Wade nodded his head to this acceptance without saying a word,

then asked Greta what they might need and when this would take place. Greta informed them of what Grant had mentioned and that they planned on doing this in seven days if they were able to recruit enough people. This time frame would give whoever enough time to decide if they weren't sure and enough time to make the walk to Grant's house.

"Okay, sounds good," Wade said of the plan, not picking it apart or adding to it in a controlling way.

"Can I ask one more thing of you guys if that's okay?" Greta asked before going to the next house on the map.

"Sure. Whatever you guys need."

"We found a couple cameras. Grant wants to take photos of everyone outside their houses to show people on the outside later. He wants the photos to support what we say as visual evidence. It really shouldn't be necessary. If the person in front of you is supposed to be dead or in the Refuge, yet they are right there healthy in front of you. But you know they will say anything to keep the truth hidden. So the more things we can say or show, the more difficult it will be for them to continually cover it up. Is that okay?"

"Sure," he said, standing up and fixing his torn shirt a bit.

They all then went outside and posed for their picture. Doing this, both boys loosened up a bit and showed a little more character. Bobby laughed a little as he cracked a big smile and Brian somewhat leaned in front of everyone while giving a friendly wave.

After the picture, Wade pushed away from his goofing sons with one more question.

"If you don't get enough people and it gets called off, are you going to come back to tell us it's off?"

"Yeah, sorry, I forgot that part. Yes. If we don't have enough people, I will come back two days before the planned date to let you know it's called off. If you don't hear back from us on that fifth day, then it's going forward. Sound good?"

"That sounds fine," he replied before offering her some supplies and wishing her good luck.

Greta likewise graciously thanked the family before she walked back to her four-wheeler and drove to the next house. Along the way, Greta felt proud of herself for being able to talk Wade and his boys into the mission. This was an encouraging feeling that gave her hope in what they were trying to do.

The next house she went to was another family of five Grant had on the map. This encounter paralleled that of the Venger's. First being met with caution but eventually being rewarded with help. This same sequence of events played out several times throughout the day, each time building her confidence in what to say and in that they might be able to get out.

Greta stuck to Grant's map until she met up with all the families, rarely having any zombie issues. Greta was even rewarded with a few bonus houses in which the directions were given to her by the families she met.

Chapter 29

Clark made his trip in just over seven hours, half of which probably being because of the limitations of his arm. His foray had been fruitful, being able to secure four of the six families he met. In these four households, a total of five women, three men, and three children joined their call.

Grant felt this was a good start but was not enough on its own. However many people Greta was able to recruit would end up being the deciding factor. If she secured enough volunteers, they would be able to move forward with the plan. If she didn't, they would have to regroup and see if they could come up with a plan that might work with less people.

Waiting on her, everyone sat around on the porch as the sun began to fall. To pass the time, first, each person guessed how many people she might have recruited. After this, they then speculated what might have been said and if she might have been given any new items. As the time passed eventually everyone's chatter slowed as the night slowly started to creep in. The usual nighttime signs of peeping frogs and flashing fireflies signaled to them all her time was almost up.

As the sun went down, Grant asked Clark to take the girls inside while he waited a little longer. Now getting worried something had happened, Grant contemplated what options he had if she didn't soon show up. Grant knew he would be the best to go out at nighttime since he had the least to lose. Yes, he could still die, but both the threat of becoming a zombie or being hurt had long faded away. Only protecting the girls or others ever held him back. Now that the night had arrived, this thought came into action.

This gave Grant two main options, taking a night ride or lighting his distraction fires. Of the two, the distraction fires would worked the least but a nighttime ride posed much more risk. The sound and sight of the four-wheeler would stir up and attract all the zombies within its range causing a problem not just for him but for Clark and the girls as well. Additionally, Clark had just finished his ride which left the tank near dry. The ATV was old and the worry of breaking down at night was much more problematic than it was during the day. Finally, nighttime rides in themselves were much more treacherous. Daytime allowed for distance and clarity, both of which were of short supply even when the moon was

bright.

Although he used them rarely, his distraction fires were set up in several spots about three hundred yards from the house. These already prepared locations of wood were stacks of dried pine that would crackle and pop when lit. With this extra sound and the sight of the flames, it would create a slight distraction that would last until a zombie trampled it out.

The reason Grant used them rarely was because of what happened after the fire went out. With the added attention, more zombies were brought in closer which led to more attacks throughout the night. Grant could minimize this some with his bow and arrows but would need to be vigilant for the entire night.

Thinking this over and seeing he was out of time, he chose his fires over the ride. With this thinking, he decided to burn only the stacks on the opposite side that Greta should be returning from. This he hoped would create a window of sorts that would allow the lowest chance of a zombie encounter.

Grant advised Clark and the girls of his destination then made off for the wood with some matches in tow. However, since he had stacked the firewood and covered them up so long ago, it took a minute for him to remember where exactly the piles were at. Although still hazy in his mind, Grant found the first two with little delay.

Striking match after match with no spark, starting the fire proved to be more of a problem than finding the wood itself. All the matches Grant had were found at different times and at different places. Grant kept them dry whenever he found some but still sometimes ran into problems if they got moist before this.

Feeling his time was up upon hearing some sounds, Grant placed one of his two boxes under the wood with it pulled open. Taking about five out of it, he struck them on his other box until a couple of them lit, then tossed them all in. This worked as all the matches quickly caught ablaze and spread throughout the dry pine.

Staying about thirty feet away, Grant watched the fire grow. He thought about returning to it to take one of the logs for the next fire but was thwarted by the growing sounds of rustling in the woods.

A zombie soon appeared as he knew it would and swiped at the

flames confused by its glow. Seeing his opportunity to extend the fire was lost, he scurried over to his next stack of wood and started it in the same fashion. Frustrated he had to use two entire boxes on two fires, Grant relented and retreated back to the house for the night.

Knowing once the fire was out the zombies would swarm, Grant asked everyone to go upstairs to prepare for the night. He however stayed downstairs next to a window to listen for whenever Greta made it back.

Grant had learned to become a patient man in the Refuge. Patience was something he had only sparingly in his previous life. He had been successful with his work, well paid, and often got what he wanted. Although polite, a good husband, and a good co-worker, waiting for things wasn't his strong suit. However, in the Refuge, he learned differently. Everything in the Refuge took much longer and was more out of his control.

With time now testing his patience, he began to pace wondering if something happened to her. Rethinking both driving out to find her and if he might have put too much on her plate, both these worries plagued his mind until he finally heard a low rumble in the distance.

The rumble started slowly and then faded from time to time. This back and forth was puzzling to Grant which made him question if he was hearing things or if it was her. Placing his head against a boarded window, Grant held his breath in an attempt to hear more.

This time the rumbling sound was constant and got progressively louder. Feeling a little more self-assured, Grant picked up Greta's pistol and went over to the door. Ready himself if she might drive straight up to the porch, Grant considered both waiting inside and out. This decision was soon made for him as he heard Greta rip on by his house.

Passing the house meant only one thing to Grant, she was being chased. Grant knew this from personal experience. Letting the situation dictate his response he opened the door and crouched just inside the door frame. Hearing but not seeing the four-wheeler, Grant wished he could somehow tell Greta to simply lead them by so he could pick them off as she drove.

Greta's four-wheeler had other plans. As Greta swerved and veered her way around the house, her four-wheeler pattered and ran out of gas. This occurred in the woods just to the side of his residence right before she could make another pass.

Figuring something like this had occurred, Grant left his position at the doorway and as stealthily as he could, cut the corner of the house and readied his gun. Seeing Greta on the run, Grant aimed the gun and waited until Greta passed by him. As she did this he noticed two zombies appear from the woods. Both zombies had her in their sights and never noticed the still-standing Grant who now had a clean shot. When he was ready, and before they got too close, Grant called out to them, changing their focus. This call slightly confused the zombies in a way that was similar to a hunter freezing a deer.

Taking advantage of this moment of confusion, Grant sighted the first zombie up and put it down. Unfazed by this, the second zombie continued in its approach, jumping over the first and continued to close the gap.

Grant, not moving an inch, stayed in his stance and re-aimed his gun. Focusing on the right time to shoot, it unpredictably fell to the ground and started to flop around. This action was a sudden change that confused Grant. Nevertheless, he wasted no time and took a few hip shots at the zombie's head before running back to the house, unsure if he had finished him off.

Reaching the door, Greta secured it behind him as Grant took a seat on the floor.

"Thank you Grant!" Greta said as she turned around to check on him.

"No problem. But I used about half your ammo for your gun," he said handing it back to her.

"I think I'm okay with that," she said, while Clark came downstairs to check on everyone.

"Is everyone okay?" he said looking them over and then double-checking the door.

"Yeah, we're good. It got a little touchy there for a sec, but we're fine." Greta said, helping Grant up.

"Yeah I saw. Harriet shot that second one with the bow. You weren't kidding, she's pretty good with that!" Clark said, referencing why the second zombie had flailed around.

Grant, Clark, and Greta all double-checked the rest of the house's windows and doors and then went upstairs to check on the girls.

"Thank you Harriet!" Grant said when he got to the room.

Harriet acknowledged this but didn't take her focus from the window, shooting a couple more times before turning to them.

"Do we have some more arrows? There are a lot of them out there," she said.

"Yeah, let me go grab the ones we made," Clark said, going back downstairs after them.

Grant left the room for a second and went into another upstairs room. Here he looked to see if his distraction fires were still going or not. Only seeing one ablaze, he then looked out each window to get an idea of how many zombies might now be outside.

Seeing three already, he knew this was not a good start to the night. Once his final distraction fire did go out, the rest of the zombies would soon fall upon them. Not knowing how many might be at the fire, Grant braced the group by arming each person and making what ammo he had available.

Clark returned upstairs after finding the two dozen arrows they had made and handed them over to Harriet. Harriet wasted little time in letting them loose with one of them taking a zombie down.

"Good shot," Greta said, seeing the zombie fall.

Feeling she had peppered the two remaining zombies enough, she saved what she had left and went over to Nanny who was scared under the bed.

"It will be okay Nanny. Do you want me to come under with you?"

Nanny shook her head yes and gestured for her to slide under. Harriet did so after putting the bow on the bed and telling Grant she was taking a break. Harriet then comforted Nanny as much as she could, telling her some made-up stories and turning any thud the zombies made into a game.

The night did get worse when the last fire went out. The fire had successfully distracted five zombies. All eventually came down and haphazardly attacked the house and the other injured zombies. Grant took over the bow duties, injuring a few more of them. Clark being hampered with his arm, took up maintenance duty and secured what he could from the inside whenever something started to give way. Greta stood guard with the shotgun whenever an area started to become compromised. She ultimately became the point man for where a problem was and which place needed attention the most. All this back and forth, watch and fix lasted the rest of the night until the sky started to lighten, scaring the zombies away.

Chapter 30

Harriet and Nanny didn't get the best sleep during the night but did get up at about the time they normally would. This was in stark contrast to Grant, Clark, and Greta who only went to bed only a few hours before the girls rose. Wanting to do something nice, the girls decided to prepare a meal for them and went down to the kitchen. Figuring they wouldn't be up for breakfast or lunch, the girls made a snack tray as an anytime meal.

As the hours passed and everyone slept, the girls took up more and more of the day's chores. Fixing issues on the outside of the house, checking some of the closer animal traps, and even refilling several old milk jugs with water. The girls did these tasks and more until upon returning from a trip to the creek, they spotted a large man sitting alone on their porch.

This sight froze the girls where they stood. Thinking quickly, Harriet again decided to take charge by arming herself and slowly backing away. When the girls started this retreat, the large man stood up and waved to them. This unthreatening, unzombie-like action paused the girls and left them not knowing what to do. From his actions, they could tell he was not a zombie, but they also had no history of meeting someone without Grant or Marcus introducing them.

Without the sight of the adults they knew, Harriet felt it came to her to fill the gap. This idea was hard for Harriet alone but compounded by the fact the guy was of herculean size. Harriet deliberated in her mind what to say, which caused for an awkward delay. This pause also allowed for other thoughts to fill her head as in if he had bad intentions or might have hurt someone already. Trying to figure out what was best to say and do, Harriet's choice was made for her when the large man began to walk her way.

"Might you be Harriet?" he said, wanting to show some sign of familiarity.

"And you must be Nanny. I haven't seen you two since you were born," he added as he stopped in his tracks and crouched down.

Both girls' remained still not saying a word, with Harriet even forgetting to lower her gun.

“I’m Orrville but my friends call me Big Orr... or they did once upon a time. I live about ten miles that way. A young man with a broken arm visited me yesterday and asked if I could help you guys. Do you know if that offer is still open?”

Harriet turned to Nanny not quite sure what to say. They did feel some comfort seeing he knew their names and seemed to know Clark but were still stymied in this new social situation.

“It’s okay girls.” Orrville said not pushing them too far.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll move my stuff off your porch and sit over there. You can go inside if you want or stay out here and talk to me. It’s all up to you, you won’t hurt my feelings. Just let Grant know I’m willing to help.” He said as he stood up, got his stuff, and sat near a large rock that was out of their way.

Both girls almost naturally took advantage of this opening and made for the door without thinking. Reaching the porch and going up the stairs, both girls felt some guilt before going inside.

Neither girl said anything to each other but were more frozen in what to do. They both made their way over to a window and looked out at him several times to see if he had moved. With each spying gaze, they always found him somewhere near the rock, lying down, sitting up, or shuffling through his bag.

Thinking the situation might play itself out if someone woke up, Harriet checked on the adults hoping one of them might get up. This not being the case and not wanting to do so, Harriet decided on an odd solution in how to talk to Big Orr.

Going into the living room and retrieving some paper, she decided to write him a letter which she felt more comfortable in doing. Both Harriet and Nanny took up this task discussing what to say and how to say it. They scratched off and wasted about three sheets of paper until they finally decided on what was right. With the letter done, they then had the obstacle of getting it to him. Harriet briefly thought of drawing straws but decided against it and went herself.

Upon opening the door, Harriet noticed that Big Orr had laid back down and was resting one of his arms over his face. Looking asleep, this to Harriet was ideal because she felt she could deliver the note without saying

a word. Harriet then cautiously made her way outside and crept over to him slowing along the way. When she reached what she felt was her best throwing range, she balled up the letter and pitched it his way.

Before it landed she started to scurry away, excited she had pulled it off. However, in her excitement, she soon remembered she had forgotten a pen to give Big Orr. Still in her hand, Harriet flipped the pen over her shoulder while continuing her run towards the house as Nanny held the door.

“You okay?” Nanny asked as she closed the door behind her.

“I’m fine. Let’s see if he’s reading it.” She replied as they both went back to a window to see what he did.

Harriet accidentally hit Orrville in the face with the balled-up letter that bounced away. Orrville himself found this funny and played along with their game, wanting to befriend them and earn their trust. Sitting up to read the letter, Orrville occasionally glanced over to the girls who he could slightly see were watching his every move.

Opening it up and reading the letter, it said “Mr. Big Orr. You seem like a nice guy but we can’t let you in. Grant is asleep but will talk with you when he gets up. If you would like some food or water write yes or no on the back of this letter and we will get some for you. Leave the letter on the porch and we will get it. Yes, our names are Harriet and Nanny. What is your full name and do you have a family? Take care. Harriet and Nanny.”

Orrville found the letter funny but understood their hesitation and caution. Before being in the Refuge, he and his wife had raised two children. Telling them not to talk to strangers was a staple in their house. He himself would have been upset with his children if they had ever done so and expected nothing less from Harriet and Nanny. Thinking he might have found an alternative to their timid wariness he decided to write a little more on the back than just yes or no. So Orrville skimmed the grass for the pen and then wrote back the idea he felt they might find agreeable.

Placing the letter and pen back on the porch, he waved to them as he walked back to his rock. Waiting patiently to see what they might do, they eventually cracked the door only enough to stick out an arm and snagged up the letter.

Harriet thought he looked to be writing more than yes or no and read the letter aloud to Nanny who listened with gripping curiosity.

“Dear Harriet and Nanny. I would very much like anything you have to offer. I would also very much like to speak with you but understand kids should be cautious around people they don’t know. So what I would like to propose is that maybe you could allow me to sit next to one of your windows so we could talk. This way I would still be outside and you two would be safe inside. If this might be okay, simply flag me over to a window of your choosing and I will happily talk about anything you want. Thank you. Big Orr. P.S. Yes I do have a family which we can talk about if you want.”

The girls looked at each other and talked it over. Deciding this sounded fair, they picked a window attached to the porch and waved for him to come over. Orrville was pleased to see this, picked up his bag, and walked on over.

Sitting next to the window he placed his bag beside him and made the first remark.

“Thank you for letting me come over. That sun was kind of hot. So what would you like to know?” he said in as friendly a voice as he could.

The girls opened up to him with this barrier in place. Soon they became giggly and gabby to Big Orr’s jokes and wisecracks while talking about anything their minds could stir up. They questioned him about his family, the animals he had seen, the outside world, and the places he had been. Before long the girls talked to him in the same way they did with Grant. Completely forgetting their shyness even to the point of verbally stumbling over each other, the girls soaked up everything Orrville had to say.

Not being asked to stop, the girls kept asking questions until Grant woke up. When he did wake, Grant could hear the girls talking and at first gave it no thought. This was until he heard a deeper voice laugh and became vocally in the mix.

Hearing this, Grant knew it couldn’t be a zombie but was still uneasy. So Grant picked up the first gun he could see and rushed down the stairs to find out what was going on. Seeing both girls crouched alone by the window was soothing but puzzled his mind in what he heard. Grant’s bewilderment was soon answered when the girls spoke up.

“Grant, Big Orr’s outside. He said there are horses that have two bumps on their back called camels!” Nanny said, finding this amazing.

“And they spit at you too!”

Grant stuttered for a second in what she had said but soon heard Orrville himself semi-correcting Nanny’s remark.

“They kind of look like horses and you can ride them. But they are a totally different animal. Some have two humps and some only have one. That spit that I mentioned was just an easy way to describe what they do. It’s actually yucky cud,” Orrville said, trying to pick his words nicely.

“Did you hear that Grant? They throw up on you!” Nanny countered, having an idea of what cud is.

Grant gave the girls a disgusted look then looked outside himself to make sure it was Orrville.

“Hello Grant,” Orrville said, seeing his grey eyes look down at him.

“What are you doing here Orrville?” Grant asked, puzzled to see him.

“Your friend Clark asked if I could help you guys and I declined. However, I thought about it some more and changed my mind.”

“Okay, well great. You were someone I was really hoping to have... but we still have six days and we don’t have an official count yet. Don’t get me wrong, you can stay if you want, I just can’t say yet if it’s going to happen or not.”

Grant then looked to the girls and asked if they could welcome Orrville with some food. With the girls racing away, Grant opened the door and greeted his old friend who looked taller than he remembered.

“Looks like you never stopped growing,” Grant said looking up at him.

Orrville laughed to this, then made an observational remark of his own.

“Well you know, just because you can’t feel anything doesn’t mean you need to test it out,” Orrville said, referring to the fresh injuries Grant had sustained because of the bomb.

Both girls then popped around the corner with a plate full of greens, happy to hand them over to Orrville whom they now considered their semi-new best friend.

“Here you go. Carrots, green beans, and broccoli!” they said with excitement.

This fetching of the food was much quicker than Grant expected until he found out how late it was and that they had readied the food hours ago.

“Thank you, girls, that was very nice of you. Could you give us a little bit of time to talk?” Grant asked, causing them to be a little disappointed.

“Girls, I’ll tell you what. I have a game for you when Grant and I are done talking. If you’re good, I’ll even be it!” Orrville said, bending over trying to take some of their letdown away.

“Okay!” They both happily said while smiling and running away.

Speaking to Clark yesterday, Grant knew Orrville had been one of the two whom had declined but didn’t know why. He was also suspicious when he noticed Orrville’s wife Finlee was not present. This was uncharacteristic of the two and sent up a red flag to Grant who knew not to ask. This question though was soon answered by Orrville himself once the girls had run off.

“You know I always like to help. I felt bad turning Clark down but I didn’t want to leave Finlee. I lost her about a year ago now. She got attacked during the daytime. I went out hunting and never got to say goodbye to her. She had already passed by the time I got home.” Orrville said, explaining to Grant why Finlee was not with him.

“She was in too bad of shape to even turn into a zombie. I buried her next to a tree swing I made for her. I turned you guys down because I didn’t want to leave her. I didn’t want her to be alone in here. But I know she would want me to help, to see our kids and even maybe our grandkids now. So if you will have me, I’ll help out in whatever way I can.”

“Well Orrville, I’m sorry to hear about Finlee. I honestly figured something wasn’t good when I didn’t see her but I wasn’t going to say anything. I’m very sorry,” Grant said, knowing how much Finlee meant to Orrville.

Grant then changed the conversation towards what they had, what they had done, and about how many people they currently were working with. Orrville chimed in with bits and pieces of information he felt might be useful and also provided some ammo to which he had no gun. Orrville also managed to pry a little information from Grant about his condition which Grant made him promise to keep secret.

The two of them sat for a while talking about the wall and plans, quizzing each other to see if they had any obvious weak spots. They did this for a while giving each other what-ifs until Greta woke up and came downstairs.

“Good afternoon,” Grant said to a still drowsy Greta.

“This is Orrville. He will be staying with us for the next few days and helping us out.”

“Boy I’m glad you’re with us,” she said in a relieved jokingly way.

“I’m glad to meet you although you might reconsider once you find out the comfy floors are our beds.”

“Well I didn’t come to be comfortable that’s for sure,” Orrville replied with a smile.

“You woke up at a good time Greta. We were just talking about some ideas and were curious about how many people you got?” Grant said so he could plan a little better with a more exact number.

“All of them,” Greta replied quickly.

“All of them?” Grant said, double-checking.

“Yep. All of them. And that actually might not be it. Some of the further families said they knew other people who weren’t on your map. They said they would ask them too. So we will have a pretty good showing here in a few days.”

“Okay then, I guess we’re in business,” Grant said, feeling more confident.

The three of them and eventually Clark, all talked about their plans throughout the day. Thinking who would do what. Who should be the ones

to defend which side. Who should watch over the children. How many children would be there. What type of weapons they had and any other tricks they could think of.

A man of his word, Orrville excused himself from the conversation and fulfilled his promise to the girls. Being it as he promised, the new game he introduced to the girls was Sly Fox. This he advised was similar to Red Light, Green light which they also knew nothing about. Before long both games became so popular that they rounded up all the adults to see who was the slyest of them all.

Chapter 31

By the sixth day, they had acquired two more families and were officially out of rooms. Both families had kids which made this time extra special for Harriet and Nanny. Neither girl ever really had any friends and likewise almost never played with others in a group. This changed fast and put them both on center stage. It was their house, their toys, and their yard. This made them the official child hosts which included questions, directions, and most of all, attention. Being in this spotlight gave both of them so many things to do that they often forgot to eat and could hardly sleep.

Grant enjoyed seeing the girls' endless smiles and joyous squeaks. This scene was something he always wanted for them. Something every child should have. Sleepovers, ice cream sandwiches, birthday cakes, all the things a child remembers the most of their youth.

These thoughts though made him sad. Although he regrettably never said it, he loved the girls and always wanted things like this for them. He wanted long piano recitals. He wanted traveling soccer teams. He even dreamed of giving them away on their wedding days. But he knew some things couldn't be and that the best he could do was to give them a chance.

Grant silently went into the house and took a moment for himself. Greta noticed this and eventually excused herself to see if he was alright. When Greta went inside, she saw Grant in a corner apparently writing something down. Greta couldn't quite see what all he was doing since he was positioned away from her. Greta didn't initially say anything but rather stayed quiet to see what he might do. During this Grant seemed to pen some things for about three minutes then flipped the page and started again.

Greta let this go on for a while until Grant heard someone else coming in. Hearing this, he pushed the paper into the same spot he had done before and then pretended to look out a window. Greta, wanting to help, spoke up and asked him if he was okay.

"Oh yeah, I'm good. It's just pretty bright outside and I forgot my sunglasses," he said, not turning around to talk to her.

"Are you sure you are okay Grant? If you need to talk about something it's okay," Greta said, again trying to extend to him some

support.

“No, I’m okay. I’m just writing down some ideas for tomorrow just in case I forget them,” he said, not knowing how long she had been watching.

“Okay, well I’ll be outside.”

Grant found his other pair of shades before coming outside to give credence to what he had said. Greta however knew something else was on his mind and had a good idea of what it probably was. Having this idea, she still didn’t push Grant into talking and let him do his own thing.

Greta acted as the greeter as more people poured in. The sight of all these people was encouraging but also turned into a problem. Lodging wasn’t something they had thought out. This was fine for now but would soon be an issue when the night crept in and the zombies came out.

For this, Greta utilized a nearby house that unfortunately was in extreme disrepair. Because of its condition, Grant had passed on it years ago although it was still sound and solid. Being solid was all Greta wanted so she asked for some help cleaning it before more people showed up.

Orrville, now covered in kids who liked his games, was the first to volunteer. This gave him a break from hair pulls, shin kicks, and random slimy sneezes.

“Thank you Orrville,” Greta said, watching him shed layers of kids off his back.

“Oh no problem,” he replied, removing a kid from his head.

“Just doing my part.”

Several more people joined in while others stayed to watch over the kids. A more than necessary thing considering all the noise they were making. Greta thanked everyone before they pitched in and started herself by removing the animal gifts.

Cleaning the house went fast and thankfully so as more families showed up leaving more need for more rooms. Moving out old boxes and setting them aside, she noticed one box which had something inside. This item stood out because it wasn’t dusty or junk, but wrapped in a plastic bag seemingly to keep safe.

Greta took it aside and unraveled the box to find several notes and old toys inside. Greta looked each over and laid everything out, reading the notes to see what they were about.

“Dear Harriet and Baby Nanny. I’m sure when Grant and Marcus feel you are old enough to read this, you won’t remember us but will still have questions. So in this letter, I’ll try to be brief but explain to you some things I think might fill in the gaps. First, I am your father, Steven Heartwell. Your mother’s name is Sophia. We both love you dearly and waited for the two of you for so long. We are sorry that the two of you are in this place and hope that one day things can be different for you in your lives.” Greta flipped the note over and then continued.

“Grant and Marcus both said they would raise you as one of their own which your mother and I believe when we see how they cherish you both. They have also shown they want freedom for you as much as your mother and I, by trying every which way they can to get you two out. Your mother and I know they want this for everyone else, but think they wouldn’t push themselves so hard if it wasn’t for the both of you. This is comforting to us as we know we do not have long and that you will be in as loving hands as our own.”

This letter went on to talk about the girls’ family past, how Harriet picked Nanny’s name, what their hopes were for them, and how much they loved them. Besides this and another note written by their mother, the box also contained a separate envelope with the notes Thomas had written for his family, a couple small stuffed toys, two small little teeth, and a couple lots of hair.

Each physical item had been labeled with the name Harriet or Nanny. Seeing that the box must have been stashed away for the girls, she tried to quickly find a safe place for it so that it wouldn’t get disturbed. As she looked around and thought of where to go, her earlier role was now reversed as Grant spoke up.

“I didn’t plan on having to use this place as a hotel,” Grant said, startling her a bit.

“I thought I hid those things for the girls pretty well. I was going to bring this box up to you tomorrow, regardless of what happens. If we get out, I want the girls to have it and for the letters, Thomas wrote to go to his family. If not, can you make sure when the girls get old enough they get it? I’m sure you saw it has some of their childhood firsts and a couple letters

from their parents. You actually caught me adding to their stash,” he said, handing over the letters Greta had caught him writing.

“They just say how we feel and what we hope for them. Marcus didn’t write them a letter so I added some of what we talked about for him. I wish I had more to give them but a letter and these things were all I could think of. Can you make sure they get them?” he asked very humbly.

“Of course Grant,” she said before he silently smiled and walked away.

Greta put the letters he wrote into the box and made a note to herself to bring it with her the next day. This unexpected find and insider revelation as to partially why Grant and Marcus had tried so hard to get out was touching to see. She knew this wasn’t their only reason but this added sliver was very moving to see.

Greta and her crew finished clearing up the house just in time for another stream of incoming aid. Situating everyone and finding them a place for the night, Greta took up the task of sorting through the guns and ammo to best arm as many as they could.

Doing this she was a little saddened to find out that Grant probably had the most guns of anyone in the Refuge. Some families had only one or none at all. A few others might have had two but no ammo to shoot. This was discouraging for her to find out because she could now tell that less than half the people would have a loaded firearm during the attack. The others would at best have a bow, but rather mostly makeshift weapons or axes that the clearers had left behind.

Before dark, Greta also took up the task of finding out who might be best at what. They all agreed for this effort, whoever was the best at handling a gun should get one of the few they had. Greta also scouted for who she thought might be the best at swinging a sledgehammer. Her first obvious choice was Orrville, who agreed to take the heaviest one they had.

She finally picked out those who she felt might not be the best in fighting but looked fast, might be good to watch over the children, or could fill another task they had in mind. For the speedy tasks, one young adult boy volunteered. Greta felt they needed someone quick to be a runner with the second bomb and any other possible task that might need to be done quickly. To double up on this, they all felt two boys should take up this task just in case something happened to the other. Both boys were advised of the risks and that they probably wouldn’t be armed. However, both boys

were given priority with football and hockey gear as a form of armor. The first boy to volunteer was also given a bulletproof vest that was found overlooked at a house.

Clark was selected to be a guide since he was the only one to have been inside the halfway ward. Being a Deputy before the Refuge became secretive, he occasionally would get called to deal with a family member who caused a problem while visiting a loved one. This somewhat confidential information was important so they didn't waste time going in different directions that didn't lead them out.

Greta came up with the idea of being an enlister. She felt that once they had a hole in the ward, it would be her duty to try and advise everyone inside the ward what they were doing. The more she could quickly turn them to their side, the more they could increase their chances of escaping.

Finally, Grant was given the task of leading the charge after a big enough hole was made. As he put it, he could more or less be a human shield to help against zombie attacks or an initial volley of fire. He could also storm any group of individuals that happened to be dug in, in a way that nobody else could.

Before the night came around, one final family showed up on the front porch. Knocking on the door, Greta answered it, still plotting out different scenarios in her mind. Opening the door she was delighted to see Ben, Mary, Mitch, and Gabby. Each was holding a sack with their personal belongings along with an additional one for the goal.

“Oh I'm so glad to see you!” Greta said, giving each a hug.

“Come, come on in before it gets dark.”

Greta escorted them in and around Grant's house trying to stay quiet as most of the families were just lying down. Greta eventually led them up the stairs and to the main room. Opening the door, Greta ushered them in and quickly closed the door to keep things as quiet as possible.

“I'm sorry there's not too much room, but here. You can put your stuff here,” Greta said, pushing some things aside.

“Oh I'm so glad you guys came!” she said again while squeezing the kids.

Greta then got over her excitement long enough to give them some

general information. She moved on from this to chit-chat a little before Grant came upstairs to rest himself.

“Oh hey!” Grant said, not knowing they were there.

“Wow... you guys got big,” he then said to Mitch and Gabby.

The kids didn’t remember Grant and got frightened when they saw his eyes. Backing behind their mom and dad, Ben reassured them Grant was fine and meant them no harm.

“See, he means no harm. Not all people that get bit change right away. Grant is a good guy!” Ben told his kids, trying to still their nerves.

“It’s okay. It’s good to be safe,” Grant said of the issue.

“So you kind of caught me at an awkward time. I really want to talk but we are all resting up for the big day tomorrow.”

“No, I figured as much. We will get to sleep too. But first, take this,” Ben said of his extra bag.

Grant graciously took the bag and looked inside. The bag wasn’t especially big and mostly had stuff that wasn’t too important. Some books of matches, some rubbing alcohol, and a few other medical items. All stuff in daily life was useful but not so much for tomorrow’s event. Still, one thing did stick out. A large bottle of ammonia was packed in with the other items.

“Clark mentioned you were using ammonia in your bombs. When I was looking around, I found this in a barn. I don’t know if it’s too late to help but I figured I’d at least bring it,” Ben said of the item.

“No, wow. Yeah, this is good. I was getting up early anyways tomorrow. This will give us a little extra kick. So yeah, thank you.”

Chapter 32

Grant slept for only about three hours on the night. He layed down next to the girls and looked them over with adoring affection. His mind went in both directions thinking about the girls. How they looked and what they were like when they were younger, and the same idea for both their futures.

Grant often had to hold back a laugh or two thinking about funny things they had said or done. Nanny especially, being the youngest and having a little more spunk to her when it was just them. These restrained laughs were countered by restrained tears. With his back-and-forth thoughts, he knew he would miss more than he got to see. Wishing his course could lead them down a different path, he gave both of them a kiss and began his day.

Grant was by far the first one up and this was for the better. He wanted to make more explosives and didn't want anyone else around. Grant took up the ammonia Ben had brought and headed for the spot he had made it before.

Grant took notice of the day and the morning birds' songs. This was something he hadn't done in a long time and was happy to see and hear one more time. Once at his site, he did as he had before, carefully mixing this and that and testing small bits of it to see if it would react.

Scaring the birds away, Grant started turning his mind towards the day's task. He tried to map out in his head what order things needed to be and what to do if something went wrong. He thought about this a lot while making his mixture, trying to cover as many variables as he could.

When he was sufficiently happy with his new batch, he walked back to the house to find almost everyone up. The parties were letting their kids play in the yard while listening to Greta who was standing on a log. When Grant got close enough, Greta spotted him and turned her pep-plan talk over to him.

"Hello everyone. Thank you all for coming," he said, taking Greta's place on the log.

"Forgive me if this isn't the most motivational speech you have ever

heard or if it's just a bad speech in general. It's been a long time since I've talked to so many and I was never really good at it anyways," he said a little uncomfortably.

"But regardless of maybe my poor delivery or bad choice of words, please keep in mind this matter we are all about to partake in is the single most important thing any of us will ever do. If we pull it off, and this won't just be getting out either. But if we pull it off, we will not only be setting ourselves, our children and grandchildren free, but a nameless number of other innocent people who don't deserve this fate," Grant said with passion.

"I want to thank all of you personally for showing up today. And all the people who you will be setting free today, even though they don't know it, thank you as well. Just one person can not overcome the darkness that has deceived, misled, and bribed so many. But we have a chance to be the light to that darkness. To be the truth to that deception and to be justice to the corrupt," Grant said, while pausing a little bit, remembering what his dad liked to tell him.

"My dad always liked to quote a verse from the Bible when it came to doing what's right. He said 'The wicked flee when no man pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.' If we do this right, we will show this to everyone. They will blame, they will make up lies to cover up what they have done and sooner or later they will run. But we need to remember we are the lion, both now and with our truth later. They won't give in just because we get out. We need to remember why we are here today and see this to its conclusion. When one of us moves forward, we all need to move forward. Support each other. Carry each other through if necessary. Our power lies in us when we are united. If we stray, we will fail."

The crowd of roughly forty adults cheered to this, understanding his call for unity. Grant then held up his hands and moved from his pep talk to the plan. In it, he described the different tasks certain individuals would perform and who would do what in the event someone might fall. He advised they would be attacking just after noon in the hope the guards would be distracted with lunch and because the daylight was at its brightest leaving less chance of a two-fronted battle with the zombies. Grant went on about other plans including the importance of taking pictures and making sure the cameras got out safely. He then finished it up with a sincere thanks, followed by a prayer led by Orrville, whose father had been a minister.

After this speech and some constructive suggestions, everyone took

some time to be with their families and rest. Grant went over the new suggestions and the plan they had with a fine toothcomb. He did this repeatedly until he felt he had it as good as he could get it. Already having all the barricades and zombie traps in place, the only thing they needed to carry was their weaponry, some other tools, and Grant's explosive mixtures.

Following this brief downtime, Grant announced the time had come in which they all gathered up their items and started their long walk to the wall. Along the way, Grant continued to talk to people about the plan and what to do. One thing that got slightly shifted was to let everyone who had a sledgehammer try to make a small hole in the wall prior to the bomb being placed. This it was felt, would help their chance by creating a weak spot the blast could hopefully exploit.

The group made the long trip in fairly good time while only having to fend off one zombie. Prior to getting to the wall, Grant asked for silence from everyone and for all but the sledgehammer men to stay well behind the tree line. Grant knew from all his other times at the wall that several cameras were mounted pointing every which way. The sight of forty-plus armed people showing up would surely sound an alarm and lessen their chances.

With this in place, he signaled to his rear guard to ready themselves against both zombie attacks and in protecting the children. Grant then had the men who were assigned the sledgehammers stand by while the men who were to help him carry his big bomb prepared themselves. Before he gave the sledgehammer men the signal, he made sure the young man who took up the assignment of carrying the second bomb knew he needed to set his bomb inside as soon as a hole was made. With his acknowledgment, Grant signaled to Orrville to start the attack.

Orrville and four other men hurried across roughly thirty yards of open area to a point next to the zombie release door. When they got there, three men went to one side while Orrville and another man went to the other. Looking up at each other and then over to Grant, Orrville made the first blow which was followed by more until he got tired. Once tired he ran back to an area of the woods which provided him cover and waited while the other men took their turns.

Grant watched this rotation while also looking at the cameras to see if they had trained on them yet. Still seeing them pivoting in their normal course, he watched as the last man took up his hammer and started to swing. This last sledgehammer man was the signal to him and his bomb

carriers to make their way out.

Grant carried part of the bomb while three other men assisted. A fourth man carried a few crates to bring the bomb level with the hole the sledgehammers made. With their presence next to the wall, the last sledgehammer man ran away while Grant and his team set up the device.

No longer needing his helpers' assistance, Grant had the rest of the men leave as he made his final adjustments. Then surprising Grant, an alarm sounded which startled him and caused him to jump away from the bomb. Seeing it wasn't the bomb going off, he continued with his setup while glancing up at the cameras which were now pointing at him. With the feeling of haste, Grant finished his setup and lit his fuse.

"Twenty seconds!" he yelled as his makeshift gas can detonator burned its way to a stack of wrapped-up butane cans.

Just as Grant got to the woods, the door that Greta and all the rest of them had been released from opened up. Several guards came running out, half with fire extinguishers and the rest with guns. The men with the extinguishers ran to the bomb as the men with the guns rushed to where the sledgehammer men had run off to.

Greta called out to those with a gun to focus on the men with the extinguishers before they had a chance to put out the bomb. Everyone with a gun that wasn't with the children opened up and struck all these men, who mostly just fell but were not all put-down.

"Duck!" Grant then yelled with his count at three.

"KABOOOM!" A large blast rang out knocking over or killing the guards while also being so loud as to set off car alarms in their parking lot.

The sound was deafening and stunned even Grant, who was covered in rubble because of the blast. Shaking this haze off as fast as he could, he ordered their charge while leading the second bomber towards the hole.

The bomb Grant had made ripped upwards making more of a vertical slit than the circular hole he desired. The hole though was still big enough and was made more so by Orrville who had orientated himself faster than anyone else. Orrville reached the explosion site first and hammered away at the looser blocks until he had opened up a garage door-sized hole for the assault.

The rest of the hammer men attacked the guards and picked up their guns as an added bonus. This though was countered by more armed guards, who appeared from the cell and sent shots into the fight.

Grant and the young man tasked with carrying the second bomb could not worry about this as they ran through the hole. Passing several dazed men of different zombie states, they made their way towards the far wall which Clark had said would lead them into the main hall.

This free pass was soon reversed as several half-men and zombies attacked them just as they got in place. Greta then reached the hole and called out for anyone's help.

"Help us!" she yelled to everyone in the ward.

"We are trying to free you. Innocent people are inside the Refuge. Fight with us. Help us!" She said over and over.

This caught the attention of some of the individuals less affected by the virus, who noticed the people coming inside did not have the zombie traits. Seeing this was so, several of the men and women who could still understand, fought with Greta who told them to pull all the zombies outside and to get away from the second bomb.

Still fighting off some zombies, Grant lost the young man who volunteered while some within the ward disregarded their own safety and helped Grant long enough to set the bomb. Wasting no time to light the fuse, Grant did so just as a few of the half-zombies grabbed him and dragged him away.

"Boooom!" The second bomb went off, not as large as the first, but doing its job.

Clark, wielding Grant's sword, led the charge from here, leading the group that had waited outside through both holes and into the hall. This was done as quickly as possible before even the smoke had faded but just after the fire sprinklers had turned on.

Choking on the smoky air, Clark directed the group to the control room which had just locked the door.

"Hammer!" Clark yelled as Orrville appeared and struck the door down.

The control room gave up no fight as most had already left to attack via the holding cell. Those who were inside were taken as hostages and questioned as to which was the easiest way out.

Besides the zombies now running free in the ward, the resistance Clark encountered was light. This was so until they came upon the hall that led to the cell the guards had run out of.

For the guards who had run out of the cell, the surviving few had been pushed back in. Locking themselves out of the Refuge, they turned around and unknowingly ran back into Clark's group, creating a standoff between the two.

At first, the guards pinned them down, having much stronger firepower for the narrow hall. Knowing time was not on their side, Clark came up with a plan to stop this stalemate. Grabbing the few guards they had taken hostage, he announced to the others he would be coming out.

"I'm coming out. Don't shoot," he said, without them knowing he had the guards in front of him.

Clark and a few others hunkered down behind the guards and forced them into sight of their fellow workers.

"Say your name." Clark yelled to one of the hostages as their fellow guards lowered their guns.

"Mark Wellings," he said in a frightened voice.

"Do you have children?" Clark asked for him to say aloud.

"I have a little girl."

"How old is she?"

"She is five."

Clark did this same thing with the other hostages before calling out to the rest of the guards to explain the situation. Clark pointed out that these individuals, their friends, would be led first down the hall and also bluffed that they had another bomb. Clark went on to explain that if they knew nothing about what was going on, they would not be held accountable. Then for those who did, if they let them go now, they would be given leniency in the future.

This call by Clark went unanswered. Feeling the pressure of time elapsing, Clark began to force the guards' hand by pushing the hostages forward, although he personally did not plan on hurting them.

"We are going to be on you in a second. Now is your chance to do the right thing." Clark shouted to them.

Clark's men situated their weapons and passed around ammo in case they declined.

"Alright," they finally heard as they got about fifteen feet away.

"We give up."

"Slide your guns over this way and we will let your fellow guardsmen go," Clark said, peaking from behind the hostages to see if they would do so.

Each guard did and gently pushed their guns down the hallway towards the hostage's feet. Clark looked at the guards he could see and told them to raise their hands. Not seeing any of them holding a weapon, he did as he promised and let his men go.

On guard but more relaxed, Clark and the men around him approached the rest of the guards, ready to shoot. Not seeing any aggressive movements, they gave the guardsmen more respect than they imagined they would get. Clark explained the situation to them not knowing who was good and who was bad. Who knew what was soon revealed as some guards became disgusted while others remained still.

Now having control of the Refuge, Clark ordered for certain areas to be locked as to help against any true zombies from getting out. However, before sealing the Refuge, he had a runner go tell the group which was guarding the children the coast was clear.

Sending some men and women to guard the children against random zombie attacks, Clark had one group of individuals look for the Refuge security camera footage while another group cut the Refuge phone lines just in case. This was done in tandem with finding the two individuals tasked with taking pictures so they could document this part of the plan.

As the kids started to come in, Ben took over and led the kids out as Clark questioned a couple of the guards he felt knew more. While doing

this, Orrville hurried over to Clark and told him he needed to go back to Greta and the girls.

Worried something happened to one of them, he and Orrville ran back through the halls and met up with them on the other side of the ward. Here, near the second hole, Grant layed on the ground unable to walk.

Seeing Clark and Orrville, Grant tried to maintain his humor by telling a joke.

“I think I felt that one,” he said of the second blast.

Grant then laughed, which eventually turned into a cough.

“Clark come here,” he said while catching his breath.

Clark knelt next to the girls who were crying by his side as Grant motioned for him to come closer.

“I want you to watch over my girls,” he said as he grabbed Clark’s good hand.

“I trust you, Clark. I know you’re young but that’s partially why I picked you. They need someone to grow with and I know they love you. Please do this for me, Clark.”

Clark agreed without hesitation then backed away as Grant wanted to talk to his girls.

“Girls, I can’t go with you,” he said.

“No!” Both girls tearfully cried as they clung to him.

“I’m sorry girls. I think my back is broken and even if it wasn’t, I know I’m about to turn into a zombie. I’ve been feeling it the last few days. I can’t go,” he said, tearing up.

Both girls cried almost inconsolably before Grant calmed them down and talked to them some more.

“Girls. I’m always with you and this opportunity is what I, Marcus, and your parents wanted for you,” he said while motioning to Greta.

“Do you have the box?”

Greta had grabbed it when the fight started to wind down and handed it over to Grant with his appreciation.

“Here you go girls, one last present from your parents and I. Keep it and look through it later, we don’t have much time.”

Harriet took up the box as Nanny still clung to him not wanting to leave.

“Be brave girls,” he said as he gave both of them one last kiss.

“I love you both more than you possibly can know. You are my girls and you have made my life so happy.”

With that, Nanny tearfully released her grip and slowly walked with Harriet over to Clark and Greta. Heartbroken himself, Grant painfully looked away. Orrville however did not move and stood firm with his sledgehammer in hand.

“You remember our secret Orrville?” Grant asked.

Orrville nodded his head with tears in his eyes. Drawing back his hammer, Orrville felt two quick brushes pass by his side while seeing the girls hunker down next to Grant for one more hug.

“We love you Daddy!”