**What Befalls the Children**

**Book 4 in the Troop of Shadows Chronicles**

By Nicki Huntsman Smith

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**Credits**

Credit to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for the poem “A Shadow”.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the following:

Lori, my editor, proofreader, and grammar consultant extraordinaire. Her contributions elevated this book to a level I wouldn’t have achieved otherwise. She is not allowed to die before me.

My beta readers, Al and Lisa, who provided advice, suggestions, and top-notch cheerleading.

Lastly and most importantly, my husband Ray, whose encouragement and support makes my books possible. I owe him everything.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#_Toc48567846)

[*Fergus*](#_Toc48567847)

[Chapter 2 -- Ray](#_Toc48567848)

[Chapter 3 -- Willadean](#_Toc48567849)

[Chapter 4 — Fergus](#_Toc48567850)

[Chapter 5 — Ray](#_Toc48567851)

[Chapter 6 — Willadean](#_Toc48567852)

[Chapter 7 — Fergus](#_Toc48567853)

[Chapter 8 — Ray](#_Toc48567854)

[Chapter 9 — Willadean](#_Toc48567855)

[Chapter 10 — Fergus](#_Toc48567856)

[Chapter 11 — Ray](#_Toc48567857)

[Chapter 12 — Willadean](#_Toc48567858)

[Chapter 13 — Harlan](#_Toc48567859)

[Chapter 14 — Fergus](#_Toc48567860)

[Chapter 15 — Ray](#_Toc48567861)

[Chapter 16 — Willadean](#_Toc48567862)

[Chapter 17 — Harlan](#_Toc48567863)

[Chapter 18 — Ray](#_Toc48567864)

[Chapter 19 — Fergus](#_Toc48567865)

[Chapter 20 — Ray](#_Toc48567866)

[Chapter 21 — Fergus](#_Toc48567867)

[Chapter 22 — Willadean](#_Toc48567868)

[Chapter 23 — Fergus](#_Toc48567869)

[Chapter 24 — Willadean](#_Toc48567870)

[Chapter 25 — Fergus](#_Toc48567871)

[Epilogue](#_Toc48567872)

[Those Who Come the Last](#_Toc48567873)

Chapter 1

***Fergus***

“Are you interested in the Snickers bar or not? I don’t have all day, sir.”

The old coot stood twenty yards away wielding an antediluvian shotgun, but Fergus knew he had nothing to fear for two reasons.

First, this was Appalachia. Over the last few days, Fergus had been ambling through a picturesque valley nestled within the magnificent Smoky Mountains near the eastern border of Tennessee. Contrary to the pervasive misconception, folks in Appalachia didn’t smoke corncob pipes on rickety porches waiting to shoot uninvited guests. They were friendly, unless you stole their hog or impregnated their daughters without first scribbling your X on a marriage certificate.

Second, his *scythen* told him the man didn’t possess an ounce of hostility at the moment. Maybe that was because of Fergus’s red hair.

In the mid-18th century, a prodigious wave of Scots-Irish immigrated to the area. DNA tests on the rural population there would likely show a disproportionately high percentage of Gaelic ancestry. The old coot could be his distant cousin. Considering Fergus’s true age, the connection would be tenuous, but still, the Scots-Irish took their familial blood ties seriously. Maybe on some enigmatic psychic level, the man recognized kinfolk.

“I reckon I’m interested. What do you want for it?” He whipped off a stained Titans ball cap, revealing a few dozen tenacious silver hairs. A threadbare shirt sleeve mopped the sweating, freckled skin between the hairs.

“Only conversation. And perhaps some information, if you’re so inclined.”

“You talk fancy. Whereabouts you from, mister?”

“Originally from Ireland, but that was a long time ago. Most recently I hailed from Jupiter, Florida. It’s a delightful burg on the Atlantic coast, where the native women are even more titillating than the turquoise waters and golden beaches. Ever heard of it?” The Ireland statement was necessarily vague. Fergus hadn’t visited the Mother Country in several hundred years.

“Nope. Purdy, is it?”

“It is indeed.”

“Ain’t never seen the ocean ‘cept in books. Ain’t never traveled beyond this here holler.”

It was a test. Fergus knew it instantly. His response would determine whether he would earn accurate answers to his questions and, more importantly, whether he would be welcomed into the very clan he had come to study. They were nearby. He could sense them.

“That’s understandable. Why travel beyond the perimeters of heaven?” He donned his most charming grin as he gestured to the surrounding mountains. The gently sloping peaks hinted at autumnal splendor yet to come.

The old coot cackled, sputtered, hawked up a loogy, spat it on the ground, and then cackled some more.

“You got that right. Where ya heading, mister? What’s your name?”

“Fergus. No need for last names under these end-of-the-world circumstances, yes?”

“As long as there ain’t two Ferguses ‘round here, we’ll be fine. My name’s Euel Whitaker, but folks just call me Skeeter. What information do you want? Do I get the candy before or after I answer your questions?”

“Now, of course. It’s well past the expiration date, but what isn’t these days?” He extended the chocolate bar to the old man, who lowered his shotgun and walked toward him.

“That wouldn’t bother me none, but it ain’t for me. It’s for my grandkids.” Skeeter swiped the candy with deft fingers, then squirreled it away in a voluminous pocket within faded, patched overalls.

In the clothing department, Skeeter lived up to societal notions of hillbilly couture. But as a pocket man himself, Fergus saw the practical appeal of all those sartorial hidey-holes. He wondered where he could find a pair.

“Grandkids? I’m envious. I’ve never fathered any children...that I know of,” Fergus added with a wink.

Skeeter cackled again, then lapsed into silence. The faded blue eyes appraised him.

Fergus waited patiently.

“I can tell you ain’t no pervert or murderer or rapist. Don’t ask me how, ‘cuz that ain’t nothin’ I can explain. So what are these questions?”

“I’ll be blunt. I’m lonely, Skeeter. I’m weary of being on the road, dodging gangs of thugs and killers who would slaughter me for my remaining Snickers bars. I want to belong to a community again, where I can contribute in a meaningful way. I’ve heard rumors of a group living happily and peacefully in this splendid place. I knew I had to try to find it. My esoteric skill set would be a boon to everyone, and my firearms prowess is second to none. Can we help each other?”

The faded blue eyes narrowed. “I have two questions for you. Where did you hear that rumor and why did you leave Florida? Careful, son. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

Suddenly the hillbilly dialect had vanished, along with the friendly tone. The shotgun pointed toward him again.

Fergus took a deep breath. He would have to lie, and he would need to block his *scythen’s* output while doing so. Skeeter must possess a smidgen of the telepathic ability if he were able to discern a stranger’s true nature in a two-minute conversation.

“The second question first. I left Florida because of a woman. She was in love with me, and though I harbored fond feelings for her, I’m not the kind of man who settles down with one female. It was in both our interests for me to leave.”

“Hmmm. What was her name?”

“Amelia,” he said promptly. At least his paramour’s name wasn’t a lie. That should help.

“Why come here?”

“Alligators. Mosquitoes. Humidity. Like the Snickers bar, I was past my expiration date in regard to Florida. I was ready for new scenery. On the road, I met a fellow who mentioned the existence of some good folks holed up near Pigeon Forge. I was immediately taken with the notion of log cabins, crackling fires, women in form-fitting gingham dresses serving me mugs of moonshine...”

That evoked a snorting chuckle. The shotgun muzzle lowered infinitesimally. Fergus knew at that moment that he and Skeeter were going to be friends.

“What was the man’s name?”

“The one on the road? His name was Tung. An Asian fellow. Decent chap, but nobody I could star alongside in a buddy film. Too straight-laced.”

A forward dip of the ball cap. More squinting of the faded blue eyes as they scrutinized him from the top of his spiky red hair to the soles of his dusty Doc Martins.

“I reckon I’ll take you there, but it ain’t up to me if’n you’ll be invited to stay.”

Interesting. The dialect was back. There was more to Skeeter than a balding old hillbilly in overalls.

“Understood. Much obliged, sir.”

“Mountain folk have particular ways of dealing with troublemakers. Ways that started long before Chicksy happened. You best mind yerself.”

It was Fergus’s turn to snort. *Chicksy* was easier to pronounce than *Chicxulub.* He would begin using it himself.

“Thanks for the warning. I promise to be the perfect gentleman. Lead on, dear fellow. By the way, where might I obtain a pair of those exquisite overalls? I’d be happy to trade more Snickers...”

\*\*\*

An hour later, the old man informed him they were approaching Whitaker Holler. It was just up yander. Not yonder. And it wasn’t a valley, but a holler, the regional term for a low-lying area nestled between mountain ranges. Family clans claimed these individual hollers as their own, and had for generations. It was the Mountain People way. Fergus anticipated he would be able to add to his already impressive repertoire of local dialects and anthropological education.

Traveling around the world for millennia built up quite a collection.

“Gotta tie a blindfold on ya, son,” Skeeter said. “Don’t take it the wrong way. I got a good feeling about you, but I’ve been snookered once or twice. Folks these days can’t be too careful.”

“Perfectly understandable. It so happens I have a bandana suitable for the task.”

“Nope. This one’ll do.” Skeeter withdrew a dubious swatch of stained fabric from one of his many pockets.

“I’m not the first fellow to wear this, am I?”

Skeeter cackled but didn’t answer. He steered Fergus by the elbow as they hiked the sloping terrain. Fergus took the opportunity of being blind to send out his *scythen* — sensory deprivation intensified it.

Skeeter was an inadvertent sender as well as a receiver. As with all neophytes, his telepathic talent seemed nebulous and untrained. The benevolent, non-threatening output was still evident, which was a relief. The Whitaker clan may collectively decide to kill him, but Skeeter himself posed no danger.

At least not yet.

After thirty minutes of hiking, the old man said, “We’re here. You can take off the blindfold now.”

Fergus happily did so. The scene before him begged to be captured on film, or perhaps in a Thomas Kinkade painting. The silent gathering of Mountain People stood motionless and staring, all striking unintentional poses that hinted at captivating personal stories. Weathered shanties belched smoke from teetering chimneys; flames flickered within lanterns strung above crooked doorways. Galvanized washtubs stood sentinel beside improvised clotheslines, while women dipped arms elbow-deep in murky water as they squatted motionless, assessing the newcomer. Children in ragged clothing positioned themselves behind lean, grim-faced males interspersed with several equally grim-faced females.

Everyone who stood clutched firearms. Nobody spoke.

“Skeeter, this isn’t a welcoming committee, is it?” Fergus whispered.

“What’d you expect? A muffin basket?” Skeeter replied.

It would have been funny under different circumstances.

Skeeter raised one hand, a gesture that said: *Everyone calm the hell down.*

At least that’s what Fergus hoped it said.

“Folks, this here feller wants to join up. I can tell he don’t pose no threat, and he says he can help us.”

A full minute of silence passed. Fergus was getting nervous, but Skeeter didn’t appear to be bothered by the chilly reception.

Finally, a tall, slender woman detached herself from the backwoods tableau and glided toward them. Long, flaxen braids framed a smudged face, then meandered down to a madras plaid-covered bosom; Fergus didn’t allow his gaze to linger on the bosom. Sneakers that needed to be replaced long ago silently covered the distance between them. She moved like a lioness. When she stood two feet away, he saw that her luminous eyes would have matched that of any feline predator in Africa.

“I’m Serena Jo,” the magnificent creature said in a low-pitched, honey-butter voice. “Who are you and why are you here?”

No bumpkin dialect from this one.

“I’m Fergus. I’d like to join your group.” He didn’t bother with a charming smile, opting instead for an undeniably sincere tone. He knew those intelligent golden eyes would notice anything phony.

“Why would we allow that?”

“Because I possess skills that would benefit everyone. I can knock a bobcat off a tree branch from fifty paces with a rock. I bake the fluffiest biscuits this side of heaven. I can juggle fiery torches and small children simultaneously, without harming the torches.”

He was relieved to see one side of the lovely mouth twitch. Was she amused? He couldn’t tell. She was a complete blank to his *scythen*.

Serena Jo was no inadvertent sender.

“We don’t need rock-throwers, bakers, nor jugglers. You’ll have to do better.”

Fergus thought furiously for several moments. What could he offer these people that they didn’t already have? Nobody was rotund, but neither did they appear to be starving. Folks who had lived primitively before the end of the world would fare well afterward. They had surely been growing much of their own food and hunting game long before Chixculub. They had no problem living without electricity, and their medical needs would be addressed homeopathically, as they had been for generations.

What could he give people who didn’t need his help to survive?

“I was a professor at Dartmouth before Chicksy,” he lied smoothly. “I can teach the children and anyone else interested in rounding out their education.”

A sudden increase in the golden eyes’ luminosity revealed interest. He had selected the perfect morsel with which to seduce the beautiful gatekeeper.

“What subject?”

“Subjects. Philosophy, History, English, and Music Theory.”

“I’ve never heard of a professor qualified to teach in so many areas. What instruments do you play?”

Fergus smiled inwardly. Even though the invention of the fiddle postdated his youth, he had learned how to play on one of his many visits there over the years. Fiddle-playing was practically demanded of anyone with Irish blood running through his veins.

“I play the violin like an angel.”

“Prove it.” The woman gestured toward a child frozen in a nearby doorway. The child disappeared, then returned with a weathered instrument and a bow with strings of unknown origin. What would these people use to replace them? Sheep intestines were preferred in the Old Country. Did the Mountain People have a hidden flock somewhere? He hadn’t heard any bleating.

The child handed over both with adorable gravity. The golden eyes staring at him now were as luminous as those of Serena Jo. This little girl must be her daughter.

“I’m a bit rusty,” he said, closing his eyes and traveling to the musical compartment of his memory palace.

The instrument felt fine in his hands. He hadn’t played a note since long before the pandemic, but it didn’t matter. Muscle memory and an ingrained love of music would suffice.

After a shaky start, he found the correct movements for Mendelssohn’s Concerto in E Minor. From that, he transitioned seamlessly to the Swallowtail Jig, a favorite of his people. As he played, he opened his eyes to see an assortment of boots, sneakers, and bare feet tapping to the lively rhythm.

He smiled. Of course these folks would love a jig. Their ancestors were Gaelic.

“Very good,” Serena Jo said when he finished. “But that only shows you can play. Most of us can do that. Music in the holler is how we entertain ourselves. What is music theory and how would you teach it?”

“Music theory examines key signatures, pitches, intervals, scale, chords, and other fundamentals. It also provides insight into the basic building blocks that form harmony, melody, and rhythm. I’ll make it fun, too. I’m quite entertaining, even when I don’t try to be.”

“Who is your favorite philosopher and why?”

Fergus responded promptly. “Epicurus. He understood the profound benefits of simple pleasure and friendship.”

“What year was Julius Caesar born?”

“Approximately 100 BCE.”

Her eyes narrowed. Suddenly, he realized who she was. Skeeter’s eyes were blue, so Serena Jo’s mother must have been responsible for the unusual golden color. “What is an ambigram?”

Fergus knew he was acing this impromptu test, but the last question was especially easy. “It’s a word that is the same upside down. Like *swims*. Did I pass?”

“Not yet. How do you get your hair to do that?”

A man standing barely five-feet tall tended to be overlooked. Choices were limited if the objective was to be noticed. One could wear high-heeled shoes or opt to make a statement with clothes or coiffure. He had chosen the latter. The notoriously spiked red hair had become his calling card. People didn’t soon forget a man with hair like his.

“My hair and its mysteries are a story to be revealed over a campfire while roasting marshmallows and telling ghost stories.”

Serena Jo smiled. He was in.

“Fine. You’re on probation. You’ll conduct classes for the children for two hours every morning. You’ll be under constant surveillance until such time as I’ve deemed you harmless. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Pops, he can stay with you, since you’re the one who brought him in.”

Skeeter dipped his head.

“If you do anything to cause me concern, one tiny misstep, we’ll kill you. You can leave now if you have any reservations. We’ll put the blindfold back on and lead you out of the holler. But if you choose to stay, you’re one of us. Nobody leaves. That’s how we stay safe from the madness that’s happening out there.”

“Very well. I accept the terms.”

Serena Jo turned her back and glided away. The other folks returned to their tasks. Fergus blew out a relieved breath.

Skeeter clapped his back and smirked. “This way, little feller. It’s gettin’ airish. Got a blanket?”

“Yes. It’s in rather a sad state, however. Could do with a good washing.”

“We’ll tend to that tomorrow. Tonight you can borrow one of mine.”

“Skeeter, I have to ask you something,” Fergus said as they strode through the primitive village toward a shanty that looked slightly less dilapidated than most. A well-worn dirt road meandered throughout the dwellings. The aroma of cooking food permeated the air. His stomach rumbled.

“Go ahead and ask,” Skeeter said. They stepped onto a wooden porch with only a few missing boards. He reached into another pocket, pulled out a matchbook, and lit the lantern hanging near the door.

“How many people have worn that blindfold?”

“About half a dozen since Chicksy.”

“Are any of them still here?”

“Just one now.”

“Me?

“Yep.”

“What happened to them?”

“They didn’t work out.”

“I see.”

“Best mind yerself. My daughter don’t like things gettin’ gaumed up. She keeps the trains runnin’ on time.”

“Gaumed up?”

“Messed up.”

“Ah, I see,” Fergus said, “Yes, she seems like quite an impressive woman.”

“Son, you got no idea.”

“I hope she doesn’t decide to kill me.”

“Can’t make no promises.”

“Skeeter, why does she talk the way she does?”

The old man opened the shanty door and stepped inside. Soon the glow of a second lamp lit up the interior. Fergus was delighted to see that the tiny space was clean and orderly. There was only one bed. He would be sleeping on the floor, but at least he would be sleeping inside. Skeeter was right. The weather was getting colder.

The faded blue eyes settled upon him. He could see some kind of inner conflict playing out on the wrinkled face.

“You mean why does she sound educated?”

“Yes.”

“Because she *is* educated. She left the holler and went to the college in Knoxville.” The old man’s tone had transitioned from friendly to stern.

“You sound as if you disapprove...”

“Folks don’t leave the holler for a reason.”

“Why is that?”

“None yer business.”

“I see.”

“No you don’t. But maybe you will in time. Anyways, when she did come back, she weren’t the same. She knew a lot of useless stuff, but also some stuff that weren’t so useless.”

“She’s the leader here.” The deference given to Serena Jo had been evident. Even the shotgun-wielders seemed to acquiesce to her. He had noticed it in their body language, as well as some snippets of *scythen* picked up from unintentional senders.

“That’s right.”

“No offense, but it seems that in a culture such as yours, a man would be in charge.”

Skeeter’s expression softened. Thankfully.

“That’s usually true. But when Chicksy happened, there weren’t no better person to take over than my daughter. Everyone knew it. Nobody fought it. Except for one feller, but he ain’t gonna give anyone no more trouble.”

“I assume he’s buried around here somewhere?”

Skeeter cackled. The various nuances of his laughter repertory were fascinating. This one sounded ominous around the edges.

“We got our own cemetery up yander.” A calloused finger pointed in a vague northerly directly. “Goes back for generations. You gotta walk through all the old graves to get to the new ones.”

“How new is the newest?”

Skeeter didn’t cackle. He merely grinned, exposing teeth that were straight and white. These folks must have superior genes to fare so well under semi-primitive conditions. Surely regular dental checkups were not woven into the Appalachian lifestyle.

He didn’t answer the question. “Leave yer stuff here. It’s just about supper time. I’ll introduce you to the Whitaker clan. You’re in for a treat, little feller.”

Chapter 2

***Ray***

Ray lay in bed, thinking about what his work day would look like. He knew one of the solar panels needed to be replaced, but he didn’t relish the notion of climbing to the roof unless he was going to fly the drone. Few people had known about his condition — back when there still were people — and he hadn’t included agoraphobia in the psyche section of the government’s exhaustive job application nineteen years ago. Why would he? As a twenty-three-year old, fresh out of Georgetown’s graduate program, he had carried a mountain of debt. He had needed the job. Desperately.

It was his M.S. in Health Systems Administration that had gotten him the interview. If he had told the human resources manager he was terrified of open spaces, it might not have mattered, considering the nature of the job opening. Being top of his class and excelling in an area of study particularly suited for working within the country’s new Strategic National Stockpile program provided him with a foot in the door. But he hadn’t mentioned the mental health disorder. Instead, he dialed up the charm, aced the emotional intelligence and skills assessment sections, and been offered a job in middle-management. Ray could be charming when he wanted to be. But there had been no need for a long time. As one of two inhabitants living in a secret government warehouse near Tremont, Tennessee, he had no need of charm.

He did, however, desire an occasional conversation with someone who wasn’t insane.

No matter how intense the sporadic bouts of loneliness, they were better than being *out there.* People had gone nuts when the end came. None of the stockpiled pharmaceuticals filling up a corner of his warehouse had been useful at the end. There was no cure for Chixculub. The pandemic ravaged the globe, unchecked, decimating the world’s population to near-extinction levels. He wondered, as he often did, just how many people were left, scratching out some kind of life in a world without technology. Without medicine. Without electricity and food and clean water.

He had all those things and more. Co-existing with Lizzy seemed a reasonable trade-off.

“Time to get up,” he said aloud to himself. That was happening more and more these days, and he didn’t fight it. Humans were hard-wired to vocalize. Otherwise, the default method of communication might have evolved into sign language or even more X-Files-ish...telepathy. The notion made him smile.

After making the bed, he brushed his teeth in the small sink of his utilitarian bathroom. His apartment — originally his office back when he’d been in charge of the place — wasn’t luxurious. The annual budget of the Strategic National Stockpile had only been a half-billion. It was one of the few truly no-frills programs within the US government. The modest allocation bought vast quantities of items which would address a variety of possible threats to the country, back when there had been a United States of America. The government stored those items in six secret warehouse locations scattered between Seattle and Boston.

The Tennessee facility was the second largest. From the outside, it looked like a sizeable but otherwise unremarkable storage building nestled within a sea of smaller storage buildings. The inside, however, was anything but unremarkable.

Two Walmarts placed side by side with their drop-ceilings removed would be similar in size and area. Plastic-wrapped pallets containing gas masks, gurneys, ventilators, and hundreds of other emergency and medical items were stacked to dizzying heights on industrial storage units. The shelf-stable food, packaged similarly, spanned six rows alone.

Ray wouldn’t starve for a thousand years.

Nerve agent antidotes, antivirals, antibiotics, insulin, and dozens of other medicines filled the refrigerated section, kept cool with electricity generated by the very solar panels he dreaded replacing. If Yellowstone’s super volcano erupted and spewed sun-blocking ash particulate into the atmosphere, he had a backup plan for powering the facility: generators and dozens of propane canisters populated the entire back wall of the facility.

Painkillers — morphine, OxyContin, codeine, and other similarly addictive, high-theft drugs — occupied their own secured chamber. He and his former assistant had been the only people who knew the lock code. They had learned that lesson early on in the program.

Everything he needed for a comfortable life was here. Although he didn’t always feel lucky, he knew he was. Surely nobody else left alive had fared so well. The warehouse had become home, and he maintained it as immaculately as two dozen government employees had before the end came.

The only glitch — the proverbial thorn in his side — was the creature who lived there with him, incarcerated in what had been the employee breakroom, when there were still employees. Lizzy had remained tied up for two days while he’d secured her quarters, creating an escape-proof environment that allowed him to sleep at night though a psychopath slept under his roof.

At list there would be time to take the drone out for a spin later.

He finished dressing, heated two bowls of instant oatmeal in the microwave, and ate his portion quickly. At a brisk pace, he walked to the prison block.

“We hear youuuu,” came the voice on the other side of the improvised mesh fence. Made of galvanized 14-gauge steel, the mesh would have been used in emergency quarantine or crowd control situations. Here, it served as prison-cell bars. Plastic cutlery would prove ineffective against it, and anything that might actually compromise it had been removed long ago.

“I hear you too, Lizzy. I guess that makes us even.”

Musical laughter floated through the mesh. Coming from anyone else, it would have sounded lovely.

“Oatmeal today?” said the voice. The timbre was dulcet and the accent unmistakably southern.

“Yes.”

“We can smell it, just like we can smell you. Mmmmm. Hope you put a lot of sugar in there. A few fingers and toes of local children would be delightful too.” More musical laughter.

“Very funny, Lizzy. Your witch allusion is a nice change from the Catholic nun you pretended to be last week.”

“We keep you entertained. There’s no denying it. Think how lonely you would be all alone in this cavernous space.”

He stood beside the mesh now. The person on the other side stared back, smiling and unblinking. The dilated pupils looked like miniature black holes...event-horizon irises, the green hue of fairy-tale poison.

Of all the personas she had displayed during their time together, the current one felt most representative of Lizzy’s true nature. A child-eating, wicked witch of the forest seemed about right.

“You know the drill.” He waited while she stepped away, turned her back, and placed both hands against the opposite wall with fingers splayed. Looking at the straight black hair instead of those soulless eyes was a relief.

He unlocked the twelve-inch hatch at the bottom of the mesh. He had rigged it to be secure, but even if she somehow managed to open it from her side, she would never fit through.

He placed the plastic bowl on the floor inside, hyper aware of her the entire time, and then re-secured the thumb screws. He was glad today was not laundry day. That took longer and required back-and-forth interaction to retrieve her soiled linens and clothing and supply clean ones.

“We could use more toothpaste,” she said, keeping her hands on the wall and turning only her head, owl-like. A human shouldn’t be able to swivel her head that far backward.

“Then you’re using too much. You’re not due for more toothpaste until next week.”

“You’re a tough nut, Ray. We like that about you. You’re a challenge to us.”

It wasn’t the first time she had said those words. They always made his skin crawl. He did a mental recap of her prison, recalling every facet of the security he had integrated while she had been tied up for those two days last year. His OCD demanded the review. Going back over everything he had done to keep him safe from Lizzy made him feel better.

He knew what she was capable of.

“I’ll be back at dinner,” he said, and turned to go.

“Nothing warm for lunch today?” The musical voice was petulant now, a complete affectation. Lizzy didn’t give a rat’s ass about food. It was fuel for her body and nothing more. Eating a cold MRE for lunch wouldn’t bother her in the slightest. It was just another way to taunt him.

He didn’t respond. His spreadsheet told him she had three more days’ worth of lunch MREs still stored in her quarters.

He turned the corner of the corridor leading away from Lizzy, contemplating the ten hours until dinner time. Nine would be filled with chores, leaving one hour for flying. The drone camera presented the perfect solution for a person like him to enjoy the great outdoors. And seeing through the eagle eyes of his Phantom made him feel less like a jailer shackled to a psychopath. Those moments spent soaring over the picturesque valleys, forests, and rivers of Smoky Mountain National Park made him feel free. Maybe today he would spot a cougar or a wild boar. He had almost given up on seeing any new people. Considering how it had worked out when he’d spotted Lizzy eight months ago, perhaps that was for the best. Three years after the plague, he doubted there were many humans left out there.

Chapter 3

***Willadean***

“Willa!” Serena Jo’s voice floated through the torn mosquito netting of the bedroom window. There was only the one bedroom in their house, and Willadean shared it with her mama and her twin brother.

She loved them both, but, lordy, sometimes she got tired of smelling their farts.

“Coming, mama!” she hollered back.

She returned her journal and pencil to their hiding place inside her lumpy mattress; she had slit the fabric near the corner that faced the wall. Did Mama know it was there? Maybe. Probably. She didn’t miss a damn thing. But so far, she hadn’t said anything about it. And Harlan wouldn’t, since he didn’t talk. He probably knew too, so she was careful about writing anything mean about either of them.

Just in case.

When she sprinted through the front door, she saw her brother and the other children gathered around the strange little man with the spiky hair and wiry crimson beard. When she’d handed him the fiddle yesterday, then listened to him play and heard his quick answers to Mama’s smart questions, she knew she had found someone worthy of her attention. He was clever, that one, and she had long grown tired of everyone else in Whitaker Holler. Even Cricket, sometimes. She figured this unusual fellow would provide plenty of material for the book she planned to write. Maybe she would make him her Main Character, or *MC,* as they were called in the literary world.

“Children, Mister Fergus will be your teacher for two hours every morning immediately after breakfast. I don’t have time to do it any longer and he’s qualified.”

“Will he teach us about astronomy, Miss Serena Jo? I have my grandpappy’s old compass. I think I figured out how to use it, but I could use some help. What about school on the weekends? Do we get the weekends off?” Cricket asked, gazing up at Willadean’s mama with adoring eyes. Her best friend had a crush on her mama, which was both hilarious and disgusting.

Serena Jo smiled. She was especially pretty when she did that. It made her look less *inexorable*. That was a word Willadean had discovered in one of the books they’d brought from Knoxville. It meant hell-bent-on. If there was anyone in the world who was inexorable, it was her mama.

“No weekends. Just Monday through Friday. Is everyone keeping up with your calendars? It’s important to track the passing of time.”

A dozen heads nodded.

Willadean had been tracking more than just the passing of time in her journal.

“Very good. It’s chilly this morning, so classes will be conducted inside the school house. Autumn has arrived.”

“What if it’s purdy outside, Miss Serena Jo?” Did Cricket even care where classes were held? Or was he just thinking of questions to ask so he could stare at her without looking creepy?

Willadean snickered. “That’s *pretty*, doofus.” She elbowed her way through the group, stopping a foot shy of their new teacher. She studied him. His sky-blue eyes twinkled with amusement. A grin appeared within the wiry beard. He had nice teeth.

He studied her right back for a few seconds, then said, “You must be Willadean.” His voice was deep for such a small man. “Your grandfather told me about you.”

“Pops has a penchant for tall tales. You know what *penchant* means? Don’t believe a word he says.”

Her grandfather’s familiar laughter sprang from somewhere in the distance. He was eavesdropping, as usual. He knew almost everything about almost everyone. She loved him with all her heart.

“He said you were sharp as a tack.”

“That’s no tall tale.”

A rumble of laughter sprang from the small, barrel chest. The trickster gods from one of her Neil Gaiman books probably laughed like that. She liked it, but she resolved to keep an eye on this one. There was a lot this Mister Fergus was holding back.

She could feel it.

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“School weren’t too boring this morning,” Cricket said later.

They were on a treasure quest in the forest. Silent Harlan led the trio, as usual. As the best tracker of the group, he could always steer them through the security perimeter without getting caught. Willadean brought up the rear, positioning Cricket as their middle man. It wasn’t the correct term for someone who literally walked in the middle of three people on a treasure quest, but she thought it was funny to call him that. Cricket wasn’t dumb, but he wasn’t a genius. She liked him, though, mostly for his willingness to go along with any wild scheme she concocted. He had been her first friend after fleeing the horror of Knoxville.

“*Wasn’t* boring. Geez, Cricket. How many times do I have to correct your crappy grammar?”

“You don’t never need to correct it. I think I sound fine.”

“*Ever.* You sound like a peckerwood. You know what that word means, at least.” A strange whirring sound caught her attention. “Wait up, Harlan.”

She locked eyes with her brother who had also heard the sound. Harlan didn’t talk, but his hearing was second to none. After a full minute of straining his ears, he began signing to her. Not the usual signing he did with their mama, but the version they had created while still in diapers. Even Serena Jo didn’t understand much of what they said to each other when they used the twin talk. It was good to have a few secrets from her.

“I agree. Sounds like buzzing bees. But it’s mechanical, not natural. That’s a manmade noise.” She might have said *monster*, so dramatic was Cricket’s reaction.

“Holy moly, Willa. We gotta get. You know what we’re supposed to do if we ever hear people sounds.”

“Hush,” she hissed. “Don’t be such a scaredy cat. We’re fine as long as we stay hidden.”

She crouched low, gesturing for the boys to stay put, and then made her way to a clearing a dozen yards ahead. They had never ventured this far in the woods. She felt a little scared herself, but also excited.

She hunkered behind a giant sugar maple at the edge of the glade, watching the blue patch of sky above it. The whirring sound became louder. Would a small airplane appear in that blue patch or perhaps a helicopter? She had to pee, but it must wait. Her focus stayed glued to the sky. She wedged a hand between her legs, holding it in for a few more minutes.

The normal forest sounds continued as if nothing dangerous were imminent. She took comfort in that. If a fire-breathing dragon bore down on them, surely the wildlife would sense it. Finally, her patience and continence were rewarded.

What looked like a pudgy, white X with little whirling blades positioned at each point whizzed above the far tree line. She knew exactly what it was; she had seen drones on TV before the end came. They were used for filming aerial scenes in movies, and also for police work to catch fleeing criminals.

What streaked across that blue patch was nothing more than a glorified flying camera. She pulled her head back behind the sugar maple before it got any closer. The next moment, a noise from behind startled her for a half-second before she identified it. Stealth was not a talent Cricket could claim. He sounded like a crazed bear crashing through the woods. Before she could stop him, his foot caught on a fallen tree branch, and he took a header right into the glade. Grabbing him by a denim strap, she hauled him back.

“What the hell, Cricket?” she snapped.

“I was comin’ to save you, Willa. I thought you were about to get uh-ducted by aliens!”

“That’s *abducted*, you idiot! I hope that drone didn’t see you.”

“What’s a drone?”

“It’s a flying camera. You know who pilots them?”

Cricket scratched the top of his head. There were probably lice nestled among the dark, greasy locks. Just like stealth, Cricket wasn’t known for personal hygiene.

“People?” he said. His cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

Willa sighed. “It’s okay. I doubt it saw you.” She glanced at the flying X again. It hadn’t veered from its trajectory. The next moment it whizzed above the tree line to the right of the clearing, then disappeared. The whirring sound became fainter and fainter.

Surely if that camera had spotted Cricket, it would have paused. Would have hovered and zoomed in for a closer look.

“We gotta get home and tell your mama.”

She felt a tap on her shoulder. When she turned, Harlan was signing emphatically.

“I know, I know,” she said to her brother.

She turned to the middle man. “Listen, Cricket, we have to swear a blood oath right now. We can’t tell anyone about this.” She reached for the Swiss Army knife always present in the front pocket of her threadbare jeans.

“Why not? She said we had to tell if we ever heard people sounds or saw people. I don’t wanna get in trouble.”

“And what do you think will happen if we tell?”

Harlan took a position next to her. With crossed arms, they glared at the hapless Cricket. It was intended to be a show of solidarity and it almost always intimidated the other holler children into submission. The twins were an indomitable pair.

Cricket thought for a moment before answering. “We won’t get to go on treasure hunts in the forest no more?”

“Exactly.” She smiled, letting him off the hook.

Harlan patted him on the shoulder.

“We three hereby swear never to tell anyone about what we just saw. Not the adults. Not the other kids. Not Mama. Especially not Mama. Swear it now.”

Three grubby palms extended toward each other. Willa didn’t cut deep with the blade. She didn’t have to. Only a drop or two was necessary to conduct a proper blood oath.

“What we gonna do now, Willa?” Cricket asked when the job was done.

“We’ll finish the hunt. We need to take home some truffles and mushrooms if we want to keep coming into the forest. That’s why Mama lets us come. She says the benefits outweigh the risks.”

“I know what those words mean.”

“Good. You’re learning, Cricket. Maybe someday you’ll be as smart as me.”

Willa signed to her brother using their twin speak: *When pigs fly out of my butt.*

Harlan snorted. Muted laughter was the only sound she ever heard from her brother.

“When we find enough of ‘em, will there still be time for a story?”

She grinned. “We’ll see.” The despised adult phrasing was nothing more than an evasive way for grownups to say no. When she said it, though, it conveyed a different subtext. If they gathered sufficient forest bounty to appease Serena Jo, and if there was still enough time for a quick yarn, she would spin one. And not just for Cricket’s entertainment. Every time she wrote a story in her mind and told it to an audience, she figured it made her a better writer.

There was nothing Willadean wanted more in life than to be an author of books. It didn’t matter that she was not quite twelve-years-old, or that few people were left in the world to read them. It only mattered that she wrote them.

Mama understood, even though Serena Jo didn’t herself have an interest in fiction. Her job was to keep everyone alive and with full bellies. Mama might act like she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders, but Willadean knew there was a tiny compartment hidden in her soul that loved every minute of it. Everyone put Mama on a pedestal, as well they should...nobody had ever run the holler so efficiently. But Willadean and Pops knew her better than anyone. In secret, they complained about how tough she was, how inflexible she was and how callous she could be when it came time to put someone in the cemetery. They understood that she had to make difficult decisions.

But they had wondered — in private, when not even Harlan was around — if Mama hadn’t occasionally put someone in the cemetery who didn’t truly deserve to be there.

Willadean hoped Mister Fergus minded his Ps and Qs. She had ratcheted up her approval of him after the morning’s lessons. And she had also set her sights on discovering his secrets.

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“Only a half-bushel of mushrooms?” Mama said while they brushed their teeth in the kitchen. It was full dark now. Time for the holler to go to sleep. “And not one truffle?”

Serena Jo’s face looked...*ethereal*...in the lantern’s glow. That was a good word. Her mama had the face of an angel, if not the resume.

Willadean was glad Mama hadn’t said anything about their feeble harvest in front of the others. If she and Harlan needed a scolding, it usually took place just before bedtime. That way they could contemplate their misdeeds while they fell asleep and therefore incorporate the necessary lessons into their dreams. Mama put a lot of thought into the timing of everything she did.

“Sorry. The pickings were slim, weren’t they Harlan?”

Harlan signed his support.

“How many of those hours in the woods were actually spent hunting for food and not for pixies?” Mama smiled. That was good. This wasn’t going to be a scolding.

“Three,” Willa replied. It was true if you replaced the word *pixies* with *pudgy X-shaped flying camera*. Half-lies were always preferable to full lies. They carried a grain of truth and thus sounded more believable.

“Then I suppose that’s okay. One of the reasons I let you two go into the forest is because you’re children, and children need to have adventures. As long as the...”

“Benefits outweigh the risks,” Willadean finished.

They both smiled.

“So nothing risky happened today?” Mama was fishing now. She’d caught a whiff of something.

Willadean planted an innocent expression on her face, then shook her head. She didn’t trust herself to speak. It might come out wrong. And besides, she answered most questions with a head nod or a head shake. A physical response was the correct move here.

“Good. You remember our agreement?”

“Yes, ma’am. If we see or hear people or see signs of people, we’re to run home immediately and tell you.”

“Very good. All right, time for sleep, you two.”

Mama ushered them into the bedroom. It was clean-sheets night, which Willadean always looked forward to. The line-dried linens smelled like trees and grass and wood smoke instead of Bounce dryer sheets, like back in Knoxville. She would enjoy a few moments of covert journaling before she blowing out the bedside candle. She would not mention anything about the drone.

She couldn’t be sure that Mama never snuck a peek at the hidden diary.

Chapter 4

***Fergus***

“Tell me about the cemetery,” Fergus said to Willadean after the morning’s lessons. She seemed to be intentionally lollygagging after class.

He could mark ‘day three’ off his mental calendar. He usually avoided fidget monkeys, preferring to engage with mature minds and well-developed bodies. But to his surprise, he had discovered that teaching them was not only rewarding, it was fun. They were receptive. They didn’t measure or overanalyze their words before speaking. They still possessed a sense of wonder, unlike most adults. And there were a few shining stars in the bunch, despite the hillbilly veneers.

The other children had scattered, including the boy twin. Fergus could not get a vibe from the silent one, but his internal radar blared whenever Willadean was nearby.

“What’s to tell?” the golden-eyed cherub replied.

She was a miniature doppelganger of the iron-fisted Serena Jo. Fergus sensed an astounding depth to the adolescent intellect. This little woodland fairy would need to be watched. Closely. He may have a *Cthor-Vangt* recruit on his hands.

“I’m concerned about ending up there...permanently,” he said.

“Play your cards right and you won’t.”

They were sitting on a large flat rock on the outskirts of the village. The forest lay just a few yards behind them. The makeshift school house — formerly the squalid shanty of a now-diseased holler resident — was visible from their vantage, as were the comings and goings of the Mountain People. In anthropological terms, they were fascinating to watch; this pocket of humanity hadn’t missed a beat when a pandemic obliterated the modern world.

“But what if I don’t understand the card game? I might inadvertently play the Ace of Spades when I should have gone with the Jack of Hearts.”

Willadean snickered. It was a delightful sound, conveying genuine amusement alongside an unbridled sense of superiority. During her short life, the child had probably become used to being the smartest person in every room.

“Best be careful when using the word *spade*,” she said.

Fergus grinned. “Good one. You’re going to be a writer someday?”

“*Am* a writer. I’m going to be a novelist someday.”

“What will your books be about?”

“Anything and everything.”

“I see. Perhaps within these titillating tomes you could incorporate a diminutive yet handsome red-haired hero.”

“Aren’t heroes supposed to be tall?”

“Not always. Have you ever heard the expression *dynamite comes in small packages*?”

“I have, and I never use it. Good writers don’t resort to clichés.”

“But you said that thing about playing my cards right.”

The blond eyebrows gathered together suddenly, then returned to their normal position. “True. I’ll strike it from my *lexicon*.”

“Very well. So about the cemetery...”

The eyes narrowed as they scrutinized him. It was during these moments that he clearly saw the familial tie between Skeeter, Serena Jo, and the little firecracker before him.

He saw her gaze shift, surveying the village, then landing on Serena Jo’s back. The leader of Whitaker Holler was engaged in an intense conversation with one of the rifle-wielding men.

There was a contingent of folks within the village whose primary job was to hunt wild game. The deer population exploded when all those weekend hunters had died off. Mountain Folk had been eating venison for hundreds of years, and they were practically tripping over deer now on every hunting expedition. Fergus was already growing a little weary of venison stew. Still, it was better than the processed or canned garbage he resorted to when traveling.

“Come on. Quick. Before she turns around.”

She sprinted into the woods. If he didn’t soon follow, he’d lose sight of the tattered jeans and ragged shirt in the sun-dappled forest. The vibrancy of the orange and red leaves deepened every day. Autumn in the mountains was lovely. It wasn’t turquoise water and amber-colored beaches lovely, but just as spectacular in its own way. Smoke from the perpetual water-boiling fires permeated the air, mingling with the natural fragrance of the forest. He breathed it in, glad that the privies lay downwind, then took off after the child.

“Ssshhh,” she hissed moments later, gesturing for him to crouch down.

He complied, waiting for further instruction while watching Willadean. She moved soundlessly through the brush, a wraith in threadbare denim and stained Keds.

“I thought I heard something. Guess not,” she said a minute later, her voice returning to normal. “Come on. It’s this way.” Even when she wasn’t on high alert, her movements were fluid and noiseless. Willadean hadn’t been born in the holler, as revealed to him by Skeeter, but she had adjusted quickly to the primitive lifestyle and rural environment. She had taken to it *natural-like*.

“What do you think the sound might have been?”

She glanced back, giving him an appraising look. “Nothing.”

“Really? It sounded like a motor to me.”

That got a reaction. She twirled, covered the distance between them in two seconds, positioned herself inches from him, and then poked his chest with a forceful finger.

“Do not say that. Not to anyone.”

“Why?”

“Because if Mama learns there might be other people out there, she won’t let us leave the village. We’ll be kept prisoner. No more exploring. No more treasure hunts. No more fun.”

Fergus stifled a grin. What fate could be more horrible to a child?

He made a twisting motion against his lips, the universal gesture for *your secret is locked away in the vault*. “Promise I won’t tell.”

“That’s not good enough.” She reached into the pocket of her jeans and withdrew a doll-sized knife. “You have to swear a blood oath. Hold out your hand, palm up.”

He considered the directive, then extended his hand. She mirrored his gesture, revealing a small, pink scar on the meaty part of her palm.

“Looks like this isn’t your first blood oath,” he said.

“Never mind that.”

She nicked him with the small blade, quick and shallow, then did the same next to her scar.

“Shake, now. And swear while you’re doing it.”

“I swear not to say anything about the motor sound I heard today.”

The pigtailed head dipped once. “Come on.” She took off again.

The childhood oath-swearing ritual was sacrosanct; that was evident. And even more interesting, he realized he would probably endure at least a half-hour of water-boarding before sharing the secret. Willadean had already proven to be worth the journey from Florida to Tennessee. And there were a few others in the holler whose mysteries he hoped to unravel. So far, he was enjoying himself immensely on this adventure. Experience had told him, however, not to become too comfortable.

Shit has a way of hitting the fan when one least expects it.

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“This is it,” Willadean said after another twenty minutes.

They stood in a glade encircled by birch trees. The whimsical paper-like trunks and shimmering copper leaves seemed at odds with the somber place. No fence designated the funerary grounds, but none was needed. Wooden crosses in various weathered states dotted the sloping hillside — more than a hundred old ones and a couple dozen not-so-old ones. Mounds of fresh soil extended from the base of several plots toward the far side.

The new area.

As far as being dead went, you would be hard-pressed to find a lovelier venue.

“Whitakers have been burying their kinfolk here for generations,” Willadean said in a solemn voice.

“It’s beautiful. So let’s get back to how I might avoid this place in the future...”

Willa laughed. “Mama isn’t so bad. Everything she does is for our own good. I don’t mean just me and Harlan. I mean for everyone. But some folks don’t always agree with her definition of *good*.”

She plopped down on a section of brown grass, then patted the space beside her. Sunlight spun the straw-colored pigtails into strands of glistening gold.

“And what happens when those folks don’t agree with her?” he said, sitting beside her.

“Depends on how loudly they complain.”

“So the key to extending my lifespan is to agree with Serena Jo, consistently and vehemently.”

“Vehemently. That’s a good word. I’ll add it to my lexicon.”

“Expanding lexicons is one of the many services I offer. Willadean,” he said, injecting a serious tone, “What if that motor noise came from bad people? Your mama should know, don’t you think? I won’t tell her, of course, but perhaps you should.”

“No way. Don’t worry about bad people. We can handle them.”

“I’ve been out there. I’ve seen bad people doing terrible things.”

“They won’t get past the perimeter. Trust me.”

“Didn’t I get past it?”

“Nope. Pops caught you. You wouldn’t have seen the shot that killed you if Pops had gotten a bad feeling about you. He’s better at reading people than anyone.”

“So that’s why I was allowed in.”

“Yes. You’re lucky. If one of the other men had spotted you, you’d probably be planted over there.” She nodded to the far side of the cemetery.

“Today wasn’t the first time you heard that noise, was it?”

There was the appraising look again. “I’ll answer if we agree that the blood oath still applies.”

“Done.”

“We heard it yesterday. We were on a quest for dryads, sprites, and mushrooms to the north. We went farther than we’ve ever been. I heard that sound and went to the edge of a clearing for a better look. That’s when I saw the drone.”

Fergus felt a stab of alarm. “Did it spot you?”

A shake of the pigtails.

“How can you be sure?”

“It didn’t hover or try to get closer to me. It just continued on, never deviating from its trajectory.”

“Another excellent word.”

“Yep.”

“It’s good that it didn’t spot you, but the significance of the drone’s presence is equally important. The range of those gadgets is limited. That means there are people with access to technology close by. And in my personal experience, people with access to technology under the current conditions may not bode well for the holler.”

“Maybe they’re not bad people.”

“They may not be, but how can we be sure?”

A shrug of the small shoulders. “Like I said, they wouldn’t get through our perimeter. I know you think we’re hillbillies, but those people you saw with the rifles are pros. There’s a few things Whitakers know how to do really well, and hunting and killing are two of them.”

Fergus thought for a few moments, while Willadean studied him. She might have been wearing a child-sized lab coat and gazing at an interesting new species of bacterium through her toy microscope.

“I think we need to know for sure,” he said finally.

“How will we do that?”

This wouldn’t be his first dangerous exploratory mission. During the last one, he had ended up locked in a stinky metal box for days.

“Not we. Me. And I’m not going to tell you. Have you heard the axiom *ignorance is bliss*?”

“Yes. Another cliché.”

“True, but it applies in this situation.”

“*Plausible deniability* works better.”

Fergus grinned. “You’re going to be a Pulitzer prize-winning author someday.”

“I don’t care about awards. I only care about the storytelling. You’ll keep your word, right? You swore an oath. Our blood mingled. That means that if you break the oath, I’ll know. My blood will tell me.”

“Ah, I see how it works now. No oath-breaking. I promise.”

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“I hope I’m not imposing,” Fergus said to Skeeter after supper. They were heading back to the old man’s shanty, where Fergus had been bunking since his arrival.

“No trouble. I don’t mind having company, even though you are an odd little feller.”

“Uh, thank you?” Fergus grinned. “It’s also easier to keep an eye on me if I’m sleeping on your floor.”

Skeeter grinned but didn’t respond. He withdrew the ever-present matches and lit the porch lamp. It was a nightly ritual, and he seemed to take comfort in the process. Fergus liked to stand on the rickety porch and watch the lanterns in the village twinkle to life. Skeeter sidled up next to him. They stood for a while in companionable silence.

“A bit airish again tonight,” the old man offered. “It’ll be a sad day when them matches is all gone,” he added, gazing at the lantern.

Fergus knew *airish* was holler-speak for chilly. He had learned many new words and phrases during the past few days. Usually he could extract their meaning from the context, but *sigoggling, gaint*, and *boomer* had required further explanation.

“Indeed.”

“Somethin’ on yer mind?”

“Yes, but nothing I can share with the class.”

Skeeter pondered that for a few heartbeats, then said, “Willa made you swear an oath, didn’t she.”

“How did you know?”

“That’s what she does. You can’t break it or she’ll know.”

“She said the same thing. The two of you are quite close, aren’t you?”

Skeeter nodded. “Ain’t just a family thing, neither. She’s special, that one.”

“I agree. Like her mother.”

Skeeter shook his head, a gesture identical to Willadean’s this afternoon. “Both special, but different.”

“Yes, I can see that. Serena Jo is a force of nature.”

“So is Willa. I wouldn’t go up against either of ‘em.”

“Frankly, neither would I. Let me ask you something, Skeeter. If I left the village, what would happen to me?”

“Willa told you ‘bout the perimeter?”

“She did.”

“There’s your answer. You’d best not step outside of it without authorization unless you want to end up in the cemetery.”

Fergus had figured out early on that Skeeter’s hillbilly talk ebbed and flowed. He still didn’t know why.

“What if I do so out of concern for your people?”

“That might change things a bit.”

“You know everything that goes on here, yes?”

“’Bout as much as anyone, I reckon.”

“You know the area as well? I mean beyond the holler?”

“I reckon so. Like I told ya when I met ya, I never been out of the holler, but that don’t mean I ain’t seen pictures and maps. She called some of ‘em *Google aerial images*. Serena Jo brought a lot of stuff with her besides matches when she came home from Knoxville.”

“Do you know of any buildings in the area? Say within a five-mile radius?”

“Don’t know about buildings, but there’s Tremont to the north.”

“How far away is it?”

“Farther than five miles.”

“Anything to the south of Tremont?”

Skeeter pondered the question. “Seems like I remember seeing some of them storage buildings, the commercial type. A big grouping of ‘em.”

“That makes sense.”

“What about it makes sense?”

“I can’t tell you. Your granddaughter will know I broke the oath.”

Skeeter nodded. “Did she see something? Don’t answer with words. I don’t need ‘em.”

Fergus stood mute and motionless. He didn’t even transmit via his *scythen*. That seemed like oath-breaking too.

“Got it.” The old man said with a sigh a minute later.

“Got what?”

“An idear of what she saw. Some kind of flying camera thing.”

Fergus pretended to be shocked. “How did you know that?”

“Can’t explain it. Don’t ask me about it anymore, neither. So you reckon you’ll sneak out of the holler and go investigate those buildings? You think it came from there?”

He couldn’t say Willa had told him she had been adventuring to the north. He probably didn’t need to.

Fergus nodded.

“It’s times like these I miss my pipe,” the old man said, shifting against the porch railing. “There’s something *halcyon* about pondering life while puffing on a baccy pipe.”

Red wiry eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“I learned it from Willa. That girl’s got the best words. Serena Jo says there ain’t room for a baccy field. Gotta use all the nearby fertile soil for food.”

“That’s a shame. I occasionally enjoy a smoke as well.”

“Back to the problem. If you’re asking for my advice, you should go to Serena Jo. Lay it out for her as best you can without breaking the oath — I’ll back ya up — and go from there. It ain’t worth getting caught in the perimeter and ending up in the cemetery. She’s intimidating, but she’s reasonable. You can win her over with logic every time.”

“Very well.”

“She should have put the kids to bed by now. This would be a good time.”

Fergus nodded, then stepped off the porch. It was full dark and the twinkling lanterns were flickering out one by one. Kerosene was a rationed commodity and used sparingly. According to Skeeter, when it was gone, they would resort to rendered animal fat. Fergus had lived in a world lit by primitive methods. The village wouldn’t smell so pleasant when they burned fat for fuel.

When Fergus reached Serena Jo’s house — not the largest or nicest in the village — he found her leaning against a porch railing just like her father moments earlier. Her lantern still glowed. Its illumination kept the night at bay while airbrushing the angular face into a softer version of its daytime counterpart. The leader of Whitaker Holler looked more approachable now than she ever had.

He would not be lulled by the lantern’s visual alchemy.

“Were you expecting someone?” Fergus said, keeping his voice low.

“No. What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to have a word with you, in private.” He gestured toward the children inside.

She nodded, unhooked the lantern, and stepped off the porch. “This way.”

She navigated the darkened village as gracefully as Willadean had the forest earlier. But this wraith was taller, shapelier, and boasted an impressive cleavage and legs that seemed almost as long as he was tall.

“Mmmm...”

“Did you say something?” she said from a few feet ahead.

“No, no. Just thinking about baseball.”

She stopped at the same flat rock he had shared with Willadean earlier that day, then sat on its surface, arms folded, sneakers extended. The dark forest presented an ominous backdrop; the lantern’s glow transformed her face into still yet another version. Fergus imagined Maleficent horns extending from the fair head.

“What’s on your mind?” she said. Her owlish eyes never seemed to blink.

“I have concerns about outsiders in the vicinity.”

“Why?”

This would be the tricky part. “You know how your father gets gut feelings about people?”

The eyes narrowed. She nodded.

“I get them too. And they’re almost always right. My gut tells me there’s something to the north that needs to be investigated. I’m offering my services.”

“Why would you put yourself in danger?”

“In a short time, I’ve become rather attached to this place and its people. I don’t want anyone or anything to harm either. Pockets of humanity like this will bring us back from the brink of extinction. You’re doing everything right here. You should be proud of all you’ve accomplished.”

“I don’t respond well to flattery.”

“It’s true, though.”

“How do I know you aren’t planning to escape and take our secrets with you? Maybe you’re a spy, sent here to discover what we have, so your group can raid us later.”

Fergus snorted. He wished he could say that was the first time he had been accused of such.

“I’m no spy. I think you realize that. Your father said to tell you he has my back. We both know what that means.”

A well-shaped eyebrow arched. Mental gymnastics were being performed between the silken braids.

Finally she spoke. “The no-leave rule is non-negotiable. I told you that when you first arrived.”

“I realize that, but these are extenuating circumstances.”

“So you would have me believe.”

“Your father believes me.”

“While I credit Pops with a kind of backwoods sixth sense, I credit my intellect more. The answer is no. Besides, we can take care of ourselves just fine.”

“With a few old shotguns and rifles? What if there’s an army amassing to the north?”

“There’s not. We would know.”

“How would you know?”

She gave him one of Willadean’s appraising looks. “Do you think you’ve seen everything we have or are capable of? Do you think I would blindly trust a stranger just because Pops said he was okay? You underestimate me. It’s usually not wise to do so. The matter is closed, Fergus. Good night.”

He watched her glide away. He didn’t know whether to be annoyed or think about baseball.

Chapter 5

***Ray***

Ray thrummed his fingers on his desk while he watched the drone footage for the twentieth time. He hadn’t noticed the kids as he live-streamed, but he caught sight of them on the playback. Before the end of the world happened, drone technology had evolved to include FPV — first person view — which didn’t require Wi-Fi or cellular. The drone and the controller utilized direct channels to communicate, and since GPS satellites still orbited the planet, his drones would always be able to find their way home. At least until those orbits deteriorated and the satellites crashed to earth, but he didn’t expect that to happen for at least twenty years. Maybe a hundred.

He used an iPad to watch footage from the memory card. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have seen the children.

There were survivors out there in the Smoky Mountain National Park. Seeing them was one of the few moments of pure joy he had experienced since Chicxulub. But that joy soon evaporated, crystalizing into something that felt more familiar. Anxiety. What should he do now? The video revealed two children, likely pre-pubescent. The camera had been recording and live-streaming in 1080 HD, not 4K, so the clarity on the memory card’s playback was less than perfect. He couldn’t tell if they were starving.

Ray knew the mortality rate of the disease: higher than ninety-nine percent. The odds that an entire community or even a family unit would have survived was next to impossible. Any organized groups out there would have banded together post-pandemic. Had the parents of these children survived? If not, had other adults adopted them? Or were they scavenging on their own?

He had flown the Phantom back to the same location the following day, set on 4K Ultra High Def this time. It captured images of deer, elk, and a well-fed black bear. But no people. That’s when the seed of an idea began to germinate.

The Phantom DJI 4 was excellent at maneuverability and boasted one of the best cameras available, but its payload was a meager half-kilo. Before the end, the drone market had been red-hot. The government had recognized the inherent usefulness of cargo drones for emergency situations when large vehicles and heavy equipment couldn’t get to the people who needed life-saving supplies.

The Freefly ALTA UAV price tag was ten times that of the Phantom, but it could haul a fifteen-pound payload. In one trip, it could carry ten MREs to the clearing where he had spotted the children. He planned to load it up, send it out, and drop off its cargo.

Surely the children had heard the drone’s motors. Surely they had recognized what the sound was. Even backwoods Appalachian people must have known about the technology before. If they were curious, they would return to the location where they had been two days earlier to see what was to be seen. Wasn’t it the nature of children to be curious?

It was eight in the morning. He would take Lizzy her breakfast, tend to the spreadsheet, then dispatch the Freefly loaded with not just calorie-laden MREs but some treats as well. The Strategic National Stockpile near Tremont contained two hundred pounds of Pop-Tarts. Strawberry wasn’t his personal favorite — he was more of a brown-sugar-cinnamon guy — but the shelf-life of the fruity breakfast pastry was impressive compared to other ready-to-eat baked goods. He and Lizzy hadn’t made a dent in them.

When he turned the corner of her corridor, he realized he was actually whistling to himself. Normally, Lizzy would begin talking to him at this point, her voice echoing off plastic-wrapped pallets, bouncing down from the cavernous ceiling, then extending an unwelcome, invisible tentacle to his ears.

Today there was no sound except that of his own footsteps.

He double-timed it the remaining yards, his mind scanning a list of possible scenarios. Had she escaped? Would he see the mesh fencing ripped off the cinderblock walls? Impossible. She was brilliant, but not superhuman. And she hadn’t overslept once during the eight months Ray had been bringing her breakfast. In fact, no matter what time of day he checked on her, she was always awake. A few weeks ago, something had propelled him out of a dreamless sleep at 3:33 in the morning. His first thought was of Lizzy. When he arrived at her cell, she had been standing there waiting for him. His stockinged feet had made no sound on the concrete floor, but somehow she knew to expect him. Rather than speaking, she’d given him her trademark smile. A smile that belonged in a Henry Fuseli painting.

He shuddered at the memory, forcing his mind back to the present as he ran. Was she ill? Was she even now suffocating on her own vomit? He was surprised to realize the notion bothered him. He despised every moment of interaction with the creature, but she was his responsibility. His burden. His job was to take care of her, even though doing so extracted a hefty chunk from his peace of mind. This had been his life ever since spotting her on the drone footage, sitting next to a body in the middle of a highway near the commercial storage facility where he lived. At the time, he had assumed the body was a friend or traveling companion. He didn’t realize until later that he’d brought a killer into his home. The body was another of Lizzy’s victims.

When he came to an abrupt stop outside her cell, the bowl of oatmeal dropped to the floor. Lizzy lay in a pool of blood, rendered oily black in the low light. Her hair splayed out from her head like the branches of a dead oak tree. His gaze darted to her chest, waiting for movement. After his own had expanded five times, hers finally did as well.

Her eyes fluttered open, then traveled down to a pale wrist. A ragged incision there served as the wellspring for Lizzy’s river of blood.

“What have you done?”

“This is not a life, Ray,” came the faint reply. “We can’t take the captivity any longer.”

He scanned the visible parts of the cell, looking for any signs of a trap. Everything appeared in order except for the woman lying on the floor, her arm seeming to float on the surface of a miniature Black Sea.

He twisted the twelve thumbscrews that secured the small opening to her cell, then reached inside, his sleeve trailing through the blood on its way to Lizzy’s wrist. With careful fingers, he encircled the slender forearm and pulled it through the opening. He surveyed the damaged flesh, his mind already working through the next few minutes. A first-aid kit sat on a shelf in his quarters. Butterfly strips would be adequate for the incision that bisected the wrist. She’d cut across the wrist instead of along the length of the forearm.

A rookie mistake for anyone genuinely seeking to end their life. Whatever Lizzy was, she was no neophyte when it came to matters of death.

“How did you do it, Lizzy?” he said. He would not reveal that he had spotted her ploy. “What did you use?”

“A plastic knife. Now go away and leave us alone.”

“That must have hurt. I’m going to get the first-aid kit. I’ll clean you up as best I can through the hatch. But I’m not removing you from your room.”

“We don’t care what you do. We’re dying anyway.”

“You might. You’ve lost a lot of blood.” He watched her face for a response. None was forthcoming.

“I’ll be right back.”

He placed the arm back inside the cell. It would take six minutes to get to his quarters and return with the medical supplies. He briefly entertained the idea of leaving the hatch open, but decided on caution, taking the extra time to secure all twelve screws.

When he returned, she was sitting up, wearing the smile that always filled him with dread.

“You seem to be coming around,” he said.

“We were hoping you would remove the fence for us.”

“Right. I’m not stupid, Lizzy. I know what you’re capable of.”

Musical laughter. “You can’t blame us for trying.”

He opened the hatch, gesturing for the wounded arm.

“Leave the strips on for a week,” he said a few minutes later. “Here are some extra paper towels to clean up your floor, and a bottle of peroxide. Pour some on your wrist several times a day. Watch for red streaks. If it gets infected, I have antibiotics.”

“What about our breakfast?” she said, the green-rimmed pupils glanced toward the spilled oatmeal.

He reached into his satchel, and handed a silver package through the hatch.

“Pop-Tarts? I thought they were for special desserts.”

“They were handy. You’re welcome.”

She accepted the package and watched him close the hatch. He mouthed the number for each thumbscrew as he secured it. Counting all twelve helped relieve anxiety.

“Interesting. We remember when you first found us. You said you had spotted us from the drone. You gave us Pop-Tarts then too.” She studied him with naked fascination, a crossroads demon waiting to see if its human counterpart would scribble a signature beside the X.

After cleaning up the oatmeal, he walked away. Her vocal tentacles reached him just as he rounded the corner.

“Have fun flying today. Maybe we’ll have company soon.”

He stopped, moving forward only when the laughter began.

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The Freefly drone returned from dropping off its cargo at the glade, but instead of sending the Phantom out right away, he decided to wait. He didn’t want to spook the kids with too much aerial surveillance. He had attached a note to the bundle:

I AM A FRIEND. I HAVE PLENTY OF FOOD. LEAVE ONE BIG ROCK IN THE CENTER OF THE CLEARING IF YOU’RE OK. LEAVE TWO BIG ROCKS IF YOU NEED MORE FOOD.

He hoped they could read. Chicxulub happened three years ago. Surely these kids had been in school prior to that. Life in Appalachia may have been behind the times, but children had attended school even throughout the poorest areas.

A timer dinged on his iPhone. He couldn’t call or text anyone on the thing, but the notes and reminder features were still useful. It also told him the correct time and date. He had realized long ago that in order to survive the current madness, he had to retain some normalcy from his old life.

It was time to take Lizzy her dinner. He would provide something special tonight. Not that she deserved it, but after her stunt earlier, he had been thinking about her existence as a well-fed inmate. If their roles were reversed, he would have lost his mind before now. But Lizzy had lost hers long before her incarceration in the employees’ break room.

“We hear yoouuu...”

“I know, Lizzy. You always do. Your hearing must be exceptional.”

When he reached her cell, everything seemed normal again. She was always pale, but after losing a half-pint of blood earlier, she’d had the appearance of a corpse. Now she merely looked like the remorseless psychopath he knew her to be.

“Oh, my. You must not be too angry with us. You brought our favorite.”

“Do you really have a favorite?”

“Of course. We love Turkey Delight because it reminds us of our childhood.”

Lizzy had never shared anything about her life other than gruesome details of the people she had murdered. She loved to talk about them. Without being told, she faced the opposite wall, hands pressing against the concrete. Her head pivoted so she could watch him with her peripheral vision.

“I thought you could use the extra calories,” he said, loosening the screws. He reached through the hatch, placing her meal on the floor. Scrawled on the beige-colored cafeteria tray with a Sharpie: *TUESDAY DINNER*.

“How was the flying today?”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he replaced the hatch and began securing the thumb screws. *One, two, three...*

“It would make us less unhappy if we could have a conversation every now and then.”

“That hasn’t gone well for me in the past.”

“We promise not to talk about our conquests. We want to hear about the world outside.”

He stood, forcing himself to look at the side of her exposed face. His gaze traveled down to the bandaged wrist.

“Autumn has arrived,” he said finally. “The leaves are turning. It’s quite lovely.”

She sighed. “Tell us about the colors. Describe them in detail, please.”

“Russet brown, burnished copper, amber and yellow-gold.”

“Did you see animals?”

“Yes. Mostly deer. A spectacular twelve-point buck.”

“Bambi’s daddy!”

He almost smiled.

“What about people?” she said in her sly tone; the miniscule change in inflection would be easily missed by untrained ears.

“No people.”

She turned to face him through the mesh now that the hatch was secure. “You’re lying.”

He shook his head, forcing himself to maintain eye contact. He didn’t blink. “Nope. Why would I lie?”

“We don’t know. Perhaps you don’t want us to know that there are still people out there.”

“Of course there are people. Just not around here.”

“Maybe not in this storage-building complex, but there must be people in the surrounding forested area. They’ll be living off animals now that modern food is mostly gone.”

“Do you know what the mortality rate of the pandemic was?”

“No. The news reporters wouldn’t tell us while television still worked. Do you know?”

“Yes. It was over ninety-nine percent. And yet with so few people left in the world, you felt compelled to murder everyone you came into contact with.”

The corner of her mouth twitched.

“Those seventeen people you killed had beaten incredible odds,” he continued. “They survived a plague that most didn’t. In that way, if not in others, they were special. They deserved a chance to make a life in this new world, but you denied them that.”

She shrugged. “We can’t help what we are, Ray. If you hadn’t discovered our trophies, you wouldn’t have known, and we would be blissfully cohabitating in this splendid place, instead of being subjected to your cruel torture. How long do you think we can remain locked up? We’ll die of boredom, if not blood loss.”

“That wouldn’t be so terrible.” He instantly regretted the words. It was never a good idea to lower himself to her level.

“There’s that mean streak we knew lurked beneath the George Clooney exterior.”

“Flattery doesn’t work on me, Lizzy.”

“You like to think that you’re not like us, but you are. Everyone is, on some level. People are born killers, whether they indulge those instincts or not. We know you would love nothing more than to poison us and be done with the burden. But you won’t, because you’re a coward.”

“And therein lies the difference between me and a monster like you.”

He turned to leave.

“Nice chatting with you, Ray. We’ll see you in the morning.”

The laughter’s tentacles didn’t reach his ears this time. He had slipped on headphones and listened to John Denver all the way back to his quarters. He sang to *Rocky Mountain High* and *Calypso* while heating his dinner in the microwave. John Denver tunes soothed him like no other music could. His mother had been an avid fan, so he grew up listening to all the old songs. After Lizzy came into his life, he had found himself ignoring the other artists in his music library and listening exclusively to the older albums: *Aerie*, *Windsong*, and his favorite, *Live at the Apollo Theater*. Hearing the cheers and applause of the audience made him feel less alone.

Once the beef stew was gone, he decided to indulge in some of the Four Roses bourbon he kept in the bottom desk drawer. Two fingers, no more. A person with anxiety issues like his could become addicted to the stuff. He had no desire to add *battle alcohol addiction* to his chores list, and with Lizzy nearby, he had to remain clear-headed and vigilant.

The amber liquid heated his belly nicely while he watched again the Freefly’s footage from earlier in the day. After dusting off, the drone had failed to catch any images of the children. He would send the Phantom out in the morning to see if the food was still there. He found his hopes rising that it would be gone, replaced by two large rocks.

Chapter 6

***Willadean***

“What do you reckon is in there?” Cricket stage-whispered to Willadean and Harlan.

The three stood just inside the tree line, scrutinizing the small, plastic-wrapped pallet at the center of the sunlit meadow.

What treasures could it hold? Gold doubloons? Ropes of pearls? Gem-encrusted tiaras? Not that actual treasure mattered these days, but it would be fun to play with.

Of course she knew the contents didn’t include actual pirate booty, but that didn’t dampen the excitement of finding the package in the location where they’d seen the drone before. Nothing this thrilling had happened since her arrival at the holler. And since the three children had slinked past the secured perimeter, it would be their secret. Serena Jo nor her henchmen would know about it.

“I have no idea, but I’m going to find out,” she said. “You two stay here.” She reached for her knife and flicked out the blood-oath blade as she approached the small pallet. Her eyes darted in all directions, seeking would-be assailants, either human, animal, or something else entirely. This northern section of the woods exuded a preternatural aura. There may be trolls or evil fairies living nearby.

When she reached the pallet, a handwritten note taped to the top caught her eye. The words felt a bit anti-climactic. She had been hoping for fairy-speak or perhaps some kind of mysterious code she could decipher.

The blade made quick work of the plastic, then flicked across the tape sealing the cardboard flaps. Holding her breath, she flipped them open. No pirate treasure filled the box. Instead, was a king’s ransom in Pop-Tarts, as well as some metallic pouches bearing labels: *Meatloaf with Gravy, Beef Teriyaki,* and the one that really got her attention, *Macaroni and Cheese.*

She hadn’t eaten the beloved food since Knoxville.

She signaled for Harlan to help carry the bounty into the forest. Once they had scrambled back to the safety of the trees, the two boys dug through the box while Willadean read the note again. She pondered the words, as well as possible outcomes of responding to it.

“Willa, I ain’t never eaten Pop-Tarts,” Cricket said in an awestruck voice. “It says these are strawberry. I bet they’re good.”

Poor little hillbilly. In the three years she’d been here, she’d never had an actual conversation with Cricket’s father. Willa hated clichés, but the man could best be described as the village idiot. Or maybe the village drunk. Or the village drunken idiot. It was a miracle Cricket was as normal as he was, considering the absence of any meaningful parenting. If the man wasn’t lounging on his front porch completely inebriated, he was off wandering in the woods, leaving Cricket to fend for himself. What kind of monster denied a kid Pop-Tarts when they were easily found in any grocery store before Chicksy?

Cricket tore into one of the bright blue boxes and withdrew a foil-wrapped pouch.

“Let me see it first,” she said. “It might be poisoned.”

“Why would it be poisoned? Whoever left this box is trying to help. It says on the note that he’s a friend.”

Willadean rolled her eyes. “You’re so gullible. It looks okay, though. The wrapping is intact.”

Cricket tore it open and began wolfing down bites of frosted pastry before anyone could stop him. Willadean and Harlan stood nearby, arms crossed, watching and waiting for any visible effects of poison.

Minutes passed.

Harlan signed: *I think it’s okay.* Willadean nodded in agreement.

For the next fifteen minutes, the three gorged on Pop-Tarts. Nothing this delicious had been included in the cargo of the U-Haul truck Mama had loaded up before leaving Knoxville. They would definitely keep their drone-flying benefactor a secret. Few Pop-Tarts still existed in the world, so the value of the box’s contents far outweighed doubloons or pearls. She began searching for two large rocks.

“What are you thinking, Willa?” asked Cricket, his perpetually dirty face smeared with crumbs and red jelly.

“I’m going to leave the rocks. I’ll leave a note, too...the next time. I didn’t bring any paper with me today.”

“What’re you gonna say in the note?”

“I haven’t decided. I’m definitely going to ask for sweets, though. If this guy has Pop-Tarts and mac and cheese, I bet he has candy too.”

Cricket’s brown eyes widened to saucer-like proportions at the notion of candy. The next moment, the corners of his mouth turned down.

“If your mama finds out, we’re gonna be in a heap of trouble.”

Willa paused in her rock quest to gaze with narrowed eyes at her friend. “Mama won’t find out. I won’t tell her. Harlan won’t tell her. You swore a blood oath, Cricket. If you break it, you will die within a week. That’s how blood oaths work.”

“I ain’t gonna tell, but she could still find out. Your grandpappy knows things he shouldn’t be able to. He might already know about the Pop-Tarts. He might be telling her right now!”

“Calm your tits, Cricket. Pops is true-blue. He would never betray me.”

Harlan tapped her shoulder, then signed: *He might if he thought we were in danger.*

She shrugged. “Can’t be helped.”

It was Harlan’s turn to shrug. He would be on board with whatever Willa proposed.

“Cricket, help me with these rocks. Let’s pull some of these weeds so the rocks can be seen from the sky.”

For the next twenty minutes, they cleared the tall weeds from a section of the meadow the size of a carnival carousel. Nothing flew overhead during the task except a red-tailed hawk and a couple of sparrows. Afterward, it was time to find a place to stash the remaining food. Willa’s stomach was too full of Pop-Tarts to eat the mac and cheese at the moment.

“If we had shovels, we could dig a hole and cover it up,” said Cricket.

“But we don’t, so we’ll stash it in these bushes for now.” She pushed aside a few spiny holly branches, revealing a void within the greenery that would serve nicely.

“What’ll keep the critters from getting into it?” Cricket said after the food had been stored. He may not be a genius, but he had lived in the holler since he was born. He knew about scavengers — weasels, badgers, coons...they would all want to get at the treasure.

“I’m thinking the metallic wrappers may put them off,” she replied.

Harlan signed: *Mylar. Like what fancy balloons are made from. Not very thick.*

Willa nodded. “Not sure if they’ll chew through it or not. I think we need to mark our territory. Boys, I hope your bladders are full. Go around the bushes in a complete circle.”

Harlan snorted. Cricket giggled. Both boys did as they were told, urinating on the dry grass encircling their food cache.

Willa had no idea if it would work, but it couldn’t hurt. Most animals were put off by the scent of humans. Since animals used their own urine to delineate territory, they should understand human urine meant the same. Boy pee said: *Stay outta our stuff!* The notion of talking urine made her smile. Maybe she would utilize the concept in one of her books.

As the trio plodded homeward, tired and full from their adventure, Harlan’s hand suddenly shot up — the gesture for STOP*.* She watched her brother’s head tilt sideways as his keen ears identified a sound. The hand’s next gesture was to point urgently downward with three fingers — the signal for HIDE*.*

Cricket and Willa knew better than to say a word. Harlan could hear a mouse crawl over a twig from a dozen paces away. He heard something nearby that he didn’t like. Willa grabbed her friend by a scrawny arm and pulled him into a clump of juniper. Inside the dark thicket, Cricket huffed and puffed like a damn freight train. Willa punched him in the bicep, then pinched his nostrils together, forcing him to breathe through his mouth.

She heard now what Harlan had picked up seconds earlier: Men talking.

“Don’t seem right, though. I don’t care how smart she is,” a man said. Willadean recognized the voice. It belonged to one of the perimeter guards, the one Serena Jo argued with a couple of days earlier.

“Ain’t just about her being smart,” came the reply. “She hauled all that gear from Knoxville. That bought her status.”

The voice sounded similar to that of the first man. Of course it did. The two were twin brothers.

“I call bullshit on that,” said Everett, the one who had spoken first.

“You can call bullshit all day long. Ain’t gonna change anything,” replied Otis. “If it weren’t for that U-Haul and everything she was smart enough to load it up with, we wouldn’t be in such good shape.”

“We’d be doing just fine. Holler folks have been taking care of business for generations. Little Miss Smarty Pants made life easier, but she didn’t save us from anything.”

Otis grunted a noncommittal reply, but said nothing further. During the conversation, the brothers had been walking in the direction of the juniper clump. She pinched Cricket’s nostrils tighter. She didn’t know where Harlan was hiding, but the men would never discover him. Even Willadean couldn’t find him when he didn’t want to be found. Harlan could practically become invisible when he wanted to. She and Cricket weren’t as talented. Plus her friend breathed like a TB patient. He probably had some sort of asthmatic condition, which was proving to be inconvenient at the moment. She covered his mouth with her other hand just as the men reached their hiding place.

“Maybe I just need to get into her Levi’s.” Everett stood just a few feet away now. “Show her what these fingers can do besides play the fiddle.” Willadean heard something in his tone that made her reach for her knife.

“Good luck with that, brother. She’s an ice queen. I heard after she squirted out them kids of hers, she closed up shop.”

“Maybe she ain’t met the right customer.”

Both men laughed. Thankfully, the guffawing sound was receding now. Willadean released her hold on Cricket’s mouth, but not his nostrils.

*Just a couple more minutes...*

Finally, she let him breathe properly.

“They’re gone,” she whispered.

Harlan’s frowning face appeared between the juniper branches a moment later, deft fingers signing furiously: *Did you hear what they said about Mama?*

“Yeah, yeah,” she replied. “It’s just guy talk. Doesn’t mean anything. Besides, she can talk care of herself.”

“What did they mean about getting into her Levi’s?” Cricket asked.

Willadean and Harlan rolled their eyes simultaneously.

“When you’re a little older, I’ll explain the birds and the bees to you.”

Harlan snorted.

“They better leave your mama alone,” Cricket said, scrambling out of the juniper after Willadean.

“Or what? You gonna ride up on a white stallion to save her?”

Cricket’s chin quivered. “I ain’t got no stallion, but I got this.” He withdrew a rusty steak knife from the bib pocket of his overalls.

“Where’d you get that? The dump?”

“Don’t matter where I got it. I’ll use it on anyone who tries to get into your mama’s Levi’s.”

Willadean smiled with affection at her friend. “Okay, killer. Just don’t cut yourself with that rusty blade. Have you ever gotten a tetanus shot, you little hillbilly?”

Cricket shrugged. “I got some shots so they would let me in school. Don’t know what was in ‘em, though.”

“How about I ask Mama to get you a better knife?”

“You think she has one in that U-Haul?”

Willadean pondered her answer. She and Harlan knew more about what was in that U-Haul, currently hidden a mile or so from the village, than anyone else. Serena Jo had sworn them both to secrecy. Not even Pops knew about all the stuff she had brought from Knoxville. Some of the firearms and ammunition had already been distributed to the folks who hunted for food and kept the perimeter secure. But there were additional weapons — along with a ton of other useful items — secured in the truck with a heavy chain and padlock. Serena Jo believed she was the only person who knew where the key was hidden, but Harlan had found it. His knack for finding things was almost as impressive as his invisibility talent.

“I’m pretty sure I can hook you up. In the meantime, why don’t you ditch that pig sticker. Seriously, Cricket, I don’t want you to get lockjaw.”

“I will when you give me the new knife.”

“All right. Let’s get home and I’ll see what I can do.”

The walk back to the village proved fruitful. They presented mama with a few handfuls of slightly shriveled huckleberries and more than a pound of oyster mushrooms, harvested from a giant fallen Fraser fir. It was late afternoon, and several of the porch lanterns had already been lit.

“It’s Friday night, Mama,” Willadean said soon after, as they headed up the path to the communal dining building. Like the school house, it was a converted, upgraded shanty that served as kitchen for the village cooks and offered inside and outside tables and chairs for its diners. Mama preferred that everyone eat together. She felt it helped strengthen the community bonds.

“Yes, I know. As soon as you finish supper, you two can go spend two hours with Pops. I don’t want him telling spooky stories, though. Last time Harlan had nightmares.”

Willadean wanted to argue, but decided her request for a knife took precedence. She knew better than to press for more than one favor at a time.

“Cricket needs a knife, one like mine and Harlan’s. Do you have more in the U-Haul?” She whispered the last part. Discussing that subject in public wasn’t allowed.

“You think he’s ready for that? Seems a little young and clumsy to be carrying a weapon.”

“It’s not really a weapon, you know. It’s more like a tool. And the rusty steak knife he’s got is a danger to himself and innocent bystanders.”

Serena Jo laughed. “He’s not much younger than you two, now that I think about it. Speaking of, your birthday is coming up. I can’t believe my babies are turning twelve.”

“You know what comes after twelve?”

“Teenagers. That’s what comes after twelve.”

“That’s right. Practically grownups in this day and age.”

Harlan withdrew a Swiss Army knife identical to Willadean’s from his jeans pocket, then signed: *Maybe we can get an upgrade on these for our birthday?*

Serena Jo raised an eyebrow. It was her noncommittal eyebrow. “We’ll see,” she said.

“Ugh, I know what that means,” Willa mumbled.

The other eyebrow lifted now too. That meant there was hope.

“Not necessarily. I just need time to process the fact that my children are growing up in a world vastly more dangerous than the one I grew up in.”

“Okay, but can you make it fast? Cricket can have my old one if we get new, better ones. I know you don’t want him to get tetanus.”

“No, I certainly don’t want that. I’ll decide after supper while you two are at Pops. How’s that?”

She kissed Mama’s cheek, then darted inside the kitchen house with Harlan at her heels. They knew to get in line early before the cornbread ran out.

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“Come on, Pops,” Willa begged. “One spooky story. We won’t tell Mama.”

“Can’t do it, child. Ain’t worth it. You should know better than anyone that you gotta pick your battles with her. I ain’t gonna get sideways with your mama over something so...*inconsequential*.” He winked at Fergus who was sitting in one of the two chairs in Pops’ cabin.

Pops had made those chairs by hand out of burled oak. He had even sewn the cushions himself, and to keep his cabin smelling sweet, he regularly replaced their feathery bald cypress leaf and fragrant rosemary stuffing. A cheerful fire crackled in the wood-burning stove. Willa and Harlan sprawled out on the braided rug which covered much of the cabin’s interior floor. The sun had fully set outside the spotless window; stars sputtered to life on the other side of the glass. Willa’s belly was full to bursting with cornbread and rabbit stew. And she didn’t have to go to bed for at least two hours.

Friday evenings at Pops’ were her favorite time of the week.

“What if I tell a spooky story?” Fergus said in the deep voice so at odds with his size. “Was the directive for everyone or just your grandfather?” Blue eyes twinkled.

Willadean liked this little man more every day.

“Her exact words were: *I don’t want him telling spooky stories.* ‘Him’ meaning Pops. She didn’t say anything about you, Mister Fergus.”

Fergus looked at Pops, who shrugged, then focused on her brother. “Harlan, do you promise not to get nightmares?”

Candlelight flickered in her brother’s dilated pupils. He pondered the question, then nodded. Slowly. Harlan didn’t like the spooky stuff the way she did.

The wiry, red beard twitched, which she now knew meant their teacher was amused. That beard twitched a lot during school sessions.

“Very well. Once upon a time, there were two children. A sister and a brother. They lived with their parents on the outskirts of a mysterious forest...”

“Wait,” Willa said. “This isn’t Hansel and Gretel, is it? We’ve heard that one a million times.”

“Not Hansel and Gretel, Maximus Interruptus. May I tell the story, please? Sans disruptive outbursts from the peanut gallery?”

Harlan snorted. Pops gave a small chuckle. Willa grinned. She would add *peanut gallery* to her lexicon.

“Sorry. Please continue.”

Fergus rolled his eyes dramatically. “They lived with their parents on the outskirts of a mysterious forest. The children weren’t allowed to enter the forest, not because of the child-eating, gingerbread house-dwelling wicked witch who did, in fact, live there. But because of the witch’s neighbor. In order to get to the gingerbread stucco, the buttercream-frosted roof tiles, and the gumdrop shrubbery, the children would have to travel past a decidedly less enticing and undoubtedly worse-tasting house. The creature that dwelled within that abominable abode sparked fear in the hearts of all the forest’s inhabitants, including a few enlightened but enchanted frogs who had the sense to avoid the place at all costs. Nobody in their right mind would stick a toe, webbed or otherwise, inside its rickety front gate.”

Fergus paused.

Willa couldn’t stand it. “Who lived there?”

“I was getting to that. Shall I continue?”

“Yes, please.”

Pops fetched two ceramic coffee mugs from a cabinet, splashed a bit of ‘shine in both, and then handed one to Fergus. Red caterpillar eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“Much obliged, Skeeter.”

“My pleasure. Makes the stories easier to tell.” Pops winked.

“I daresay. Let’s proceed, then. It’s more a matter of *what* lived there, rather than *who* lived there,” he said. “Yes, yes. It looked human on the outside...but its alabaster skin was too flawless to be human. Its hair too luxurious and shiny to be human. Its figure too shapely, its waist too tiny, and its legs too long to be human.”

Willa frowned. “You just described Barbie.”

One caterpillar levitated while blue laser beams targeted her. “Exactly. Barbie was a monster.”

“Barbie was a lump of molded plastic.”

“That’s what the toy manufacturer wanted you to believe, but in fact, the real-life inspiration for that lump of plastic lived and breathed, just as real as all of us sitting here, and dwelled within the mysterious forest.”

Willa had to give the little man points for creativity.

“Her real name was Barcaloungerbeelzebub, but Mattel shortened it to Barbie because it tested better with the focus groups. Until word got out about Barbie’s true nature, many folks and creatures went missing, lured into the house by her superficial beauty as well as the freshly baked dingle-berry pies perpetually cooling on the sill of an open kitchen window. On a side note, this is where the wicked witch came up with the idea for her gingerbread house. She figured an entire edible house would work better than one pie, and since she had to compensate for warts and green skin, it was definitely a smart career move. But I digress...”

He took a sip of the ‘shine, which made the blue eyes water suddenly.

Willa grinned at ‘dingle-berry pie.’ The story wasn’t spooky at all, but she suspected Fergus would be entertaining reading an instruction manual.

“For years, Barbie used her beauty and her dingle-berry pies to lure hapless folks and unsuspecting woodland creatures into her house, where she would consume them, bones, eyeballs, gall bladders...everything.”

“How did she consume them?” Willa interrupted.

“How do you think?”

“Well, each type of monster has its own MO. Vampires suck blood, zombies eat brains, and werewolves pretty much just rip you to shreds.”

Fergus nodded. “Indeed. Did you know that the digestion process of many spiders actually begins outside the spider’s stomach? After trapping its prey, the spider will inject it with venom, wrap it in silk, and wait for it to die. To get a jump on things, Spidey vomits digestive fluids onto the unfortunate moth or the grasshopper with bad timing, then sucks up the liquefied meat juices.”

“That’s gross.”

“Spidey doesn’t think so. Barbie’s process was similar. Once she lured her prey into her house and disabled it, she would spew it with stomach acid and suck its meat juices with a shiny straw. Not a plastic straw, but an earth-friendly stainless-steel straw, because Barbie was a monster, but she was an environmentally conscious monster.”

Pops snorted. The red beard twitched.

“One day, Barbie noticed movement in the nearby woods, so she quickly placed a freshly baked dingle-berry pie on the window sill and waited. A handsome woodsman with blond hair, a chiseled jaw, and impressive glutes appeared just outside her gate. Barbie’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Her stomach juices didn’t gurgle like they usually did when she spied prey. Instead, her heart began to flutter and the palms of her hands became sweaty. She decided she wanted to kiss that handsome woodsman...she had read about kissing during her monster teen years.

“So she opened her front door and struck an enticing pose. The woodsman, coincidentally named Ken, smiled a charming, handsome-woodsman smile, walked toward Barbie, swept her off her feet and into his strong arms, and then carried her into the house. She slipped her arms around his neck while he gazed down at her with adoration. Just when she thought he was about to kiss her, he vomited digestive fluid all over her pretty face and luxurious hair, waited for her to congeal, and then sucked her up with a brightly colored plastic straw. Because Ken was a monster who didn’t care about the environment.”

“Nice!” Willa said. “What happened to the children, though?”

“Oh, right. So the children came along soon after Ken had consumed Barbie, and since he had also eaten the dingle-berry pie on the windowsill as a post-Barbie dessert, they passed right by the rickety gate and proceeded toward the gingerbread house a bit farther down the road. Within minutes, they stood on the path leading to a golden-brown front door framed by candy canes. It stood slightly ajar, beckoning them to enter. The sister tugged on her brother’s sleeve, gesturing that they should go inside. But the brother, who was wise beyond his years...” Fergus winked at Harlan, “Shook his head adamantly. *No, it’s not safe,* he said. *Can’t you see that this is a trap?* To which the sister replied, *Yes, of course, but we’re faster than that old, warty green hag. We can grab the sweets and be out of there in two farts of a swamp rat.”*

Willa snickered. Harlan grinned.

“And because the sister usually got her way, the children crept up the path and peered through the open front door, which smelled of cinnamon and molasses. But the aroma emanating from inside the house wasn’t so pleasant. Before the children could decide what to do next, two gnarled, green hands shot through the door and dragged them inside the house, after which they were promptly thrown into a pre-heated commercial convection oven — the witch had recently updated her large kitchen appliances — and were eaten for dinner. The end.”

Willa said, “Wait, what? That’s not how the story ends.”

“That’s how my story ends because it’s a parable. Can you identify the lesson?”

Harlan tapped her arm and signed: *They got eaten by the witch because the sister was over-confident.*

Willa translated.

Fergus nodded. “Exactly. Well done, Harlan.”

“You think I’m over-confident?” she asked, first glancing at Pops who wore a suspiciously neutral expression.

“Folks who are especially smart and self-assured need to be careful just like everyone else. There will always be someone who is smarter and faster and sneakier. That’s all I’m saying.”

“But...” she began.

“Time to head home, kids. Your mama will be looking for you.” Pops stood and stretched. “Come on. I’ll walk with you.”

As much as she loved Friday evenings at Pops, she loved this part the best. With their grandfather sandwiched between them, she and Harlan meandered through the village toward home. It was Harlan’s turn to carry the oil lamp, which created a cheerful sphere of light to guide them. The chilly air coaxed goosebumps to blossom on her bare arms.

“Shoulda worn a jacket, Doodlebug,” Pops said, using an endearment he hadn’t spoken in months. Something about living in the holler seemed to inspire insect-themed nicknames.

“Yep. It’s getting cold. I’m not looking forward to winter. It’s damn boring when we’re holed up for weeks at a time.” Pops let her get away with an occasional cuss word.

Harlan nodded in agreement. She noticed he’d had the foresight to wear a jacket, which reminded her that apparently Fergus believed her brother to be wise for his age. She had to admit, the parable stung. Was she over-confident? Was she not also wise beyond her years? Or was there a difference between being wise and being smart?

“Maybe we can come up with some fun winter projects,” Pops was saying. “Let’s start working on it now so we have a plan come first snowfall. I could teach you how to make furniture.”

“Boring,” Willa said. “No offense, Pops. Instead of furniture, maybe you could teach us how you do that thing...” She knew she was venturing into a sensitive area. Her grandfather did not like to talk about his mysterious talent for knowing stuff.

He didn’t even bother responding. Subject closed.

“Fine. Well, at least keep your antenna up when you’re in the vicinity of a couple of twin brothers,” she whispered now. “You know who I mean.”

“Why?” Pops demanded. “You hear somethin’?”

She relayed the overheard conversation. Pops’ scruffy face showed dismay at the news.

“That’s exactly what I been worried about. Where were you when you heard this?” He had picked up on the part of the story that she had intentionally left out.

“Does it matter?”

“If I have to talk to your mama about it, she’ll want to know.”

“Ugh, Pops. Don’t go there. Please.”

“Gotta. Were you two past the perimeter?”

“I wish I hadn’t said anything,” she grumbled.

Pops was silent for a few seconds, then said, “Don’t tell your mama about this yet. Let me do some diggin’ first.”

“Are you afraid she’ll plant Everett in the cemetery?”

“We know how she is. Just keep mum for now. Got it?”

She and Harlan nodded. Mama’s lantern beckoned from the front porch just around the bend. Glimpses of it glowed between the other darkened cabins now. Willa plastered a disarming, innocent expression on her face just before they arrived.

Chapter 7

***Fergus***

“Those kids are quite special,” Fergus said when Skeeter returned.

Interacting with the twins had been entertaining as well as enlightening. Harlan was still a bit of a mystery, but he sensed an intellect there that may rival the sister’s. Willadean was a pint-sized genius, no doubt, but time would tell whether she qualified for a place in *Cthor-Vangt*. Fergus must first discover evidence of *scythen* — the ability to communicate telepathically. Then he would look for signs of *langthal,* the talent of rapid self-healing. If she proved to be a rare gem like Jessie from Arizona, who had saved his life with her healing touch, it would guarantee admission into *Cthor-Vangt* and all that place had to offer. *Langthal,* and enhanced *langthal* such as Jessie possessed, weren’t prerequisites for recruits, but they propelled a person to the top of the list.

“Yep. They surely are,” Skeeter replied, closing the cabin door behind him.

The two had settled into an easy friendship since Fergus started sleeping on the old man’s floor. Fergus sensed Skeeter enjoyed the company, and Fergus was thrilled by such clean, cozy accommodations from which to conduct his mission. The notion prompted another: he was overdue in sending an update not only to *Cthor-Vangt*, but also to his beloved Amelia. The thought of the mental tongue-lashing he would receive when he sent his *scythen* south to Florida made him smile.

“Somethin’ I want to talk to you about,” Skeeter continued.

Lamplight softened the wrinkled face into a slightly younger version. Skeeter had likely been a handsome fellow in his youth; his beauty queen offspring confirmed that assumption. Most folks who hadn’t succumbed to Chicxulub tended to be more physically attractive than the general population prior to the pandemic. Fergus had to admit, he didn’t hate that many of the remaining women were so beautiful.

“Of course. What’s on your mind?” he said, stripping down to his boxer briefs and a threadbare t-shirt. If he stayed until winter, he would need to see about wrangling a pair of long underwear.

“You get the feeling folks here are content?” Skeeter asked.

“You mean with your daughter as their de facto leader? I’m reading between the lines.”

“I’d say she’s more than just the *de facto* leader. Don’t act so surprised that I know that word. I’ve been learning lots from Willa these last few years. I don’t want to sound uppity, so I keep much of it to myself. But sometimes I need to use some of them fancy words and arrange ‘em just right to make my point. ‘Specially to outsiders who don’t talk like holler folks.”

Fergus smiled. That explained Skeeter’s sporadic forays into proper grammar. “Was there an actual election placing her officially in that role?”

Skeeter shrugged. “Sort of. After she handed out a bunch of the supplies she’d brought, people were so excited with the gifts that they took a vote then and there. She won by a landslide. Didn’t hurt that she’d passed out a few fifths of Wild Turkey before.”

Fergus chuckled. “Clever woman. That makes her official in my book. People are always going to grumble about authority figures. From what I can tell, your daughter is doing a fine job. I’ve seen much worse in my travels. People here should appreciate how lucky they are.”

“Maybe you could spread that around a bit more. For the most part, everyone here has lived in the holler all their lives. Just like me. There’s only a handful of folks who wandered in and were allowed to stay.”

“Wait a minute. You’re telling me that almost all of the hundred or so souls currently residing in Whitaker Holler are indigenous?”

Skeeter nodded. “Yes. And I know what that word means, too.”

“How many of the residents died from the plague?”

“Not many. Maybe a dozen or so.”

“That’s extraordinary! Do you know what the mortality rate of Chicxulub...Chicksy was?”

“The news fellers never said, but Serena Jo told us it was pretty bad out there.”

“It was over ninety-nine percent.”

“Not here, it weren’t.”

Fergus’s mind was spinning. He and others at *Cthor-Vangt* had suspected these mountain people were special, but they had no idea how special. The vastly superior survival rate Skeeter alluded to meant that a disproportionate percentage of the residents possessed the genetically-engineered DNA that had saved them.

And Fergus thought now he knew why.

“Lots of folks are related to each other here in the holler, aren’t they?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. Just about everyone is kinfolk here. We don’t marry our sisters or brothers like those rednecks in Arkansas, but we ain’t opposed to marrying our second or third cousins. Don’t see nothin’ wrong with that.”

Of course.

“That...uh practice, shall we call it, is probably what saved you all. Your ancestors passed on the magic gene that kept you from succumbing to the plague. Did you know Chicksy was genetic in nature?”

Skeeter shook his head. “Nope. Serena Jo never mentioned that when she came home from Knoxville.” There was that faint tone of disapproval associated with Knoxville that Fergus had heard before.

“I don’t think it was common knowledge. You didn’t want her to go to Knoxville in the first place, did you? You said there was a reason folks didn’t leave the holler...” He trailed off, prompting Skeeter to elaborate.

But the old man didn’t take the bait. “I reckon it’s time for bed. I’ll see about getting you some warmer clothes in the morning. If I forget, just remind me. I been forgettin’ more and more things these days.” He blew out the lantern.

Fergus grinned in the dark. Skeeter possessed a healthy dose of *scythen*, no doubt. But he was too old and not terribly exceptional in other areas to be considered as a recruit for *Cthor-Vangt*. A few other holler residents, however, had potential. He was enjoying himself immensely on this mission, and the picturesque setting scored bonus points. The only thing he missed about Florida and *Cthor-Vangt* was Amelia.

He closed his eyes and sent his *scythen* south.

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“Willadean, may I have a word with you?” Fergus said following a communal breakfast of grits and ham the next morning. He was relieved of schoolmaster duties for the next two days. The weekend, now a pointless temporal construct, would provide extra free time to work on both short-term and long-term goals. The latter: isolating and testing potential recruits. The former: discovering whether the children had heard or seen the drone again.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“First, what’s behind your back?”

“Nunya.”

Fergus chuckled. “That’s not a respectful response to an adult who is not only your teacher, but your Friday-evening raconteur.”

Sudden interest sparked in the golden eyes. Of course she took the bait. A born writer couldn’t resist learning a new word.

“What’s a...*rackunTER*? How’s it spelled?”

“Quid pro quo. Tell me what’s behind your back and I’ll give you the spelling and definition of that most excellent word, a word that any author worth her salt includes in her repertoire.”

“Fine. It’s a sheet of paper from a big drawing pad. We brought a bunch of art supplies with us. Kept Harlan and me distracted on the drive here. We were just little kids then, you know.”

He could imagine the harrowing drive from a populated city during the aftermath of the pandemic. Had Serena Jo the foresight to leave early, before the bloody, violent end? He resolved to discover the details later.

“What do you plan to draw with only one black magic marker? Are you into abstracts? You’ll need a red marker if you intend to sketch my portrait.”

Willadean gave him a friendly grin that quickly turned sly. “Our agreement was only about what was behind my back. It didn’t include what I’m going to do with it.”

“Sneaky cheeky monkey. Very well. I’ll give you *raconteur* as well as *insouciance*. It’s Frenchy, too. Do you know it?”

“No. And I like the sound of it. Agreed, but you’ll have to swear another blood oath.”

He sighed, then extended his hand, palm up as before. His previous blood-oath incision had just scabbed over. The child’s palm, now open next to his, exposed only a barely perceptible scar, not a recent wound.

It seemed the child possessed *langthal*. Fergus smiled.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Nunya,” he replied.

“Fine. Okay, here we go.” Instead of the doll-sized Swiss Army knife, a rather lethal looking blade flicked out of its black casing and made quick work of summoning blood for the oath. The blade was so sharp, Fergus didn’t feel a thing.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” she said, seeing his surprise. “Mama gave Harlan and me new knives last night. We were due. It’s a more dangerous world now, you know.”

Fergus nodded. A wave of sadness washed over him, but he quickly shoved it back into that compartment of his soul in which he stored inconvenient emotions.

She said, “Do you agree to keep secret what I’m about to tell you?”

“I do.”

“Mingle, mingle, mingle, and done.” She wiped her hand on the grass, then stood. “The person who flew the drone dropped off a load of food. And Pop-Tarts! Cricket is in hog heaven. Poor little bumpkin has never had them before.”

Fergus’s eyes flew wide. “Willadean, please tell me you didn’t eat any of it.”

“It’s fine. Cricket tested it first before we could stop him, so I let him be the guinea pig. We all survived.”

“Oh, dear. What does that have to do with the paper?”

“There was a note on the pallet. It said if we wanted more food, we should leave two big rocks in the clearing, which we did. But I figured next time, I’d leave a note next to the rocks, written in letters large enough for the drone operator to read.”

“This is incredibly dangerous, Willadean. You must know that.”

“I don’t see why.”

“What if the drone belongs to a psychopath who intends to eventually poison you once your guard is down?”

“Or maybe it belongs to a nice person who wants to help kids?”

“There are some awful people in the world, young lady.”

She shrugged. “Why go to all this trouble bringing us food if he just wants to kill us? That doesn’t make sense.”

Fergus pondered how to delicately phrase his next question, then decided to simply be blunt. “What if he’s a pedophile who is training you to return to the same isolated, dangerous section of the forest where your kinfolk never go? Do you know what a pedophile is?”

“Of course I know! Good grief, Mister Fergus. That is even more ridiculous than the poison scenario. Ever heard of Occam’s Razor?”

Fergus sighed. “Of course. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one.”

“Exactly. This guy...or maybe it’s a lady, but my gut says it’s a guy...is just trying to help some kids. He thinks we’re all alone in this big forest and probably starving to death. Maybe we’re doing him a favor by eating his food, so he feels like he’s helping.”

She made a valid point. “What do you intend to write on your note?”

Willadean grinned. “I’m going to ask for candy.”

“Very well. I can see there’s no stopping you, but at least let me go with you.”

“No can do. Mama won’t let you past the perimeter.”

“You’re not supposed to venture past, either.”

“Yeah, but, we’re small and fast and quiet.”

“I can be all those things too.”

There was that appraising look again. “You’re definitely small, I’ll say that for you. But what if you’re caught? I don’t want you to end up in the cemetery, Mister Fergus. I’ve taken a liking to you,” she added with an affectionate pat to his back.

“And I, you. That’s why I’m worried. Just get me past the perimeter, that’s all I ask. I’m going to find out who is flying that drone. I don’t care if it’s risky.” He had other reasons for wanting that information. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Serena Jo that their small pocket of humanity was the future. These special Mountain People of Whitaker Holler must be allowed to survive and thrive, and he needed to make sure the drone pilot didn’t pose a threat to their tenuous existence. Equally important, he must keep potential *Cthor-Vangt* recruits safe. And the third reason was one he no longer bothered to deny to himself.

He had become addicted to the adrenaline rush presented by precarious situations. Even making love to beautiful women didn’t get his engine revving like prevailing against insurmountable odds or treacherous adversaries. These past few years of adventuring topside, away from *Cthor-Vangt*, had been the most thrilling of his incredibly long life.

For the first time ever, he wondered if he could go back there.

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“Shhh!” Willadean hissed to the unremarkable boy she had insisted they bring along.

So far, the only quality Cricket seemed to offer was that of unquestioning loyalty. Fergus knew the boy’s intellect and motor skills were barely average. Whatever sliver of creative genius or savant talent lurking beneath the grubby façade had yet to manifest. But the twins included him in all their adventures, and Willadean would brook no argument about that today.

Harlan led the group, and Fergus saw why. If the sister moved through the forest like a wood sprite, the brother navigated the dense timber, briar-infested undergrowth, and insidious poison ivy like dandelion fluff floating on the breeze. Fergus soon gave up trying to follow Harlan, and kept his eyes on Willadean instead. How Cricket managed to keep pace with the silent twin was a mystery. Perhaps there was a latent gift buried in there somewhere after all.

Willadean suddenly crouched low. Cricket had done the same a half-second earlier, seemingly acting on a directive from Harlan.

“This is the tricky part,” Willadean whispered, swiveling her head to the side and funneling the words behind her with a cupped hand. Fergus brought up the rear, the safest place for the person who would be shot on sight if discovered by Serena Jo’s perimeter guards. “Hope your knees are in good shape.”

For the next half-hour, they scrambled, crawled, snaked, and wriggled through a section of the forest few adults would have attempted. Exactly why the children had selected the area.

“Holy crap,” Fergus said when Willadean finally gave him the all-clear sign. “Was that *quicksand*?”

“Not quicksand, silly, but it is a bit swampy next to that stream we crossed.”

“Children, please promise me you’ll not attempt this passage during the rainy season or the spring thaw. I have a feeling that Quicksand Creek transforms into Raging River.”

Willadean nodded. “You’re probably right about that. We’ve blazed this trail recently. It’s our new favorite, especially since it leads to this meadow.” Like a game show model, she made a sweeping gesture toward a clearing ten yards ahead.

Patches of blue sky and fleecy clouds peeked between gnarled branches. From the edge of the tree line, the foursome peered into the meadow at a plastic-wrapped bundle of boxes positioned there.

“Let me get it,” Fergus said with a glance up at the sky. Before anyone could argue, he darted into the clearing and scooped up the bundle. The children waited at the edge of the forest, knives drawn, ready to attack the plastic sheathing upon his return.

“It’s different this time,” Willadean said with a frown.

“Pop-Tarts again, Willa!” Cricket squealed.

“Yeah, but not many. And there’s other stuff, too. Damn, he took up valuable cargo space. Nobody is sick or hurt. Why do we need Cephalexin and Band-Aids?”

“Your drone pilot doesn’t know you’re not sick or hurt. Hmmm, a bottle of peroxide, nice. Water-purifying tablets, excellent. Vitamin C supplements, a tarp, matches. Your Good Samaritan has resources. Fascinating...”

Suddenly Harlan began signing. Whatever he said compelled his sister to dash into the clearing, unfolding a sheet of drawing paper as she ran.

“Willadean, get back over here this instant!” Fergus said.

The child ignored him, quickly placing an oversized note between two bowling-ball sized rocks. Just as she scrambled back into the marginal safety of the forest, a flying object whizzed into the blue patch of sky.

Instinctively, they crouched low, watching the drone hover above the clearing, then slowly descend. It sounded like a swarm of angry bees and it looked like a flying plus sign with four rotating blades. With graceful movements, it lowered itself to a position a few feet above Willadean’s note, like a dragonfly poised above an insect-covered pond.

“What did you write?” Fergus asked.

“I didn’t have much room because I figured I should make the letters extra-large. I just said, PLEASE SEND CANDY NEXT TIME. If he doesn’t have any, maybe he’ll get the idea and send age-appropriate stuff instead of more of this crap.”

Fergus rolled his eyes, started to reply, but was cut off by an irritated *sshhh!*

The mechanical creature seemed to be reading the note. Of course that wasn’t happening — the drone operator was viewing it through the lens of the camera — but visually it was impossible not to attribute human, or insectile, qualities to the thing. Finally, it had its fill, and lifted up into the blue patch of sky, then zoomed off to the north.

That’s what Fergus had been waiting for. He noted the trajectory.

“Only two boxes of Pop-Tarts and no mac and cheese,” Willadean lamented. “Maybe next time will be better. Okay, boys, let’s take this stuff to the cache.”

“You have a cache?”

“Of course. We can’t eat everything all at once. And we can’t take any of it back home.”

“Right. Then Serena Jo would know what you’ve been up to and put an end to this risky behavior.”

“It’s only risky if we’re not careful.”

“I have to admit, I feel a bit better after seeing the medical supplies, but it’s not enough. I need to find out who is behind this, and more importantly, what his end game is.”

“I hope you don’t make that guy mad, Mister Fergus,” Cricket said between bites of strawberry pastry. “I’d sure hate for him to stop sending this stuff.”

Willadean ignored Cricket, homing in on Fergus. “How will you do it? If you don’t come back to the village, Mama will know you breached the perimeter. That won’t end well for you.”

“Right. That’s why you’re going to ask your grandfather to cover for me. I’m leaving now. Based on the limited range of these things, I expect to find its base no farther than a few miles to the north. I think I know where to start looking. Your job, Agent Willadean, is to convince your grandfather to tell everyone I’m ill. Tell him to embellish the cover story with lurid details of noxious-smelling vomit and liquid bowel movements. That should keep everyone away for at least a day.”

Harlan signed to his sister.

“Harlan wants to know how you’re going to get back through the perimeter without being caught.”

“It won’t be easy navigating that arboreal obstacle course, but I’m sure I can manage. I’m rather resourceful for a scholarly type. Don’t let my professorial façade fool you.”

“I like you, but I don’t buy the professor thing.”

“Clearly you have impeccable taste.”

“Clearly I’m not easily hoodwinked.”

“But are you bamboozled?”

“Nope.”

“Hornswoggled?”

Willadean snorted. “Nope. And neither am I deceived, deluded, nor duped.”

“But are you cozened?”

There was the sudden keen interest again. He had gifted another gem to her glossarial repository and she hadn’t noticed the pivot from the matter of his background.

“How do you spell it?”

“Do we have a deal? You’ll make sure my absence is convincingly explained? No need for an exchange of hemoglobin. Just a promise.”

“You have it.”

After spelling the new word and a brief lecture from Cricket on navigating the forest, he took off in the direction of the drone.

Chapter 8

***Ray***

Ray had no idea how long someone had been banging on his door. He’d been listening to John Denver while watching the drone footage from that afternoon. *PLEASE SEND CANDY NEXT TIME* made him smile every time he read it.

The government had installed discreet security cameras at the facility’s entrances. As part of his evening routine, he logged into the internal monitoring system to look for anything amiss in Self-Storageville.

If the small man currently pounding on the heavy-gauge commercial rolling door had been carrying a pot of gold in his other hand, Ray would have only been mildly surprised. The cameras filmed in black and white, so he could only speculate on the color of the bizarre hair. Surely it was red.

He rolled his office chair backward, slamming it into his bunk, then reached into a file cabinet used as a bedside table. The Glock had not been fired since the shooting range in Gatlinburg prior to Chicxulub, but he continued to clean and oil it every month. The clip contained ten bullets. He hoped none would be required now.

As he ran toward the commotion, he passed by Lizzy’s corridor.

“We hear it too, Ray! We wonder if it has to do with your flying excursions!”

She said something else that he didn’t catch; he was already two cavernous aisles away.

He stopped at the rolling steel doors, fire-rated and custom-fitted to accommodate the space. Equipment brought to the facility over the years had arrived discreetly on generic long-haul trucks and unloaded under cover of darkness. The government did not want the self-storage facility’s nosy neighbors to witness the unusual variety of supplies being fed into the maw of the building. It owned the entire compound. The purpose of all those empty units surrounding Ray’s home was merely to provide cover for the operation. The treasure trove of supplies contained in the primary building was worth millions, so the security of the facility was necessarily austere. The double rolling doors where he stood now hadn’t been opened for three years. The final shipment brought through them had been of a personal nature, and he had been the only employee to unload it.

After tapping a numerical code into the electronic pad next to the door, the monitor sprang to life. The man standing outside held his arms up in a gesture intended to express innocence. Ray studied him from the odd hair down to the well-worn boots before pressing the white button on the pad.

“Step away from the door. I have a gun, and I will use it.”

The grin that appeared within the beard seemed genuine.

“Absolutely, sir. Stepping away now.” The man sprang down the metal steps, then turned to face the doors from the lower vantage. “I mean you no harm. I carry no firearms. I’m interested in neither pillaging nor plundering, but would appreciate a moment of your time. There’s a matter of some forest-dwelling children and the goodies you’ve been leaving for them.”

Ray’s finger flew to the keypad. When the corrugated steel groaned and clanked, then began to rise, he crouched in the expanding opening with the Glock pointed downward.

He had been right about the hair color.

“I’m Fergus,” the intruder said, slowly climbing the metal steps, then extending a hand. The other hand still reached innocuously toward the darkening sky.

For a reason he could not explain, Ray accepted the handshake, but kept the gun aimed at the small chest during the process. He felt a warm tingling sensation when their palms came together. For such a small man, he had a firm grip.

“I’m Ray,” he said.

“Yes, you are.” The man grinned again. His teeth looked clean and well-maintained. Smart folks took care of their teeth in a post-apocalyptic world.

“Tell me about the children, Fergus.”

“May I come in? I’ll remove my jacket so you can frisk me, but I think you know I’m not here to make trouble. You can sense it, can’t you?”

There was no denying the benevolent body language, nor Ray’s own gut instinct. This strange little man was telling the truth. The notion of human interaction probably compelled the potential lapse in judgment. It had been so long since he’d enjoyed the company of someone who wasn’t a monster.

“You may come in. I’ll keep the gun on you, just in case.”

“Excellent,” Fergus said, springing through the opening and removing the jacket with slow, exaggerated motions. “I’ll just lay it here on the floor, then do a pirouette so you can inspect my clearly harmless person. See? Nothing to fear.”

Ray conducted a quick pat-down. “I’ll take the jacket for now.”

“Of course. Any cautious person would do the same. This is quite a place you have here, Ray. I’m guessing government, yes?”

“Tell me about the children.”

“Very well, but first may I offer you a nip of social lubricant? I have a flask in my jacket. I find conversations grow exponentially more enlightening with whiskey. I’ll take the first sip so you know it’s not poisoned.”

Ray couldn’t help liking this strange man. He may regret it, but he decided to take a leap of faith.

“I’ll pass on the whiskey, but you may join me for dinner. I’m still keeping the gun on you, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all. I’m famished. I’ve been walking for miles navigating the Fire Swamp and fighting Rodents of Unusual Size.”

“You’re a movie buff.” Ray chuckled. He had watched the *The Princess Bride* dozens of times. It was one of a hundred DVD titles delivered to the facility on the final shipment.

“Over here,” he said, using the Glock’s barrel to direct the small man toward the improvised kitchen area. He’d selected that corner of the building because of its proximity to the food pallets. When he was ready to microwave his dinner or brew a pot of coffee, he didn’t have to travel far for supplies. The washer and dryer were there, too. They’d arrived on that last shipment before the double rolling doors had closed for the final time.

“Sit, please,” Ray said. “Hands on the table in front of you.” The aluminum table and its matching chairs had been scavenged from the employee lounge before he’d converted it to Lizzy’s prison. Now the table was mostly used for folding laundry. He preferred eating meals in his room.

“Would you mind fetching the flask from my jacket?”

There should be no harm in letting the man have his booze, but Ray wasn’t about to drink from the flask of a stranger. Even if it weren’t drugged or poisoned, there were surely germs inhabiting its interior and exterior.

“No problem, but I won’t be joining you.”

“A teetotaler, are you?”

“No. I just prefer you keep your cooties to yourself.”

The deep chuckle bounced off the ceiling and throughout the facility. Lizzy must be beside herself with curiosity.

“Good thing I’m not easily offended. Now about that dinner...”

“Your choices are Irish Stew or Asian Beef Strips.”

“That’s a no-brainer. You may have guessed my heritage.”

Ray smiled. “The red hair tipped me off, and I detect an accent. What part of Ireland?”

“Dublin. I taught at Trinity College before moving to the states. I was at Dartmouth prior to the pandemic.”

An academic. The day was definitely taking a turn for the better.

“New Hampshire. That’s some pretty country. What subject?”

“Music theory. You?”

“Georgetown. M.S. in Health Systems Administration.”

“I see. You ran this place before, didn’t you?”

“How did you guess?”

“Just a feeling. I’d heard of these types of national stockpiles. You Americans like to be prepared, don’t you?”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“Indeed. Smart folks hope for the best and plan for the worst.”

“Tell me about the children, Fergus.”

The blue eyes twinkled. “They’re fine, Ray. But I should tell you that you’re being taken advantage of. Just a wee bit.”

“So they’re not starving? Who’s taking care of them?”

“It’s not my place to say. Just know that they’re healthy and happy. And safe,” he added with a meaningful look.

“So there are plenty of adults looking after them?”

“No worries there.”

Ray sighed. He realized at that moment just how much he had been fretting about the children. “That’s wonderful to hear.”

“They’re trying to extort candy from you.”

“Yes, I saw that. I have some, but it will take a bit of digging to get to it. When communities suffer a catastrophic event — tornado, flood, hurricane — the people who often suffer the most during the aftermath are the children. Their worlds have been turned upside down, and unlike the adults, they’re usually helpless to do anything. So as part of our national disaster preparedness plan, we decided to include items meant to comfort. Stuffed animals, cozy pajamas, candy.”

“That’s brilliant. You probably have enough candy here for a thousand children.” The blue eyes took in all the wonders that were visible from their vantage. But Ray was no fool. The pharmaceuticals and firearms were secured at the far side of the building, well beyond the visual range of this stranger.

“It think so, too. So how did you find me? And why exactly did you come looking?” Best just to get that out in the open. He could only guess at the horrors people experienced during the pandemic and what followed: complete societal collapse. He had been safe and well-fed throughout. How bad had it gotten out there? What had people been reduced to? Had this man sitting before him committed atrocities? Ray gave a small, involuntary shiver. It wasn’t missed by his dinner companion.

The small man took a deep breath, then said, “I’m not starving, Ray. I’m just a bit peckish from the hike over. I’m in good health. I have no desire to take anything from you, nor does anyone I know. The children and their...group...are fine. They’re better than fine,” he added. “They’re quite happy with their primitive lifestyle. I’m not saying they would turn down any gifts you were so inclined to offer from your vast reserves, but they don’t need anything. At least not yet. In many ways, their lives are more satisfying now than before. Maybe that’s the key to happiness — not having everything you could possibly want or need at the press of a button or with a dash to the corner store.” He gestured to the warehouse contents.

“Maybe,” Ray replied. “But there’s something to be said for not having to worry about where your next meal is coming from. Why are you here, Fergus?”

“Simple. The kids told me about your drone and your benevolence. I had to make sure you weren’t a pedophile.”

“I’m a lot of things, but pedophile is not on the list.”

“I can see that. But I bet *lonely* is. When was the last time you had a conversation with another human being?”

Ray’s laugh was bitter. “You should qualify that statement by adding *sane* before *human being*.”

At that moment, Lizzy’s voice echoed down the corridor. Her timing was perfect.

“We are tired of waiting, Ray! We want dinner. We want to know who is inside here with us. We can smell hiiimmm.”

Ray watched the expression on the newcomer’s face transition from mild concern to surprised alarm.

“What the hell, Ray? Who is that?”

“That would be Lizzy,” he said.

“Tell me about her.”

“I’ll tell you about her while we eat. I’ll leave out the gory parts until you’ve finished.”

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“Hello, Lizzy. My name is Fergus.”

They stood in the corridor several feet away from the steel mesh wall of Lizzy’s prison. She had been standing just on the other side of it when they arrived with her dinner. She was expecting them.

“Are you a leprechaun?” she said in the voice that always made Ray think of tree limbs creaking in the wind. In a cemetery. At midnight. It was her witch affectation, the one she’d been using for a couple of weeks now. Every voice was different, determined by the personality or character currently assumed.

“No, I’m not a leprechaun. Ray told me about you, Lizzy,” Fergus said. The blue eyes no longer twinkled as they had during dinner. “It sounds to me like you belong in there.”

Lizzy’s unfurling lips stretched all the way to the long, inky-black hair on either side of her face. He’d never seen a mouth that wide. Lizzy liked to brag about the extra teeth she claimed to possess. Hyperdontia was rare, but it did occur. It wouldn’t surprise him if Lizzy were telling the truth about that, at least. But he hadn’t gotten close enough to check.

“Perhaps. Doesn’t mean we like it, or that we will tolerate confinement indefinitely.”

Fergus flashed him a concerned look, then focused on the captive.

“Why do you enjoy killing, Lizzy?”

Another shrug. “Why not ask why we enjoy breathing?”

The blue eyes narrowed. “How many of you are in there?”

The question sent a shiver across Ray’s shoulders.

“Our name is Legion. For we are many.”

“You’ve read the Bible, I see.”

“Of course. We’ve read all the important books. I’m especially intrigued by the notion of crucifixion.”

“I have a strange question. Do you mind if I ask it?”

“There is no question too strange for the likes of us.”

“May I hold your hand? Just for a moment or two? I find it gives me greater insight while having a conversation.”

Lizzy laughed. “Clearly I’m not the only weirdo in this place now.”

Ray’s eyes flew wide. Lizzy had been referring to herself as ‘we’ since her incarceration. What did the slip-up signify? Had Fergus thrown her off her game? Was Lizzy not as crazy as she seemed?

“Ray, do you mind?” Fergus said, gesturing toward the twelve thumb screws.

“It’s a strange request, but I don’t see what harm it could do. Just be careful. Let her hand extend out, don’t place yours inside.”

“Understood.”

Ray squatted down and began removing the screws. He’d opted for these so he wouldn’t have to use a tool every time he needed to pass Lizzy supplies and food. They weren’t as secure as regular screws, but he’d countered that with an overkill of quantity. *One, two, three...*

“Excellent,” Fergus said when Ray stepped aside.

“The portal to hell is now open,” Ray said, only half-joking. It was a thought he entertained frequently but had never spoken aloud.

The small man sat cross-legged near the hatch. Lizzy mimicked the position, then extended a pale hand through the opening. Fergus took it gently, almost lovingly, in his own. His blue-eyed gaze locked onto the green-rimmed, bottomless-pit orbs of Lizzy’s eyes. A frown emerged within the red beard.

Seeing it evoked a matching frown from Ray. He’d gotten the willies too on those occasions when he’d had to touch her.

“What’s your favorite color?” Fergus asked after a few seconds.

“Gray, although it is more an absence of color than a color itself. That’s probably why we like it.”

“What’s your favorite song?”

“*The Forest* by the Cure. It’s delightfully bleak.” She recited the song’s haunting lyrics like a poem, without inflection or rhythm.

Fergus blinked slowly. His grip on Lizzy’s hand tightened.

“I know you’re a reader. What’s your favorite book?”

“*The Stranger Beside Me*, by Ann Rule.”

Fergus nodded. “Of course. The true crime novel about Ted Bundy. If you were free, Lizzy, what would you do?”

“We would build a cottage in the woods and live there peacefully forever.”

“What type of cottage? Cape Cod? Country French? Log cabin?”

The impossibly wide grin unfolded across the narrow face again. Ray was relieved she didn’t show her teeth this time.

“Something understated. Deliciously cozy and quaint. A cottage that would tempt wanderers to seek sanctuary within its walls. Perhaps we would place a freshly baked pie on the windowsill to encourage guests.”

Fergus dropped her hand quickly, then rubbed his own against the fabric of his pants. He stood the next moment and took a step away from the fencing. “I’m finished, Ray. You may close the hell portal.”

Deranged laughter erupted while Ray slid her meal through the opening. He quickly secured the hatch.

“Good night, Lizzy,” he said, taking Fergus by the elbow and walking back down the corridor. By the time they reached his sleeping quarters, the echoes had faded.

“Looks like you could use a drink. We’ll have some of mine, though. No offense,” Ray said.

“I don’t recall a time I could use a drink more than this moment.”

“She freaked you out, huh? Welcome to my world.”

“I don’t like your world much. May I be frank?”

Ray splashed some of his Four Roses into a couple of red solo cups. “Cheers. And yes, by all means, speak your mind.”

The small man downed the bourbon in one large gulp, then sat heavily on Ray’s bunk bed. “That woman is perhaps the most evil human being I’ve ever encountered. And I’ve encountered more than a few in my time.”

“I would have thought ‘music professor’ would be a fairly innocuous profession.”

“I wasn’t a teacher my entire life.”

“What was that business with holding her hand?”

“What I told Lizzy was true. I find that physical contact amplifies whatever...undercurrents...exist in a person’s verbal output.”

“Interesting, but not very science-y.”

“I did a stint in Tibet during my inquisitive and adventurous youth. Not everything can be explained by modern science. Are you familiar with transcendental meditation?”

“Of course. I have anxiety issues, so I meditate on occasion.”

Fergus nodded. “What I learned from the monks takes mainstream meditation ten levels up. Let’s just say I’m adept at reading energy. If Lizzy were a celestial being, she would be a black hole.”

“That sounds about right.”

“Here’s the frank part. Why keep her alive?”

Ray chuckled. “Don’t think I haven’t asked myself that question a hundred times.” He sighed. “I can’t do it. I can’t kill her. It would cross a metaphorical line. I’m agnostic, so I don’t believe in heaven or hell, but I do believe that killing another human being, no matter how worthy the person is of being killed, would damn my soul. It would diminish me. I don’t think I could come back from that.”

“I think she may be worse than you realize,” Fergus replied, wiggling the red cup.

Ray splashed in another ounce while scanning a mental inventory of the remaining bottles. Two cases were included on the final shipment to the warehouse; of that, thirteen bottles remained.

“Is that what you absorbed from touching her hand?”

“Yes. I realize it sounds silly, but you must believe me. The world would be a safer place without Lizzy in it.”

“She’s not going anywhere, Fergus. After I discovered what she was capable of, I turned that room into a Supermax.”

“I assume you secured the ductwork.”

“That was the first thing I did. You noticed the front wall of her cell? It’s galvanized steel mesh. Unless she has an oxy-fuel torch hidden in there, she’s not cutting through it. I also bolted sections of the same material against the vents, and I used a power drill to screw them in place. There’s no way Lizzy could loosen those bolts. I only give her plastic utensils with her meals.”

“She could loosen those thumb screws.”

“If she could somehow get her fingers through the mesh fence, and I don’t see how, then what? The hatch is only twelve inches by twelve inches. I made it that size for a reason. No adult could squeeze through an opening that small.”

“On some level, would you miss her? Is that part of your reasoning to keep her alive? Having company? We could find you a dog. Or a raccoon. Maybe a hedgehog.”

“Believe me, I’d take any of those over Lizzy. I’d prefer a rabid bear over Lizzy.”

“It’s rare for bears to contract rabies,” Fergus replied with a friendly smile. “But I understand. And I admire you for letting her live, even though I’m not sure I agree with your decision.”

Maybe it was the alcohol, or perhaps it was the pleasure of having a conversation with an intelligent and sane person, but Ray decided at that moment to step outside his comfort zone.

“You could stay, if you like. There’s plenty of food for the three of us.”

The blue eyes were back to twinkling.

“That is a generous offer, Ray, and I appreciate it. However, I’m a rolling stone. I like to remain on the move, see the world, engage in fellowship with those fellows and fellow-ettes who still remain. They’re a fascinating bunch, you know.”

“It’s dangerous out there, Fergus. It must be.”

“Oh, it’s certainly dangerous. But it’s also exhilarating.”

Ray sighed. “I don’t need exhilaration. I’d rather know where my next meal is coming from and that I won’t freeze to death in the winter.”

“I understand. We’re not all cut from the same cloth, friend.”

The word caught Ray by surprise. He liked the newcomer, but it was a bit too soon to consider him a friend.

“I’ll have to secure you in one of the storage rooms that lock from the outside. That is, if you decide to spend the night.” He glanced at his watch. “The sun has set. It wouldn’t be wise to leave until morning. I hope you understand.”

“I do. I’ve enjoyed my time here, Ray, but I’ll be leaving at first light. People will be wondering where I’ve gotten off to.”

“Will you tell me about your people? And the children?”

The bristly eyebrows pulled down in a frown. “As I said before, I’m not at liberty to say. I think you’re aces, but that doesn’t give me the right to tell their secrets. They don’t need anyone to know where they are and how they’re getting by. It’s their business.”

“I suppose I understand, although I’m certainly in a position to help. If they need it.” His gaze sought out the plastic-wrapped pallets reaching to dizzying heights.

“It’s a two-way street, Ray. I also won’t be telling them about you and what you have here. Not everyone in their group is Mother Theresa.”

“I appreciate that. But is it okay for me to send shipments to the children?”

“Occasionally. I’ll have a conversation with them upon my return.”

“Very well. How about a nightcap? I don’t know about you, but I could use it.”

“I have never in my life turned down free bourbon. I’m not about to start now.”

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The alcohol worked as a sleep aid. When Ray awoke at his usual time, he felt refreshed and something else...something foreign.

Content? Happy, even?

He swung his legs out of bed and threw on some clothes. He would release Fergus from the improvised guest room, share some coffee and breakfast with his new friend, and then load him up with candy for the children. He’d located it in the warehouse after locking Fergus in for the night. Even though the drone hadn’t gotten a close-up of the children’s faces, he imagined their squeals of delight when Fergus bestowed the tooth-decaying bounty.

He was actually humming a cheerful tune when he unlocked the storage room. Fergus was already awake and waiting for him. The melody stuck in his throat when he saw the expression the man wore.

“Have you checked on Lizzy?” the deep voice demanded.

“No. I haven’t even had coffee yet.”

“Let’s go. Right now.”

Fergus pushed him aside and darted down the corridor.

“What’s going on?” Ray hollered, chasing after. “Did you hear something? You couldn’t have. Lizzy’s cell is on the other side of the building.”

“I can’t explain it. Just call it a gut instinct.”

Ray’s heart pounded in his chest. Not from the exertion of running, but from the thought of a freed Lizzy. A Lizzy on the loose. A Lizzy slithering in the shadows, between gas masks and bed pans, wriggling around nerve-agent antidotes and morphine...

...caressing riot-control tear gas and stun guns...

...seizing upon the Glock 22s and the M4 Carbines, then loading up armfuls of ammunition boxes onto the flatbed cart he kept handy.

Ray had passed Fergus by the time the two skidded to a halt outside Lizzy’s cell.

So many disturbing mental images had flashed through his brain by the time he got there, it was almost anticlimactic to see the open hatch and an empty room beyond it. Twelve thumbscrew soldiers stood sentinel on the spot where Fergus had sat the night before. They formed a curve on the concrete floor that looked like a smile.

“We’ve screwed the pooch, haven’t we?” Fergus said.

“You’re being kind. There’s no ‘we’ to this. I totally fucked up.” At that moment, he felt a cool breeze waft across his bare arms; it was scented with pine trees and decaying leaves instead of plastic and metal.

He took off toward the overhead doors.

Moments later, the two men stood in the opening of the building where all those shipments had arrived over the years. From their vantage, they could only see other storage buildings. Ray pressed the button, then didn’t wait for the sliding door to close. He jogged to the stairwell that led to the roof. Fergus trotted silently behind him.

Once outside, he ignored the spectacular sunrise blossoming in the east and headed straight for the storage bin he kept there. A rain gauge, a barometer, a tube of sun block, and a pair of high-powered Nikon binoculars were among the bin’s contents. He grabbed the last item and darted toward the south side of the roof, careful not to get too close to the edge. Heights had been known to trigger his occasional panic attacks.

“Do you see her?” Fergus asked in a voice that sounded carefully non-accusatory.

“No,” he replied, scanning the perimeter in a 360-degree sweep. “Nothing. Damn it.” He lowered the glasses, then peered at his new friend.

Fergus’s eyelids were closed. The skin surrounding the crimson beard looked paler than it had inside the warehouse. Was it due to the natural lighting or the thought of Lizzy roaming loose around the countryside?

“What’s wrong?” Ray said.

The eyelids flickered open. “Nothing. I’m fine. I think she might have gone south.”

“The direction you came from?”

“Yes. The direction your drone was flying when it spied the children.”

“What makes you think that? How could you know?”

“The same way I knew she had escaped, even though I was locked in a storage closet. May I?” he said, gesturing toward the binoculars. “There. See those tread marks leading into the tree line?”

Ray retrieved the Nikons and peered through them again, adjusting the setting, then zeroing in on a patch of ground next to the road leading to the facility. The road didn’t venture into the woodland beyond, but those tracks did.

“I’m sure those are from the cart that I keep inside the building. I don’t need to see that it’s gone to know she took it.” The image he’d conjured on the mad run to Lizzy’s cell flashed through his mind. *Stupid...stupid...stupid.*

“What all do you think she took?”

“I can’t answer that until I do an inventory.”

“I’m guessing it could be bad, though. You have weaponry stored here.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. It’s a critical part of disaster preparedness.” His tone sounded defensive even to his own ears.

“No judgment from me. I’m going to head out after her.” Fergus turned to go.

“I’ll come with you,” Ray said.

“What purpose would that serve? You’re not used to being outside, Ray. Think about it. I can move a lot faster on my own.”

The words felt like a gut punch.

Fergus must have read his thoughts.

“Now isn’t the time to tiptoe around fragile male egos. I have a better use for you, anyway.”

As they sped down the stairwell, Fergus revealed a plan both practical and simple. He would go after Lizzy while Ray delivered an urgent message to the children via the Freefly done: *Don’t venture into the woods until Fergus gives you the okay.*

“Wait until I can do a quick check of the items she took. You’ll need to know what you’re up against,” Ray said, veering down a side corridor.

“Make it fast,” Fergus replied, heading toward the kitchen area where he’d left his jacket.

“I will.” Ray took off at a run. He didn’t take the time to print out an inventory checklist. Many of the sensitive inventory items such as weapons and pharmaceuticals had been committed to memory, and those items were stored in secure areas.

Thankfully, Lizzy didn’t have access to the security codes.

When he stood outside the temperature-controlled room containing the drugs, his heart sank. Lizzy didn’t need the security code here. She had simply smashed the tempered glass of its window. Pebble-like shards surrounding an impossibly small opening were tinged with Lizzy’s blood. Under normal conditions, a guard would have been stationed here, restricting access to the Lorazepam, Oxycodone, and dozens of other powerful sedatives and painkillers. But three years after Chicxulub, the world was anything but normal.

Lizzy had been methodical in her selection.

Fergus’s voice came from behind. “What did she take?”

“Midazolam, the fastest-acting of the injectable sedatives, as well as a dozen syringes or so. Ketamine, which was nearing FDA approval for depression when the end came, but had also been abused as a street drug for its mood-altering and hallucinogenic qualities. Looks like she also took a field surgery kit, and some standard stuff like bandages and Quik-Clot. Quik-Clot is...”

“I’m familiar with Quik-Clot.”

Ray frowned. “Your life as a music professor becomes more interesting by the minute.”

Fergus ignored the comment. “Have you checked the weapons?”

“Not yet. Going there next.”

The news was even worse there than at the pharmaceutical vault. No tempered glass window existed at the weapons unit, and the door remained intact. Lizzy’s solution to gaining entry there was simple: cut through the drywall. Again, the opening in the wall was impossibly small. The implements she used — a reciprocating saw and a sledge hammer — lay abandoned in the corridor. Access to the power and manual tools required a short trip to an unsecured area at the end of Lizzy’s corridor.

Ray punched in the code, then did a quick count.

“Six CS canisters, an M16 along with a half-dozen boxes of 5.56mm rounds, and a SIG Sauer .380, along with its ammo. Four boxes.”

“The CS canisters concern me almost more than the firearms,” Fergus mused. “Someone who desires only to dwell peacefully in a woodland cottage doesn’t need tear gas.”

“Right,” Ray said.

“How the hell did she squirm through such small openings, Ray? She’s a slender woman, but otherwise average for an adult female.”

“I have no idea...” he said, then an image popped into his brain: Lizzy with her hands against the opposite wall of her cell when he delivered her meals. Lizzy’s head pivoting owl-like toward him.

*A human shouldn’t be able to swivel their head that far backward.*

“Oh no,” he said.

“What?”

“Maybe she’s double-jointed.”

“That’s not a physical condition. The correct term is ‘joint hypermobility’ and doesn’t involve having extra joints.”

“I’ve heard of people who can pop their shoulders out of socket. Maybe she did something like that.”

“It very well could be. At this point, it doesn’t matter. She escaped, and we need to find her.”

“Agreed. Damn. I thought I was being so careful. I thought I had covered all the bases.”

Fergus gave his shoulder a squeeze. “You didn’t know the extent of her talents. Focus on what can be done going forward. Why don’t you get that drone aloft while I gather my things.”

“I will, but I’m going to outfit you first. You need to be prepared when you run up against her.”

Fergus slid deft fingers into one of his Doc Martens, then flicked out the glimmering blade of a long automatic knife. “I’m pretty good with this.”

“You had that the entire time?”

“Of course. I never leave home without it.”

“I really suck at this, don’t I?”

Fergus chuckled. “It’s not in your nature to be suspicious.”

“You seem to have figured me out pretty quickly. You know the old saying about bringing a knife to a gun fight? She has guns, in which case you should too. I’m fairly certain I didn’t miss any when I patted you down.”

A crimson eyebrow arched. “No, you didn’t. And you may be right. Very well. I’ll have the Ruger 357 and two boxes of ammo.” Blue eyes scanned the shelves. “Also a canister of the CS spray. Two can play that game.”

“You want tear gas and a revolver? The Ruger can only shoot five times before you have to reload. Don’t you want an automatic?”

“I do not. A revolver never jams and it will make me look like a bad-ass gunslinger.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. I’ll pack a first-aid kit for you as well, and some food and water. Would you be willing to carry a two-way radio? We could stay in touch that way. I have Motorolas that will transmit and receive up to twenty miles.”

“The problem with radios is they tend to squawk at the most inconvenient times. I’ll pass on the walkie-talkie, but I will take some of the Midazolam and a few syringes. Just in case. Like you, I’m no murderer. I’d rather catch her — and declaw her — than kill her.”

Ray nodded. “Unless she’s a threat to the children, of course.”

“Yes. In which case, she’ll be put down.”

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After Fergus was gone, Ray concentrated on getting a shipment ready for the children. He located the candy — Jolly Ranchers and Smarties had been chosen for the comfort kits because of their shelf life — and included them along with more mac and cheese MREs, and the note, written in large red letters: A DANGEROUSE WOMAN IS ON THE LOOSE. DO NOT VENTURE INTO THE FOREST UNTIL YOU TALK TO FERGUS. HE’S ON HIS WAY TO YOU AS OF 9:00AM SUNDAY. SINCERELY, RAY.

He headed to the roof, then loaded the cargo onto the Freefly, which had been fully charged, thankfully, and was ready to take off. As the drone soared through the air, he scrutinized the ground below it, looking for any signs of Lizzy. She would be careful to keep out of sight if she heard its motor, so he wasn’t surprised not to capture any evidence of her. After the cargo had been dropped off and the Freefly returned safely to the rooftop, he could no longer delay his next chore.

He must go to Lizzy’s cell and inspect every inch of it. After that, he would come up with an improved system for securing her. He didn’t have much faith in Fergus apprehending her, but he would be prepared just in case.

The notion of touching anything she touched — let alone slept on, ate with, washed with, dressed in — was deeply revolting. When he did her laundry every week, he used gloves. He honestly didn’t know which part of the chore would be the most difficult, removing the mesh fence or scouring every inch of her personal space looking for insights.

Hours later he sat on his bed and opened the leather journal Lizzy had kept under her mattress. He’d known about it, of course. It was the one personal item he let her keep. He’d searched every inch of her cell, but the only contraband found there was a black ink pen, stolen from his office.

The strange hand-tooled leather book felt as if it might begin squirming in his hands at any moment, having sensed an intruder seeking access to its secrets. Intricate designs of unknown meaning decorated its front cover and surrounded a large flat-back gem. The stone looked like the eye of a tiger, or perhaps a dragon. A pewter shank button spiraled by cording served as the closure. Ray could imagine Lizzy muttering privacy protection spells as she opened the cover to begin writing. He briefly toyed with the notion of protection spells himself.

What horrific insights would he glean from reading her journal? Did he really want to know the inner musings of a madwoman? He set the book down on top of the neat blanket, splashed two ounces of bourbon into his coffee mug, tapped on his desktop keyboard, briefly closed his eyes when Calypso began playing, and then picked up Lizzy’s journal again.

*Dear Diary,*

*For my first entry, I want to thank my cousin for this gift. We are kindred spirits, Charlotte and I. She, being three years older and infinitely worldlier after traveling from Kentucky all by herself this summer, is my role model. We shared many dark secrets these past few months, so when she gave me this unexpected treasure in which to express myself after she leaves, I vowed to write in it regularly. And so here I am.*

The handwriting personified Lizzy herself — vaguely gothic, unsettling on some ambiguous level, and generally creepy as hell. He thumbed through a couple hundred pages of spiky, cramped longhand to the blank sheets at the end. There were no more than a dozen. He flipped back to the most recently written passage, then reached for the bourbon bottle as Lizzy’s voice tentacles slithered past John Denver and squirmed into his brain:

*If you’re reading this, Ray, it means my mission was successful. Of course, it was. You do realize that I only ever remained here because I chose to, right? Silly man. No one can keep me in a cage unless I want to be in it. It was fun while it lasted. The service was exemplary and the company most intriguing. I absorbed so much more from you than you realize, Ray. You thought you were being careful, but you weren’t careful enough. I wonder how profoundly you’ll regret that failure in the weeks and months to come. I’m smiling as I write this because I’m pondering your distress. Let’s face it, you’re not the most emotionally stable person in the world. I doubt your conscience will be able to tolerate knowing that you’re responsible for the carnage I intend to leave in my wake.*

*Do you think the guilt will compel you to take your own life?*

*I wish I could watch.*

*It wasn’t an easy decision to leave my journal behind. But even now as I imagine you sitting on your tidy bed with the red blanket, sipping from your coffee mug while reading its dark secrets, I’m smiling. And so I know it was the correct decision. Besides, this one is almost full and so I shall find an unstoried replacement with which to document my new life.*

*In the woods...*

He slapped the book shut. The first thing he noticed was her use of the singular pronoun. All that ‘we’ and ‘us’ business when referring to herself had been for show. She had been trying to convince him she was insane. It had worked. Lizzy wasn’t a schizophrenic lunatic. She was a killer. A psychopath.

A predator.

The only way she could know about his red blanket and coffee mug was if she had spied on him during her incarceration. Had she been slipping out of her cell on a regular basis? She’d gotten out at least once, as evidenced by the ink pen. The image of her skulking about the warehouse while he relaxed in the evening — or worse, while he slept — made his stomach churn and his skin crawl.

He opened the journal again. Despite the dread washing over him, he would force himself to read it. He must know what he faced if he managed to work up the courage to join in the hunt.

Chapter 9

***Willadean***

“What’s it say?” Cricket demanded. His mouth wasn’t full of strawberry Pop-Tarts this time. Their benefactor — ‘Ray’ as it turned out — had sent candy, just as requested. Jolly Ranchers and Smarties didn’t break Willa’s Top Ten Favorite Candy list, but they were better than no candy at all.

“It says there’s a dangerous woman on the loose. Mister Fergus wants us to stay out of the forest for now.” Frowning, she scanned the surrounding woods. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No sudden hush of wildlife telegraphed approaching danger.

“Reckon we better skedaddle?” Unease tinged Cricket’s words. She normally disparaged her friend’s ready caution, but not today.

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. Finish up boys, and let’s put this stuff in the cache. Not sure when we’ll be able to get back here.”

The thought of ending their forest adventures, even temporarily, threatened her cheerful mood. As soon as Mister Fergus returned, she would pump him for information. She hoped it would be that night. Pops had done an excellent job covering for him, but that couldn’t last much longer. Serena Jo would demand to see him in person if he didn’t show up for school the next day.

Her mind was preoccupied as they traipsed through the woods. With Harlan in the lead as usual, they navigated the treacherous ravines and thorny underbrush. They were approaching the perimeter. Everett and Otis could be nearby, or any one of the other folks whose primary job it was to keep strangers from stumbling upon their village and its surrounding land. The ones assigned to the farthest corners of Whitaker Holler got to move about the forest in all directions, looking for tracks and other evidence of people and wildlife. The Scouts, as they were known, included Everett and Otis; their group presided at the top of the holler hierarchy. Just below Serena Jo.

The lowly guards were assigned specific locations to protect: the crop fields, the orchards, or the livestock. They had to remain in one location all day or all night, depending on their shift. Willa had no idea how they didn’t fall asleep while engaging in such mindless, boring work. The Scouts, on the other hand, regularly enjoyed a change of scenery and experienced exciting adventures on a near daily basis.

She aspired to be a Scout one day. Someone with her intellect wouldn’t be assigned permanent grunt work like laundry hanging or crop tilling, and she knew it. But first she must turn sixteen and become proficient with a rifle. While the notion of killing forest creatures didn’t appeal to her, hitting the hand-drawn bullseye at the gun range did.

Movement from Harlan snapped her out of her reverie. He was signaling to stop-and-squat. That meant he had heard something out of the ordinary. She wasn’t alarmed, though. This usually happened in the vicinity of the perimeter during exiting and re-entering. This time, though, Harlan’s body language seemed more tense than usual. When he tilted his head back and sniffed the air like a bloodhound, her inner danger-radar blared.

“Cricket,” she hissed, then made a hand motion when his head swiveled in her direction. The well-trained Cricket dropped flat on the ground. He would pay for that later, she thought. The unfortunate timing placed him in a particularly nasty patch of smilax vines. Those cat-claw thorns could rip exposed flesh handily, and pierce lightweight clothing. Poor Cricket wore his jacket tied around his waist. His bare arms would be shredded like he’d crawled through barbed wire.

Willa’s hearing was no match for her brother’s, but it was still excellent. Lying flat on the ground, she listened for what might have registered on Harlan’s sensitive eardrums.

Muffled crunching of dead leaves in the cadence of footfalls. The snapping of a small tree branch, immediately followed by silence. Perhaps the perpetrator knew he’d screwed up, thus the silence to regroup and take the full measure of the mistake. Any woodsman worth his salt didn’t step on brittle tree branches in the forest when he was trying to be stealthy. The thought triggered an image: the handsome woodsman from Fergus’s fairy tale who vomited digestive juices to liquefy the Barbie monster. Another thought followed on its heels: that of the gingerbread house-dwelling witch who had prevailed against the over-confident child and her brother.

Two minutes passed. The crunching footfalls resumed, and they were coming closer. She slipped her fingers into the pocket of her jeans and withdrew her new knife. After a gentle press at its base, the stainless steel blade gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight.

A snuffling sound resonated from the direction of the broken tree branch. Was it a bear? Bears lived in the forest, of course, but they usually avoided humans. During their adventures, they had never encountered one. What was the correct protocol during a bear confrontation? Playing dead was definitely not the way to go. She remembered that, at least. Were you supposed to be loud? Make yourself appear large and aggressive? Yes, that was right. And one more thing. Never turn your back on a bear.

The snuffling stopped, but the crunching of leaves continued. She rolled onto her stomach, then lifted her torso off the ground just far enough above the brush to see what was happening. Movement in the murky depths caught her eye. A blurred shape darted from behind a giant pine tree, then disappeared behind another.

Willadean wasn’t so confident that she believed three children could overpower a bear. So was it a good thing or a bad thing that the shape wasn’t bear-like? Somehow, the remaining options felt more ominous. If a Scout found them outside the perimeter, Mama would ground them to the village for weeks. Maybe even months. If it was a stranger, the outcome could go one of two ways. Bad stranger equaled danger. Good stranger, no harm, no foul...everyone could go about their respective business. If it was the dangerous woman on the loose that their benefactor Ray had mentioned in the note, they might be in serious trouble.

Seconds ticked by. She strained her ears. Snuffling sounds emanated again from the gloomy forest.

She smiled. Now that the snuffling was closer, she recognized who it belonged to. “Pops!” she called. “Over here!”

With his ancient shotgun in hand, her grandfather came into view. She saw a look of relief cross his wrinkled face.

“You kids will be the death of me. I been worried sick,” he said when he caught up to them.

“Why?” She frowned. Most likely, Pops knew about their forays beyond the perimeter, though they didn’t discuss them. She hadn’t given Pops the specifics of why he needed to cover for Fergus, and he hadn’t asked. *Plausible deniability* and all that. They were close enough now to the perimeter that she could deny realizing they had traveled beyond it. But with her grandfather, she wouldn’t need to deny anything. She suspected he didn’t ask a lot of questions because he already knew the answers.

“Can’t explain it. Just got a feeling.”

“Pops, you’re shaking.” She stared at the trembling hands in surprise. For such an old coot, they were still plenty strong. Strong hands didn’t tremble; weak ones did. The thought of her grandfather becoming frail sent a wave of nausea through her belly.

“Told ya. I been worried sick.”

“But why? Why is today different than any other day when we’re out...uh, playing?”

“Can’t explain it and you know why. Come on. Let’s get going.” He shot furtive glances behind them as they plodded through the woods.

“Seriously, Pops. What is going on?” she said once they’d gotten through the perimeter. Pops had given two men a cursory nod as they passed fifty yards in the distance. The Scouts had identified her grandfather moments earlier through an exchange of subtle, nuanced whistles.

If Willadean could emulate those whistles, they wouldn’t have to traverse all the ravines and thorny brush to get through the perimeter. She couldn’t though, mainly because the melody and cadence changed on a weekly basis and wasn’t shared with the children. The ‘signal’ was part of the group’s defense strategy. Unsophisticated, but effective.

Just before they arrived at the village, Pops motioned for them to stop. They stood in a half-circle facing her grandfather and waited for an announcement, or perhaps a lecture. Whatever it was, Pops didn’t want Serena Jo or any of her spies to hear.

“You know how I get them feelings...” His voice was a hoarse whisper.

Three nods.

“Well, I have one now. And it’s a bad ‘un.”

“A bad ‘un? Like a mountain lion eating us up?” Cricket squeaked.

Pops’ faded blue eyes latched onto her friend. Willadean had never seen fear in those eyes. Until now.

“Worse than a mountain lion, boy.”

“What then?” Willa demanded. “A bear? They avoid people, Pops. You know that. And there aren’t any wolves in this part of the country. The only apex predators are mountain lions and bears. And people, of course.”

“Bingo.”

The handwritten note she had read an hour ago flashed through her mind. *A DANGEROUS WOMAN IS ON THE LOOSE. DO NOT VENTURE INTO THE FOREST UNTIL YOU TALK TO FERGUS.*

“It ain’t safe to be in the woods right now. I know you kids go where you ain’t supposed to, and it’s gotta stop. At least for a while.”

“Until your feeling goes away?” Cricket asked.

“Yep. I’ll tell you when it does.”

Willa whispered, “Is it a woman?”

Pops eyes flew wide. “How’d you know?”

She withdrew Ray’s note from her pocket, unfolded it and handed it to her grandfather.

“Where’d you get this?” he demanded.

Instead of answering, she flicked out the blade of her new pocket knife, then fixed him with a steely gaze. It was a pivotal moment. He was an adult family member. By all rights, he could tell her to stuff her blood oath where the sun didn’t shine and demand to know the answer anyway. It wasn’t much of a gamble, though. Pops was in many ways a kid at heart. He knew that kind of behavior would get him kicked out of their club.

The gamble paid off. He extended a hand toward her, palm up. A half-dozen tiny white scars would soon welcome a new sibling.

After it was done, she told him the whole story: seeing the drone the first time; finding the clearing in the forest beyond the perimeter where food shipments were dropped; hiding the mac and cheese and devouring the Pop-Tarts; and finally, she explained the reason she’d asked him to cover for Fergus.

“You kids been busy, ain’t ya?” he said.

Harlan signed, *Sorry we didn’t bring any back to share. Willa said we couldn’t.*

Pops nodded. “’Course you couldn’t. Your mama would be on you like a duck on a June bug.”

“Like stink on shit,” Cricket replied with a solemn expression.

“Yep. I understand, kids. But you have to agree right now to stay in the village until I say different. No argument. From anyone,” he added with an uncharacteristic ferocity while skewering Willa with a glare.

Three heads nodded in unison.

“All right. Let’s get home. I got a lot of thinkin’ to do.”

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Later that night, Willa lay in bed, contemplating her situation. Tomorrow was Monday, which meant Mister Fergus better get back before morning or Serena Jo would find out he was missing. The last place she wanted Mister Fergus to end up was six feet under in the newest section of Whitaker Holler cemetery. He was more fun than all the other adults except for Pops. His arrival at their village had been...*fortuitous.*

She smiled to herself in the dark. The best way to improve one’s vocabulary wasn’t to write with new words, but to first think with them and then to speak them. Writing them came naturally after that, and thus sounded more natural to the reader.

Just as she found herself dozing off, a loud knock on the front door of the cabin startled her wide awake. Her ears pricked up, straining to hear the conversation between Serena Jo and the late-night caller. She recognized the male voice right away.

“He’s gone. Just flat-out disappeared,” Otis said.

“Calm down, Otis, and tell me exactly what happened,” Serena Jo replied.

“Everett went to take a leak. We was in the northwest quadrant. He only stepped a few feet away. He was so close, I could hear his piss splashing on the leaves.”

Willa noticed his voice catching in his throat. Was he crying? The notion of a grown man weeping fascinated her. She had never seen it happen except in movies and on TV. Back when they still had movies and TV.

“Then what happened? Be precise,” Mama demanded.

“I kept expecting to hear him coming up behind me again, but after a couple of minutes of waiting, I turned around to see what he was up to. Thought maybe he needed to take a...I mean, go number two.”

It was a testament to Otis that despite his dismay, he still attempted to adhere to the no-cussing mandate. Or perhaps it was a testament to Serena Jo.

“He was just gone. Flat-out disappeared, like I said. I looked around for two hours. We need a search party.”

Willa crawled out from under her covers and crept toward the open bedroom door to hear better. Harlan was right behind her.

“We’ll initiate the emergency protocol.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll go wake the others.”

The front door closed.

“I know you two are out of bed,” Mama’s voice came from the kitchen. The lantern there flickered to life. “Come on out.”

She sat at their rickety table where she was lacing up the hiking boots she used only for critical excursions beyond the village. Per her directive, their family was careful about using many of the items they’d brought from Knoxville, like waterproof boots, drawing paper, duct tape, and the antibiotics only Mama knew were loaded in the U-Haul. Those things couldn’t be replaced when they were gone or worn out. She must think this was serious business to be putting on her good boots.

“You’re going out, too?” Willa asked, suddenly worried about what might be lurking in the woods. It was bad that Everett had gone missing, she supposed, but it was much worse for her mama to be venturing out into a menacing situation. The problem was, Willa couldn’t reveal why it might be more menacing than usual.

“Yes. Pops is part of the emergency protocol, so you two will be on your own for a few hours. Can I count on you to behave yourselves?”

Harlan nodded. Willa nodded more slowly. She watched Mama reach for a holstered Smith & Wesson she kept on top of the kitchen cabinet. After slipping on the canvas belt, she checked the slots where the extra clips were stored. Everything was in place. All the firearms in the village received a thorough cleaning every month and ammunition levels were checked weekly. Not only every gun, but every bullet in Whitaker Holler was accounted for, and if used, updated as such in Serena Jo’s inventory binder.

That binder was practically the Bible in their house.

“You two go back to bed and stay there. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Willa replied.

Once the front door was closed, Willa turned to her brother. “I sure hope Mister Fergus made it back.”

Chapter 10

***Fergus***

Fergus had just finished washing his face and had slipped into the clean pajamas Skeeter left out for him, when a knock sounded at the cabin’s door. The old man’s gentle snores came to a sudden halt.

Serena Jo didn’t wait her father to open the door. Fergus felt her eyes appraise him in the light of a lantern she held aloft.

“You don’t look sick to me,” she said.

“I’m better now. You should have seen me twenty-four hours ago. I took diarrhea to an entirely new level, and my projectile vomiting set a land-speed record.”

“Hmmm,” she said, then turned to her father who scrambled out of bed.

“What’s wrong?” Skeeter’s eyes squinted in the lamplight.

“Everett’s gone missing. He was on patrol with Otis in the northwest quadrant. I’m initiating the emergency protocol. Are you up for it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Give me a minute.”

“You can come with me,” she said, her expression softening as she watched the old man slip into his patched overalls and shrugged on a heavy flannel jacket.

“Emergency protocol?” Fergus asked.

“Yes. If you weren’t sick, you’d be going too. I don’t smell vomit or diarrhea in here, so I assume you did all that in the privies.” Her disconcerting gaze focused on him as Skeeter laced up his boots.

“Indeed. About this emergency protocol...what does it entail?”

“It’s a bit like circling the wagons. One Scout is assigned to each search party. Each search party is comprised of three people. We’re spread a bit thin because at least a dozen others who can shoot remain in the village to protect the children. The search parties are each assigned a sector. We can cover more ground that way. Once you’ve fully earned my trust in regard to our operations here, you’ll be assigned a squad and a firearm. Until then, you’ll stay in the village.”

The revolver Ray had gifted him earlier that morning was hidden under a floorboard in Skeeter’s cabin. Visions of Lizzy skulking about in the forest and abducting the muscle-bound Everett made Fergus slightly nauseated. Perhaps that helped sell the cover story of his illness.

“There is something you can do, though,” she continued.

“Anything.”

“Check on my kids. They’re supposed to be in bed, but I’m not naïve. Willadean will want to sneak out and insert herself into the unfolding drama.” When Serena Jo spoke about her daughter, all the sharp angles of her face softened, and a love that was paradoxically fierce and gentle revealed itself.

If mama grizzlies appeared in human form, they would look exactly like Whitaker Holler’s leader.

“Of course,” he replied. “It would be my pleasure.”

She nodded, then turned to leave. Fergus tapped Skeeter lightly on the shoulder as the old man headed toward the door.

“Be extra careful, Skeeter. The woods are dangerous. More so now than yesterday.” He spoke the words in a low key, barely a whisper.

Skeeter winked. “Yep. I know,” he said, then followed his daughter into the night.

It had happened. It always seemed to happen these days. The thought of harm coming to the old man, the children, or their stoic mother summoned twisting knots in his stomach. He’d come to Tennessee to study Chicxulub’s survivors and perhaps find new recruits for *Cthor-Vangt*. He was doing that, yes, but he was also becoming emotionally invested. In a very short period of time, he had become attached to these folks.

He sighed, then pulled his jacket over the pajamas and trotted into the night.

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“Holy cow, Mister Fergus. That woman sounds scary as hell.”

Fergus gave Willadean a wry grin. “Child, you have no idea. Now that I’ve told you all this, do you agree to put aside the blood oath and tell your mother what we know? This has become larger than us. If Lizzy abducted Everett, she could do it again, and the next time it might be someone we like.”

The manner in which the impressive young brain struggled with the dilemma was revealed through a series of shifting facial expressions. Harlan sat next to his sister in the warm glow of the candlelit kitchen, watching her mental process.

Fergus watched him watch her. The boy remained a mystery, but an occasional blip on Fergus’s *scythen* always registered in his presence. The signal was nothing like Willadean’s, whose output was a steady, frenetic jumble of unharnessed intellect. The boy’s felt nebulous, deep and profound — the faint music of a faraway didgeridoo.

Fergus had already conducted a thorough check to make sure the cabin was secure. The long knife he carried in his boot pressed reassuringly against his skin. Lizzy may be out there. She could evade Serena Jo’s perimeter guards and slink into the village like a malignant fog. When he touched her hand back at the warehouse, he’d glimpsed the nightmare of Lizzy’s true essence.

These people had no idea what they were dealing with.

“No can do, Mister Fergus,” Willa said finally. “Tipping off Mama will bring an end to all our fun. I agree to stay out of the woods for a few days, but I don’t agree to spilling our guts. She’d never let us out of her sight if she knew about that woman.”

“You’ve put me in a difficult situation,” Fergus replied. Of course he would do whatever necessary to keep the family out of danger, even if it meant breaking a promise. But perhaps there was another option. One he wouldn’t share with the precocious, intimidating child before him.

“Can’t break a blood oath,” she said. “If you do, you’ll be dead from the curse in a week. And if the curse doesn’t get you, Mama will, when we tell her you weren’t really sick and that you left the holler and went exploring on your own. Either way, it won’t end well for you. So I guess it’s just a matter of whether you’d prefer to die of a curse or die at Mama’s hands.”

Fergus struggled to keep from grinning. He could easily imagine this miniature pirate prodding him with a tiny sword, prompting him to step off a weathered wooden plank and into the chilling embrace of an inky black sea.

“Very well,” he said. “I won’t break the oath, but I’m not going to sit idly by and let something terrible happen.”

“What will you do?” she demanded.

“I guess that’s for me to know and you to find out, Anne Bonny.”

“Why did you call me that?”

“Do you recognize the name?”

“It sounds familiar. Is she a fictional character or a historical figure?”

“The latter.”

Harlan began signing. Willa watched the flying fingers as understanding dawned on her freckled face.

“Oh, you think I’m a pirate lady. I like that!”

“I don’t know about the *lady* part, but I definitely see a bloodthirsty streak in you.”

Willa snorted. “That’s not such a bad thing. You need to be a little bloodthirsty in this day and age. Right, Harlan?”

The boy nodded solemnly.

“I suppose you have a point,” Fergus replied. “At any rate, pirate gentlemen and pirate ladies need their rest. Off to bed, both of you. The school bell will ring early tomorrow. I expect two pairs of bright eyes and a couple of bushy tails when I see you in class.”

“You’re staying here tonight?” Willa asked.

“Yes. Your mother didn’t specifically ask me to, but she doesn’t know what could be lurking nearby.”

“Would you like a pillow? We have an extra one.”

“No, thank you. I won’t be sleeping. I take my babysitting responsibilities seriously. Besides, I can’t turn my back on you savages for a second. I might wake up dead.”

“True. Good night, Mister Fergus. See you in the morning.”

When the woodland sprite-pirate lady kissed his cheek just above the beard before scampering back to bed, he felt that familiar hitch in his chest. The one he experienced when he became deeply involved in his work.

Too deeply.

He glanced at the gingham-check fabric covering the window pane and the blackness beyond, then withdrew the knife from one boot and a whetstone from the other. It would be a long night coming on the heels of an arduous day. He would spend the hours sharpening the blade to a razor’s edge. In the process, he would refine his plan to keep loved ones safe from what may well be the most dangerous human being he’d encountered during his colorful, harrowing, prolonged life.

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“Between you and me, Otis, I think your brother might have been abducted by a witch.”

Class had been dismissed, and Fergus was making his way through the village the next morning, walking next to the brother of the perimeter guard who’d gone missing the night before.

Otis shot him a disgusted look.

“That was a bad joke. I’m sorry. But,” Fergus lowered his voice, “I do think there’s something in the woods that is more dangerous than our...leadership...may realize.”

“What do you know?” Otis replied, instantly attentive.

This was the tricky part. Fergus had to tell a lie, and if Otis possessed even a smattering of *scythen*, he may well sniff it out. “I encountered a woman on my travels, before arriving at your quaint hamlet. She was the epitome of evil. She reeked of brimstone and insanity.”

“What do I care about some evil bitch?” Otis replied, annoyance and fatigue punctuating his words.

“I think she may be lurking in the forest. Stalking people. I think she may have taken your brother.”

Otis gave a dismissive grunt. “If you’re dumb enough to think Everett could be overpowered by some broad, you shouldn’t be teachin’ those kids.” The dark head gestured toward the schoolhouse as they walked.

“Misogyny aside, if the woman were clever enough to compensate for the physical disparity, and if she captured your brother, I shudder to ponder the gamut of torture she is inflicting on him.”

Otis stopped, put his hands on his hips, and turned slowly to face Fergus. The hostility and grief on his face made Fergus take a step backward.

“Listen, you little fuck-wad. I don’t know what you’re up to or what asses you kissed to get yourself in so fast around here, but I don’t like it. And I don’t like *you*.” The last word was emphasized with a forceful finger-poke to Fergus’s chest.

“Does it matter whether you like me or not? Believe me, I’m not losing sleep over your lack of affection. The issue isn’t me. It’s getting your brother back, if he’s even still alive.”

Before Otis could punch him in the face, Fergus ducked, skirted around the larger man, and drew his knife. He pressed the tip against the threadbare fabric of Otis’s shirt, just above the right kidney and just hard enough to get the man’s attention.

Otis didn’t move.

Perhaps he wasn’t as stupid as he looked.

“Now it’s your turn to listen to me, you gap-toothed cretin. I don’t give a rat’s ass about your brother, but I do care about a few of these people, and I’d rather nobody else went missing. Get me outside the perimeter to the area where he vanished, and I’ll do the rest.”

Otis swiveled his head, peering back at him. Fergus could see interest in the dark eyes.

“You some kind of tracker?”

“You could call me that,” Fergus replied, sliding the knife back into his boot. “Special Ops. Afghanistan.”

Otis turned to face him, grinning. “Why the hell didn’t you say so sooner?”

“I don’t like to brag. Do we have a deal? Serena Jo hasn’t given me permission to stray beyond the village proper. Our excursion will have to entail subterfuge.”

“You sure do like to use them big words, don’t ya? Yeah. We got a deal. Meet me by the cabbage field. North corner. You know where it is?”

“Yes, one of the more humbling duties during my tenure here has included fertilizing said cabbage field. What time?”

“One hour,” Otis replied, glancing up at leaden, oppressive skies. “Better bring some rain gear.” He strode off in the direction of the privies.

Fergus blew out a relieved breath.

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“This is the spot,” Otis said several hours later.

Light rain had begun falling, making the terrain more treacherous than normal. Fergus was thankful for the waterproof poncho. It was almost as effective at keeping him dry as the camouflage hunting jacket and pants Otis had donned before leaving the village. These rural folk could smell rain far better than urban dwellers.

They stood in a thicket known as the northwest quadrant. The journey from the village had been uneventful, with Otis whistling every now and then per security protocol. Those whistles kept a person from getting shot.

Thorny underbrush connected one tree to the next, creating natural barbed wire fencing throughout the forest. But they didn’t have to navigate it. What had likely been a game trail was now a well-worn path, one which the perimeter guards traversed on a regular basis. If he could emulate those whistles, he would find it much easier getting back to Ray and the warehouse if the necessity arose. Or to escape Whitaker Holler, if he got on Serena Jo’s bad side. Many of his future plans would depend on what happened today.

“Excellent,” Fergus said. “Specifically, where did he go to relieve himself?”

The dark head dipped. “See that oak with the split trunk up yander? Just on the other side. Last place I saw him.” The final words came out as a whisper.

Fergus reached up and squeezed the man’s shoulder. “Give me a minute. I need to conduct some research. Plus, I need to take a leak, too.”

Otis nodded, pressing his lips together in a thin line.

Fergus continued on toward the oak tree. As he walked, he performed the mental tasks necessary to prepare his *scythen* for receiving random signals. Ideally, a soundless, pitch-black box would serve best, as he’d discovered back in Florida. But over the millennia he had learned to improvise on the fly. He did so now.

By the time he reached the oak and placed a hand upon its rough surface, his mental radar dish was picking up ambiguous snatches of thought. Proximity played a small part in the quality of the communication, but wasn’t critical, especially between *Cthor-Vangt* residents.

*Hope we can get that new privy built ‘fore the ground freezes. This one stinks to high heaven...*

*Should I use the rabbit or the venison in the stew tonight...?*

*Those kids better not go past the clotheslines today or I’ll have to tell their mama...*

Fergus grinned. That last one was from Skeeter. His output was strong, which wasn’t surprising, considering he was also a gifted receiver and somewhat aware of his own abilities.

*How could I have been so stupid? I knew she was dangerous. I should have killed her while I had the chance...*

Ray was a sender, too, it seemed.

And there it was at last. No snatches of thought, but rather a mental miasma that crept into his psyche like an invisible poisonous gas. He recognized its signature from the hand-holding back at the warehouse. On some level, Lizzy was probably aware of an inherent telepathic ability, as were a few other sociopathic survivors he’d encountered recently. But hers didn’t appear to be honed nor disciplined. At least, not yet. Fergus made sure to lock down his own thoughts so they wouldn’t return to Lizzy on the same transcendental highway on which hers had traveled outward.

Just as he closed his eyes to concentrate on dialing in her location, her output abruptly ended, like a haunted-house door slamming shut from the inside. Damn. Had she learned to control her *scythen* on some rudimentary level?

The smell assaulted his nostrils the next moment.

“Oh no,” he muttered, glancing backward to Otis.

The rain had stopped, and the man’s uplifted nose was scenting a sudden breeze. A brisk wind blew from the north, heavy with the smell of death. Any mediocre woodsman would recognize that smell.

Otis crashed through the forest, past Fergus and the split oak. Fergus followed.

It didn’t take long to locate the wretched figure crucified to a massive hickory tree. The vibrant yellow leaves surrounding the body seemed intentionally placed, like an arboreal halo meant to emphasize the human focal point positioned within. The dead twin’s arms stretched outward, tied with nylon rope to tree branches a man’s height off the ground. The head tilted unnaturally to the left; several coils of rope at the base of Everett’s neck were visible between the blood-stained, open shirt collar. How the slight Lizzy had managed such a feat was impressive, if not beyond belief. One universal tenet to which Fergus subscribed after countless human encounters on earth was this:

Never underestimate the tenacity and determination of the very good and the very evil.

Otis crouched at the base of the tree, his face in hands, his body wracked with sobs. Fergus stood respectfully nearby with eyes closed, attempting for a final time to triangulate the source of Lizzy’s signal. No luck. He waited for the grief-stricken man to gather himself.

“We’ll get her, Otis. I promise you that.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Otis jerked himself from the ground and stomped toward Fergus, stopping inches from his face. “You think some woman did *this*?”

Fergus nodded. “I do. And we will find her. But you have to do the impossible right now, and that is to be calm. Hysteria will not avenge your brother. Cold, calculated methodology will. Is there anything you want more at this moment than to exterminate the person responsible for your brother’s death?”

Otis blinked, then brushed tears from his ruddy cheeks. He shook his head.

“Exactly. Now, first things first. Let’s get him down and take him home. Then we will track down the creature who did this and burn her at the fucking stake.”

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Later that evening, a solemn crowd encircled a recently dug grave in Whitaker Holler’s ancient cemetery. The sun had set, so the mountain people held lanterns and torches, illuminating the eerily beautiful setting populated with primitive tombstones and wooden crosses; they were unaware of how their clothing — their expressions, their somber demeanors — added to the picturesque scene.

Fergus stood at the edge of the crowd, watching the proceedings with fascination that mingled with a sense of foreboding. Lizzy would have to be dealt with, and soon. After reporting in to Serena Jo and coming clean about his perimeter breach in an effort to find Everett, he knew he’d been excused if not forgiven. The woman did not suffer transgressions, but she’d seen fit to let it slide. This time.

“Bad business,” Skeeter whispered. He’d sidled up without Fergus even noticing. Sometimes he was less of an old coot and more of a hillbilly ninja.

“Extraordinarily bad,” Fergus replied.

“You think it’s that woman?”

“No doubt in my mind.”

“Seems a stretch to think she coulda done that thing with the tree.”

Fergus turned to face him, then said, “You know that talent you have that you don’t like to talk about? Well, I have a bit of it myself. You’ll just have to trust me on this. She did it. And we need to find her before she does it again.”

At the words, both pairs of blue eyes sought out the children standing next to their mother at the front of the crowd. Serena Jo was providing the eulogy.

“And so, friends, we will honor this man who gave his life for our community. Everett wouldn’t want us to mourn his passing. He wouldn’t want us to be sad. He wouldn’t want us to mope around, wishing he were still here. He would want us to revenge his death.” Serena Jo’s tone transitioned from soothing to fierce in the span of a few words. The performance, if that’s what it was, worked marvelously. The somber crowd met her final statement with howls of agreement.

“You don’t want to cross us holler folks. It may take a while, but we’ll catch up to you.”

“Duly noted,” Fergus replied.

Serena Jo strode toward him now with the twins in tow. Not for the first time, he was struck by her effortless grace as she glided through the parting crowd.

“You two. My cabin in an hour.”

She didn’t break stride as she walked past. Willadean turned and shot him a stern look steeped in subtext: *Don’t break the blood oath, Mister Fergus, or it won’t end well for you.*

Fergus sighed.

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By the time they had gathered at Serena Jo’s cabin, it was midnight. The children were sleeping — supposedly — but Fergus knew better. Their mama probably did, too.

“Tell me about this woman,” she said, the golden eyes boring into him.

“It’s like I told Otis. I met this daunting female on my way here from Florida. She struck me immediately as someone to avoid at all costs. I parted ways with her as soon as I could manage it.”

“What did she look like?”

“Long black hair, slender build, probably about your height. Exuded malevolence with every breath.”

Serena Jo’s eyes narrowed. “You’re telling me a slender woman did that to Everett?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t buy it. I don’t believe a woman, especially one like you’ve described, could have gotten Everett into that tree. Besides, I have another theory. Maybe we have a traitor in our midst.”

Fergus set aside his surprise for a moment. “Let me ask you something. If you wanted to kill a man and string him up in a tree, could you do it?”

“Of course. But that’s me. Not everyone is so...determined.”

Skeeter snorted from his perch on one of the kitchen chairs. A similar but higher pitched snort came from the bedroom.

Fergus continued, “I believe this woman is also determined. And hers is the determination of a warped mind. She has the focus of a depraved soul, coupled with the tenacity of a dedicated psychopath. There are none so determined as the truly wicked.”

A skeptical blond eyebrow arched. “How poetic. You picked up all that from a short encounter on the road?”

Fergus held her gaze without blinking. “I did. She shared some details about her life that raised a few red flags. But more importantly, when she was asleep, I went through her things. She kept trophies. You know the kind I mean?” Half-lies always worked best. He hadn’t actually met Lizzy on the road, nor gone through her belongings. But he had Ray’s testimony about them as well as his own *scythen*. Together they presented a textbook study of a high-functioning serial killer.

“Interesting. Very well. I won’t rule her out as a suspect, but as I said, I have another theory to consider. Pops, have you heard anything lately? Any rumblings of discontent? It’s common knowledge that Everett resented my authority. What better way to bring me down than to frame me for his murder? I doubt there’s anyone who would want Everett out of the way more than me. He’s been a thorn in my side and everyone knows it.”

Skeeter shook his head. “Ain’t heard nothing other than the usual chatter. I think I’d a’ heard, one way or another.” He gave Fergus a meaningful look.

“You might have heard and then forgotten. Sorry, Pops, but I’ve been noticing your memory issues. If you hear any grumbling or complaining about my leadership, report to me immediately. Other than sanctioned scouting missions, we’re in full lock-down mode until the murderer is caught. You two,” she pointed at him and then her father, “Will be with Otis. He wouldn’t kill his own brother. I consider everyone else a suspect. Are we clear?”

Skeeter dipped his head once.

Fergus nodded. “Clear as a mountain stream.”

Serena Jo wasn’t finished with him. “The only reason you’re not a suspect is because you’ve been ill. And the only reason I believe you’ve been ill is because my father vouched for you. And the only reason I excused your perimeter breach with Otis is because I think you had good intentions. Don’t undermine my trust again. It won’t end well for you.”

That line seemed to be a recurring theme in Whitaker Holler. Fergus did not take the threat lightly. Visions of the torch-lit cemetery sprang to mind. He had no desire to become one of its permanent residents.

Chapter 11

***Ray***

Ray now knew more about Lizzy than probably anyone who had ever lived. Certainly more than anyone currently alive. The gruesome details of the murders she had committed — the first of which had been perpetrated at the age of thirteen — were indelibly imprinted on his brain. The bizarre fire-dancing rituals she performed after a murder, which involved burning locks of the victims’ hair, had struck him as especially heinous. He was no psychologist, but he understood that Lizzy wasn’t insane. He’d suspected as much when he first began reading her journal; now he knew with certainty. She didn’t hear demonic voices. She was no more schizophrenic than he was. She killed because she savored the activity, like a normal person would relish reading a well-written book or eating a delicious meal.

Allusions to events which had taken place during her childhood provided insight to her chosen path: other family members, including a cousin and her father, had engaged in ritualized killing while making her watch. One entry struck him as especially poignant: *Pa made me kill my bunnies because he knew I’d gotten too attached. He worried the same might happen with people, and he was right.*

If he didn’t know about her trophies, he might be inclined to feel sympathy.

After finishing the journal two days ago, he still hadn’t worked up the courage to leave the warehouse and join the search. Not because he was afraid of her — well, mostly not because of that — but because in addition to OCD, he also suffered from agoraphobia. It was the primary reason past romantic relationships had fizzled and why he was so oddly content now. What situation could be more perfect for an agoraphobic OCD introvert than living in a safe, well-stocked facility after the tragic end of humankind? His disorder was another reason he loved flying the drones: he could see the outside world without physically venturing into it. If he had more DVDs and books, his setup would have been damn-near perfect.

Until Lizzy had come along and ruined everything. If she was wandering around out there wreaking havoc with the few remaining survivors, that meant she wasn’t in here wreaking havoc with his peace of mind. It was a selfish notion, he realized. And it prompted a question: Why hadn’t Lizzy killed him when she had the chance?

He forced his thoughts from her journal and onto plans for making her prison more secure in the event that Fergus was successful in finding her. Although in his heart, he hoped the little man would dispense instant justice — something he himself wasn’t capable of — rather than bring her back here. If he had been able to put Lizzy down like the rabid animal she was, he would have done so months ago. But he couldn’t even kill the spiders in the warehouse, choosing to catch and release them on the rooftop.

The situation filled him with anxiety. And when he was filled with anxiety, his mind drifted to a period in his life more fraught with it than any other.

The end of the world.

*Three years ago...*

*“Ray, you know what this means.”*

*“Which part of ‘this’ are you talking about? The fact that the director of the CDC just lied about the mortality rate? Or that everything we’ve been doing for the last two decades won’t matter, because to be prepared for a disaster requires having enough people left to orchestrate an effective response to it?”*

*“That second one. Who cares that Frieden lied? He had to. If people knew the actual mortality rate, society would be collapsing even faster than it already is.”*

*Ray suspected the number was even higher than the fifty percent the big wigs at Health and Human Services revealed to everyone with a level-two security clearance. A dozen employees had called in sick that morning. Even the cost analyst sitting across the desk looked pale and sweaty. His speech was muffled through the medical masks they all wore, but Ray estimated he was slurring about every third word. Was the man drunk, panic-stricken, or ill? Did it matter?*

*Ray felt physically fine. No chills. No headache. No fatigue, other than the effects of inadequate sleep. Maybe he would be one of the lucky ones...*

*“You should go home, Tom. There’s not much you can do here. We’re in a holding pattern.”*

*The man nodded, then left abruptly, stumbling on his way out the door.*

*Definitely drunk, Ray thought.*

*He was glad for the reprieve. Next, he tapped on his keyboard, then scanned the Excel spreadsheet titled ‘JUST IN CASE.’ He had used his personal credit card to order additional supplies that would arrive at the warehouse that day, per UPS tracking. If things continued on the current trajectory, it may well be the last shipment the facility would receive.*

*Surveying the neat columns helped him tamp down the anxiety. There was nothing he could do about possibly dying from the pandemic. But if he didn’t die — if he was one of the lucky ones — there was much he could do in terms of survival. The warehouse already contained almost everything he would possibly need in the event of TEOTWAWKI, an acronym he’d picked up from an online prepping forum; the breadth and depth of information contained there had proven priceless. Or at least it would if the metaphorical shit did hit the fan and he was facing The End Of The World As We Know It.*

*After noticing Tom’s stumble, Ray scanned down to the bottom of the spreadsheet to a list of items not yet ordered or purchased and added a new entry:* bourbon*. He pondered the word for a moment, then typed in another:* DVDs*. He added a mental note: as many as you can find.*

*He saved the spreadsheet, pushed his chair back, and headed for the small office next door.*

*“Carla, I’ll be gone for the afternoon. You might as well go home too.”*

*His administrative assistant’s reptilian eyes peered at him over the obligatory medical mask. “I’m on the clock until five, sir.” No slurring there.*

*“And I’m giving you permission to leave early,” he replied, careful to keep the annoyance out of his voice. He didn’t want anyone at the facility when he returned, let alone that particular career bureaucrat. He could imagine those penciled eyebrows raised with suspicion when he returned with the cargo he intended to purchase.*

*“Very well,” she replied with a sniff.*

*He watched her retrieve her navy blue blazer from the back of her chair and followed her through the security checkpoint. The man standing next to the x-ray machine looked sick. The paper mask covered much of his face, but the eyes, struggling to focus on him now, were rheumy and red.*

*Carla placed her purse on the conveyor belt, gazed at the sick guard, pointedly took two steps away from him and walked through the metal detector.*

*When it was Ray’s turn, he gave the man’s shoulder a squeeze. “Go home, Charles. You’re the last one here. Lock up and go to bed. Don’t worry about coming in tomorrow. I’ll handle security in the morning.”*

*The man gave him a relieved nod. “Thank you, sir.”*

*As Carla headed toward her Subaru, he stopped her in the covert government-employee parking lot situated in a sea of self-storage buildings.*

*“Carla, the same goes for you. You know I can’t say what the actual number is...the mortality rate...but I can tell you it’s bad. Take the rest of the week off. Stay home. Maybe stockpile some canned goods and water. Catch up on your recorded TV shows. Let’s see how this thing plays out. If everything gets better, I’ll see you next week. If not, then it won’t matter. At least you’ll be home instead of here or on the roads. I have a feeling it’s not going to be safe to be outside much longer.”*

*She turned to face him. For the first time in the five years she’d been his administrative assistant, her eyes displayed actual emotion.*

*Fear.*

*“Thank you, sir. I have some PTO coming anyway.”*

*“You won’t need to use it. We’ll keep this between us.”*

*She nodded and scurried to her car. He watched as the Subaru turned the corner. Something told him he would never see her — or Charles or Tom or any of the employees — again.*

*He pressed the electronic key fob, listening for the metallic click as the driver-side door of the rented cargo van unlocked. Sliding behind the steering wheel, he started the vehicle, and tapped an address onto the display screen.*

*Anxiety blossomed again in his chest and belly. As the facility’s automatic gate opened with a click of the remote he carried, the Excel spreadsheets whizzed through his brain like old news articles stored on microfiche in a library basement. He mentally scanned the line items, then zipped on to the next list.*

*In terms of helping with his anxiety, it was better to see those lists on his computer screen than to go through them over and over in his mind. But perusing them mentally was better than nothing. Once he purchased the remaining items and squirreled them away in the warehouse, he might find a bit of relief.*

*Until then, the Tums and the Xanax in the glove box would have to suffice.*

Present...

John Denver’s voice funneled directly into his auditory canal via the most expensive earbuds available at the time of his last supply run. It helped with the anxiety somewhat. The coffee didn’t, but he knew he needed to back off the bourbon for now, and he tended to do his best thinking with a mug in his hand. His mind needed to be clear, sharp, and objective, not mellowed and mushy from alcohol.

He stood in the corridor outside Lizzy’s enclosure, head tilted, looking for the fiftieth time at the twelve-inch by twelve-inch opening. Squeezing through that opening was more than merely remarkable. It was side-show creepy. He imagined those bony shoulders popping out of their sockets, then Lizzy — wearing that ghoulish grin — slithering through the hatch like a black mamba.

Twelve thumb screws. Twelve freaking thumb screws had to be twisted off from the outside. How had she gotten her fingers through the mesh? He pulled a small ruler from his shirt pocket and held it against the steel wire. The bands ran horizontally and vertically, leaving small square openings of exactly three-eighths inch in size.

Closing his eyes, he forced himself to refresh the most recent mental images of Lizzy. He let his mind’s eye travel from those bony shoulders down to her fingers. Fingers that were slender, but not thin enough to slip through the wire. Those fingers somehow still managed to telegraph a subliminal message, like the retracted claws of a predatory cat.

With his free hand, he smacked himself in the forehead.

The fingernails. She must have been growing them out for months. She’d asked for an emery board shortly after her incarceration. The pretext had been to keep her fingernails and toenails neat and tidy. She didn’t expect him to provide her with metal clippers or small scissors, of course. Those could be repurposed into weapons. What harm was there in a small piece of cardboard glued to some mildly abrasive sand paper? She must have been filing her pointed nails down to slightly narrower than three-eighths of an inch.

No more emery boards for Lizzy in the future.

He blew out a disgusted breath, then headed toward the section of the warehouse that contained construction materials used for DRCs — Disaster Recovery Centers — during emergencies. Instead of steel mesh fencing, he would use solid panels made with a titanium alloy. On his way, he traversed the food corridor and surveyed the pallets stacked on metal shelving three stories high. He wondered if he would ever need to use the hydraulic warehouse crane to get to them. So far, everything he’d needed had been accessible with the smaller order-picking forklift. Fortunately, the Jolly Ranchers and Smarties had been stored on one of the lower-level shelves.

The candy reminded him of the children. Fergus had told him little about them, so his mind had to fill in the blanks. What kind of lives were they living? Had people reverted to brutal bare-bones survival? Were children used as slave labor? Fergus said they were being cared for, but what did that mean in terms of quality of life? Kids should be allowed to be kids. They needed to be educated, and not just in the ways of staying alive. They needed to feel safe. They needed to feel loved. They needed to feel treasured. If the children growing up in a post-apocalyptic world were denied these necessities, they might turn into monsters as adults.

He had never been in a long-term relationship, had never fathered children of his own. Maybe that was for the best. He couldn’t begin to imagine the suffering of parents seeing their children succumb to the ravages of Chicxulub. It would be even worse to watch children who had survived the plague die of something as treatable as an infection, dysentery, or malnutrition.

Walking past the pharmaceutical facility prompted him to refresh the mental inventory lists. Just about everything a small community would need to fight disease or heal injuries lay in his warehouse. Should he try to find these mountain people? Share his embarrassment of riches with them? He could even bring them into the warehouse during the cold months. How much easier their existence would be with electricity, ready food, and clean water, rather than out there battling the elements, wild animals, and violent people.

He stepped inside the formerly secured area, contemplating what that scenario would look like. It wouldn’t be an easy adjustment for a hard-core introvert to house strangers, but it would be the right thing to do. Helping people in an emergency situation was precisely what this place and his job had been created for. Now, finally, there might be an opportunity to actually implement the protocols for which he had been trained.

The notion was profoundly appealing. But there was still the Lizzy situation to contend with. What if she were captured and returned here? It would be a relief to have help with the figurative and literal burden of restraining her. But wouldn’t that also put the children at risk? Were they at an even greater risk out there with her lurking about?

Damn it. He knew what he should be doing, and instead he was creating busy work to avoid doing it. With a surge of determination and clarity, he changed course and headed toward the weapons sector of the warehouse.

Chapter 12

***Willadean***

Life sucked like a giant Hoover. Willadean, Harlan, and Cricket were basically under house arrest, or maybe village arrest would be more accurate. The shortest leash she’d been tethered to since their arrival in the holler was siphoning all the joy from her existence. And there was nothing to be done about it. Yet.

Wriggle room normally presented itself in these situations, but Mama knew how to close all possible loopholes. She hadn’t simply said, *Don’t stray outside the village*. She had said, *Don’t go beyond the privies to the north, the clotheslines to the south, the schoolhouse to the east, and Pops’ cabin to the west.* Not only that, Serena Jo had embedded a timeline in the rule: *In effect until I specifically tell you otherwise.*

Still, ways to circumnavigate rules always presented themselves.

“You reckon it’s that scary lady Mister Fergus talked about?” Cricket said, his mouth full of cornbread and honey.

The cooking ladies had been especially generous at breakfast that morning. And since the village beehives set a record for honey production in early September, everyone seemed to have sticky fingers that morning. In the literal sense. But the notion of figurative sticky fingers gave her an idea.

“Who knows?” she muttered, pondering how she might get access to Mister Fergus’s mysterious jacket. She hadn’t forgotten her mission to uncover his many secrets. And if she couldn’t go adventuring outside the village, she would have to scare up some entertainment within.

“What do you suppose Mister Fergus has in those pockets?” she said, mostly to Harlan. Cricket wasn’t known for his powers of observation. “He’s pulled some weird stuff out of them, more than once.”

Harlan nodded, then signed: *Maybe he’s a sorcerer and his pockets are full of bat wing and eye of newt.*

Willa snorted. “Right. More like a fairy king with pixie dust in his pockets. He’s really short. I kind of like that about him, though. Makes him feel like he’s one of us.”

Harlan and Cricket nodded. Everyone under the age of thirteen understood the chasm that existed between the realm of grownups and that of children. Grownups dealt with boring reality day after day, while kids could travel at will between stark absolutes and fabricated make-believe. She sensed that Mister Fergus could still manage those types of journeys, and it made her like him even more. But it didn’t get him off the hook.

“Come on. Let’s go see if Pops is home,” she said.

“Willa, you know your Pops is out with Mister Fergus and Otis. They’re on one of those...what do you call ‘em?” Cricket said, his face scrunched up the way it always did when he didn’t know something. Sometimes Willa found that dumb-scrunch amusing, but other times it was just plain annoying.

Today it was the latter.

“A reconnaissance mission. Duh, Cricket,” she hissed, then took off at a run.

She heard the boys’ boots pound against the hard-packed dirt behind her. Seconds later, they stood on the porch of her grandfather’s cabin. She knocked on the door, loudly, so anyone within earshot would hear. Turning to give Harlan a wink, she sighed when she saw the confusion on Cricket’s face.

“This is what you call a *pretense*,” she said in a low voice. “We’re acting like we don’t know whether Pops is home. He won’t answer his door, and then we’ll go in and search the place. If anyone catches us, we’ll pretend we were just here for Pops. Got it?”

The dark head dipped slowly. “What are we looking for?”

“Won’t know until we find it. Right, Harlan?”

Harlan nodded. His eyes were bright with excitement, and perhaps a bit of trepidation. Harlan wasn’t as fearless as Willa. She grinned, remembering what Mister Fergus had called her: Anne Bonny, the pirate lady.

Well, a pirate lady could also be a clever spy when it served her purpose. She lifted the door latch and stepped inside Pops’ tidy cabin. She took a deep breath, smelling the familiar herbs he stashed inside cupboards and cushions.

Harlan tapped her shoulder and gestured toward the empty hook by the door. *Jacket isn’t here,* he signed.

“Right,” she said. “I guess he’s wearing it under the coat Pops gave him. I thought he might leave it behind.”

“He been sleeping on the floor?” Cricket said, standing on the braided rag rug Pops had made. Her grandfather prided himself on being able to do ‘women’s work’ as well as any woman.

“Where else would he sleep? Pops isn’t the spooning type.”

Harlan snorted.

It didn’t take long to search his tiny cabin. The woodworking tools Pops used to create furniture, toys for the smaller kids, and miniature works of art were stored in a cabinet next to the front door. Kitchen utensils filled the cupboard beside the water jug and basin. Clean, neatly folded, oft-patched clothing populated an armoire built by Pops himself. The carved forest scene was supposedly from the Bible, but Mama said it resembled a Roman bacchanal...that was a word Willa had first heard two years ago after the infamous Night of Moonshine*.* Nobody in the holler was allowed to talk about the raucous events which took place after she and Harlan had gone to bed that evening.

“Nothing interesting here,” she said in disgust. “Cricket, quit stomping all over Pops’ rug with your dirty shoes.”

Cricket’s head tilted to the side, like a dog listening to one of those special whistles. “There’s a hollow spot under them boards,” Cricket said. “See?” Stomp, stomp, stomp, *thud*.

“You’re right. Pull up that rug,” Willa ordered.

“There’s a nail missing here,” Cricket said. “Bet we can pry it up.”

“Do it carefully, Cricket. We can’t leave evidence we’ve been spying.”

Cricket lifted the loose board. Three pairs of eyes opened wide at the hidden items in the space.

“What the heck is this stuff?” The dumb-scrunch was back on Cricket’s face. This time it was understandable.

“I’m not sure about those.” Willa pointed to some silver cartridges imprinted with numbers and letters. “Or that.” A pharmaceutical bottle filled with clear fluid. “But I do know that’s a revolver and those are syringes.”

Did possession of these items mean Mister Fergus was a bad guy? She desperately hoped not. Surely there was a logical explanation for their presence...hidden under the floor...where Pops probably didn’t know about them.

“What does it mean, Willa?” Cricket whispered.

“I don’t know, but I aim to find out,” she replied. Thoughts of pirate ladies and clever spies vanished, replaced by images of that revolver pointed at Pops’ bald head when he was sound asleep.

“You gonna interrogate him?”

Willa’s eyebrows lifted at Cricket’s word choice. Maybe he was actually learning a thing or two. “I don’t know. I need to think about it.”

*Maybe we should just tell Mama. She’ll know what to do,* Harlan signed.

“We can’t tell Mama. She probably wouldn’t even ask him about this stuff. She’d just put him in the cemetery straight away, without due process.”

“What’s due process?”

The dumb-scrunch annoyed her this time, which probably wasn’t fair to Cricket, but she was very worried about the contents of that hiding place and the possible repercussions of exposing them. Mister Fergus was the most interesting person who had ever shown up in the holler.

“Don’t worry about it. Just don’t say anything to anyone until I have time to think about this. Agreed? Do I need to get the blood oath knife out?”

Cricket and Harlan shook their heads.

She reached for one of the silver cartridges, turning it slowly to read the print on all sides.

“I think this is tear gas. See that little graphic? I think that’s what cops throw into a rowdy mob to get them to disperse.”

Harlan nodded, then pointed with a questioning look to the pharmaceutical bottle.

She set the cartridge beside the revolver and reached for the small glass vial filled with clear liquid and topped with a rubber lid. “*Midazolam, injection.* *Can cause paranoid or suicidal i-de-a-tion...*there’s a new word...*and impair memory, judgment, and coordination. Combining with other substances, particularly alcohol, may slow breathing and possibly lead to death.* Wonder what this stuff is for?”

“It’s for sedating pesky children who meddle with other people’s personal property,” a deep voice said from the door.

Three children spun to face a visibly displeased Mister Fergus.

They must have been so distracted with the hidey hole that they hadn’t felt the chilly air waft in. Plus — Willa had noticed this before — Mister Fergus moved as quietly as a mouse. Almost as quietly as Harlan. Most grownups, except for the best game hunters in the village, weren’t so quiet.

“We were looking for Pops,” she said defiantly.

“You think your grandfather could fit in that hole under the board? Is he a shapeshifter?”

Willa couldn’t help but grin. What other grownup would have used a word like that? She decided to come clean.

“Sorry, Mister Fergus. We were bored and decided to investigate you. We wanted to go through your jacket, but since you’re wearing it, we thought we’d toss the cell. Do a shakedown.”

She watched the red beard twitch. Just once. He was undoubtedly displeased, but also a bit amused by her jailhouse terminology.

“Those items are incredibly dangerous. You’re smart children. You should know not to handle such things.”

“What are they doing there, Mister Fergus? You know you’re not allowed to have stuff like that. If Mama found out...”

A crimson eyebrow arched. “But she won’t. Just remember, I may end up in the cemetery, but you could end up grounded to the village until you’re twenty-one.”

He wasn’t wrong. So, mutual blackmail was how this would go down. The notion was intriguing.

“Just explain this stuff and we won’t tell anyone. Right, boys?”

Harlan nodded.

Cricket was in full-blown conflict mode. It was written all over his face. “It don’t seem right not to tell your mama about a gun, Willa. I don’t want to get no one in trouble, but I don’t want to be in trouble with your mama neither.”

Willa smacked her friend’s greasy dark locks. “Snap out of it, Cricket. Just because you’re in love with Mama doesn’t mean you’re going to snitch.”

“It ain’t about that. It’s about doing the right thing. It’s one thing to swipe an extra piece of cornbread. It’s somethin’ else to not tell about a gun.”

Willa narrowed her eyes, ignoring another of Cricket’s goody-two-shoes speeches. “You know what happens to snitches?”

“They get their tongues sliced off and stuffed down their throats in the middle of the night?”

“Correct. Not a word or you’ll be ingesting your own tongue before daylight tomorrow.”

Cricket swallowed hard and nodded.

“Now, Mister Fergus, about this contraband...Wait a minute. Where’s Pops?”

“He’s reporting to Serena Jo.”

Willa noticed the grim expression on the normally cheerful face. Her stomach did a flip. “Reporting about what?”

Mister Fergus looked exhausted all of a sudden. He stepped inside the cabin, shutting the door behind him and lit the stove in the corner. Willa hadn’t noticed she could see her own breath.

“We found another body,” he said. Sudden flames from the kindling danced in the normally merry eyes. Now, those eyes looked tired and sad.

“You mean like Mister Everett?”

A nod of his head.

“Just like Mister Everett? In a tree?” Cricket whispered.

Another nod. “This was closer, though. Only a couple miles to the north. Very close to your cache of goodies.”

“Did anyone find our stuff?”

Mister Fergus gave her a quizzical look. Was there disdain there too?

“Aren’t you interested in who the victim was?”

Willa felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “Yes, of course. I mean, I know it wasn’t Pops because you said he’s with Mama.”

“You’re only concerned about a murder if the victim is someone you love?”

Willa frowned. “No. I’m not saying that.”

“I’m sorry. That was unkind of me. I’m just tired and cranky. I’m also not sure what’s to be done about this...situation. Trying to find the perpetrator is like trying to snare a ghost. There were no tracks to speak of near the...scene.”

She felt a sudden surge of affection for her odd little teacher.

“You don’t have to tiptoe around horror, Mister Fergus. We were in Knoxville when everything collapsed. It was bad. We’ve been living off the land for the three years since. We see hogs slaughtered, deer gutted, rule-breakers put in the stocks...”

The blue eyes flew wide open. “Stocks? As in the medieval form of torture?”

“More like they used in old western movies for drunkards and troublemakers.”

“Why haven’t I seen evidence of this barbarity?”

Cricket piped up, “Don’t happen that often, Mister Fergus. Most folks avoid the stocks if they can. They usually can.”

Mister Fergus shook his head in disgust, but didn’t comment further.

Pops chose that moment to stomp up the cabin steps.

“Quick. Replace the board, Cricket!” Willa hissed.

“Your grandfather knows about my belongings. Do you think I would hide items as dangerous as these in a house without telling the homeowner?”

“What’s all this about?” Pops said as he walked in the door. He looked even more exhausted than Mister Fergus.

“The children are bored, Skeeter. Perhaps we can find them something productive to do with their time that doesn’t involve breaking and entering.”

“Technically, there was no breaking. Just entering,” Willa offered. “And Mama doesn’t need to know. She has plenty of other things on her mind. Right Pops?”

Her grandfather squinted at her and gave a tired grunt. “You got that right. And just in case you three were thinking about sneaking out of the village, I’m telling you right now, don’t do it. I will personally tell your mother if I catch wind of it. And you know I will catch wind of it...”

Uh oh. Pops was using proper grammar. That meant serious business.

“Who was it that got strung up?” Cricket asked.

“The Tate girl. The one who just earned her place on the Scouts,” Pops replied.

“Adelaide? That’s awful,” Willa said. It was awful, but not *catastrophic*. Adelaide was a bully. Not only that, she liked to torture small animals when she thought nobody else was around; they’d seen it firsthand on one of their forest adventures. As much as Willa hated the thought of someone getting murdered, at least the village’s next litter of puppies would be safe.

“Right. I know exactly how you felt about the girl, Willa. Coulda been worse, I s’pose. You all get going, now. Your mama’s waiting on you.”

They dashed out the door, dropped Cricket off at the most squalid of all the houses in the village — his drunkard daddy was a ne’er do well — and raced home. Willa beat Harlan to the front steps. She always did. Harlan was stealthy, but she was faster.

“Slow down, you two.” Their mother’s gaze zeroed in on them the second they stormed inside. Willa felt the heat in that gaze. Serena Jo had an agenda. Willa could almost see it floating above the braids, like squiggly lines coming off a cartoon skunk. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“We already know about Adelaide. Pops told us.”

“There’s something else. Sit down, please.”

Mama was sitting at their wobbly kitchen table, warming her hands on a steaming cup of instant coffee. The taste of coffee was gross, but it smelled heavenly. She’d brought a ton of it with them in the U-Haul, and she only drank it at home so she wouldn’t have to share it.

“I need to tell you something...” she began, then stopped.

Willa felt a sudden unpleasant fluttering in her belly. Serena Jo never hesitated.

After a deep breath, Mama said, “If anything happens to me, Pops will move in here with you. You must promise to mind him just like you do me. I know you love him, but I also know you take adventure of him. And you’ll need to take care of him too. His memory isn’t what it used to be.”

The fluttering exploded into a swarm of angry bees. The notion of Mama not being with them was too dreadful to ponder even for a second.

Harlan signed, *Nothing will ever happen to you, Mama. You’re too smart for that scary lady.*

Mama smiled. “We don’t know who is behind these murders, but we do know the person is formidable.”

Willa approved the word choice with a nod.

Mama continued. “The person abducted and killed two of our members — people who were quite capable of defending themselves — without anyone seeing a thing. Then he was able to hoist them into a tree and stage them for us to find. So the murderer is either very strong or very clever. And he’s quick. From the time Adelaide was last seen alive until she was found...in the tree...was only an hour.”

Harlan signed, *Are you scared, Mama?*

“Yes, I’m scared for my family and our people. That’s why it’s vitally important that you two don’t leave the village.”

*We won’t Mama. We promised.* Then he switched to their twin sign language, *I mean it, Willa. Don’t try to bully me this time.*

Willa leaned back in her chair and studied her brother through hooded eyes. This rebellious streak she’d been seeing in him lately...she didn’t like it. Not one bit.

“Anyway,” Mama continued, “I just want you both to know that if something happens to me, Pops will take care of you.”

“What if something happens to Pops?” Willa demanded. “He’s no spring chicken, you know.”

“Pops isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. He’s a healthy old goat.”

*What if that lady gets him when he’s out on patrol?* Harlan’s chin quivered at the thought.

Mama sighed. “We don’t know who the killer is, Harlan.”

*I’m not saying she is the killer. I’m just saying she’s out there somewhere.*

“He’s got a point,” Willa said, warming to the notion of two potential villains.

“I know you both like Mister Fergus very much, but that doesn’t mean he was truthful about that woman. Something seemed off about his story. But he’s the least of my worries now. He has an alibi for the two murders. It’s someone else, and I’m going to find out who.”

Chapter 13

***Harlan***

*Harlan awoke to find himself soaring through the night air fifty feet above the ground. He breathed in the smell of wood-smoke and pine needles with a nose that wasn’t really there. The pine-needle scent was stronger than the smoke in his imagined nostrils, so he must be farther away from the village than usual. His imagined skin registered a chill in the air as he swooped and soared, but the cold temperature didn’t truly affect him because his body wasn’t actually outside.*

*After they’d moved from Knoxville to the holler, it had taken a few months to get used to the new terrain. As with traveling in the real world, he had to know where he was going in the astral plane or he might get lost, like a tourist in New York City. So he’d learned to let his fabricated nose guide him in situations where he didn’t recognize the topography from his bird’s eye view.*

*He had never gotten lost in the astral plane and had no idea what would happen if he did. Sometimes he worried about that because he suspected if he did get lost, he might wake up in a stranger’s bed with a family he didn’t know. But it was so much fun that he was willing to risk it the two or three times a month he was able to do it. He enjoyed these special dreams even more than adventuring in the forest with Cricket and Willa.*

*A village hunting dog flew beside him. It was always interesting when one showed up.*

*“Hey, Cooper,” he said with his mind.*

*The dog, floppy bloodhound ears blowing backward, acknowledged his presence with a lolling tongue and a tiny wink.*

*“I guess we’ll go north tonight. Does that sound good?”*

*Another doggy wink.*

*Harlan never knew ahead of time where he would be when he slid into a one of these dreams, which was part of the fun. Unlike the real world, he couldn’t really be hurt in the astral plane, so there was nothing to be afraid of.*

*Theoretically.*

*Tonight, though, the northerly route made him feel a bit anxious. According to Mister Fergus, the scary lady had come from that direction. Not only that, but the two murder victims had been found north of the village. Was that a coincidence? Probably not.*

*He decided to utilize his dream to conduct a reconnaissance mission, just like the village Scouts. Maybe he would see something useful. And anything that might help the investigation could keep Mama and everyone else safe.*

*He spotted a small campfire in the distance. He believed his position to be close to the clearing where the Pop-Tarts and candy had been delivered. After soaring over the very location where their spoils lay hidden in holly bushes and corralled by urine, he came upon the campfire.*

*Through the thick branches it was difficult to clearly see the person beside the fire, who stoked the flames with a long stick. Was it a woman? Was it THE woman? Impossible to tell.*

*It wasn’t easy to alter his course during a dream, but he had managed it a few times. He glanced at Cooper, still flying an arm’s length beside him. He placed a dream hand on the dog’s head, and then closed his imagined eyes. Cooper seemed to know he was needed as a kind of anchor, and he gave Harlan a quick swipe with his rough dream tongue. The gesture said, I’ve got you, friend!*

*Harlan concentrated.*

*When he opened his eyes again, he and Cooper had circled back around and were soaring over the same campfire. From the lower altitude, he could make out the figure gazing into the flames.*

*It was a man.*

*Whew! Harlan supposed a man could be responsible for the terrible murders, but his gut told him Mister Fergus was right about the scary lady.*

*What next, then? He and Cooper were heading north, but something pulled at his brain, telling him to go west. His hand still rested on Cooper’s head, so he squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on steering them to the left. When he opened his eyes again, he recognized the familiar terrain. He and Willa and Cricket had played Robin Hood and his Merry Band in a copse of trees just below. The giant live oaks there were perfect for climbing and a small clearing had hosted more than a few of Willa’s storytelling sessions. He could see the Pyramid Logs, three dead trees that had fallen into a triangle shape, forming the perfect setting for conversation.*

*A small campfire blazed there now, and a woman with long black hair danced around its flames.*

*Harlan’s imagined heart skipped a beat. Mama had never taken them to church, nor pressed any religious beliefs upon them. But if there was a hell, surely this scary, witchy-looking lady belonged there. Just as he and Cooper soared over the clearing, her head tilted backward. A smile unfurled on the white-skinned face that glowed in the darkness, like a lighthouse beacon on a haunted island.*

*Did she ‘see’ him somehow? He had never experienced any kind of interaction with living people during these astral journeys.*

*He shuddered. “Time to go home, Cooper.” His eyes closed in the dream for the final time.*

When they opened again, his body was safely tucked beneath the covers of his bed. Willa snored gently from two feet away. His heart...the real one inside his real chest...pounded like a kettle drum. Mama’s beautiful eyes were open, watching him in the darkness from across the small bedroom.

“Nightmare?” she whispered.

He nodded. Nobody knew about the dream flights. Not even Willa.

Mama lifted her blanket and patted the mattress. He was much too old to be snuggling with his mother, but he didn’t care. Sometimes a boy just wanted the reassuring proximity of the person who loved him more than anyone in the world.

Finally Mama’s breathing slowed. He was nowhere close to being able to sleep yet, not after seeing that Witchy Lady dancing in the hellish firelight. Mister Fergus was surely right about her. And now that Harlan knew her location, he must pass it along to his teacher. Discreetly, since Mama didn’t seem convinced of the Witchy Lady’s existence.

Something shifted inside his brain then. It was a feeling similar to taking a math test and knowing he would get a perfect score, or beating Willa at chess when she almost always won. It happened when he made the right move...the *best* move. Just like the special dreams, the sensation was a secret, one he had never told anyone about, mostly because it would be so difficult to explain. He didn’t understand it himself, but he knew he trusted it.

For a boy who chose not to speak, the Shift was just one more addition to the War Chest of Oddities.

And the Chest was close to overflowing.

Chapter 14

***Fergus***

Fergus opened his eyes to late morning sun filtering in through the cabin’s solitary window. A boy sat motionless beside him, staring.

Harlan pressed a finger to his lips.

Fortunately for them both, Fergus’s squeal reflex had been successfully squelched after millennia of silently overcoming squeal-inducing situations. Skeeter lay on his bunk, emitting the chainsaw snores of the tired and the elderly.

Harlan handed him a note, then motioned toward the door. Fergus nodded, pulled on his boots, and followed the boy outside.

The scintillating aroma of smoked pork drew his attention toward the kitchen house, but only for a second. He ignored the rumblings of his belly and turned his focus to the boy, then the note.

“Shall I read it here?” They stood just outside Skeeter’s cabin. People were on the move, performing various chores, paying them not one iota of attention.

Harlan shook his head, took Fergus’s elbow, and guided him to the front steps of the rickety school building, away from the center of activity. Serena Jo had canceled classes; nobody could concentrate on learning or teaching while there was a murderer in their midst. They sat side by side on the warped pine planks. Fergus opened the folded note and began to read.

He could feel the golden eyes — eyes that so resembled those of the mother and the sister — upon him. He scanned the note, and read again. Then he went back over it slowly and mindfully, fully digesting every word. Finally, he folded the note and stuck it in his pocket.

Without looking at the boy, he said, “There are some very special people left in the world these days. I’ve met a lot of them. You’re one of them.”

He sensed Harlan nodding beside him.

“I bet you’ve always felt different from other kids. From other people.”

Another nod. More vigorous this time.

“I’m sure your mother and sister know you’re special. They’re special too, but not in the same way. You know that thing that your grandfather does? How sometimes he seems to hear people’s thoughts?”

A slow nod.

“Can you do that?”

Harlan hesitated, then gave a shoulder shrug.

“I bet you can a little. Maybe it sounds confusing, like a television commercial from two rooms away.”

Another nod.

“When your sister makes you swear a blood oath, whose cut heals the fastest?”

Harlan grinned and pointed at his chest.

“I know this next question will sound strange, but I’m going to ask it anyway. I need you to keep it just between the two of us. Can you promise me that?”

He faced the boy now, projecting his own inherent decency and goodness. This kind of conversation would — and should — put a child on high alert if that child had been properly educated about stranger-danger.

Harlan gave him another slow nod.

“Have you ever touched a person, or perhaps even a pet or animal, that was sickly or injured, and afterward that person or animal got better right away?”

Enhanced *langthal* was the Holy Grail of talents, prized by The Ancient Ones more than any other. It had taken tens of thousands of years for the *Cthor* to genetically engineer the trait — the ability to self-heal rapidly and also to heal other living creatures. If Harlan possessed enhanced *lanthal*, like Jessie in Kansas, Fergus would have no choice but to recruit him and take him to *Cthor-Vangt*, away from his home and family.

Harlan merely gave him a noncommittal shrug. Probably just as well.

“Okay. Back to the astral dreaming. Even though it’s not commonplace, others do it too. I’ve experienced it myself on a few occasions. Quite pleasant, isn’t it?”

A giant grin and a vigorous nod.

“Do you think you could make it happen rather than waiting for it?”

A shrug of the narrow shoulders.

“Will you try?”

*Yes.*

“Can you tell me where you saw the Witchy Lady?”

*Yes.*

“You’ll write down the directions or perhaps draw a map?”

*Yes.*

Fergus tilted his head and studied the boy for a few moments.

“Harlan, why don’t you speak? Your sister says it’s a choice, not a physical issue.”

In response, the boy merely stared at him with unblinking eyes.

“Very well. It’s your business. I hope you brought some paper and a pencil. I’d like to learn sign language someday, but there’s no time for that now.”

Harlan reached into his coat and withdrew a wrinkled piece of paper covered in pencil-eraser smears. He began to draw.

What appeared on the grimy sheet over the next few minutes might have been a pre-oil sketch by Lorrain or Patinir or any of the Renaissance landscape masters. Fergus shouldn’t have been surprised. Many of Chicxulub’s survivors possessed astounding artistic talent, but Harlan was so unassuming and quiet — a glowing crescent moon to Willadean’s blinding noonday sun — that he had simply been overlooked.

“I know where this is. It’s not far from the cemetery, yes?”

Another nod.

“Very good. Let me know if you’re able to dream fly again tonight. Now, run along, young man. I need to have a talk with your grandfather.”

Harlan gave him a beseeching look.

“I understand. The astral traveling is between us.” He patted the shaggy, brindle hair, then watched as the slender boy, still a half-head shorter than his twin, took off at a full run.

Did children ever simply walk?

The thought made him feel tired and old. After his mission at Whitaker Holler, perhaps he would spend some time down in *Cthor-Vangt’s* vast confines where he didn’t age even a day. Oddly, the notion of spending time there was appealing but also distasteful. That sometimes happened when he spent years above ground, mingling with modern humans.

When he returned to the cabin, Skeeter was awake, rubbing his mostly bald head and lifting a dented tea kettle from the squatty wood stove.

“What’d the boy want?” the old man said without turning.

“I thought you were asleep.” Fergus smiled at the two chipped ceramic cups Skeeter had set out beside a Tupperware container filled with instant coffee. The aromatic grounds might have been gold, so precious now in areas without volcanic soil.

“Not much escapes me. ‘Specially these days.”

“Interesting. You believe your...talent...has increased since Chicksy?”

“No doubt about it. Now, quit hedging and tell me what Harlan was in such a froth to talk to you about.”

“Froth is not a term I would apply to your grandson.”

Skeeter cackled. It was an exhausted cackle. Even though the old man was chronologically thousands of years younger than Fergus himself, his body was that of an eighty-year-old. No matter how healthy, Skeeter was still subject to the aches, pains, and fatigue of a body in decline.

That was Fergus’s future if he didn’t get his ass back to *Cthor-Vangt* soon.

“True ‘nuff. He’s enigmatic, for sure. That’s one of Willa’s words. So, what did he want?”

Fergus accepted the steaming cup of coffee, breathing in the aroma before answering. “He didn’t make me swear a blood oath, but it amounted to the same thing. What I can tell you is I have an inkling as to the location of the murderess.”

Skeeter twirled like a man in his prime. “Where?” he demanded.

“About two miles west of the cemetery.”

The old man set his cup down, sloshing a bit on the spotless countertop. “Let’s go, then.”

“Hold on a minute. We can’t go riding into danger like our lives don’t matter. And that’s not because I’m a coward, but because there are people counting on us to stay alive for myriad reasons.”

“What will we do, then?”

Fergus sat on one of the wooden chairs. “This woman cannot be underestimated. She is brilliant, she is remorseless, and she loves to kill. I doubt you’ve ever been up against someone like her before.”

“She’s still a woman.”

Fergus laughed. “Ah, there’s the backwoods sexism I’ve been expecting.”

“Ain’t sexism if it’s true. Men are stronger than women. Period. You can’t argue ‘bout that.”

“That’s generally correct, but my experience is that intelligent women figure out workarounds for any physical disparities. Consider your daughter.”

“Hmmph.”

“Lizzy will be expecting us to pursue her. So I think rather than approach this like a hunting situation, we should entice her to come to a place of our choosing. Lure her out, like one of those corn feeders that deer hunters use.”

“Amateurs use those, not real hunters. How you reckon on doing that?”

“With the perfect bait.”

“What would that be?”

“A fresh potential victim.”

“Who?”

Fergus sighed. “Me, of course.”

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“Why would you sacrifice yourself like this?” Serena Jo asked later that evening.

Fergus was savoring his second cup of coffee of the day, courtesy of Whitaker Holler’s leader. Apparently being willing to die for the safety of the mountain folks scored major points, redeemable for hot coffee.

“That word invokes a lamb scampering off to slaughter. I do have a few skills, you know,” Fergus replied.

“Right. Otis told me you’re former Special Ops.”

It had been a convenient white lie, but wasn’t far off the mark. He did, in fact, possess expertise surpassing that of elite military types. “I think I’m well-suited to confront this threat. Plus, I’m expendable.”

“Not as expendable as when you first arrived,” she replied, tapping slender fingers on her kitchen table and studying a pine-knot bullseye on the opposite wall.

“You’ve fallen in love with me! I knew it. I’ve been picking up vibes for dozens of minutes now.”

Serena Jo didn’t laugh often, but when she did, it was the music of a hammered dulcimer. He couldn’t picture the taciturn woman singing with abandon, but he could imagine the voice that would flow from that lovely mouth.

“Hardly,” she replied. “But for some inexplicable reason, I have decided I like you. More importantly, so do the children and my father.”

“Clearly you all have exquisite taste. So you agree to my plan?”

“Yes. I don’t see a downside.”

“Other than I could be killed and strung up in a tree.”

“Yes, other than that,” she replied, unsmiling.

“Mister Fergus!” Willadean said from the darkened bedroom. “Don’t get yourself killed. You’re the most interesting person in this backwater hell hole.”

“Language,” Serena Jo said.

He grinned. “May I?” he said to their mother, who answered with a distracted nod.

Standing in the bedroom doorway, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Both children sat upright in their beds. Of course they had heard everything about his plan, which was good. Harlan needed to understand how helpful the information he might gather from his astral excursions could prove.

“I promise not to get myself killed. But if I do, please make sure I’m buried in the cemetery’s most choice location.”

“When will you leave?” Willa asked.

“In the morning. I need a good night’s sleep first,” he said with a pointed look at Harlan. The boy gave him the barest of nods.

“How long will you be gone?”

“That depends on how quickly I’m able to apprehend the perpetrator.”

“Will you be armed?” the girl said with a big wink her mother couldn’t see. Serena Jo didn’t know about the mini arsenal under the floor of her father’s cabin.

“If our leader allows it.”

“Of course,” Serena Jo said from behind. “You’ll be given a firearm in the morning. You and I will visit the U-Haul before you leave. We’ll take Pops with us. He’s the only other person I allow inside it.”

Fergus turned, his interest piqued. “How exciting. I’ve been hearing about the mysterious U-Haul since my arrival.”

“Better make him swear a blood oath, Mama.”

“No need for that. I understand discretion,” Fergus replied.

Serena Jo said, “I really don’t know why I trust you so soon and with such sensitive information. But I do.”

“Maybe you inherited some of your father’s...what was the term? Backwoods sixth sense? You realize on some intuitive level that I’m one of the good guys.” In truth, he’d had his *scythen’s* output set to ‘trustworthy’ since the moment he’d taken off Skeeter’s stained blindfold.

“Maybe so.” The luminescent eyes stared at him, unblinking. “Good night, then.”

As he closed the cabin’s door behind him, he summoned images of the last Yankees game prior to Chicxulub. It had been a squeaker with the Astros, but the Yanks pulled it out in the bottom of the ninth.

Thinking about baseball was far safer than imagining the bosom of Whitaker Holler’s leader sans the obligatory plaid flannel.

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“I won’t make you swear a blood oath, but I do need your word of honor that you won’t speak of what you see in here.”

The flaxen hair, unbraided this morning, hung below an ivory cable-knit beanie, the slouchy type fashionable prior to the end of the world. The morning had dawned chilly but clear, and Serena Jo’s usual flannel shirt, faded jeans, and sneakers had been replaced with a fleece pullover, gray heather leggings, and shearling-lined rubber-soled boots. Fashion no longer mattered these days, but Whitaker Holler’s leader could have been the cover model for L.L. Bean’s winter catalog.

“You have my word,” Fergus replied, shifting his attention from the woman to the U-Haul truck, parked in a cluster of mountain cedars. Squiggles of beige, green, and black paint covered every inch of the vehicle, even the tires. “Nice camouflage job, by the way.”

“Harlan did that. He has a talent for painting.”

“He’s an impressive boy,” Fergus replied.

“Yes,” she said, unlocking the rollup door on the back of the vehicle.

“So is his mother,” Fergus said after he’d absorbed what he saw.

The truck itself was more than twenty feet long, adequate for moving the contents of a medium-sized home. In neat stacks and tidy piles within its cargo hold lay a treasure trove of profoundly useful post-apocalyptic items. He’d expected firearms and ammunition, two things not easily acquired after a societal collapse. Smart people had also gathered medicine, water purifiers, and such. Those were present as well, but there was so much more.

“You put a lot of thought into this collection,” he said.

“She sure did,” Skeeter replied. “Nobody else in the holler thought about half this stuff. Serena Jo came rolling in, all calm, cool, and collected, just when the world was going crazy.” The pride in the old man’s voice was unmistakable. He could see it made Serena Jo uncomfortable.

“We may not even need everything in here, but we’ll have it if we do.”

“How did you get your hands on all the antibiotics?” Fergus asked, eyeing an egg crate filled with bottles of amoxicillin and cephalexin. Beside it, another crate was filled with even more bottles. Printed on their labels: Fish Mox and Fish Flex. Thanks to Dani back in Kansas, he already knew about fish antibiotics. He was curious how Serena Jo had acquired so much of their prescription versions.

“I held up a Walgreens.”

He started to laugh, then realized it wasn’t a joke.

“Armed robbery?”

“Yes. It was the only way to get prescription medicines in bulk...fast. I did it before the runs on food and drug stores began. It was still well-stocked then, thankfully.”

“I see. And the firearms? Isn’t there a limit on how many guns and ammunition a person can buy at one time? I hope you didn’t hold up a Cabela’s.”

“No, I slept with the store manager. He let me buy everything I wanted with my Citi Card. I racked up a lot of miles with that purchase.” She smiled.

Fergus had no idea if she were serious or not, and he decided he didn’t want to know.

“Heirloom seeds...smart. A bullet re-loader, clever. I assume there’s black powder somewhere else?”

“Of course. Not here, obviously. Same with the kerosene and matches.”

Ferus nodded. “Salt, baking powder, instant coffee. Blankets, clothing, shoes. Axes, hand saws, shovels, hammers and nails, animal traps. All smart choices. Equally smart are the books: medical textbooks, beekeeping tutorials, *Farming for Dummies*,” he grinned. “As well as many classic fiction titles. I assume the drawing pads and spiral notebooks are for your progeny?”

She nodded. There was that protective mama-bear expression again.

“Sewing needles, fishing line, duct tape, mason jars, fire extinguishers...all items you can’t make or find here in the holler.”

“No more fire trucks and glass factories,” Skeeter said.

“I’m especially intrigued with this item,” Fergus said, reaching for something that looked like it belonged on a dystopian book cover. “Chicxulub wasn’t airborne. You know that, right?”

Serena Jo nodded. “Yes, I know that now, but I didn’t know it then. Better safe than sorry.”

“May I take it?”

“Why?”

“I have reason to believe the perpetrator — the woman I encountered — has tear gas.”

“Did you see it when you went through her things?”

He would have to lie. He needed that respirator mask. “Yes. Well, I thought that’s what it was. I didn’t have time to scrutinize it, though.”

“Hmmm. Okay, take it.”

He considered a wicked-looking implement next. The spring-loaded, saw-toothed monstrosity was designed to maim and restrain North America’s largest predator, the bear. Using something this lethal would be in direct violation of a primary *Cthor-Vangt* tenant: don’t cause injury to any human unless in self-defense. There wasn’t much wiggle room in that regard. All Fergus had to do to defend himself against Lizzy was to leave the holler. But he had no intention of doing that. Not yet. Not until he had eliminated her threat to the residents, and most importantly, to the children. He would deal with any *Cthor* fallout later, but he also wouldn’t consider using such an exceptionally painful method for dealing with any dangerous human, even Lizzy.

Serena Jo said, “What type of firearm do you prefer? One of the ARs? Some of our younger Scouts seem to like them.”

“If I were hunting feral hogs in Oklahoma that might be my choice. For this mission, I’ll take the Browning pistol, loaded. No extra clips.”

“That’s it?”

“I’ll only get one chance at Lizzy, and when I do, I won’t miss.”

Fergus liked to think he saw a flash of admiration on the beautiful face, but it might have been skepticism.

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By nightfall, Fergus was situated in his deer blind. Or perhaps ‘Lizzy blind’ would have been a more appropriate description. He’d gotten the idea from his earlier conversation with Skeeter. Hunter purists might disparage their use, but they wouldn’t if they were tracking a ruthless psychopath.

By midnight, his butt was killing him.

Perched on a leviathan oak branch ten feet above the ground, his face covered in black soot to match the borrowed black clothing, he should be nearly invisible. A smart hunter knew that in addition to masking one’s appearance, one’s smell must also be disguised. Prior to leaving the village, he had taken care to bathe in a washtub of heated water — no soap — and then rolled around in the crunchy dead leaves covering the forest floor. He had inadvertently rolled in some animal scat, but that should only further camouflage his natural musk. What exuded from him as he crouched in the branches would have discouraged all but the most ardent suitor. The notion made him smile. He would take a moment to send his *scythen* down to Florida.

*Hello, darling. I was just thinking about you. I hope I didn’t wake you.*

*Of course you woke me, but I don’t mind. You know that. How are things there? Have you taken up with an axe-wielding lumberjack wench?*

Fergus grinned. *No. I’ve been faithful to you, love. At least so far.*

*I wish I could say the same.*

*Do tell.*

*He’s much too young for me, but aren’t they all?*

*Indeed.*

*I’ll enjoy it while it lasts.*

*As you should. How is the Colony?*

*Flourishing. I’m utterly content here. It was the right decision. No regrets, love.*

The familiar stab almost unseated him. He couldn’t bear thinking about Amelia’s banishment from their home. She would live another thirty or forty years — with luck — and then she would die and turn to dust. Just like everyone who didn’t have access to the suspended-animation qualities of *Cthor-Vangt*.

*I miss you.*

*What’s happening with the children you mentioned?*

*Plenty. Not sure if either are potential recruits yet, but I did just discover that the boy regularly journeys to the astral plane.*

*Delightful! Just like Jessie.*

*Exactly. The child was able to gather useful information about a dangerous foe.*

Amelia didn’t answer right away. He was beginning to wonder if they’d lost their connection.

*You told him about shielding himself in situations like that? Astral dreaming can be a two-way street, you know.*

Damn! He had forgotten that not only was Jessie able to see the malevolent Isaiah during her dreams, but he was able to see her as well.

*No, I didn’t think to tell him. I will, though, the next time I see him.*

*The sooner the better. I must sign off, darling. My young paramour is stirring.*

*Very well. Just do me a favor. Picture my face on his muscular, nubile body during your lovemaking.*

*Of course!*

He could hear the smile in her voice.

The next moment, he was alone in the woods, cold and worried. He hadn’t gotten the opportunity for a private chat with Harlan before he’d left, and didn’t know if the boy had managed to slip into an astral dream the night before. It seemed unlikely, though. Harlan said the dreams only happened a couple of times each month. Unless, as Fergus had instructed, the boy had figured out how to initiate the experience through sheer will.

The tree in which he perched offered a clear view of the three logs where Harlan had seen Lizzy dancing in his dream. He hoped she would reappear tonight, following the subtle trail he’d left for her through the forest. The revolver from Ray’s warehouse pointed toward the fallen-log triangle Harlan had mentioned. The Browning from the U-Haul pressed against the small of his back. His backpack, looped on a nearby branch, held the tear gas and midazolam.

All he could do was wait.

Thank goodness for the last cup of coffee Serena Jo had offered before his departure. Between the caffeine and the discomfort of straddling a tree limb, he had no fear of falling asleep. The minutes passed like hours, and still Lizzy didn’t skulk into sight. The scent of wood smoke teased his nose from time to time; he wondered if it came from the village or elsewhere. Had Lizzy found a new location from which to conduct her murder sprees? All the details Harlan had supplied from his dream indicated she had set up some kind of camp here. There was something significant about the three logs and their positioning. He could imagine primitive people in the clearing below, clothed in wolf skins and roasting meat above a fire, their animal-hide teepees scattered nearby.

A kind of electromagnetic energy seemed to flow through this place; maybe that’s why the children were drawn here. Perhaps a ley line bisected the area. The concept had been disparaged by mainstream science over the last fifty years, but Fergus knew they did, in fact, exist. Hundreds, perhaps thousands circumnavigated the earth, and the places where they crossed resulted in regions with elevated levels of dynamism, boosting the creative and mental performance of any sensitive types within their influence.

The snapping of a tree branch below propelled him from his thoughts. Alert now, his ears strained for the source of the noise. It emanated from a dense section of forest on the opposite side of his perch. His eyes had adjusted to the gloom, and he held his breath, listening to the crunching of leaves.

With a sinking sensation, he understood it wasn’t Lizzy who approached. She would never be so noisy.

When Ray trudged into the clearing, Fergus wasn’t terribly surprised. He admired his new friend for braving the wilderness in search of Lizzy, but Ray was as stealthy as a hippo in heat. An idea dawned on him. If she were nearby, she would hear Ray as easily as Fergus heard him now. Ray may be the choicest bait with which to lure Lizzy into the clearing.

Fergus watched as Ray shrugged out of his backpack and sat on one of the logs encircling the cold remains of a campfire.

*Surely he wouldn’t be obtuse enough to start a fire*.

A minute later, Ray proved him wrong, muttering to himself as he gathered kindling and placed it inside a rough stone circle. Once enough dry wood was in place to roast a barrel-full of marshmallows, he withdrew a puck-shaped object from his backpack, lit it, and tossed it into the circle.

*Oh for fuck’s sake! If that doesn’t lure Lizzy in, nothing will.*

Between the noise of Ray’s meal preparation, the light of the blaze, and the smell of wood smoke, Fergus expected Lizzy to appear at any moment.

He wasn’t disappointed. Moments later, a shadow detached itself from the tree-line ten feet away. It was on Ray before Fergus had a chance to react.

Illuminated by the campfire’s flames, Fergus saw that Lizzy held a syringe to Ray’s throat. A smile stretched widely across her narrow face, exposing all those Cheshire-cat teeth. “Come down out of that tree. Do it now or I’ll inject him.”

Damn it. She’d discovered his presence in the tree. From his perch, Fergus saw ruthless determination etched in the contours of Lizzy’s face. He placed the revolver in the bag, unhooked it from the tree limb, and dropped it to the ground. He followed, while his mind worked furiously. If Lizzy wanted Ray dead, she would have used one of the firearms from the warehouse.

He climbed down, remaining in the shadows. “Go ahead, inject him. Midazolam will knock him out, but it won’t kill him,” The Browning automatic still pressed against his lower back. He’d have it out and two shots fired before Lizzy could do anything other than inject Ray.

“You don’t know how much is in this syringe. And before you do whatever it is you’re thinking about doing, you should know that I have one of the children.”

That stopped his hand from inching further.

“That’s right. I strolled right into the village and snatched up the little darling, practically under everyone’s nose. Prior to my incarceration, I’d been covertly watching their activities. Quite the industrious beehive, they have there. I’d set my sights on the girl, though I’d be hard-pressed to explain why. She struck me as...interesting, I think. The two I strung up in the trees were just for fun. Ray had denied me my pleasures for such a long time, I needed a fix.” She giggled. “I didn’t want to kill the child right away, so I merely absconded with her. I haven’t quite decided what to do with her yet.”

“You’re bluffing. You couldn’t have snuck in there,” Fergus replied.

“Even now she’s safely stored in the forest, bound and gagged, in a location you will never be able to find. And here’s the delicious part: if you manage to apprehend me, you’ll kill her. I will never tell you where she is and she will experience a rather painful death of dehydration with a side of hyperthermia.”

Ray said, “I should have killed you when I had the chance.”

“Yes, you should have. But you’re too kind for your own good.”

“What do you want?” Fergus asked.

“I want you both to put these on.” Still holding the needle to Ray’s neck, she reached into a cross-body bag and withdrew two pairs of handcuffs. “Behind your back, of course.”

Fergus hesitated.

“You really don’t have a choice,” she added.

“I think I do.” He needed to buy a few extra seconds. “If we put these on, then what? You string us up in the trees Jesus-style and slit our throats like you did the others? That was impressive, by the way. I’d love to know how you managed to get them up so high, especially the man. He probably weighed two-twenty.”

“Closer to two-thirty. Now, quit stalling, or Ray will get it in the neck.”

“So what? He’s nothing to me. One thing I’ve learned the last few years is it’s every man for himself.”

Before he finished saying the last words, the Browning was in his hand. He fired three shots, aiming for Lizzy’s right shoulder — the one that belonged to the hand that held the syringe. Lizzy moved just in time, ducking down behind Ray. The shots went wide. Firing a fourth time wasn’t an option with Ray being used as a human shield.

We have ourselves a Mexican standoff, Ferus thought. The next moment, Lizzy’s free hand darted into her bag. A flash of silver streaked above the campfire toward him. Behind it, a contrail of vapor escaped.

The respirator from the U-Haul lay in the backpack on the forest floor. The last image he saw before closing his eyes was that of Lizzy donning a similar mask and Ray lying in a crumpled heap on the ground, his hand dangerously close to the fire.

Lizzy clawed at the bag again.

Fergus held his breath and dove for the pack.

Seconds later, the respirator was in place, but his vision couldn’t penetrate the tear-gas fog. He dropped to the ground, then fired six bullets in the direction of Lizzy.

He had no idea if any of them connected.

He counted half a dozen heartbeats, then crabbed toward the spot where she’d last been. The fog obscured his vision, but he hadn’t lost his bearings. After connecting with the log Ray had been sitting on, Fergus touched the man’s unconscious body on the ground. He moved the limp hand away from the encroaching flames.

The gas was beginning to disperse now, and the cylinder lying on the ground no longer spewed its noxious vapor. The respirator limited his vision, but he could make out a dark figure to his left, rising from the mist like an apparition. The Browning recoiled five more times as he emptied the clip.

The next moment, he felt a sharp pinch in his neck.

*Damn it*, he muttered. The world went black.

Chapter 15

***Ray***

The last thing Ray remembered was the sound of gunfire. His thoughts felt weirdly disconnected, like his brain’s synapses were attempting to fire along neural pathways that had been rerouted to some cerebral No Man’s Land. With every breath, his throat burned. He struggled to lift a hand to rub eyelids that felt glued together with sand.

The hand didn’t budge. Something held it behind his back. He tried the other hand with the same result. Unpleasant memories of events prior to the blackout didn’t come crashing in. Instead, they flitted toward consciousness in singles or pairs, inaugural blowflies arriving at a fresh corpse. More gathered with every passing moment: Lizzy, the syringe at his neck, the tear gas, the gunshots.

The handcuffs.

He forced his crusty eyelids apart. Daylight greeted him, as did cold air and stiff muscles. The rough bark of a pine tree pressed against his back; he could tell it was pine because its shed needles cushioned his rump, keeping the moisture from soaking into his pants.

“About time,” a deep voice said from a few feet away.

His neck felt like his head had been soldered to it, but he managed to twist it enough to see Fergus in a similar state.

There was a blowfly banquet at the corpse now.

“I can tell by the look on your face that your memory is coming back. It took me a few minutes too,” Fergus said.

“Where is she?” his voice came out raspy. Talking hurt more than breathing. Tear gas will do that.

“I have no idea. She was gone when I woke up about a half-hour ago.”

“The child...” Ray said.

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out.” The determination in his voice was unmistakable, and the expression on the normally sanguine face would have intimidated anyone with an ounce of sense.

It was not the face of an innocuous music teacher.

“How do we get out of these?” Ray asked.

“Fortunately for both of us, I have some experience with handcuffs.”

“Learned during your professorial days?” Ray said, injecting a healthy measure of sarcasm while watching his companion squirm and wriggle.

Fergus chuckled. “Hardly. The origin of that particular skill set is more boudoir in nature.”

Ray nodded, then turned away and vomited. His neck was too stiff to wipe his mouth with a shoulder. “This sucks.”

“Indeed. Nausea is a side effect of the drug, but I’m wondering if there’s something else going on with you,” Fergus replied, thrashing about as he talked. “Not much of a woodsman, are you?”

“Never claimed to be.”

“And yet, here you are, out beating the bushes for Lizzy, I assume?”

Ray nodded.

“That’s admirable.”

“She’s my responsibility.”

“Not sure I agree.”

“It’s my fault she escaped. What’s she been up to?” Ray asked with a grimace.

“You really don’t want to know, but I’ll tell you anyway.

Fergus detailed the grisly deaths of the two victims.

Ray wasn’t surprised. “I knew it would be like this. After you left, I read her journal. Stephen King would be impressed by its horrific prose.”

“Interesting. Do you have fresh insight into our Lizzy? Anything you can share may be helpful in her capture.”

Ray sighed. “She’s as bad as I thought. The main thing I realized was that she’s not insane, as she wanted me to believe during her incarceration. The multiple personality business...that was just for show.”

“So she’s just your run-of-the-mill psychopath?”

“I guess. I haven’t rubbed elbows with many psychopaths. As far as I know.”

“You’ll be pleased to know that the village is on full lockdown, and people are out looking for her. It’s not just you and me.”

“That’s good. I certainly hope she’s caught before she kills anyone else.”

“Someone will catch her, Ray. Sooner than later, too.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because serial killers don’t stop killing. They’re not capable of stopping, so it becomes a numbers game.”

“That’s not particularly reassuring.”

Fergus shrugged. “The odds are in our favor now. We’ve unmasked her. There’s nowhere for her to hide, metaphorically. She’ll eventually slip up. She’s an impressive creature, but she’s still human.”

“I read her journal. I disagree.”

Ray leaned his head back against the tree trunk, trying to ignore the sour taste in his mouth. Nothing would be gained from revealing his mental health issues, yet something about Fergus seemed to invite candor.

Ray had been in the forest for several days, miserable, cold, barely able to sleep, and now he was handcuffed and trussed to a tree. Lizzy had used bungee cord, looped around his waist and hooked behind the trunk — a simple, fast, and effective way to bind someone who couldn’t use his hands.

“I have agoraphobia.”

“Ah. That explains a lot.”

Ray waited for the tone he usually heard when he shared the intensely personal information. Most people had no patience with silly phobias that made no sense to them. The fear of being outside was not something the average mentally healthy individual could wrap his brain around. But ‘the tone’ was nowhere to be found in Fergus’s voice.

“You’re familiar with it?”

“Oh yes. I’ve known a few people who suffered from it. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

“It’s been a struggle my entire life. I took medicine for it...before. But I ran out a year ago, then realized I no longer needed it. Not in the warehouse, at least.”

“Going up on the roof to fly your drones didn’t seem to bother you.”

Ray nodded. “The difference is, when I’m up on the roof, there’s really no chance that I’ll have to go beyond the building. Beyond what’s familiar and safe. I had to condition myself to it at first. And there was some discomfort in the beginning, but watching the drone footage is worth it.”

“I see. It took a lot of courage to venture out here to hunt Lizzy.”

“Yes,” he said simply. Anyone who didn’t suffer from agoraphobia would never understand just how much.

Fergus nodded, done with the subject. “On to our pressing and somewhat dire situation. In my jacket pocket is a handcuff key. I must get this cord off so I can stand up.”

“You carry a handcuff key with you?”

The twinkle had returned to the blue eyes. “I’m a man who likes to be prepared.”

“I think there’s a lot more to you than what you’ve told me,” Ray said, then felt a pinch in his neck.

As he began to lose consciousness, he heard Fergus say, “Damn it. So close.”

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When Ray awoke the second time, the shadows had lengthened. It was late afternoon. He must have been unconscious for most of the day. He didn’t feel as loopy this time; perhaps Lizzy had used less sedative. His limbs were stiffer though, so twisting his neck toward Fergus took some determination.

His friend was gone.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“Tsk, tsk,” came a familiar voice from behind.

“What did you do with him?” he demanded, trying to exude a ferocity he didn’t feel. His mouth was so dry he could barely get the words out.

“I took him elsewhere. Away from you. Away from us,” she said from behind, but closer now. “We need to get you to a more suitable location. What I have planned requires privacy.”

“Water. Please,” he said. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the wetness in his crotch. It was especially aggravating that Lizzy would likely notice the smell of his urine.

When he opened his eyes, she stood in front of him, wearing the trademark grin. In the daylight, he was able to see her clearly, unlike the night before. She looked healthy. The chilly temperature, or perhaps the exertion of dragging Fergus off somewhere, had brought a flush to her normal pallor. He wouldn’t have imagined the woods to be a comfortable habitat for someone like Lizzy, but after reading her journal, he knew she was capable of rustic living. She’d grown up in Appalachia, after all.

“All in good time. I’m going to remove the cord now, and then you may stand up. The handcuffs remain. You’ll be stiff and sore, so go slowly.”

“Water first.” It was a pivotal moment. He understood that he must exert some of his old authority over her or all would be lost.

The black hair, pulled back in a girlish ponytail, bobbed to one side while she considered his request. The grin had thankfully vanished. Without speaking, she reached into the omnipresent cross-body bag and withdraw a Yeti thermos. He recognized it from the warehouse; it was one he had designated as hers from the first week of her captivity. It had frequently held water, sometimes coffee, and occasionally hot chocolate — when he’d felt especially guilty about her captivity.

He tried not to picture all those Lizzy germs as he took greedy sips of cool water. “Thank you,” he said.

“It’s the least I can do. As far as prison wardens go, you weren’t too bad.”

“I had to restrain you. Surely you realize that.”

“I’m not sure that I agree, but we’ll shelve that conversation for another time. Stand, please.”

He did, but not without discomfort. During his time in the warehouse, he’d exercised daily, but even the fittest of individuals would feel near-crippled after being handcuffed and tied to a tree in forty-five-degree temperatures for hours.

“Now, walk in front of me. We’re going that way.” The ponytail dipped as Lizzy indicted a northerly direction.

“Where are you taking me? Is Fergus okay? What about the child?”

“So many questions.” The sly tone was back. He felt something hard poke his shoulder blade. Probably the SIG Sauer she’d taken from the warehouse.

“Please, Lizzy. Just tell me.”

After a dramatic sigh, she said, “They’re fine. For now. How long they stay that way largely depends on the Whitaker Holler hillbillies. There are rules, you know...” An odd undercurrent had replaced the sly tone.

“What do you mean?”

“Rules that govern my...behavior. My choices.”

“You mean your killings?”

“Yes.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“I can, but I won’t.”

“How far are we going?” he asked, almost tripping over some thorny vines. They seemed to reach up and grab his boots like living, malevolent barbed wire.

“Those are roundleaf greenbriers, a sub-species of the pervasive smilax,” Lizzy offered. She might have been a sixth-grade science teacher. “There are worse thorny plants in the woods, but these are quite annoying. Try to lift your feet rather than shuffling along like a hobo.”

“It would be easier to navigate the terrain if my hands were free.”

“Don’t underestimate me, Ray,” said a deep voice that sounded nothing like Lizzy. Perhaps he’d been rash to dismiss her multiple personalities.

It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

He didn’t respond, but continued trudging through the forest taking care to lift his feet eight inches off the ground with each step. Lizzy was right. It helped. Fergus was right as well. Ray was no woodsman. Images of his cozy quarters in the warehouse — watching the drone footage, listening to John Denver, eating hot food — flitted through his mind. He’d been in the woods for a couple of days, but he’d been miserable the entire time. And now, rather than capturing Lizzy, she had captured him. Everything he knew about her must be utilized if he hoped to survive. According to her journal, no one had accomplished that singular feat.

“Here we are,” she said several minutes later, interrupting his thoughts.

A crumbling wood cabin stood before him. Or leaned, rather. A strong wind might reduce it to kindling.

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s not in great shape, but the bones are good. *Bones*...” She giggled. “Come on. I’ll turn on the lantern.”

He tried to commit everything about the exterior of his would-be prison to memory: rusted corrugated metal sheets served as a roof; a stovepipe in an equal state of decline thrusted through the angular surface on the right side; large rocks shored up the structure’s left front corner where the ground had eroded; a pane-less window framed blackness within.

Another shoulder-poke forced him through the doorway the next moment. He stopped, waiting for light. When it arrived, his heart sank. The interior looked as bad as the exterior. Rotten floorboards, several sections missing, promised to break the fibula of careless tenants. A desiccated pile of firewood in one corner had likely hosted countless generations of rat families, and a squatty cast iron stove with its grate hanging askew cradled ashes from decades-old fires.

Two shiny eye bolts had been screwed into the only solid-looking wall in the place.

“Come on, Lizzy. I treated you better than this.” He struggled to keep the fear out of his voice.

“Be grateful, Ray. It’s better than being outside, exposed to the elements. You’ll have a roof over your head tonight, and I’m going to light a fire for you. How nice of me!”

“I’m talking about those.” He gestured toward the bolts.

“Would you prefer the previous arrangement?”

“No,” he said finally.

The wide grin almost split her face in two.

He looked out the window rather than at Lizzy. “Can we cover that opening with something?”

“Yes. I have some plastic sheeting. At the very least, you kept me warm, dry, and well-fed. I will do the same for you.”

“Thank you.”

Another giggle. “You may not thank me later.”

Next came the familiar pinch in the back of his neck, then blackness.

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When he awoke again, his mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. Not a good kind of cotton, like cotton candy. More like cotton gauze used to wrap limburger cheese.

His stomach rumbled at the thought of cheese of any kind, even stinky cheese.

The sight of a cheerful fire in the wood-burning stove greeted him when he opened his eyes. His arms seemed to be pinned to the wall behind him. He tugged at them, puzzled by their obstinacy, yet finding the position not terribly uncomfortable.

Then the blowflies returned.

Lizzy. His decaying prison. The handcuffs.

Before he could work up a healthy state of dismay, he became distracted by a scintillating aroma.

“Rabbit stew,” a voice said.

Turning his head to locate its source felt like moving underwater. There sat Lizzy, cross-legged on the floor, grinning. The corners of his mouth responded of their own volition.

“Well,” she said, “I haven’t seen you smile in a month. How nice. You’re really quite handsome, Ray. I wonder if you realize that.”

The effort to respond vocally was too strenuous. He just continued to smile.

“I bet you’re hungry. I hope you don’t mind if I feed you. Your hands are out of commission at the moment.” A girlish giggle followed. “Have you ever eaten rabbit stew? It’s normally better than this. Freeze-dried vegetables aren’t as good as fresh.”

Whatever Lizzy had put in the stew, it tasted delicious. With every spoonful she fed to him, his salivary glands spurted. How long had it been since he’d eaten?

“Poor little bunny didn’t stand a chance.”

Another giggle. This one sounded less attractive.

More blowflies arrived. He almost spit out the mouthful of stew, but stopped short. He must navigate this situation carefully.

“What was in the syringe, Lizzy?”

“If you think hard enough, you can figure it out. I’m sure you did an inventory of everything that was missing after I left. You probably had printouts of all your little spreadsheets.”

He hadn’t because everything that was relevant these days was stored in his head. He remembered the missing midazolam, then a few seconds later, the ketamine. Special K would explain much about his current state. Despite knowing that the drug coursed through his system, he felt no anxiety — a side effect, no doubt. Depending on the dosage, there could be many more side effects, and not all beneficial.

“You could accidentally give me an overdose.” The words came out slurred, but understandable.

“Did you notice that I never made any references to a job in my journal, Ray? There was a reason for that glaring omission. If it had fallen into the wrong hands, the authorities would have no trouble tracking me down. But I’ll tell you now. I was a doctor.”

Surprise filtered through the mental fog.

“I know,” she continued. “It’s an odd occupation for someone like me, but when you consider my career specialty, it will make sense.”

“Let me guess. A medical examiner?”

“Well done. My doctorate was in forensic pathology.”

“You cut open dead people.”

“Correct again. Makes sense now, doesn’t it? So you don’t need to worry about an inadvertent overdose. I know the precise dosage needed to produce the results I desire. Here, have another spoonful of stew. You’ll need to keep your strength up. I have so many delicious plans for you...for us. Perhaps you won’t find all of them...unpleasant. There was a reason I faked my suicide back in the warehouse, you know. I thought it might soften your feelings toward me. Every now and then, even a woman like me finds herself needing...*gratification*...of a carnal nature. What can I say? I’m a victim of biology,” she added, an odd tone in her voice.

He suppressed a full-body shudder at her words, then focused on the dancing flames in the ancient stove as he chewed his food. Forcing himself to analyze his physiological and mental state wasn’t as hard as it had been a few minutes ago. His brain felt slightly clearer. The food may be helping; a filled belly could often mitigate adverse effects of pharmaceuticals.

Still, his thoughts felt like they were slogging through petroleum jelly. Escape was essential to survival, but formulating a plan would have to wait. His brain was simply not up to the task of tackling complicated logistics at that moment. The warmth of the fire, the oddly cozy ambiance, and the drug-induced comfort lulled him into a state of complacency.

Yes, he must escape. Later.

Chapter 16

***Willadean***

“You think she plans to kill us, like the tree people?” Willa used her stealth-voice. There was no telling if their abductor, whom Fergus called Lizzy, could hear. Willa had come up with a more suitable name for the woman...

Witch.

“I honestly don’t know,” Fergus whispered. “She’s capable of anything. But I suspect she’s dealing with us differently than those other people, considering we’re holed up here instead of in the woods.”

Willa appreciated the candor. Most grownups tip-toed around violent topics when they talked to children.

“When Mama finds us, it won’t end well for the witch.”

That was the thought to which she had been clinging ever since she’d woken up in bed at home with a hand covering her mouth — a female hand that wasn’t Mama’s. After a sharp poking sensation in her neck, there had been nothing but blackness. Then, a couple of hours ago, she’d awakened in this creepy basement with Mister Fergus.

He’d filled in the blank parts as best he could. He didn’t actually know how the witch had gotten into her bedroom. Maybe she used magic? And what about Harlan? He wasn’t in the basement with her and Fergus, so had the witch put him somewhere else? Or was he still safe at home?

“Your mother is indeed a formidable woman, a quality that grows exponentially when it comes to matters of her children’s safety, no doubt.”

“That’s a good word,” she whispered.

“Formidable or exponentially?”

“Exponentially. I learned formidable years ago.”

Mister Fergus chuckled from behind the metal bars in the corner of the basement. He looked like a hobbit in a canary cage.

“You’re a shining star, young lady.”

“Pops calls me that sometimes. I sure do miss him and Mama and Harlan. I wish I was back home with them.” She kept her voice steady when she said that last part. Mister Fergus did not need to know how scared she felt.

“Willa, do you feel brave?”

Had he noticed anyway? Damn.

“Always. I’m Anne Bonney, remember?” There. That came out formidably, just like Mama.

Only one of her hands had been chained to a wall next to the bunk. Apparently, it was a kindness gifted by the witch so that Willa would be able to lie down comfortably. Anne Bonney would do her best to make the witch regret that kindness.

“Check the floor as close to me as you can get. I’m almost certain I heard a pinging sound when Lizzy removed my jacket.”

“I thought you said you were groggy when she brought you in here.”

“I was, but I know what I heard.”

“I believe you. I’ll look again.”

A nightlight next to the door provided minimal illumination. She scooted off the narrow bed and crawled toward the metal cage on two knees and one arm.

“Feel all along the floor as you go. Under that cabinet, too.”

“I’ve done that already.”

“You might have missed it.”

“What kind of a person happens to have a handcuff key in his jacket?”

“The kind of person who has found himself in dangerous situations in the past.”

“Interesting. That only confirms my theory about you.”

“What theory is that?”

Willa puffed a strand of hair away from her face. “You were no college professor. I’m sure Mama knows it too, but for some reason she trusted you anyway.”

“Indeed? Well, if you find that key, I’ll grant you a boon. I’ll answer exactly three questions pertaining to my former life. No stonewalling or prevaricating.”

“Words like these are exactly why I like talking to you.”

“Right. Hurry, child. She could return at any time.”

“Still not finding anything. Wait...”

Her fingers, stretching as far as the chain allowed, brushed against something beneath the cabinet. She couldn’t reach any of the drawers, but her hand disappeared up to the wrist between the two rolling wheels. Anything under there was obscured by the bulk of the cabinet, a type used for storing garage tools. The tip of her middle finger encountered an object. She must be careful not to push it farther away.

“I don’t think it’s a key, but it does feel metallic. It kind of feels like a nail file.”

“Can you slide it out?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, Maximus Impatientus.”

A quiet chuckle came from the corner.

Willa smiled to herself, then concentrated on catching the rounded tip of the metal object with her fingernail. It felt smooth, though. There was no purchase. It required a gripping, whorled fingertip rather than a ragged fingernail.

“I just need another quarter inch...”

“Back to your bed, child. I hear her coming.”

“I don’t hear anything. Almost have it...”

*“Now!”*

That got her moving. A shrill tone coated the deep voice. By the time the door opened, she was sitting on the bed arranging her face into an expression of innocence. The one that always kept her out of trouble. Well, almost always.

“Hello, my little jailbirds. Are we feeling more clear-headed now?”

The witch caressed the switch next to the door. A sudden burst of light assaulted Willa’s eyes, but she forced them to stay open in order to study everything: what lay beyond that door (a wooden staircase), the clothing the witch wore (a black long-sleeved shirt, thick black leggings, black boots), the items she carried (a tray of food...two bowls...probably poisoned), and the analog clock hanging in the stairwell (6:33, but whether AM or PM was unknowable).

Even the tiniest bit of information about her surroundings and her abductor might prove helpful. She’d read that FBI trainees learned how to make mental notes on everything in their realm of vision, even when they were on vacation.

“I need to pee,” Willa replied in her sweetest voice. It wasn’t even a lie.

A raven’s-wing eyebrow arched. “That’s what the pail is for.” The witch indicated a plastic bucket next to the bed.

“I can’t go in front of him.” Willa had been working on this strategy prior to the key quest. She figured the witch might allow her to go somewhere else to pee, or the witch might release Mister Fergus from his cage to give them both privacy. He had a bucket too, but she couldn’t figure how he would be able to use it while wearing handcuffs. He probably had to go pretty badly, too.

“If you wet the bed, you will have to lie in it. Not only that, if you soil the sheets, I will cut off your pinky finger and feed it to my wolf.”

“You have a pet wolf?” She used a childish voice an octave higher than her own. Like the innocent expression, it had worked well on grown-ups in the past.

“An intriguing notion, isn’t it?” the witch replied.

Willa nodded. She could imagine herself with a pet wolf, although a pet panther would be even more exotic. Maybe she could have the panther and Harlan could have the wolf.

“Where does your wolf sleep?” she continued in the high-pitched voice, adding a cute head-tilt. “At the foot of your bed, like a dog, or out in the open with his pack? Does he have his own wolf house in the backyard?”

“You’re an imaginative one,” said the witch.

“I’m a writer. You can’t be a writer without an imagination. It’s probably even more important than proper grammar. Editors can fix grammar mistakes, but they can’t fix a lack of imagination.”

“What makes you think my wolf is male?” the witch said in a sly tone. Willa did not like that tone one bit. She adored clever people; sly ones made her hackles rise.

“Oh, I didn’t think of that. Wolves in books and stories always seem to be male, but of course there must be plenty of female wolves too. She-wolves!” Willa added with what she hoped was a disarming grin.

The witch stared at her, then set the tray on a table next to the door.

“Whatever is in those bowls smells delicious,” Willa said. “But I don’t think I can eat until I pee. I promise to behave if you let me go in private. I bet you have a proper bathroom upstairs. You’re an elegant lady. I can’t picture you squatting behind a tree or peeing in a bucket.”

The witch giggled. To some, that giggle might sound charming. To Willa, it sounded ghoulish.

Seconds passed as the witch busied herself with the food tray. Willa studied her from the back. The witch was about as tall as Serna Jo, but skinnier. Her boots showed evidence of wear but were good quality; mud had squished out from between the treads, leaving footprints on the concrete floor with every step.

Finally, the witch said, “Very well. I do hope you behave because if you pull any shenanigans, I will slice off your entire hand to feed to my wolf.”

“Shenanigans is a good word! I’ll add it to my lexicon.”

Poison-green eyes stared at her, unblinking. The expression the witch wore now was inscrutable.

Willa hoped she was winning the witch over. She didn’t know if that was possible with witches, but she was giving it everything she had. A normal grown-up wouldn’t stand a chance. A psychopath, as Fergus believed the witch to be, may possess an innate ability to withstand her charm offensive.

The witch didn’t respond. Wordlessly, she carried one of the food bowls to the cage in the corner. From his perch on a stool within, Fergus studied the woman’s every move, like a wary, red-haired gargoyle.

“You look tired, Lizzy. You’re probably not getting much sleep between all your nocturnal adventures. How’s Ray, by the way? I can’t imagine you’ve done anything too nefarious to him, considering your, shall we call them, *tender feelings*.”

The black-clad figure stiffened. Even from behind, Willa could see the discomfort the words had evoked.

“Don’t be absurd. I’m not capable of tender feelings.”

A deep chuckle. “That’s true for most psychopaths, but something developed between you and Ray in that warehouse. You know that I know it, too. You felt the transference of your thoughts to me when I held your hand. You don’t yet understand how that process works, but you’ve learned to tamp it down. I see I’ve piqued your interest.”

“You’ve piqued nothing. I’ve known about my telepathy for some time.”

“I’m sure that’s true on some level, but you don’t fully understand it. You don’t know how to harness it. To exploit it. I could teach you. If you kill the child or me, those mysteries will be forever lost to you.”

Instead of answering, the witch reached down to the bottom of the cage and slid the bowl through a narrow opening.

Telepathy? Mister Fergus sure had a lot of explaining to do when they were alone again.

The witch twirled, her eerie green eyes resting on Willa. Just like in stories, the fine hairs on the back of Willa’s neck stood up. “I’m going to unlock the chain,” Lizzy said. “You will walk in front of me, up the stairs, then through the door on the right. That’s the bathroom. You’ll have exactly one minute to relieve yourself with the door open.”

It wasn’t the perfect scenario. Willa had hoped for a couple of private moments for sleuthing, but it was better than nothing. “Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

Cold fingers brushed Willa’s skin when the witch removed the chain’s padlock. Willa sprinted toward the door, then dashed up the stairs. As she’d expected, the witch followed behind her. The light was on, revealing a half-bathroom containing a sink and a toilet. Light dust coated all the surfaces except for the toilet seat. Interesting. Perhaps this bathroom was infrequently used, or the witch hadn’t been in residence long. A quick scan of every item in the small room indicated it didn’t often host visitors: a full bottle of antibacterial hand soap, an immaculate white towel, and a large roll of cheap toilet paper.

“Didn’t want to spring for the Charmin?” Willa said as she pulled down her pajama bottoms and then her underwear. She was too old for Wonder Woman panties, but she couldn’t bear to part with them. Mama didn’t mind; she wanted to get every bit of use out of all the clothing they’d brought from Knoxville.

“The plush stuff doesn’t break down well in my septic system,” the witch said from the hall.

“Clever of you to stock up on TP before the apocalypse. I miss it. Shall I flush or are we preserving water?” Willa was fishing, and the use of ‘we’ was intentional. If Lizzy began seeing Willa as a member of her witch club, she might not be so inclined to kill her.

“Flush, please. Water is not a concern.”

*Interesting.*

“May I wash my face and hands?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

The faucet water only took a few seconds to warm — that must mean the hot water tank had been turned on for a while — and the towel smelled liked bleach. More data that may prove useful.

“Thank you.”

She knew better than to try make a run for it. Much smarter to continue gathering information and worming her way into the witch’s good graces. Once Willa was secured again in the basement, Lizzy turned her attention to Mister Fergus. Apparently, she was having a moment of benevolence.

“I’ll release you from the handcuffs long enough for you to relieve yourself in the bucket and eat your supper. Don’t try anything stupid or I will inject you again.”

Willa exchanged a meaningful look with her friend. *Supper* implied evening. Did it matter? Maybe, maybe not.

“How kind of you,” Mister Fergus replied without a trace of sarcasm.

Once he had done his business in the bucket (with his back turned to the females in the room), he ate his dinner. Willa waited, watching for any discernable effects of poison. He gave her a tiny wink when the witch wasn’t looking. The wink said: *It’s fine.*

Willa dug into her bowl. It had been countless hours since she’d eaten last, and the stew wasn’t half-bad. The meat tasted gamey, a bit like venison, but definitely not venison. What could it be? A horrific thought occurred to her. When she glanced up at Mister Fergus, he seemed to be reading her thoughts; a small shake of the red-haired head said: *No,* *not human flesh.*

She wondered if he was using his telepathy on her.

“Are you considering my offer?” Mister Fergus asked the witch while she stood watching them eat.

“I’m considering many things.” The creepy grin was back. It reminded Willa of the Grinch when he decided to steal Christmas. “Supper is finished. The water should last you until I return,” she added, placing a red solo cup next to Willa’s bed and another inside the canary cage. After replacing the handcuffs and locking the metal door, she flipped the light switch off and left without another word.

Willa blew out a relieved breath. “How are you going to drink without using your hands?”

“I’m fairly bendy for a middle-aged gentleman. Don’t worry your pretty head about me. Now, why don’t you have another go at whatever is beneath that cabinet?”

“Not so fast, Gumby. Spill the beans about this telepathy business.”

Mister Fergus chuckled. “There’s much I can’t tell you, but I can tell you some, and you must accept it at face value with no further explanation.”

“If I find the handcuff key, all bets are off. I get three questions and you give me three straight answers.”

“You have my word. But since you haven’t found the key thus far, for now you just need to understand one thing: the people who survived the plague are all special in some way. They have characteristics or talents that separate them from the average human. From before, I mean.”

“I haven’t noticed that. A few of the folks in the holler aren’t rocket scientists, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, but they’re still special in some way. They still have gifts, even if not easily identifiable ones. The plague was genetic in nature, neither viral nor bacterial. Meaning the people who survived it did so because their DNA was programmed to. You know about DNA?”

“Of course. The building blocks of life. A complete set of DNA is called a genome, which is like an instruction booklet for the human body.”

Mister Fergus blinked. “You really are quite remarkable.”

Willa was used to people being amazed when she let her intellect show, but the genuine wonderment on the face of her teacher made her cheeks redden. It was one thing to dazzle Cricket, quite another to dazzle someone like him. “Who programmed the DNA?” she asked.

“Excellent question, and one I’m not inclined to answer, assuming I could. But I will tell you that some people — not all — have the ability to transmit and receive thoughts.”

“You’re one of those people. So is the witch.”

Mister Fergus nodded. “I don’t know if you have that ability or not, but you certainly possess an remarkable intellect. Did your mother ever have you tested?”

“She’d planned to. Me and Harlan both. But things got crazy before we could do the tests.”

“I assume you were in advanced classes at your school?”

“Yes, but back in third grade three years ago, our options were limited. We got ‘extension activities’ because we were gifted, but they didn’t amount to much. It would have gotten really interesting if we’d made it to sixth grade. We would have been in a separate class with all the other smart kids.”

“That’s why your mother allowed me into the village knowing that I probably wasn’t the college professor I proclaimed myself to be.”

“Yep.”

“She sensed that I posed no threat and that I would be beneficial to her children’s education.”

“You think she has telepathy too? That would explain a few things.”

“If so, she may not even be aware of it. Your grandfather, on the other hand...”

“Oh, yes. Pops definitely has it and knows it.”

“Indeed. So do you understand that it’s not some supernatural hocus pocus, but actually a genetic directive?”

“The magic stuff is more fun. I know science can explain just about everything, but sometimes I don’t want it to.”

The bird-nest beard split apart in a grin. “Hold onto magic as long as you can, Willadean. Most grownups let fragments of it slip through their fingers with every passing day.”

Willa nodded. “The witch was blocking her own thoughts so you couldn’t read them?”

“In a rudimentary way, perhaps. As with any skill or talent, the more you practice, the better you get. She couldn’t block the fact that she was exhausted, nor her blossoming migraine. Because of that exhaustion and discomfort, I was able to access more of her thoughts just now. My primary concern was whether this room is being monitored, either visually or audibly, but I couldn’t extract that information.”

“Do you think she can read my thoughts?”

“You would sense it if she could. You’re self-aware and smart enough to identify a foreign entity’s attempts at probing your mind. You may not understand what’s happening, but you’d know something was amiss. You haven’t felt anything like that?”

Willa shook her head.

“That’s good. Now, can we focus on escape, please? Between us, I think we’ve bought a bit of time with Lizzy. You seem to captivate her. Possibly she relates to you as the gifted child she herself was at the same age. But we can’t count on that continuing. She could flip at any moment and decide to crucify us in a tree.”

“Got it,” Willa replied, scrambling off the bed again.

Perhaps the witch had shackled her differently this time, because her fingertip connected with the metal object under the cabinet. She slid it out, then held it up in the nightlight’s faint glow.

“Looks like a surgeon’s scalpel,” she said. “Good thing I grabbed it from the handle end.”

“Well done, child.”

“Can you pick the lock with it?”

“Does a bear defecate in the woods?”

“It sure does. Stand back.” She grinned, then tossed the wicked-looking implement into the canary cage.

Chapter 17

***Harlan***

*Harlan was determined not to let the Witchy Lady see him this time. It couldn’t have been a coincidence that Willa went missing from her bed soon after the Witchy Lady had spotted him flying above the Pyramid Logs in the astral plane. He and Willa slept only inches apart. Had he drawn her to their home, inadvertently leaving some kind of mystical breadcrumb trail? When he settled on that explanation for Willa’s abduction, he felt the Shift again, that feeling of being absolutely sure of something. He didn’t know where the Shift came from, but he trusted it. It had never let him down.*

*If he didn’t block thoughts of Willa at that moment, he would start crying in his dream, and probably in the real world too. Mama was out hunting for her, but Pops was sitting on her bed with his old shotgun. Nobody was going to snatch Harlan. Seeing his grandfather in the gloom, awake and watchful, was the only reason Harlan had been able to fall asleep.*

*None of the village dogs flew with him that night. Disappointing, but maybe a good thing. He needed to concentrate on controlling his movements. The lofty goals he’d set for himself that night included finding Willa, keeping an eye on Mama in the woods, and possibly spotting the Witchy Lady. Any information he could gather may prove useful.*

*Since his physical body was home in bed covered by one of Pops’ handmade quilts, the chilly autumn air didn’t penetrate his flapping flannel pajamas. But the astral version of himself registered the temperature, the wind speed, and the scents whooshing past him as he soared: pungent juniper, skunk-from-a-distance, decaying vegetation...all familiar smells he associated with living in the country. It made the skunk aroma oddly pleasant.*

*His life in the holler these past three years had been a happy one. In Knoxville, a boy who didn’t speak was a boy shunned. Reviled, even. And not just by other students, but sometimes by the teachers. In hindsight, perhaps it wasn’t just the muteness people found off-putting. Maybe they’d sensed his burgeoning War Chest of Oddities. It had always been easier to let Willa stand in the limelight — where she was quite happy to be — and almost always better to let her make the decisions. Or at least let her think she was making them. A force of nature like Willa could wear a person down. Like water on stone, Pops told him once.*

*But she was his other half and the main reason he was undertaking this dangerous mission. He would find her and let Mama know where she was. The twin connection told him she was alive. No question.*

*Something registered on his astral-plane eardrums just then. It sounded mechanical in nature, which immediately struck him as unusual. Nobody had access to gasoline or electricity anymore. Yes, their drone-flying candy provider in the warehouse had power, but this noise came from the woods, and it wasn’t the insectile sound of a drone. He closed his eyes and concentrated...willing himself to find the source. There was no way of knowing how much time passed; he’d long ago given up trying to measure minutes or hours during these adventures. So when he opened his eyes to find himself soaring above a man-made structure, he didn’t know how long he’d been flying. He didn’t know where he was, either, which was scary. But he would not panic.*

*He concentrated on hovering, instead of forward motion. Beneath his fluttering pajamas lay a cabin, nestled in a small clearing. In the glow of a full moon and a sky full of stars, he identified a narrow dirt road winding away from the structure. The roof of a tiny building, a shed perhaps, lay a football field’s distance from the main house. The cabin appeared neither primitive nor old, likely built with modern tools before the plague. A motorcycle was parked nearby, its rider’s helmet perched on the seat. The mechanical noise emanated from a metal box the size of a small sofa, positioned next to the house.*

*A generator?*

*The Shift confirmed.*

*Okay, then. Now he was getting somewhere, but he would need more detail. He closed his eyes and concentrated on altitude. Some time later (seconds? hours?), he floated just above the cabin’s roof. Definitely a recently built house. The shingles and log walls were in perfect condition. In contrast, the houses in the village had been patched and repaired so many times they looked like children had made them out of cardboard and wooden blocks. An igloo-shaped structure huddled near the foundation. He’d seen those before in Knoxville, usually with a dog inside or nearby.*

*The cabin was beautiful. Inviting, even. So appealing that he found himself wanting to see what it looked like on the inside.*

*A delectable scent drifted beneath his imagined nose.*

*What was it? Something that smelled like Christmas? Yes. Christmas. The next moment he had it.*

*Gingerbread.*

*The Shift confirmed.*

*Oh, I see now, he said to himself and also to the Shift. You’re letting me know this is the Witchy Lady’s house.*

*Bingo. His imagined smile stretched from ear-to-ear.*

*He didn’t dare hover any lower. The Witchy Lady could come out at any moment and catch him. He closed his eyes again and concentrated on his twin connection. Was Willa in that house?*

*There it was. A ping inside his brain. The only person who generated that particular ping was Willa.*

*Okay. She’s inside, and she’s alive. Success! Was there anything else he could accomplish here at the moment? No. The pressing issue now was to determine the location of the cabin so Mama and the Scouts could find it.*

*His astral-plane stomach flip-flopped as he studied the terrain. He truly had no idea where he was.*

*Don’t panic, Harlan.*

*It wasn’t the voice of his own brain. It wasn’t the voice of the Shift, either. Icicles blossomed in his dream belly.*

*It’s Mister Fergus.*

*The icicles melted instantly.*

*Are you with Willa?*

*Yes. We’re both safe. For now. But you must use critical thinking along with your artistic talent to help us. This thing that we’re doing, this telepathy, is called* scythen*. You’re a natural at it. You must make a mental note of the stars’ positions above you and details of the forest below you. That way, perhaps someone in the village can triangulate the location. Paint a picture in your mind of everything you’re seeing, then remember that picture and draw it on paper immediately upon awakening. Can you do that?*

*I think so.*

*Excellent. Do the first part now.*

*Harlan rolled onto his dream back, noted the placement of the twinkling stars against the black velvet sky, and burned the celestial map into his brain. Then he righted himself, performed an astral-plane pirouette, and absorbed every detail of the surrounding forest. He’d had plenty of practice doing this. It was an artist’s technique.*

*I think I’ve got it.*

*Very good. Now you need to leave quickly. Lizzy may be awake. She could spot you if she comes outside. I forgot to mention that possibility when we talked about your astral-plane dreaming before.*

*That’s okay. The Shift already warned me.*

*The Shift? Tell me about that later. Now skedaddle.*

*Mister Fergus, I’m not sure how to get home.*

*Never fear, boy. There’s a simple technique I learned from others who have mastered astral projection. You’ve seen the Wizard of Oz, yes?*

*Of course. What kid hasn’t?*

*Right. So you’re Dorothy, repeating over and over:* There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. *Now imagine yourself back home in your warm bed, safe and sound. Don’t let any other thoughts interfere with that visualization. Do it now. You’ll be home before you know it. I have to sign off now, Harlan. You’ll be fine. Just believe in your abilities. Believe in your War Chest of Oddities and everything will turn out peachy.*

*The next moment Mister Fergus’s voice went silent. Harlan no longer sensed the presence in his brain.*

*Before he began chanting the mantra, he thought about those final words.*

*He’d never told Mister Fergus or anyone else about his War Chest of Oddities. In a way, it was a relief for someone else to know about them, he decided.*

*The Shift agreed.*

*He smiled to himself and closed his eyes.*

Chapter 18

***Ray***

Pink-tinged sunlight filtered through the plastic sheeting on the window. Was it morning or evening? Impossible to know.

Lizzy was nowhere in sight.

Upon awakening, Ray’s thoughts seemed clearer than they’d been since his capture. He remembered Lizzy feeding him. Remembered the sips of water she insisted he take. Remembered using his most appealing smile when asking her to loosen the chain dangling from the eye-bolts to his wrists. At some point during unconsciousness, Lizzy had apparently obliged. He could move a bit farther from the wall in a 180-degree range. His limbs and back felt stiff, but he could fully stand now. A plastic bucket placed near the woodpile contained a quarter-inch of amber liquid.

“Ugh,” he croaked. He had no memory of urinating in the bucket and the thought of Lizzy helping made him nauseated.

He shuffled toward it now, sliding down his fly. After adding another quarter-inch to the bucket, his gaze fell upon the desiccated wood in the corner. His thoughts were definitely clearer now. Most of the ketamine and midazolam must have passed through his kidneys and into the bucket.

The crumbling firewood lay in the corner of the cabin shored up by rocks on the outside. Still eyeing the corner, he reached for the water bottle next to the bucket. She may torture him in some grisly manner, but she would not let him die of thirst or hunger. A breakfast MRE lay next to the water. He recognized it as one from the warehouse — one of his favorites, actually.

What was the significance of those rocks, he wondered, idly chewing a cold maple sausage patty. Obviously, they reinforced the eroded soil in that spot, but maybe there was more to their positioning. What if the floor under all that rotting firewood was also rotting? Did a hole in the floor leading to the outside do him any good while shackled to a wall? No. Unless the wall was in a similar state. He imagined a cartoon version of himself sawing out a chunk and running away as chains, plaster, and boards chased him from behind.

“It’s not the worst idea,” he said to himself, “if I had a saw.” The sound of his own voice in the chilly quiet of the morning air startled him. Made him think about Lizzy: Where was she? How long had she been gone? What had she done to Fergus and the little girl?

It was time to focus on escape. He was no help to anyone in his current situation. He tested the eye bolts first, assuming Lizzy wouldn’t have merely screwed them in by hand — that would have made for an easy escape. A quick twist to the left of both proved his theory correct. Unscrewing those things would take leverage, a tool, or more strength than his fingers could provide at the moment.

He took a few steps, careful to check the floor’s integrity, and shuffled to the farthest reaches of his tether. The clanking chain sounded unnatural in the rustic setting. His fingertips couldn’t quite touch the woodstove, but they could discern some residual heat from the cast iron.

He studied every inch of the cabin now, scanning up and down, left to right. He began compiling mental spreadsheets of all that he’d identified visually. Then he closed his eyes and listened, being careful not to rattle the chain, and concentrated on nature’s ambient noise flowing through the plaster chinks: a hawk screeched from far above the roof; wind rushed through a nearby pine tree with a pleasant *whoosh*; mourning doves cooed; the faint but constant gurgle of water slid over stones on its way to somewhere else. He added the audible notes to his mental spreadsheet.

Next came olfactory: lingering wood smoke from the stove; fresh urine in the bucket and stale urine from the camouflage pants he’d been wearing for days; the residual aroma of food from last night’s supper and the more prevalent scent of maple sausage; the mustiness of decay from the walls; a faint whiff of rodent feces from the woodpile.

Suddenly, a much stronger scent assaulted his nostrils, carried on a breeze that filtered under the edges of the window’s plastic sheeting. It was a smell he’d never experienced before: earthy and pungent, but not unpleasant. A faint whiff of sweetness — berries perhaps — followed the aroma.

Something about the fragrance registered on the lizard part of his brain. He wasn’t completely surprised when a low-pitched snuffle resonated through the window.

*Do not make a noise. Do not breathe. Do not even blink.*

He was grateful for exactly one thing at that moment: Grizzlies did not populate the Smoky Mountains. But black bears did. An average female weighed about a hundred pounds. A male could get up to two-fifty. By autumn, bears had been packing on weight for months in preparation for winter hibernation. This time of year those numbers could double. Even a small female would have no problem crashing through that window.

He scanned the room again. Nothing within reach would serve as a weapon. Lizzy wouldn’t have been so careless.

Growls punctuated the snuffling now. The bear had caught his scent. The only weapon available was the chain tethering him to the wall. Could he strangle a bear? Would he survive the attempt? The notion seemed ludicrous.

There was nothing left to do but remain motionless. With luck, the bear would decide that gaining access to the cabin required too much effort. Surely with so few humans left to use up resources, the bear population enjoyed easy pickings these days. Why expend energy crashing through a window when acorns, blackberries, and river trout could so easily be procured?

Claws raked against the cabin’s outside wall. Bits of ancient plaster and dried moss cascaded to the floor next to him. The snuffling grew louder, coming now through a fresh opening between the dilapidated boards. Another low growl. He imagined the snout and its incisors, molars, and canine teeth on the other side of a few pieces of flimsy, rotten lumber. He envisioned fangs that could shred human flesh like a steak knife slicing through beef tenderloin.

The low growls abruptly transitioned to intermittent roars.

A small female likely couldn’t produce the bass notes and ear-splitting volume. The next moment, a trio of curved four-inch long claws razored the plastic.

*That’s it, then. That’s what I deserve for going outside. There was a reason my agoraphobia kept me in one piece all these years. It’s safer indoors. The one time I venture out into nature, I get drugged and kidnapped by a psychopath, then mauled and eaten by a bear. With luck, I’ll be dead before the eating begins...*

The roaring stopped abruptly. A rifle shot pierced the silence. On the other side of the wall, the bear hit the ground with a satisfying thud, like a half-ton boulder had been dropped from a crane.

He was likely witnessing Lizzy’s dramatic return. Would he owe her a debt of gratitude for saving his life only to torture and murder him later?

His heart still raced from residual adrenaline. The cabin door flew open. A woman filled the doorway, framed by dust-moted sunlight.

It wasn’t Lizzy.

“Who are you?” the woman asked in a sharp, no-nonsense voice. Despite its edge, the sultry notes befitted the woman herself. She sniffed delicately.

Blood rushed to his cheeks as he imagined his stench. “Sorry about the smell. I’ve been chained up for more than a day.” The absurdity of his response wasn’t missed by the woman.

She smiled. He didn’t suddenly hear a singing choir, but his heart did skip a figurative beat.

“Your circumstances excuse it. Otis, everything’s under control in here,” she said over her shoulder. Her gold-flecked eyes skewered him again. “What happened to you?” She stepped inside the cabin. Her boots seemed to know precisely where to tread on the compromised boards.

“I was out looking for a dangerous woman...a psychopath. She found me first.”

“Interesting. Is her name Lizzy?”

“Yes. How did...? You must know Fergus. You’re from the holler, right?”

“What do you know about the holler?”

“Very little. Fergus wouldn’t tell me much, out of respect for the people who live there.”

A small forward dip of the blond braids indicated an acknowledgement of his new friend’s discretion.

“She’s as bad as he probably told you,” Ray continued. “How big was the bear?”

“You wouldn’t have stood a chance.” There was the smile again.

“I hope you’ll be able to utilize the meat.”

“Of course. Nothing goes to waste in our village. But first things first. Do you know where Lizzy might have taken my daughter?” The edge was back in her voice. “I know she’s alive. Her brother can feel it. They’re twins.”

“Ah. I didn’t know she had a sibling.” Were these the children the drone camera had caught a glimpse of? The ones he’d been delivering food and candy to? He had no idea.

The muzzle of the rifle the woman held suddenly pointed at him. “Better come clean and fast.”

How stupid of him. What would trigger a mother faster than a strange man having knowledge of her child? “Just before Lizzy captured me...us...I’m not sure yet what happened to Fergus in all this...she mentioned having abducted a child. A girl.”

“What else?” the woman demanded.

Ray took a deep breath. “Let me explain. Then afterward, perhaps you can help me get out of this.” The chain clinked as he lifted his hands a few inches.

“We’ll see.”

Ray told her everything: about his life in the warehouse since the pandemic; discovering Lizzy with the drone; bringing her inside only to discover what she was; securing her living space and keeping her contained so as not to harm anyone else; ultimately failing in that endeavor; meeting Fergus after delivering food to the mystery children; admitting that those children were the main reason he’d ventured outside to try to capture Lizzy. It was all completely true and unembellished.

If not for those children, he doubted he could have worked up the courage.

A curt nod of the head was her only response. The next moment she was studying the chain — how it attached to the wall through the eyebolts then threaded through the handcuffs on his wrists. Her proximity made his head swim. She smelled of coffee, female sweat, and something herbaceous. Rosemary? The combination was intoxicating. Either he’d been away from non-psychopathic women for too long or she was, in fact, the most attractive woman he’d ever encountered.

“Otis!” she called out the next moment. “Bring the bolt cutters in here.”

A male voice responded just on the other side of the wall. “I’m working on the bear.” The Appalachian dialect was unmistakable.

“Now, please. The bear can wait.”

Indistinct muttering, footsteps on the ground, then a man appeared in the doorway in full camo hunting gear. Something about his eyes didn’t jibe with the expressionless face. There was anger in those eyes.

Ray disliked him instantly. How much of that could be attributed to the perceived anger or to the fact that he accompanied the woman, he didn’t know.

“You haven’t told me your name yet,” Ray said to her. “Nor have you asked mine.” He ignored the man handing her the tool.

“I’m Serena Jo. Obviously this is Otis. His brother was recently murdered, as was another member of our village. Both were strung up in a tree with their throats slit.”

That would explain the anger. “I’m sorry for your loss,” Ray said.

Otis turned without a word and disappeared outside again.

“I’m Ray,” he continued. “That certainly sounds like Lizzy’s MO. She mentioned having a ‘thing’ for crucifixions.”

“Fergus mentioned that too.”

“Trust me. That bear is nothing compared to what Lizzy can and will do.”

“She specifically said she had taken a child?”

“Yes,” he said. The woman snipped the handcuffs’ steel links. It felt wonderful to be able to spread his arms. “She said Fergus and I better not do anything to her or the child would die. That we would never find her and she would perish of dehydration or hypothermia.” He omitted the ‘bound and gagged’ part.

Serena Jo moved to the eye bolts now, cutting sections out of each and releasing the chain from the wall.

“Thank you,” he said, stretching.

“Hands up. I’ll cut through the cuffs now. Please continue.”

“That’s about it. She’s been injecting me with drugs...midazolam and ketamine...to keep me groggy and manageable. I have no idea what happened to Fergus. He was gone when I woke up in the forest yesterday after the altercation with Lizzy. She told me she had taken him somewhere else so she could have privacy when dealing with me. Payback is on her agenda, I assume. I held her captive for months.”

“I’m not worried about Fergus. My only concern is my daughter.”

“I understand. But he was out here trying his best to catch Lizzy before she could cause more harm.”

“What else?”

“There’s something she mentioned yesterday. Something about following rules in terms of her victims. In the context of the situation, I took it to mean regarding children, specifically.”

“You’re saying she may treat a child victim differently than an adult?”

He nodded. “She wouldn’t elaborate, but that’s how I interpreted it. Which is a good thing for your daughter. What is her name?”

Her eyes misted suddenly before she could turn away. “Willadean.”

“That’s a lovely name. We’ll find her.”

“Yes, we will. But first we’re going to the village for supplies. And I need to check on my son. Here, put this on. Cover your eyes.” She untied a scarf from her neck and handed it to him.

“You want me blindfolded while navigating the forest?” he said, reaching for the garment. He could smell her scent in its fibers.

“No offense, but we don’t let anyone from the outside know the location of our village. That’s one of the security measures that keeps us safe.”

“I understand, but I don’t think I can walk without seeing. There are all kinds of tripping hazards. Roundleaf briars, for one.” He’d remembered Lizzy’s horticulture lesson.

“Lift your feet up high when you step. You can hold onto me. We don’t have far to go.”

He shuddered at hearing the same advice given by Lizzy. When he tied the scarf over his eyes, the sudden loss of vision prompted him to focus on another sense. His olfactory was assaulted — pleasantly so — by Serena Jo’s scent embedded in the scarf just above his nose.

The next moment, strong fingers directed his hand. “Hold onto my coat sleeve. If you feel like you’re going to stumble, reach for my bicep.” She raised her voice. “You coming, Otis?”

“I’m going to finish field dressing this bear. I’ll be along shortly.”

Even behind the blindfold, Ray sensed the woman’s annoyance. She didn’t reply, but began walking. He barely managed to keep up. He remembered the long legs that could surely cover ground faster than most people.

After they’d walked for a few minutes, he said, “You wanted to force Otis to come with us, but you didn’t. Or couldn’t.”

She didn’t respond immediately. Finally she said, “Was there a question in there?”

“Aren’t you the leader of your village? I may have made an assumption. Fergus gave me no details.”

Her sigh was subtle. He might not have heard it if not for the blindfold.

“Yes, I’m in charge. But sometimes I have to pick my battles. We have a mandate: no one goes outside the village alone.”

“So Otis was openly defying you.”

“And it may cost him his life.”

“It’ll be on him, then.”

“In theory, but everything that goes wrong in the village is my fault, even when it’s not my fault. I accept that responsibility.”

“That’s the attitude of an effective leader.”

Another long pause. “Why did you assume I was the leader?”

Ray laughed. “Everything about you screams authority. Your confidence, your competence, your obvious intellect. At least that’s what I remember before you made me wear a blindfold.”

“Flattery will get you no further than those who hate my guts.”

“Not flattery. Trust me. I wouldn’t know how to flatter someone. I’m hopelessly inadequate in social situations. Especially when it comes to women.”

“I doubt that.”

“It’s true. I’m a textbook introvert with anxiety issues and agoraphobia.”

“Interesting. So you’re perfectly happy being holed up in that warehouse?”

“Weirdly, yes. Except for the Lizzy part. I admit, though, I was getting lonely. The drone helped. Spotting the kids on the footage gave me an unexpected jolt of happiness. Got me...hopeful...again. If that makes sense.”

“Yes, it does. The children are everything.”

“I agree. I could help, you know. I have enough food and medicine to last for years. Not just for the kids, but for everyone.”

She stopped suddenly.

“Don’t mention that to anyone in the village. Understood?” The menace in her tone was unmistakable.

“Yes, of course,” he replied quickly. “But why? I just want to help.”

“Because the contents of your warehouse are not sustainable. We’re doing more than merely getting by. We’re healthy, we’re happy for the most part, and we’re self-reliant. No more candy, by the way. The last thing we need is tooth decay. They don’t need food, either. They get plenty to eat.”

“But do they get macaroni and cheese? What childhood is complete without it?”

“I mean it, Ray.”

There would be no arguing with that tone. “Duly noted,” he replied. “I’ve told you all about me. The warehouse, my life before and after. You haven’t told me much about you.”

“Are you familiar with the term OPSEC?”

“Of course. Operational security. I worked for the government, remember? So you’re saying if you told me about your life, you’d have to kill me?”

“I won’t tell you much about our village. Yet. You’ll be seeing parts of it soon anyway.”

“So tell me about before. Did you always live there? No offense, but you sound...”

“Not like an Appalachian hillbilly?” she finished.

“Yes.”

“I started out here, but the day after I graduated from high school, I left for Knoxville. Leaving the holler was...frowned upon, but I’d won a full academic scholarship to the University of Tennessee.”

“You were a rebel. Nice. What was your degree?”

“Political science. I minored in economics.”

“So you planned to go into politics?”

“Yes, ultimately. I’d been involved in local elections for years after college, much of it volunteer stuff. Then I got a job at Mayor Haslam’s office back in 2008. When Haslam got himself elected governor, I was on a fast track to be selected as his top advisor. I was getting ready to move to Nashville when the pandemic started hitting the news.”

“Bill Haslam. A Republican, right?”

“Yes, but party affiliation never mattered to me.”

“What did?”

Without hesitation, she replied, “Power.”

“I see.”

She laughed again. “I realize that sounds bad. Maybe *control* would have been a better word choice.”

Ray decided to change the subject. “How terrible was it in Knoxville during the end?”

“Horrible for a lot of people. I always had a feeling we wouldn’t catch the sickness, though. Can’t explain why. And I had a plan because I’d seen the writing on the wall earlier than most. I knew I’d be leaving and taking my children home to the holler. A remote, rural location was the smart choice to ride out the chaos. Once I realized it was going to be much worse than what the officials in DC were telling us, I made a list, rented a U-Haul, loaded it up, and left town. Not before polite society began to collapse, though.”

“I can confirm that what was coming out of DC was willfully inaccurate. You and the children must have been in danger, I imagine. What about their father?” He couldn’t help himself.

“I have no idea what happened to him. He was not part of our lives, and my kids never knew him.”

He could tell by the tone in her voice that the subject of paternity was now closed. Shifting again, he said, “I’m curious about what was on your list. Emergency preparedness was what I did for a living, you know.”

“Sorry. OPSEC.”

He smiled, tripped over a vine, and fell flat on his face.

He waited for laughter that didn’t materialize. His hand no longer held onto her sleeve, but he managed to stand up. “Where’d you go?”

No response came from Serena Jo, but he heard movement.

He ripped the scarf from his eyes.

Two women stood facing each other across those yards. Both pointed rifles at each other. Serena Jo wore a grim expression. Lizzy smirked. A picture flashed through his mind: a graceful snowy swan facing a clever ebony-hued raven. The imagery was both a bizarre and unwelcome distraction at the moment.

“I’m a better shot,” Serena Jo said, her tone matter-of-fact.

“You can’t know that. Your knowledge of any marksmanship ends with you. Besides, if you kill me, you’re killing your little girl. Yes, I know she’s yours. I’ve been watching your village. She’ll die of dehydration and hunger long before you can find her.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“No you won’t.” Lizzy’s grin unfurled.

Ray covered the two steps between himself and Serena Jo faster than he would have thought possible.

“You’ll have to go through me, Lizzy,” he said. “Something tells me you don’t want me dead. Not yet.”

“I don’t need to be rescued,” Serena Jo hissed from behind.

“You should probably listen less to your inner voice, Ray. Your instincts are dreadful.” Lizzy giggled. Then a section of her upper sleeve exploded. The sharp report of a rifle followed.

Ray blinked in confusion. Serena Jo hadn’t fired. Then his brain caught up to events. By the time that happened, Lizzy had disappeared and Otis jogged past.

“Don’t kill her, Otis!” Serena Jo yelled to his back.

Without breaking stride, Otis nodded.

“Damn it,” Serena Jo said once he’d entered the tree line.

“He winged her,” Ray said.

“I’m not sure he hit anything but fabric. She’s skinny. You said she was slender, but she looked emaciated. I guess Fergus was right.”

“Are we going after her?”

Serena Jo shook her head. “Otis is the best. Better than me. If he can’t track her, she can’t be tracked. I need to get back to my boy.” There was urgency in her voice now. She sounded close to panic.

“We can make better time if I don’t have to wear the scarf.”

“Let’s go,” she replied, and took off at a run.

Chapter 19

***Fergus***

“So apparently a bear does *not* defecate in the woods,” Willadean said as Fergus struggled with the scalpel.

“Sometimes your precociousness is annoying,” he replied, concentrating on the handcuffs behind his back.

“I wish I could say that was the first time someone told me that.”

Fergus laugh-grunted. “If a certain person had located the handcuff key instead of a razor-sharp scalpel, we’d be out of here by now.”

“I’m just a kid. You should be doing the heavy lifting.”

She had a point. He’d managed to get himself out of a small metal box back in Florida. He should be up to this challenge.

“It’s the blasted lock on the blasted handcuffs. They may not be standard issue. Damn it. She’s coming back. Get on your bed.”

Lizzy stormed through the door, flipped on the light, ignored Willadean cringing on the tiny bed, and thrust her hand through the cage bars. “Give it to me, pointy end toward yourself.”

Fergus stared into those green-rimmed black orbs. There would be no denying this Lizzy, who seemed different from the Lizzy that brought their supper. He turned his back to allow access to the scalpel in his hands.

“You’re lucky I don’t slit your wrists with it.”

Biting his lip to keep from supplying a tart retort, he felt the metal slide from his fingertips, along with any hopes of a quick escape. The next second, he felt a tiny stabbing sensation in his neck.

*Damn it...*

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When he awoke unknown hours later, the memory of his *scythen* conversation with Harlan hovered between consciousness and unconsciousness. He forced it to the forefront.

*Perhaps the cavalry is coming.*

A raging thirst superseded all thoughts. He squatted on the cement floor to reach the red solo cup. The tepid water may be dosed with more of the drug with which Lizzy had injected him, but it didn’t matter. His body needed hydration.

“Finally,” came Willadean’s voice through the gloom.

“How long have I been out?”

“I’m not sure. I fell asleep about an hour after she left. We sure pissed her off. I wonder how she knew about the scalpel. What are we going to do now?”

“Fewer questions until I’m fully awake, please."

“Fine.”

He closed his eyes again and reached out with his *scythen*. Lizzy was definitely no longer in the cabin. “She’s gone,” he said, louder now. “We should assume going forward that she may be listening or watching. Understand?”

“Already thought of that.”

“I assume you weren’t drugged as well?”

“I was not. I’m a good girl,” she said loudly.

“Willadean, do you know about your brother’s...nighttime activities?”

“You mean yanking his wanker or that other thing?”

“That other thing. Careful, love.”

“He never told me about it, but I got a whiff of it because we’re twins. That’s probably all I should say.”

“Very good. Since I asked about it, you can probably fill in the blanks.”

A half-minute passed before she replied. “Gotcha.”

“You’re a clever girl.”

“Damn straight.”

“How are you doing? Are you nervous? Worried? It’s okay to tell me.”

“I am a little of both. But I have faith that everything will work out fine.”

“Good. I have faith too.”

“I don’t mean the kind you get from the Bible,” she added. He could hear the derision in her voice.

“So you’re an atheist?”

“I like to think there may be a God, but I’m not certain of it. I can’t imagine God would allow all those people to die from Chicksy. It wasn’t pretty for them at the end, you know.”

Fergus felt the familiar lump in his throat. That always happened when he thought about the children, both those who had died in the pandemic and those who had survived it only to witness the unspeakable suffering.

“But I also look at the forest and the mountains and the sky, and I think all that beauty couldn’t have happened by accident.”

Fergus smiled but didn’t respond.

“On a side note, I hope she lets me use the bathroom when she comes back.”

“I’ll turn my back so you can have privacy at the bucket.”

“I can wait. What about you?”

“I can wait, too. I think I’m dehydrated,” he added, grimly. “I need to think for a few minutes, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Sure. I’m not going anywhere.”

He pondered their situation. It was difficult not to be frustrated under the circumstances; one of his more finely tuned talents was escape. Yet Lizzy’s containment system had flummoxed him. If Willadean had located the dropped handcuff key, would it have even worked on the nonstandard cuffs? The cage in the basement, the isolated location, the restraints...all smacked of preparedness.

The notion of a ‘kill room’ surfaced in his mind. A faint aroma of bleach permeated the floor; he’d noticed it when taking sips from the water cup. Why was bleach needed to clean the floor? What better location than a remote forest in which to conduct one’s nefarious deeds? What better setup than an underground room furnished with chains, handcuffs, a metal cage, and — likely — implements of torture tucked inside a rolling cabinet? Lizzy must have dropped the scalpel then inadvertently kicked it under the cabinet during some previous visit to the basement. Had she been too distracted by a former occupant of the cage to notice? He thought of the bleach again and how its use would destroy trace evidence.

Any self-respecting, sadistic serial killer would own dozens of such devices: pliers to remove teeth, bamboo shards to jamb under fingernails, cudgels to break kneecaps. Perhaps Lizzy delved into more medieval forms of torture: the breast-ripper, the pear of anguish, the head-crusher.

Fergus had seen those used in Europe firsthand. He very much didn’t want to be the victim of any of them, nor their modern counterparts. Withstanding torture wasn’t impossible. He’d done it before. But the psychological damage it would inflict on Willadean was unthinkable. Also unthinkable: Lizzy performing such torture on the child. Lizzy was a monster. Was she also *that* kind of monster? His gut said no, but his gut had been wrong before. They must escape — and soon. Time wasted waiting on rescue was better spent formulating a plan.

“Are you thinking about how we’ll escape?” Willadean whispered.

“I know there’s an avenue I’ve yet to uncover. I’m rather adept at escape, you know.” Even if Lizzy were listening, the message was necessary. Willadean must believe in him and his ability to save her.

The girl snickered. “You’re so not a college professor.”

“I’ll take the fifth.”

Silence from the bed now. Willadean’s outsized intellect was doubtless pondering a multitude of titillating former professions for him. But when she spoke, he realized he was wrong.

“I think our best bet lies in a different direction...”

“What? Wait. Don’t answer that.”

“I hadn’t planned to,” she said. Then, “Trust me. No more talking. Okay?”

The subtle chastisement made him smile. She was right, of course. If Lizzy were somehow listening, the less she knew about their state of mind, the better.

After what seemed like hours, his *scythen* pinged, immediately followed by footsteps outside the door.

Lizzy entered the room. She hadn’t yet flipped on the light switch. He listened to her labored breathing with a jolt of excitement. Was she ill? Injured? He had his answer seconds later when light flooded the room.

Thorny vines twisted their way through strands of normally sleek locks, creating a tangled hairdresser’s nightmare. Her pants were shredded and muddy, and her pale face was pinched in pain. Blood oozed from a small hole in the fabric of her left sleeve.

Fergus opened his mouth to speak, but Willadean beat him.

“Oh, you’re hurt,” she said, using that childish voice from earlier. “Can I help you?”

Lizzy clutched a first-aid kit with fingers that might have been broken.

“I can’t do it myself,” Lizzy said to Willadean. Her voice sounded calm on the surface, but Fergus heard a sub-harmony of pain.

“What do you want me to do?”

“I need you to remove my shirt and clean the bullet wound. I’ll guide you through it.”

Fergus watched with fascination as the drama unfolded. He knew Willadean well enough at this point to recognize that she was playing a part: that of a concerned, caring child.

“I don’t know if I can do that with these chains.”

*Brilliant!*

Lizzy nodded, set the first-aid kit on the tiny bed, and then pointed to a front pants pocket with one of her functioning fingers.

“Got it,” Willadean said, after fishing out the key that would release her from her bonds.

“Don’t do anything stupid, child, or your friend will pay for it. You know what they say about injured animals?”

“They can be even more dangerous than healthy ones. I won’t do anything stupid.”

Fergus found himself being persuaded of the girl’s sincerity.

Several heartbeats later, Willadean was free. Fergus shuttered his *scythen* so as not to transmit excitement. He might not make it out of the kill room, but Willadean now had a fighting chance. He tried to get her attention by shifting loudly in the cage, jangling the chain’s links against each other. As soon as she looked his way, he would mouth the word: *RUN!*

Willadean pointedly kept her attention on Lizzy. She peeled off the tattered outer shirt with care, revealing a fitted tank top. Its bareness exposed outlines of scapula and thoracic vertebrae. Lizzy was skin and bones.

Mirroring his thoughts, Willadean said in a sweet voice, “We need to get some food in you. You’ve been so careful to keep us fed, but you probably haven’t eaten a decent meal yourself.”

From his vantage, Fergus could only see Lizzy’s backside, but something about her body language indicated surprise.

“Child, open the kit and remove the peroxide and a sterile gauze pad. Pour two capfuls of the peroxide on the pad, then clean the outside of the wounds. The bullet went through, so there are two areas to tend.”

“Willadean is my name, but my mama calls me Willa. You can call me Willa, too.”

*Victim strategy 101: make it personal with your captor...become a human being, not just a body or a number.* The red beard twitched.

“Very well. Once you’ve cleaned off the blood, I need to get a look, but I can’t do it from this angle. Take the compact mirror from my other pocket and place it next to my arm.”

Willadean did as she was told. Apparently Lizzy didn’t like what she saw reflected in the mirror.

“The next part is going to be tricky. I’ll need you to take the tweezers and fish out the fabric stuck in the wound. Do you see it?”

“Yes. Okay, Miss Lizzy,” Willa said. “Should I spray it with the Bactine first? Mama uses that to clean our scraps. It says on the bottle that it relieves pain.”

“Yes, do that, though I fear an over-the-counter pain-relieving spray will be a bit like using a blanket to smother a forest fire.”

“That’s a wonderful simile. Did I tell you I’m a writer?”

Lizzy’s head dipped once.

“I’ll add it to my list of metaphors and similes. A well-written simile feels like March sunshine on winter-pale skin. See what I did there?” Willa grinned at her captor.

“I do. Very clever, Willa. Now, let’s get this over with quickly.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Fergus heard a sudden, hissing intake of air. The next moment, Willadean brandished the tweezers, with the bloody swatch of cloth caught between its pointed tips.

“Got it!” she said.

“Very good,” Lizzy said. “Now get more gauze and hold it firmly against the wound for a few minutes. It’s begun to bleed again. We can’t apply the butterfly strips until the surrounding area is dry. No talking for now.”

Fatigue had joined the pain in Lizzy’s voice, no longer a sub-harmony, but a dominant note.

Several minutes passed. No one spoke.

Fergus jangled his chains again, but Willadean refused to look his direction. The child was not being obtuse — she probably couldn’t be if she tried — she was being stubborn. Or maybe she was trying to stay in character. Lizzy would surely sense a ploy if it were too overt.

“It’s time to put the butterfly strips on. Both sides. Do you know how they work?” Lizzy said.

“I sure do. We used them once back in Knoxville when I cut my hand on a broken glass. Mama said it wasn’t deep enough to get stitches, so we cleaned it out with peroxide, sprayed it with the Bactine, and then slapped on a butterfly strip. Just like we’re doing today. You remind me a lot of my mama. She’s smart and pretty too.”

Fergus smiled.

Chapter 20

***Ray***

“This is impressive,” Ray said. They walked along the hard-packed dirt road that meandered through several dozen cabins. Some looked almost new, while others might have been around for generations. Serena Jo continued along the main walkway, motioning for Ray to follow.

“Thanks. First things first. You need to meet someone.”

She led him to one of the smaller dwellings. The structural integrity looked sound, and the porch steps were spotless. The front door opened while they were still a dozen yards away.

“Who the hell is this?” an old man said. Keen blue eyes squinted while studying Ray. A blond-haired boy stood beside him.

“Do your thing, Pops,” Serena Jo said, then moved aside.

Ray stopped at the bottom step of the porch, curious about this old man’s “thing.” Serena Jo’s father — for that’s surely who he was — approached slowly, then reached out a surprisingly youthful hand, compelling Ray to extend his own. When their hands touched, Ray felt an electric sensation in his palm. He had no idea what it meant, but he watched the expression on the old man’s face transition from suspicious to amenable.

“He’s fine,” the old man said to Serena Jo. Then to Ray, “I’m Euel Whitaker, this young lady’s daddy, but everyone calls me Skeeter. Or Pops, if they’re related to me. Welcome to Whitaker Holler.”

As he’d suspected, this was Serena Jo’s father. The shy boy standing behind him would likely be his grandson.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m Ray.”

“I know.”

“I guess Fergus must have told you.”

Skeeter didn’t reply.

The boy moved onto the porch and tugged at his mother’s sleeve. The fingers began to dance. Ray didn’t know sign language, but he recognized what it was. Serena Jo nodded occasionally throughout the visual discourse. A second boy, this one with dark hair, emerged from the cabin. He clutched a sheet of grimy paper.

“This is Harlan, my grandson, and this other’n is Cricket,” Skeeter said.

“You’re the one who was sending us candy?” the boy asked in a squeaky voice. Puberty hadn’t yet arrived at Cricket’s world.

Ray smiled. “Yes, sir. Did you like it?”

“Ain’t no such thing as bad candy,” Cricket replied, then shifted his gaze to Serena Jo. A dreamy smile emerged within the freckles.

“Harlan,” she said gently, “you know that doesn’t make any sense.”

The boy frowned, then his fingers danced more vigorously.

His mother sighed.

Cricket took the opportunity to show Serena Jo the sheet of paper. From his position, Ray could see a detailed sketch of a cabin surrounded by trees, a road leading to it, and a star-filled sky above it. He recognized the Little Dipper.

“This makes sense,” Cricket said, pointing to the stars. “Before he went missing, Mister Fergus showed me how to use my grandpappy’s old compass. I can figure out where this is. At least, I think I can. You got some maps somewhere, right Miss Serena Jo? I bet we can...” the falsetto petered out.

“Triangulate,” Skeeter offered.

“Right! *Tri-ang-U-late* the location.”

A slender eyebrow arched while Serena Jo pondered what her son had told her.

Ray stepped closer, studying the details of the sketch. “I think I know this place,” he said suddenly. “I’ve seen it in my drone footage. It was a while ago, though.”

“There you go!” said Cricket. “Between me and Harlan and Candy Man, I bet we can find Willa and Mister Fergus in the cabin where Harlan dreamed ‘em.”

Serena Jo gazed with skepticism at the earnest face. “Even if I believed in this astral projection business, you’ve never embraced learning since I’ve known you, Cricket. You’re telling me now you know how to use a compass to navigate with the stars?”

“I figured out Harlan’s signin’, didn’t I? And just ‘cuz I ain’t smart like him and Willa don’t mean I’m a goober. I’m smart about things they ain’t. Mister Fergus taught me how to use the compass when nobody else was around. I took to it natural, just like Harlan with his drawing and Willa with her words and book-writin’.”

Ray smiled at the eagerness. “What do we have to lose?” he said quietly.

“Time,” Serena Jo snapped. Then she sighed. “All right, Cricket. I’ll get out the maps.” Turning to her son, she said, “Later, you and I are going to have a long talk about these dreams.”

Soon after, the small group clustered around a primitive wooden table inside the cabin, studying a set of well-worn maps. Ray assumed the penciled lines drawn on the topmost map indicated the village’s extended perimeter. Another included the entire state of Tennessee. Others were printouts of Google satellite images depicting swaths of the Smoky Mountain National Park. Ray recognized some of the locations from his drone footage, but he wouldn’t be able to pinpoint them without accessing his computer. One pictured an aerial view of the self-storage facility and his warehouse home. A part of him longed to be there now, but another part — a larger part — relished the recent social interactions.

The two boys, both small but otherwise polar opposites, studied the maps together. Harlan’s eyes matched the gold of his mother’s. Cricket’s hazel version darted about like a hummingbird. Harlan signed, Cricket nodded, then moved the ancient compass back and forth between the drawing, the map, and the aerial images.

Ray held no hope for the process, even if Harlan’s star-scape was accurate. It simply didn’t make sense that coordinates could be gleaned from whatever the boys were doing.

Finally, Harlan smiled. Cricket’s grin was even wider, and his hazel eyes sparkled.

“Willa is gonna be really mad at us, but we can’t hold onto our big secret no longer.”

Harlan nodded solemnly.

“What?” Serena Jo demanded. “What secret?”

“We been going farther into the forest than we been honest about. For a long time.”

“Yes, I know. What did you find?”

Cricket gulped, then continued. “We think we got a pretty good idea of where this cabin is. One time when we was playing Peter Pan, Wendy, and the Lost Boy...Harlan was Peter Pan, Willa was Wendy, and I was the Lost Boy. There’s supposed to be more than one, so Willa said I could play like I was three or four different Lost Boys.”

“Cricket, get to the point.”

“Anyways, we caught sight of a cabin that looked like this one in Harlan’s drawing. We think we can find it again.”

A commotion at the door interrupted whatever Whitaker Holler’s leader was going to say. All heads turned as one. A bleeding, barely upright Otis filled the doorway.

“Pops, get the med kit. Everyone out. Now,” she said.

Skeeter ushered Ray outside into the overcast day and then took off at a brisk pace in a direction Ray hadn’t yet been. Cricket patted the top wooden plank of the porch where the boys sat.

“Take a load off, Mister Ray. Let’s talk about that candy you got back at your place.”

Ray sat, grinning at the boys. “I promised Serena Jo I wouldn’t. She’s concerned about toothy decay.”

“Dang it. I knew it was too good to keep going.”

Harlan nodded.

Ray found himself intrigued by the blond boy. “If you don’t mind my asking...”

“You wanna know why he don’t talk?” Cricket offered.

“Yes. I was curious. Was it a disease?”

Harlan seemed content to let Cricket be his spokesperson. His gaze glided to some point on the tree line surrounding the village, but Ray got the sense the boy’s attention remained focused on the conversation.

“No disease. It’s an interestin’ story,” Cricket said. “He was like this when he got here three years ago. Took me a bit of gettin’ used to. Ain’t easy being best friends with a kid who don’t talk. The interestin’ part is he *can* talk, he just don’t. I ain’t never heard him speak, not once. Willa explained all that to me ‘fore I learned how to read his fingers.”

Skeeter brushed past them carrying a bulky suitcase.

Ray watched him enter the cabin and close the door behind him. “I’ve never known of anything like that,” he said to Cricket. He directed his next question to Harlan. “I’m sure you’ve been asked this a lot. Why do you choose not to speak? Vocalizing is one of the most natural of human instincts.”

The fingers began to dance. Cricket nodded, then said, “He likes the quiet. He likes to *be* quiet. He also says there ain’t real words for a lot of the stuff that’s goin’ on in his brain.”

“I see.” Ray thought about the detailed sketch of the cabin, a rendering that could easily decorate the wall of an elegant home. “How long have you been drawing?”

Fingers danced. Cricket said, “Since he was a baby. Says he started drawing on the kitchen floor with crayons when he was nine months old.”

“Your mother told you this?”

A shake of the blond hair. *No.*

Cricket translated the sudden finger movements. “He just remembers it. He remembers the colors he used, too. Says they was robin-egg blue, pine green, and a lotta plain old white. He was tryin’ to draw the cliffs of Dover. Seen it in a book, he says. I don’t know what Dover is but that’s what he said. He likes drawing landscapes the best. Good thing his mama brought all that paper from Knoxville.”

Harlan nodded, grinning.

Ray was skeptical. Surely no nine-month-old baby was capable of what had just been described, especially remembering specific names of the crayons. The boys were having fun with him.

“So what’s the deal with the dream?” he said to Harlan. “Your mama mentioned astral projection. Can you tell me about that?”

Discomfort washed across the small face. Ray looked at Cricket for guidance. The dark-haired boy shrugged.

“This dream stuff is new to me. I just heard about it today for the first time. Harlan ain’t never lied ‘bout nothin’ before, so...”

“I don’t mean to imply that I don’t believe it. I’m just intrigued by the concept. I’ve read about it, but I’ve never personally experienced anything like the astral projection or lucid dreaming described by people on the internet. I’d like to hear about it.” He waited, watching Harlan’s pixie-like face. He could well imagine him playing the role of a mischievous, pointed-eared flying boy.

Finally, the fingers twitched, then transitioned to the graceful movements from before.

Cricket translated.

*It started when I was seven back home in Knoxville. I’d fallen asleep. Willa was sleeping in the next room. We had our own bedrooms by then because Mama said we were getting too big to share. I woke up but I wasn’t in bed any longer. I was flying above the houses in our neighborhood. At first, I was scared. I knew it couldn’t be real, but it felt real. I felt the warm summer breeze on my skin and smelled the steaks somebody was cooking on their grill. I heard the night sounds: cicadas, frogs, and every now and then a screech owl. I could see colors, but only their night versions, like when I look outside my window because I can’t sleep...gray-red, gray-blue, gray-yellow. So I decided it must be real. In a way, that was worse, because I was really high above the ground. ‘*What if it suddenly stopped working?’ *I wondered. Well, that hasn’t happened yet, so I’m no longer scared about it.*

*The next part was learning how to get around. I wasn’t sure if I could get lost, like people get lost in the real world. I came up with a system, kind of like leaving breadcrumbs in a forest. But my breadcrumbs were sights and sounds and smells. I’d notice a funny-shaped chimney, a sweet-smelling rosebush, or a dog who barked when I flew over. The system worked great, so I’ve been using it this whole time...just in case.*

Harlan’s fingers paused. Cricket took the opportunity to slide a piece of cornbread out of his grubby pocket and pop it in his mouth. Ray smiled. Boys that age were always hungry.

The fingers started up again.

*I told Mister Fergus about it. I hadn’t told anyone before then, but I saw something in a dream that scared me. The Witchy Lady. For some reason, I thought Mister Fergus would be the one to tell about it. After I did, he took off after her.*

Ray nodded. “I ran into him in the woods. The Witch found us both,” he added in a grim tone. “Please continue.”

*After he was gone, I tried to find him and Willa...in one of my dreams. That was something I’d never tried before. I’d always just kind of gone wherever the dream wanted to take me. That night I told myself to find Willa’s beacon. It’s a twin thing. Sure enough, I found it, but it was Mister Fergus who talked to me when I hovered over the cabin. That’s pretty much it.*

“The twin beacon...can you feel it while you’re awake or do you have to be in one of these dreams?”

*I can feel it most of the time, but it was stronger during the dream.*

Ray nodded. The concept was fascinating, and he didn’t doubt the story’s veracity. For a numbers guy like him, that was surprising. “You boys think you can find the cabin?”

Both heads nodded.

“I don’t see Serena Jo letting you venture into the forest. You’ll probably have to draw a map.”

“The problem with that,” Cricket began, then Harlan tapped his friend’s shoulder and began to sign.

*The way we’ve figured out the location is through Cricket’s compass work, my dream memory, and because we’ve been there before. Mama has to let us come.*

“I’m not the one who needs convincing.”

The door opened then.

A slightly less disheveled Otis walked past them, down the steps, and up the dirt road that led through the village. Ray remained silent until he was gone, then turned to face Serena Jo.

“Will he be okay?”

She nodded. “Your friend grazed him. He just needs some rest. He’s operating on very little sleep ever since...his brother.”

“She’s no friend of mine,” Ray said with a frown.

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m tired too.”

Skeeter stuck his head out from behind his daughter. “What you boys been talkin’ ‘bout?” The blue eyes squinted with suspicion.

The boys exchanged guilty glances. Ray stifled a grin.

“You been talkin’ ‘bout goin’ into the woods, haven’t you? It’s comin’ off you both like skunk stink.”

Cricket giggled. “You always seem to know everything, Mister Skeeter. Guess we can’t deny it. Just want to help, is all.”

“Well, you can’t. Ain’t the job of you boys to find Willa.”

As the old man brushed past them again, his back now toward his daughter, Ray caught an exaggerated wink directed at himself and the boys. The wink’s message was clear: *We’re going to do exactly what I just said you can’t*. The man continued in the direction he’d gone a few minutes earlier. Ray kept his face from reacting as he turned to face Serena Jo.

“What now?” he asked.

“I’m going to talk to my son. In private,” Serena Jo replied.

Harlan stood, let his gaze rest on Ray for a moment, and then followed his mother inside.

Cricket whispered, “You got that, right?”

“I think so. We’re going to go with Skeeter to look for Willa? The four of us?”

“Yep. You’re smarter than you look. Usually, good-lookin’ fellers like you ain’t none too smart.”

Ray smiled. “What’s next?”

“I’ll take you to Mister Skeeter’s house. We’ll wait for Harlan there.”

“Shouldn’t I say something to Serena Jo first?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Just holler through the door. She’ll hear ya. And by the way, don’t be gettin’ any ideas about her. She don’t need no boyfriend.”

He would not insult this boy who was so clearly smitten with his best friend’s mother. Ray could relate. It seemed he was also developing a crush, but he wouldn’t act on it. Not yet. The first order of business was to find her child and the enigmatic Fergus.

Images of himself as the rescuer flitted through his mind, evoking thoughts of a passionately grateful Serena Jo.

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“You sure she’s in the privies?” Skeeter asked Harlan, who had shown up a few minutes ago. They’d been waiting for him in the old man’s cabin. Now Ray knew why Serena Jo smelled of rosemary — the herb’s fragrance permeated her father’s home. Ray found himself hungry for some focaccia bread dipped in olive oil. Instead, he’d happily eaten the dry cornbread drizzled with honey that Skeeter offered.

Harlan nodded.

“Hmmph,” the grandfather replied, but he seemed content with the answer.

“She’s gonna be awful mad at us, Mister Skeeter.”

“You don’t think I know that?” The old man was clearly agitated.

“Should we rethink this venture?” Ray asked. The notion of an angry Serena Jo was distressing, especially if the anger were directed at himself.

“We got no choice,” Skeeter replied. “I know my daughter, and she will never allow the boys to go into the woods right now. She’s scared to death for her kids. Plus, she ain’t buying the dream business. I can tell.”

“But you do?”

“’Course. I had ‘em myself when I was younger. But my daughter ain’t cut from the same cloth as me and the boy.”

“So what’s the plan?” Ray asked, warming to the task. He’d recently navigated the woods alone and then been chained up in a decrepit cabin awaiting torture. At least on this excursion, he wouldn’t be alone.

Skeeter narrowed his eyes and placed a hand on the shoulder of each boy. “You’re absolutely sure about this? This is no time for half-truths and half-measures.”

The sudden departure from Skeeter’s normal Appalachian dialect puzzled Ray. He had a sense there was a lot more to this man than just an old coot in faded overalls.

A light head and a dark one nodded in unison.

“You know how to handle a firearm?” Skeeter demanded of him.

“I’m no sharpshooter, but yes. Problem is, I no longer have the ones I brought with me.”

“Hmmph,” the old man said again, then opened the door of a beautifully carved cabinet. He withdrew a hammer and began coaxing nails from a floorboard with the clawed end. Seconds later, Skeeter held two long slender objects wrapped in oil cloth.

“My daughter don’t know about these. She’s aces when it comes to leadership, but she don’t need to know everything ‘bout everything.”

“Understood,” Ray replied.

“Bought these right before it got bad out there. Ain’t never had a credit card, but I got one so I could get these beauties. Ain’t had to use ‘em before now. Been getting’ by with Josie just fine.” The bald head dipped in the direction of the cabin’s door and the ancient shotgun languishing on two wooden posts above it. “This job calls for precision,” he continued, unwrapping the oil cloth. “These here are Mossberg Patriots. Scopes been sighted. Got plenty of shells for ‘em.”

“No ARs for you, huh?” Ray said.

“Them newfangled rifles are for pussies. Pardon my language, boys. The Mossies will do the job. Don’t you worry.”

“Mister Skeeter, can I take Josie? Seems like us boys should have somethin’ ‘sides our blades.”

“No, you may not. Josie would knock you on your backside. Your knives are fine. Keep ‘em in your pockets, though, ‘less I tell you otherwise.”

“We can leave the village without a problem?” Ray asked. He had a feeling this small community was run with the efficiency of an imperial Roman outpost.

“You couldn’t, but I can,” Skeeter replied. “Problem is gonna be the boys. So here’s the plan. You two head on over to the onion field. Take a bushel basket with you. The one next to my porch will do fine. Anybody sees you, they’ll figure you’re fetching some for supper. Wait in the brush on the northeast corner. We’ll catch up to you there. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” Cricket said, excited at the prospect of an adventure.

The boys dashed out the door, slamming it behind them.

Skeeter gave Ray a level look. “It seems wrong to be taking the boys, exposing them to unnecessary danger. But I have a good reason.”

“What’s the reason?”

“My gut. It’s telling me the boys are gonna come out of this just fine.”

“Uh,” Ray started to say, but Skeeter interrupted.

“I know how it sounds. Remember when I shook your hand? You felt something, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Kind of like you had one of those joke buzzers in your hand that kids play with.”

“Exactly. I have some talents that are difficult to explain. Knowing people’s intentions when I touch them is one of them. The other one doesn’t happen consistently, but when it does, it’s always right.”

The articulate Skeeter was back.

“And your gut is saying the boys will be safe?”

“Yes. No question. So if you were wondering why I could be so cavalier about taking them, that’s the reason.”

“I admit, I was questioning your decision. But I also admit, I’m a numbers and science guy, so if I seem skeptical of your gut, please don’t take offense.”

“Deal.”

“So exactly how angry will your daughter be with...us?”

The blue eyes narrowed. “I don’t think you’re overly concerned with her being mad at me, but don’t worry about it either way. If Willa makes it back home safe and sound, you’ll be her mama’s huckleberry.”

Ray ignored the sudden increase in his heart rate.

“You ready?” Skeeter asked.

“Like a virgin on prom night,” he replied, then a wave of mortification struck. Why had he said something so off-color to a stranger?

The old man just cackled, though. Ray found the sound vaguely soothing.

Minutes later, the two of them trudged through the forest on a well-worn trail. At one point in its history, the trail had surely witnessed deer and other wildlife traversing its length; perhaps it still did. Currently, its most regular travelers were humans on their way back and forth from the village to the crops. Skeeter greeted the passersby with a head nod, promptly returned. No words were spoken when they passed.

Ray’s awe of these mountain people expanded. He more fully understood Serena Jo’s directive about not revealing the contents of his warehouse. And she was right. The extensive, furrowed fields had surely been producing food all summer; even now, a robust crop of autumn vegetables tempted him from their tidy, leafy rows. Fresh veggies weren’t part of his daily menu. All the fruits and vegetables he consumed were either canned, dehydrated, or freeze-dried. Maybe when he returned home, he’d rig up some raised plant beds on the roof.

Or maybe he would earn himself a permanent place in Whitaker Holler.

“This is impressive, Skeeter,” he said.

Countless rows of stubby green scallions hinted at a secret bounty growing just below the surface of a field an acre in size. A young man and an older woman meandered through the furrows, occasionally plucking a weed or squishing a bug.

“These are Texas Sweets, a short-day variety, which works well for the fall here. You know anything about farming?”

“Not a thing.”

“We were doing pretty good before my daughter came home from Knoxville. Whitaker Holler folks been farming and hunting for generations, so it ain’t like she taught us anything we didn’t already know. But what she did do was bring a whole lotta new seeds. ‘Fore, we was just farming the same crops we been farming forever. Now we got kale and parsnips and hardy kiwi and all kinds of exotic stuff. Took me a while to get used to the kale, but it ain’t too bad in a stew. S’pose to be real good for ya.”

“Your daughter told me about the U-Haul. Wouldn’t tell me what all she had in there, though.”

“Damn straight. Anyways, the other thing she did was organize the farming. Instead of folks doing their own thing, she came up with something called a *work-share system*. Nobody seems to mind doing a few hours of hoeing and planting here and there, and everyone gets to feel like they had a hand in making the food that goes in their bellies.”

“Very nice. She strikes me as a competent, smart lady.”

Skeeter chuckled. “I’m sure she does. See over yander?” He pointed to a distant field dotted with orange blobs nestled amongst low green foliage. “That one’s pumpkin and butternut squash. Ain’t just for the kids to carve up later this month. There’s all kinds of nutrients in them things. Delicious, too.”

Ray nodded.

“Okay, boys!” Skeeter hollered once they were out of sight of the two people in the onion field.

Harlan and Cricket emerged from a thicket of dense shrubbery speckled with clusters of round, black berries.

“Better not have eaten too many of them choke berries or you’ll get the chicken-shits while we’re on our mission.”

Cricket giggled. “No, sir. We only ate a handful.”

Skeeter sighed. “Let’s get going. North, right?”

Both boys’ heads bobbed.

“Harlan, I know you’re a good scout, but I gotta be in front, so you stay just a few feet behind me and tap on my shoulder of the direction we need to go. Cricket, you’re after Harlan. Ray, you bring up the rear. Daylight’s burning. Let’s move.”

Under different circumstances, the hike would have been pleasant. Autumn had arrived with its usual magnificence in the Smoky Mountains. Before the pandemic, this was the time of year visitors flocked by the tens of thousands to the area, cameras in hand, determined to capture the vibrant orange, gold, and red of the foliage. The cool temperature felt invigorating, not biting, and the aquamarine sky belonged in a painting. Every now and then, Skeeter stopped, then whistled a strange little tune. After a whistled response came from somewhere in the distance, they resumed.

The beautiful scenery was largely lost on Ray. The physical weight of his stuffed backpack wasn’t intolerable; it was the figurative weight of the Mossberg rifle he carried that felt oppressive. Ominous, even, like gray-green thunderheads building on the horizon. Something about the ‘Mossy’ exuded a vague malevolence that the firearms from his warehouse hadn’t. When he’d been hunting Lizzy on his own, it hadn’t felt like this. He’d been scared, of course; wilderness wasn’t his forte. But the only life in jeopardy had been his own. While he enjoyed having company, the burden of protecting three other people — two of them children — weighed on him.

“Don’t you worry, young man,” Skeeter said from a few yards ahead. “I ain’t the tracker and sharpshooter Otis is, but I’m pretty dang handy with a firearm. More so with the Mossy.”

“How did you...?” Ray said, then stopped himself. Right. The mysterious ‘talents.’

Maybe there was something to it after all.

He watched Harlan pat the old man’s left shoulder. Then the boy glanced back at him. The unblinking gaze latched onto him and drifted away. For a few seconds Ray felt like an Alcatraz escapee caught in a guard-tower spotlight. For the next hour, Ray kept his thoughts to himself. Navigating the briars and the brush became increasingly difficult the farther away from the village they forged. Skeeter and Harlan moved soundlessly through the woods. Not so with Cricket or himself. Occasionally Cricket would catch up to Harlan and the two would communicate through whispers and sign language. Then both heads would nod in agreement, Harlan would catch up to his grandfather, and off they’d go again.

Another hour passed. They had gone left and right so many times, Ray had lost track. Two small hands touched both of Skeeter’s shoulders simultaneously — a silent directive to stop.

Harlan turned and signed to Cricket. Cricket nodded and pointed to the right. Then the dark-haired boy turned and whispered, “We’re gettin’ close. Prolly about another half mile that-a-way.”

This part of the plan terrified Ray. The boys would stay behind, hiding like newborn fawns in the forest shadows, while he and Skeeter approached the cabin. At least fawns blended into the sun-dappled foliage and exuded no scent. Virtually silent Harlan would probably be fine, but the noisy Cricket couldn’t be quiet. And two sweaty boys who probably hadn’t had a bath in days certainly exuded scent. Ray could only hope that Lizzy was in residence inside the cabin and not skulking about in the surrounding woods.

After another ten minutes of brush and briar navigation, a clearing appeared twenty yards ahead. Through the foliage, Ray made out a structure; the mechanical sound of a generator reached his ears. Skeeter tilted back his bald head, nose pointed skyward, scenting the air.

Ray breathed deeply as well and processed what his olfactory senses revealed: decaying leaves along with a faint tinge of rotten-egg. Propane exhaust. A remote residence like this required off-grid self-sufficiency. A generator would power lights, refrigeration, HVAC units, and hot water tanks — all the modern luxuries — if it had been outfitted to do so. Had Lizzy lived here before the pandemic? Or had she commandeered the place afterward? When he’d first spotted her with the drone, he assumed she’d been on the road like other survivors, looking for food, shelter, and companionship. Of course that hadn’t been true in Lizzy’s case. She had been looking for victims. Maybe this cabin was her home base from which all her deadly excursions originated. Maybe this cabin was where she had lived during her career as a full-time medical examiner and part-time serial killer. Maybe this was, in fact, the lair of a monster.

Skeeter pointed toward a thicket of dense juniper and motioned for the boys to enter it. Next, he gestured to Ray to follow.

It was go time.

Emerging from the forest’s protective shadows felt like stepping from the wings of a live-action theater and into the center-stage spotlight. The rushed strategy the two men had pieced together now felt absurdly inadequate.

A charming house lay in the center of a sea of brown, knee-high Bermuda, a grass that didn’t grow naturally in the Smoky Mountains. Lizzy had sodded the area at some point. He could imagine how lovely this little country cabin would look surrounded by a lush, green yard. Had she done the work herself or hired a landscaper? How many contractors and laborers had gone missing when their jobs were complete?

He ran toward the front door, ignoring the two shuttered windows on either side of the porch. Those shutters would make it more difficult for Lizzy to shoot him without some noise; the knowledge gave him a small boost of confidence. Skeeter had already disappeared around the corner.

So much was riding on Ray’s knowledge of Lizzy and their history together. She hadn’t killed him when she’d had the chance. Actually, she’d had many chances, both inside and outside the warehouse. The fact was significant, and the detail upon which the success of their plan now hinged.

From the bottom step of the cabin, Ray yelled, “I know you’re in there, Lizzy! Come out and let’s talk.”

A scuffling sound came from inside the house. Harlan believed Willa and Fergus were in there, constrained in some way, details unknown. Accepting this limited information as fact required a large dose of reality suspension and an even larger leap of faith. Ray desperately hoped Harlan and his astral-plane intel would prove accurate.

More scuffling sounds.

Ray charged up the steps and pounded on the wooden door.

“Lizzy! You know you don’t want to hurt a child. You told me that in the woods. Your *rules*, remember?”

The doorknob moved an inch to the left, then another inch. Ray held his breath; the Mossberg’s muzzle pointed toward the ground.

The door creaked halfway open, just like in a horror flick. Nothing but darkness beyond.

“Lizzy,” he said, his voice lower and reasonable-sounding now, “Please. We can work something out.”

“Hi,” a high-pitched voice squeaked from inside. A moment later, a head with flaxen pigtails appeared in the opening.

“Hi,” Ray replied. “You must be Willadean.”

“Yep. And you’re the guy who delivered candy to me and the boys. Miss Lizzy said your name is Ray.”

He smiled. “That’s right. Are you well? Is everything...okay in there?”

The instant grin looked just like her brother’s. “Oh, yes. We’re being treated very well.”

“Fergus is with you, then?”

“Yes, sir. Mister Fergus is also being treated very well.”

Something about the sing-song quality of the girl’s voice sounded phony, like a child star in a Broadway musical*. Leapin’ lizards!* Ray wished Skeeter had been standing nearby so he could gauge the grandfather’s reaction to it.

“I’m happy to hear that. May I speak with Lizzy? Is she in there?”

“She said she can’t come to the door at the moment. She’s indisposed.”

Lizzy’s unsettling giggle emerged from somewhere behind the child.

Willadean’s Adam’s apple bobbed, normally a nervous ‘tell,’ but the little girl sounded casual and unafraid. Perky. “Perhaps you should come back another time.” *The sun’ll come out tomorrow...bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there’ll be sun.*

“I can’t do that, Willadean. Lizzy, I need to talk to you,” he said, projecting his voice above the child, toward the source of the giggle, and loud enough — he hoped — to cover the noise of Skeeter entering through the back.

“The .380 I took from your warehouse is pointed at the back of the adorable head you’re looking at,” Lizzy said. Her words were slurred, like she was tipsy. Or drugged. The image of her sleeve exploding flashed through his mind. How much damage had Otis’s shot inflicted? “How did you find me, by the way? You’re no woodsman, Ray. That was evident when I captured you and your friend. Someone led you here. Was it the woman you were with? I doubt it was the man. I’m fairly certain I left him in worse shape than he left me.”

“Just let the girl go. You can keep Fergus. He’s a big boy.” Ray hated hearing himself say those words. Sacrificing Fergus was a calculated risk. If he could get the child to safety, they would come back for his friend.

Another giggle. This one sounded tired.

“You read my journal, Ray. Did anything in there give you the impression I’m magnanimous?”

“No. I know exactly what you are. But I also know what you said about rules. You’re not going to hurt a child.”

As he spoke to Lizzy, he watched the girl. The intelligent eyes blinked. Then one eyelid dropped and raised. Willadean had winked, but what did it mean? What silent signal was she sending him?

“You have no idea what I’ll do. Sometimes *I* don’t even know what I’ll do.”

The consonants softened with each sentence. Whatever drug Lizzy had taken was making her sleepy. *There may never be a better opportunity.*

He squatted on the front porch, eye-level with the child, hoping her body would block Lizzy from seeing his face and the words he planned to mouth to her.

Before he had time to do anything else, the sound of rifle shots followed by the crash of a door bursting from its hinges propelled him to action. Almost without thinking, he grabbed the little girl by her arm, wrapped her in a bear hug, and leaped off the porch. Zig-zagging across the overgrown lawn, feeling like a bull’s eye was pinned to his exposed back, he counted the seconds it took to reach the relative safety of the tree line.

Five...six...seven...eight...

Any moment a bullet could slam into his back. All he wanted was to get Willadean to those trees before that happened.

Another shot fired. This time the bullet shattered one of the front windows. The cacophony of exploding glass and more shots sent a second jolt of adrenaline through his veins.

Ten seconds later he charged into the forest, but he didn’t slacken his pace until he made it to the juniper bush where the boys hid. He set Willadean on the ground as the boys scurried out through the spiny branches.

The moment her feet connected with the forest floor, she emitted a low-pitched furious growl, then in a voice that definitely didn’t sound like it belonged in a Broadway production, she said, “Why the hell did you do that?”

Chapter 21

***Fergus***

A few minutes earlier, Lizzy had come to fetch Willadean, wordlessly indicating her directives with awkward hand motions and grunting noises. She was definitely in pain. After they left, Fergus closed his eyes and sent out his *scythen*. Something major was going down while he remained chained in a basement cage.

Bloody hell.

His *scythen* picked up disjointed thoughts. Who was out there? Skeeter? T*hrough the back door...gotta be quieter than I ever been.* Ray? *Let’s talk. You don’t want to hurt a child. Let her go. Keep Fergus...he’s a big boy.*

Definitely Ray. His new friend was an inadvertent sender with little filtration.

Well, fuck you too, Ray, he thought, smiling now. Throwing an adult to the wolves to save a child was exactly what he would have done.

The sound of rifle shots snatched him out of his *scythen* state. Next came a muffled crash, then thumping and pounding on the ceiling above.

Silence for thirty heartbeats.

Someone was descending the stairs. No...two someones.

The basement door burst open again, slamming against the cinderblock wall. Skeeter loomed in the doorway, blood streaming from his nose, his hands in the air.

“On. The. Bed,” Lizzy hissed.

Skeeter complied. The barrel of Lizzy’s handgun, pressed against the bald head, brooked no argument. How she got the old man chained up, Fergus had no idea; her body blocked his view from the cage, but it must have been excruciating. Some of the fingers of one hand had appeared broken, and the bullet wound in the other shoulder was surely hurting like hell.

Once Skeeter was restrained, she turned to face Fergus. Gone was the normally composed Lizzy. In her place was a wild-eyed banshee wearing a mask of agony.

“I’ll be back,” she said. “And when I return, you’ll have a front-row seat for the show.”

After the door slammed behind her, Skeeter raised his head and scanned the room. The keen blue eyes settled on Fergus in the cage. A wide grin just about split the wrinkled face in two.

“Welcome to hell,” Fergus said. “What are you so happy about?”

“Got Willa outta here. This might just be the happiest day of my life.”

“Thank goodness. Ray has her?”

“Yep. How’d you know?”

“Same way you know stuff. About that happiest-day-of-your-life business, enjoy it now. When Lizzy comes back, she’s probably going to torture you.”

Skeeter chuckled. “I ain’t worried ‘bout that. Not even a little bit.”

“You say that now. Ever been tortured before? I have a feeling Lizzy is a real pro.”

The bald head tilted to one side, identical to Willadean’s when she contemplated something important.

“Nope, never been, but I still ain’t worried about it. She got cameras in here? Audio?”

“Good question. Unknown, but better to be safe...”

“Gotcha. Anyways, like I said, I ain’t worried about it. There’s a reason folks don’t leave the holler.”

“You’ve said that before and I still don’t know what it means.”

Another chuckle, this time more enigmatic than joyful. “Gotta keep them talents from gettin’...*attenuated*. Willadean taught me that word. Know what it means?”

“Of course. Weakened...diluted.”

“Right. Maybe I ain’t told you ‘bout all of the abilities I got.”

Fergus considered the words. What additional talents could the old man possess besides *scythen*? He pondered the survivors with whom he’d had contact after the plague. What had their gifts been? Elevated intelligence, obviously. Everyone these days was special, but not all in the same way. Some actually registered below average in terms of brain power, but Fergus knew compensations existed that offset lackluster intellects.

Mentally challenged savants were no longer as rare as they used to be. Even beyond inherent artistic, intellectual, or even biomechanical gifts, less obvious ‘enhanced’ attributes surfaced within the surviving population. A person came to mind at that moment from his recent travels in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

Sam.

Sam was no intellectual giant, but his physical prowess was extraordinary. Still, that wasn’t the most impressive thing about Sam. Fergus had watched the young man’s horrific wounds heal practically overnight...wounds that should have proved fatal or at least required weeks of recovery. Even more recently, he’d witnessed that same rapid healing in Willadean’s self-inflicted blood-oath cut; it had gone from open wound to pink scar overnight. Was this the genetic gift that Skeeter was alluding to? Being able to heal quickly didn’t mean you could withstand torture, though. Skeeter had said he’d never been through that, so how could he be so unconcerned about it? Was there something else?

“I see your hamster’s goin’ hard on his little wheel,” Skeeter said with a tap to his bald temple.

Fergus laughed. “Yes. I’m considering the possibilities.”

The old man leaned his back against the concrete wall. “You ever hear of a family in Italy just before Chicksy happened? Last name’s...” Skeeter mouthed the letters *M-A-R-S-I-L-I-S.*

The surname sounded vaguely familiar. Perhaps he’d read an article about them at some point.

Skeeter grinned. “If you can remember that article, you’ll have your answer ‘bout why folks don’t leave the holler.”

“You’re good, old man. I had a talk with your granddaughter about the very thing you just did.”

“She ain’t got it, but there’s plenty of other things she can do.”

“Right. I suspect she’s like her mother in many ways. Her brother on the other hand...”

“Yep. Harlan’s a special boy.”

“Indeed.”

Fergus was getting frustrated by not being able to speak freely. His *scythen* wasn’t pinging, but he couldn’t be sure Lizzy wasn’t listening. She had found a way to block her output, so he had to assume she was lurking on the other side of the door or watching them through a hidden camera.

“You keep working on that article. Don’t mind me.”

The keen blue eyes closed. Fergus would take the opportunity to analyze what had just happened. Then he would visit his memory palace and try to access the article about the Marsilis family.

Lizzy had appeared exhausted and in pain. Her words slurred a bit when she talked about returning to torture Skeeter. Was she on drugs? Some kind of narcotic for pain? If so, could he take advantage of that? Perhaps. He’d return to that thought soon.

Next. Obviously Ray had escaped from wherever Lizzy had taken him, and for that Fergus was grateful. How he had done so and then managed to find Skeeter, Fergus had no idea. But the two had discovered Lizzy’s isolated cabin. Maybe the conversation with Harlan in the astral plane had paid off.

Willadean had escaped, and as long as Ray got her far away, she should be safe. The relief felt like slicing through an anchor’s rope that had been pulling him to the bottom of a murky lake. Surely Lizzy was in no state to go hunting for them in the woods. She looked near collapse. Unless she had access to stimulants, she wouldn’t be going anywhere for a while.

Now to the article about the Marsilis family. Fergus closed his eyes and summoned an image of Versailles. A person who’d lived for thousands of years needed a 700-hundred-room palace to store all those memories. He imagined himself strolling past doorway after doorway, this one baroque, the next rococo, then colonial revival, art deco, and mid-century modern. The various styles of interior design helped him categorize the memories stored behind them.

He arrived at the Asian Zen door, tugged on the embossed, nickel-plated pull, and then entered. Bookshelves lined the walls, as they did in all the other rooms. Some shelves appeared as a hodgepodge of various colored tomes in a dozen different sizes. Books wedged onto other shelves matched in size and hue. After a moment’s hesitation, he slid an unremarkable-looking book from its unremarkable-looking shelf.

*News Articles from 2016.*

Time lost all meaning in the memory palace, so he had no idea how long or how many pages he scanned until he came upon what he’d been searching for.

*Scientists have discovered the secret to the Italian family that doesn’t feel pain...a genetic mutation is responsible for their seeming super-power... sometimes they experience a moment of unpleasantness from a broken bone or a burned hand, but the sensation doesn’t last long...the rare anomaly allows these individuals to blissfully navigate extreme physical discomfort...*

Fergus glanced up from the book. Bingo.

In the real world, his eyes popped open.

Skeeter grinned at him from across the room.

“Figured it out, did ya?”

“I believe so. I knew the reference sounded familiar. The holler people wanted to keep it from becoming *attenuated*...of course that makes perfect sense. How long has this been, uh, kept in the family?”

“We’ve known about it for generations. That’s all I’m gonna say.”

“That explains why you were angry that Serena Jo left.”

The bald head nodded.

“Does everyone know about it?”

“Mostly.”

“Does she?”

The keen blue gaze drifted away for a second as Skeeter contemplated the question, then returned to the cage. “My daughter ain’t as open to this kinda stuff as most folks in the holler. Prolly ‘cause of her university education.”

“So you’re like those people in the article?”

“Yep.”

“Who else?”

“A few folks you don’t know. And the grandkids, a little bit. Not like me, though.”

“What about their mom?”

“Nope.”

“Fascinating. So it randomly manifests?”

“Exactly.”

Fergus desperately wanted to ask the old man about anyone possessing enhanced *langthal,* the ability to heal others — the most prized of all the gifts the *Cthor* had coded into the extant population’s DNA. If not for Jessie’s enhanced *langthal*, Fergus wouldn’t be alive today. She was the only person in the world he knew of who possessed that rare gift.

Instead, he said, “This talent of yours will come in handy soon.”

“Yep. I reckon it will.”

Chapter 22

***Willadean***

“I was getting in good with her until you ruined it,” Willa growled. “Now she’s going to torture Mister Fergus and it will be your fault.”

The man standing before her arched an eyebrow, making him look like the actor from one of her mother’s favorite movies.

“Come on, kids. We have a lot of ground to cover before sundown,” the man said. Then he took off in the wrong direction.

“Uh, Mister Ray, it’s this-a-way,” Cricket stage-whispered.

“Guess Harlan should lead. I’m no good at this.” His lopsided grin turned rueful.

Willa blew out an exasperated breath, then focused on her brother. Her twin stood silently beside her, a reassuring presence after her captivity. “What happened?”

*Cricket and I figured out where you and Mister Fergus were. Pops believed us, but Mama wasn’t on board, and we knew she’d never let me and Cricket out of the village to lead the way. So the four of us snuck out.*

*“*So that was Pops who crashed in through the back door?”

Harlan nodded, his face a picture of worry.

“Damn it. Now the witch has him too. We can’t leave him there. Come on, let’s go back.”

*I think we need to go for help, Willa. I hate to say this, but we’re not sure Pops is even still alive. Candy Man isn’t a tough guy and we’re just three kids. We need Mama and Otis at least. Be smart. That’s what you do.*

Harlan rarely defied her, but he had a point. Maybe this was one of those situations like in the story Mister Fergus had told them. She was being all damn-the-torpedoes and Harlan was being the cool voice of reason. For a half-second, she hated him for it.

“Fine,” she said out loud.

Harlan looked visibly relieved. He motioned for Cricket and the stranger to follow.

“This is the place where we played Peter Pan,” she said as the foursome began navigating through the forest.

“Yep,” Cricket replied from in front of her. “That’s partly how we knew how to get here, but another part was Harlan’s dream and my work with the compass.”

Willa heard the pride in the squeaky voice. If she hadn’t been so worried about her grandfather, she would have praised him. He’d earned it.

Instead, she glanced back at...George Clooney. That’s who it was. So this was the guy who’d been delivering candy and food to them. She could tell he hadn’t spent much time in the woods; he navigated the brush like someone who sat in front of a computer all day. Still, he wore a look of grim determination that took the edge off her annoyance. He’d been trying to help, after all. Maybe he’d even saved her life. Probably not, though. Her charm offensive had been working on the witch. No doubt about it.

“Thanks,” she tossed back at him. “For rescuing me. Sorry I was rude before. I’m worried about Mister Fergus. And now Pops.”

“No problem, Willadean.”

She noticed the rifle he carried. It was one of the two Pops kept hidden under the floorboards of his cabin. Mama didn’t have a clue about them.

“So Pops released one of the Krakens, I see. Is that what he brought instead of Josie?”

“Yes,” Cricket said. “I wanted to bring her, but your grandpa said she’d knock me on my backside.”

“He’s correct. You’re not big enough to handle Josie’s kick. You know how to use that thing, Mister Ray?” she said, glancing back.

There was the lopsided grin again, followed by a nod.

He was handsome for an older man, and she liked his self-deprecating smile. “You met my mama yet?” A sly thought began to percolate.

“Yes, indeed. She’s an incredible woman.”

Willa snorted. George Clooney already had it bad for Mama. That could mean easy access to Jolly Ranchers.

Just as she was about to ask another question, Harlan’s hand flew up, then three fingers pointed downward — the signal for *HIDE!* The problem was they were hiking through an open meadow. No clusters of juniper or thick blackberry bushes lay anywhere in sight, but a solitary Ponderosa pine towered thirty yards ahead. Both boys looked at her for guidance. She analyzed the tree’s branches and the overall situation, then with hand gestures, indicated to the boys what they would do.

Mister Ray wouldn’t know about the *HIDE!* signal, but he’d figure it out when he saw them hauling ass for the tree. She couldn’t take the time to explain it. The signal was only used in extreme situations when dangerous people or creatures were close by and immediate action was required.

Willa made it to the tree first, thinking *thank goodness for the low branches.* She began to climb. The boys followed close behind. The pine needles offered excellent cover, and most human predators wouldn’t think to look up.

Yes, they’d be trapped up there, but the calculated risk was the best decision under the circumstances. She perched twenty feet off the ground now. The boys took positions an arm’s length above and below her.

Where the hell was Mister Ray? Shielding her eyes from the mid-afternoon sun, she scanned the meadow and spotted him traveling in the opposite direction of their hiding place.

*Damn it! Was he totally clueless?*

She watched his diminishing backside, his rifle held at the ready, the salt-and-pepper head swiveling from side to side. She could hear his loud movements across the distance. He was headed back toward the cabin.

*Idiot!*

A light tap on her knee interrupted her thoughts. Harlan leaned against the tree’s rough trunk, legs encircling a branch just below her. He began to sign.

*He’s not stupid, Willa. He’s leading the witch away from us.*

Comprehension dawned. Yes, best to split up the group. The witch can’t go in two directions at once, and the man’s movements almost seemed intentionally awkward and loud. He was making sure the witch’s attention was drawn to him, not the children hiding in the tree.

She whispered, “He doesn’t stand a chance against her.”

Harlan nodded.

Seconds passed, then minutes. How long should they wait before climbing down and making a beeline for the village?

A single rifle shot split the air, reverberating from the direction of the cabin. She’d never heard Pops fire the Mossies, so she had no idea who had done the shooting.

Harlan tapped her again. *We should go.*

Instinctively, she wanted to wait and see if Mister Ray would come walking back through the meadow, but Harlan was right. Whatever was happening out there, it would distract from them and their escape. She nodded. Once they had scrambled out of the tree, Harlan pointed in a different direction.

“Why go that way? Isn’t the village over there?”She pointed.

Harlan nodded, then signed before taking off. *Yes, but mama is coming from this way. Let’s go.*

Willadean only had the psychic thing with Harlan, her twin. It was news to her that Harlan could sense Mama. The two of them would be having some long conversations when all this was over.

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Normally Mama wasn’t a hugger and that worked for Willadean just fine. She’d never seen the need for squeezing one’s body against another person’s. But when they came across Serena Jo and a bloody, battered-looking Otis half an hour later, Mama just about squished all the air out of her lungs.

“I’ve been so worried.” There was a catch in Mama’s voice Willa had never heard before. It made her sound less...formidable.

Willa didn’t like it.

She allowed the hugging for a half-minute, then wriggled out of her mother’s grasp. “We gotta go back for Pops and Mister Fergus,” Willa said. “And probably Mister Ray. I bet the witch has him in the basement by now.”

“They may not even be alive, Willa,” Cricket said. “That rifle shot we heard from the tree coulda been the end of Candy Man. The shots we heard from inside the cabin coulda been the end of your Pops, too.”

Harlan nodded, his eyes round as saucers.

Seeing the boys in cahoots pissed her off. “You don’t know diddly squat, Cricket. Now shut up and let the smart people figure out what we’re gonna do.”

Her friend’s normally smiling mouth turned down at the corners. The hazel eyes filled with tears.

*Shit.* “I’m sorry, Cricket. You’re smart too. That compass thing you did was impressive, and I want to hear all about it later.”

“Nobody is going anywhere but home,” Mama said, giving her a level-eyed stare.

“Pops is alive in the cabin, Mama. I know it. Maybe Mister Ray too, and definitely Mister Fergus. We have to rescue them.”

“That is not happening. Adults are expendable. You three are not. Now let’s go. Otis, you okay to lead or do you want the rear?”

Something was off. Serena Jo would never ask a subordinate for his preference during a scouting mission. She only ever dictated.

Willadean studied the man then. Otis was quiet and easy to overlook, the Harlan version of the twin brothers. After Everett had been murdered, he talked even less.

The man’s jaw tightened. “I’m not leaving. I’m going to kill that bitch.”

“Otis, be reasonable. You’re the walking wounded and we can’t take a chance with the kids. Let’s go back home and regroup. We’ll come up with a plan.”

Otis didn’t bother replying. He simply turned his back on the small group and took off in the direction Willadean and the boys had just come from.

“Damn it,” Mama muttered, watching him walk away.

Willadean pounced on the opportunity. She took Mama’s hand and arranged her face in that irresistible expression that worked well on most adults. “He’s the best tracker and the best shooter. We’re probably safer with him than going by ourselves to the village. Pops doesn’t have much time. The witch is going to kill him. Otis has an extra gun in his pack...he always does. Give that to me, and I’ll keep us kids safe. You know I can shoot. I scored top of the under-thirteens at the range.”

Mama’s eyes narrowed, just like Pops’ did when Willa taught him a new word. It usually meant she was thinking hard about something.

“Another reason to act now is the witch is tired and hurt. I saw her injecting herself with something called *butorphanol*. Saw it on the label. She started slurring right after. She’s got a bullet wound in her shoulder and some broken fingers. Now is the time, Mama. She’s only going to get better and when she does, it won’t end well for Pops.”

Mama loved Pops, but she loved her children fiercely. Willa knew that. Proper framing of the danger was critical now. That’s why she didn’t tell her about the second injection right before Mister Ray had started pounding on the door. The label on that bottle said *epinephrine*. She hadn’t heard of butorphanol, but she knew all about epinephrine from a suspense thriller she’d read. It worked like a long-lasting jolt of adrenaline.

“We’ll be extra careful. And we’ll be safer if we catch up with Otis before he gets too far away. The witch could be hiding, waiting for Otis to walk by. She might follow us instead. She’s real smart, Mama, like you. Isn’t that what you would do?”

Willa saw the moment Serena Jo made the decision.

“Stay behind me every second. Tight line, no more than two feet apart. Got it? And you’re not getting a gun, Willa. It’s one thing to hit a target during practice and quite another during a chaotic situation when your heart is pounding like crazy. Let’s go. No talking.”

Willa took a position directly behind Mama. She watched the long khaki-covered legs stride through the tall grass, navigating thorny, grasping vines like they were made of warm butter. Someday, Willa would have legs that long and would glide through life like a backwoods ballerina.

Otis had covered a lot of ground while Willa had been working Mama. It took twenty minutes to catch him. When they did, he was standing next to a corpse, casually contemplating it.

Then the corpse lifted its head off the ground.

The foursome joined Otis, who barely seemed to register their presence. Mama squatted next to Mister Ray — the corpse — then mutely began unbuttoning the blood-stained shirt, exposing the damage from the witch’s bullet. When her fingers pressed around the seeping hole, a hiss of air escaped the deathly pale lips. She tilted her head backward and gazed up at the sky for a few seconds. Willa knew then the prognosis was bleak.

Mama brushed a sweaty lock of dark hair from the man’s brow. His eyes fluttered open. A shaky hand lifted a few inches off the ground. Three of his fingers pressed together and circled about — the universal sign language for writing. She reached into her satchel and withdrew a stub of a pencil and a weathered notepad, the one she used to jot down notes about running the holler. She flipped to a clean sheet and handed both items to Mister Ray.

The blood-stained fingers could barely grasp the pencil stub, but he scrawled some hen scratches. Willa leaned over Mama’s shoulder to read them: 7-9-3-7-4-2-0. Then Mister Ray dropped the pencil and grabbed Mama’s hand, willing her with his eyes to bend down closer. Serena Jo did, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear so she could hear the whispered words.

Willa didn’t know what the man said, but she saw Mama give one of her curt head shakes, the one that said, *No way in hell is that happening*. Mister Ray let out a small groan, lifted his other hand, and cupped the back of Mama’s head, forcing her ear right up against his lips.

A full minute passed. To her left, Otis shuffled his feet, eager to get back to witch-tracking. Willa turned the other way, only to see tears gliding down Cricket’s face. She wanted to ask him in the superior voice she used for cry-baby behavior if his tears were for the dying man or for the loss of future candy deliveries. She wanted to, but she couldn’t because of the painful lump in her throat. Harlan stood apart, silent and enigmatic. Nobody could do silent and enigmatic like Harlan.

Finally Mama leaned back. Mister Ray’s chest had stopped rising and falling. She closed his eyelids, placed both hands on his motionless ribcage, then stood and faced the group. She wasn’t crying, but her eyes looked as hard and bright as polished marbles.

Willa knew what those marbles meant: the witch was in for a world of hurt.

Otis reached down for the rifle next to the dead man, then handed it to Willa, watching Serena Jo’s face the entire time. “This is similar to the one she’s used on the range. Not much of a kick. She can handle it, and she’s less likely to kill one of us with it than with a handgun.”

Surprisingly, Mama didn’t argue. She gave him a nod, then said, “Willa, if I see you pointing that thing within a ten-foot radius of your brother, I’ll wear out your backside. I mean it, too.”

Willa swallowed, hard. Mama had never spanked her in her life. “I won’t.”

“Let’s go, then. Otis, you first, then Willa, Harlan, and Cricket. I’ll bring up the rear. Ears and hands from now on.”

That was Mama-speak for no talking, which was fine with Willa. She still had that painful lump in her throat after glancing back at Mister Ray.

Chapter 23

***Fergus***

“Ah, clever,” Fergus whispered. The basement door had slammed open again, and just before Lizzy shut it, he’d caught a glimpse of something on the stairs.

A motorcycle helmet.

That’s why his *scythen* hadn’t been pinging just before her basement entrances. She’d figured out a rudimentary barrier. Whether it actually had any effect, which seemed unlikely, or her belief in it created a placebo, was a mystery he would ponder and perhaps test later. At the moment, he must focus on the dangerous woman on the other side of the cage.

“You seem perkier than the last time I saw you,” Fergus said, noting the tiny black dots of her pupils, the opposite of how they normally appeared.

“Ray is dead,” she said in a deadpan voice.

Fergus ignored the sudden lack of oxygen in his lungs. “He was a good man, Lizzy. Shame on you.”

“A good man wouldn’t have kept me caged for months. A good man would have either killed me or freed me. Instead, he condemned me to purgatory.”

“And yet you figured out a way to roam about the warehouse whenever you liked. You could have left, but you didn’t. In the meantime, he kept you safe, clean, and fed. Yes, an absolute monster, that Ray.”

“Why would a creature such as myself worry about the nature of my victims? You think I care whether he was a good man or a bad man?”

“Actually, I do,” Fergus replied, warming to the notion that had been flitting about in his brain for a while now. “I think that’s why you didn’t kill him all those times you had the chance. I think that’s why you chose only certain victims from the village. Skeeter, elucidate us on the nature of the two people Lizzy crucified. What were they like? Good folks or bad folks, would you say?”

Skeeter fixed him with an unblinking stare — an unspoken message. The old man had caught on to the stalling ploy. “Oh, tweren’t much good about either of ‘em. Everett was useful, in his own way. Strong, good hunter, but a rascal. Liked to force himself on the young women when he thought nobody was looking. Get ‘em up against a tree or in a dark corner and rub his crotch against ‘em. Everett the Perverett. That’s what people called him when him or his brother weren’t around.”

“And what about the young woman?” Fergus prompted, with a quick glance at Lizzy. She seemed captivated by the conversation. Had she not realized she’d been selecting victims who may have deserved punishment? The notion was intriguing. She’d probably been using her inherent, untrained *scythen* for years to sort the wheat from the chaff.

“Adelaide? She weren’t no peach. Willa told me she caught her torturing animals in the woods. Didn’t have no friends. Kept to herself. A real smart-aleck even when folks’d try to be nice to her. Sorry to say, I don’t think a single tear was shed when we found her in the tree.”

“See, Lizzy? You targeted victims worthy of your particular brand of justice. That’s why killing Ray bothers you. I can see it in your face, and I can sense it too.”

“Shut up,” she said, snapping out of her mesmerized state and storming past the cage toward the rolling cabinet. She slid one of the drawers open. “Let’s start the show.”

From his vantage, Fergus saw items that belonged in a hospital, the type used to pry apart ribs and saw open craniums.

“Can you guess my former profession?” she asked, displaying a gleaming device that might be used to trim errant hedges. The too-wide leer had returned. “I was a medical examiner. Not only do I possess all the tools and skills necessary to inflict exquisite pain, I have the pharmaceuticals required to keep my subjects from passing out and missing all the fun.”

She spun, facing the old man now. A syringe appeared in the injured fingers. She stabbed Skeeter with the needle.

“It’s a heady cocktail containing a small amount of a neural muscular blocker to keep you from squirming too much, and epinephrine. You’ll be awake and pliable while you experience the worst pain of your life. Then I’ll move on to you...*Fergusss*.”

He’d never heard her speak his name before. It sounded like Golem pining for his *Preciousss*.

A few moments later, Skeeter’s head fell back against the cinderblock wall. A slit of glacial blue remained visible between the drooping eyelids.

“Tell me, old man,” Lizzy said in a conversational tone, “besides Ray, who was with you?”

“Nobody. Just me and him,” Skeeter muttered.

“Don’t insult my intelligence.” She grabbed one of his shackled hands, extending it to the limit of the chain, then inserted a pinky finger between stainless steel blades. “Who was with you? The blond woman?”

“Answer don’t change. Don’t matter how many fingers you snip off.”

“You say that now. Experience has taught me people are more forthcoming after the first one.”

Lizzy sheared the pinky finger off at the first knuckle. Blood flowed from the stub, saturating the cot’s blanket in a rapidly expanding circle.

Skeeter watched the process, slack-faced but eyes alert. His gaze followed the severed appendage’s journey to the concrete floor without a blink. The old man’s body didn’t flinch when the finger came off. Skeeter looked like he might be watching a TV show rather than experiencing the events in the flesh.

Thankfully, Lizzy didn’t seem to notice the lack of reaction. Perhaps the combination of drugs that coursed through her own system, revealed by those tiny pupils, had rendered her less observant.

“Now, let’s try that again. Who else was with you?”

Skeeter merely chuckled in response. Fergus smiled.

“Maybe we’ll cut to the chase and go right to the thumb,” Lizzy hissed.

Fergus’s *scythen* pinged: Lizzy’s painkiller was wearing off. Would that make her more or less dangerous? Ironically, as long as she didn’t kill the old man, it didn’t matter. He could hold out longer than her. The torturer becomes the tortured. Fergus was picking up on Skeeter’s *scythen* output as well as Lizzy’s. While her pain escalated, the old man merely felt impatient.

*How long is this crazy gal gonna keep going?*

The problem, Fergus knew, would be blood loss. Just because he couldn’t feel pain didn’t mean he could survive exsanguination.

“Lizzy, have you considered it was just Skeeter and Ray?” Fergus said. “It’s a fact that torture is ineffective at extracting information. He’ll just tell you what you want to hear to make you stop.”

Fergus winked at Skeeter behind Lizzy’s back. A corner of the old man’s mouth twitched.

Lizzy snatched at another finger, thankfully not the thumb. Fergus noticed the narrow gold band for the first time. Since he’d been in the holler, Fergus had never heard about Skeeter’s wife...Serena Jo’s mother, grandmother to the remarkable twins.

“Married man, are you?” Lizzy said. “Wonder how your wife would feel about a husband with no fingers? It’s a rhetorical question. You won’t be getting out of here alive.”

Skeeter’s eyes opened fully. “You keep that word out of your mouth, demon.”

Uh oh. Lizzy had revealed a weakness.

She giggled; it sounded off-kilter, even for her.

“Demon? How quaint. You know, I was like you once. Ignorant, poor, superstitious. It’s amazing what leaving rural Appalachia and getting an education will do for a person.”

Skeeter merely blinked in response. He knew all about that subject. His own daughter had done it.

“You do realize demons don’t exist,” she said, then gave a small grunt when she snipped off the ring finger’s tip.

After a two-second delay, Skeeter groaned. Anyone who hadn’t spent time with the man would have heard pain in that groan. It reminded Fergus of Willadean’s sweet-innocent-child act in the basement — believable only to an audience who didn’t know the actor.

“Who was with you besides Ray?”

“Go to hell, demon.”

Lizzy let Skeeter’s shackled, bloody hand fall to the cot. She whirled, facing Fergus. “Enjoying the show? I like to make these events last as long as possible, but I fear time is critical. If you can make him talk, now would be a good time to do so.”

Fergus gazed into Lizzy’s eyes.

*The color of witch poison!*

He heard Willadean’s voice, but not with his *scythen*. It was just something the creative little girl would have said. He looked beyond Lizzy to Skeeter. The bald head moved from left to right one time.

*I got this, little feller. You just keep stalling her as long as you can. Help is gonna come...eventually.*

That wasn’t his imagination. Skeeter possessed remarkable control of his *scythen*. Not at the level of *Cthor-Vangt* inhabitants, but still impressive. He’d probably been practicing it his entire life, perhaps not even knowing how exceptional he was.

Lizzy turned away again. This time she wasn’t slow and methodical when she sheared off the index finger at its base.

Skeeter groaned, quicker to react this time. The genetic gift that kept him from fully experiencing pain would qualify him for a place at *Cthor-Vangt,* but Fergus knew Skeeter would never leave the holler. The Whitaker family’s instincts to keep the gene isolated within their kinfolk would override the appeal of all that *Cthor-Vangt* could offer. Besides, family was everything to this man.

He needed to get out of the cage while Skeeter still had a few fingers left. A glossy magazine image, picked up in his memory palace, presented an idea for addressing the handcuffs. He needed privacy and time to attempt the escape mechanics. Locating the neural pathways — not traveled since escaping a metal box back in Florida — required absolute concentration.

“Lizzy,” he said in his most reasonable sounding voice. “You’re in pain. I can hear it in your voice. You know what pain does to one’s decision-making ability?”

“Of course I know!”

“Then be smart. Give yourself a break. Take another dose of whatever pain medicine you have upstairs. You won’t extract information when you’re not thinking clearly. Trust me. He may look like a hillbilly, and he is, but he’s a tough old coot. You’re using a sledgehammer approach instead of a scalpel. That’s sloppy work and you know it.”

The scalpel analogy hit first...hard. Then *sloppy* knocked it out of the park. As an educated medical professional and a high-functioning serial killer, what insult could be worse?

She spun again, a whirling dervish of frustration and agony, tossed the stainless steel implement into the rolling cabinet, then stormed out of the basement.

“We don’t have long,” Fergus said when the door closed.

“What you got in mind?”

“Vacating this cage.”

“Well, get on with it while I still have enough fingers left to wipe my ass.”

He closed his eyes. “’Fore we left to come lookin’ for you and Willa, we went by my daughter’s U-Haul. That young woman is one smart cookie, as you know. She brung all kinda things when she left Knoxville. Most of it we’ve put to good use, but some of it we ain’t.”

“If you don’t mind, Skeeter, I’m trying to concentrate. These handcuffs are more challenging than I’m used to.”

“Yeah, I knew you weren’t no professor. Maybe you’re into that...what do ya call it? M and Ms?”

Fergus sighed, annoyed. “That’s S and M...sadism and masochism. Anyway, I need complete quiet for a few minutes, please.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just use a key? I brung three different types, just in case.”

Fergus leaped off the bench. “Why the hell didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Sorry, little feller. I forgot about ‘em when I first came down here. Been forgettin’ more and more lately. Seeing them *schematics* you was thinkin’ about just now triggered a memory of me fetchin’ the keys out of the U-Haul. Don’t remember now why I did that.” A corner of the old man’s mouth turned down. “Then I was busy getting my fingers chopped off. Here ya go.” He reached into one of the overall pockets with his non-damaged hand. With perfect dexterity, he tossed the metal objects through the steel bars. All three landed on the concrete floor next to Fergus’s boots. Two of them would fit older model handcuffs. The third should open the two-lock mechanism of the constraints behind his back.

Too bad about Skeeter’s memory issues. Fergus remembered the old man mentioning them when he first arrived. Early onset dementia automatically ruled out an invitation to *Cthor-Vangt*, not that the old man would have accepted it anyway.

Fergus made quick work of the key. The handcuffs fell to the floor.

“How you gonna open the cage door?”

“That’s the easy part. The Masterlock ProSeries 6121 is not the easiest padlock to pick nor is it the most difficult. Now that my hands are free, I can access the lock-pick in my boot.” He reached down to his Doc Martens, twisted the lug sole twenty degrees, and then withdrew a small tool with a zig-zag tip.

“Them’s some kind of spy boots? What the hell did you really do before Chicksy?” Skeeter asked, beginning to actively wiggle now. The drug must be wearing off.

“I’ve worked at many jobs in my life. Maybe I’ll tell you about a few when we’re out of here.”

“You sure are an interesting little man.”

“Skeeter, you have no idea.”

“Someone’s coming,” he said suddenly.

“Damn it. I almost have it. Three...more...seconds.”

The basement door flew open again, but by then he was out of the cage and reaching into the tool cabinet for something to use on Lizzy.

He pivoted, bone saw in hand, to face the muzzle of a rifle.

But it wasn’t Lizzy wielding the weapon.

“Where is she?” Otis snapped.

“Isn’t she upstairs?” Fergus said, allowing a moment of relief to wash through his body before addressing Skeeter’s shackles.

“No. Upstairs is empty.”

“She went up there less than five minutes ago. Did you have the cabin under surveillance? Who’s with you?”

“Serena Jo and the kids. They’re hidden. I barricaded the back door and then came in through the front. She’s gotta be in here.”

A niggling thought that had been hovering around the perimeter of consciousness surfaced, evoked by memories of Harlan’s astral-plane images. During their telepathic conversation, Harlan had transmitted what he saw as he hovered above the cabin. Several details stood out: the motorcycle and its helmet and the igloo-shaped structure near the foundation. He’d figured out the significance of the helmet. Now he thought he’d identified the purpose of the dog house.

“Damn it,” he said, as the lock-pick found the sweet spot. Skeeter stood, a bit wobbly on his feet, but already making a beeline for the door. “Hold up, old man. Let’s get that hand bandaged before you lose any more blood.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

Otis glanced down at the fingers on the floor, then Skeeter’s hand. Wordlessly, he blocked the door with a nod to Fergus.

“Dang it!” Skeeter said.

Fergus was already rifling through the rolling cabinet, pushing aside implements of torture. He located a tube of Neosporin in a far corner and some hemostatic gauze. Lizzy must have wanted to keep her victims from dying too quickly from infection or blood loss. Fergus quickly tended to Skeeter’s hand and the three men bolted upstairs. Otis and his rifle lead the charge. The last time Fergus had come through the upstairs, he’d been drugged and loopy, unable to remember much about the interior of the cabin.

A quick scan of the rooms revealed a welcoming environment; décor and furniture practically begged guests to curl up in front of a roaring fire with a cozy mystery novel. Perhaps it was designed to lure people in, like a house made of gingerbread.

That was Willa’s voice again.

“Split up. Search the house,” Otis said.

In what was surely Lizzy’s bedroom, LED monitors covered most of one wall. The screens were black at the moment, but Fergus had no doubt that when powered on, they would reveal grainy, black-and-white images of the basement. Perhaps even other sections of the cabin and surrounding area. On the bed lay patched and faded denim jeans, a threadbare flannel shirt, and a woven straw hat — wardrobe essentials for many of the Whitaker Holler females. Lizzy hadn’t used witchy powers to kidnap Willadean. She’d used a disguise to sneak into the village and snatch the child from her bed. Perhaps he wouldn’t share this discovery with Willadean. *The magic stuff is more fun.*

The three gathered in the kitchen a minute later. Lizzy wasn’t discovered skulking in a coat closet or hiding under any of the Laura Ashley beds. She had vanished like a bad dream in the sudden light of a bedside lamp.

Something didn’t look quite right about the positioning of a rolling butcher’s block. “Let’s move this,” Fergus said when the three made it to the kitchen*.*

Otis slid the small cart from against the southern wall...the dog house wall. The butcher’s block had hidden a framed opening along the baseboard, wide enough for an adult to slither through. A curved surface lined the small space beyond. A circular opening had been excavated into the ground; the wooden rungs of a ladder leaned against the side of a bricked tunnel descending into blackness.

Lizzy had spared no expense in building her kill house. She’d even planned for the contingency of an FBI raid.

Otis ducked through the opening, positioning himself on the top of the ladder.

“Wait a minute,” Fergus said. “This may be exactly what she wants. You get to the bottom of that hole and Lizzy might be standing there with a gun.”

“Or she may already be escaping out the other end.”

“Hold on. I have an idea.” Fergus darted from the room. The previous search of the house had revealed a small bedroom used for storage. Tidy shelves and neatly stacked plastic bins lined the walls. On one of the shelves, a braided nylon rope coiled around three stainless steel heavy-duty pulleys, revealing the magic behind Lizzy’s tree crucifixions. In the center of the room lay a familiar object, tossed onto the floor like a child’s discarded toy, its pockets and hidey holes closed except for a rubber strap extending through the top zipper. His backpack.

A quick search uncovered the tear gas cartridge still nestled at the bottom of one of the compartments. He grabbed the pack in one hand and the CS cartridge in the other and ran back to the kitchen. Otis saw the object he carried.

“No way. You toss that down and we won’t be able to follow her. The gas will fill up the tunnel.”

“Contrary to popular belief, there is no gas in tear gas. It’s actually a chemical solid, ground into tiny particles and dispersed using aerosols, creating a fog of unpleasantness that irritates the eyes, skin, and trachea.”

“Exactly. So we’re not using it. I’ll take my chances.” Otis began to descend.

“Wait,” Fergus said, unzipping the largest compartment of his pack. “Ever wear one of these?” Lizzy had returned the gas mask to his pack at some point. Perhaps she had kept his belongings for her trophy collection.

“Never. Help me get it on, then we’ll toss the gas,” Otis said.

“And while you’re navigating the tunnel, I’ll meet you at the other end of it.”

“How the hell do you know where it leads?” Skeeter asked.

Fergus grinned. He had remembered another useful tidbit from Harlan’s astral-plane intel. “Why would anyone build a shed so far away from their house? Why not have your lawn mower and your garden gnomes stored close by, within easy reach?”

“Shit,” Otis said, struggling to position the mask.

“What?”

“I left Serena Jo and the kids hiding near that shed.”

“Go. Now,” Fergus said, suddenly grim. He finished securing the mask on Otis, popped the canister’s top and dropped it down into the abyss.

Otis didn’t hesitate.

“Can you run?” Fergus asked Skeeter, digging through his backpack for the revolver Ray had given him. It was there, as well as a handful of bullets.

“Not as fast as you. Go on. I’m gonna look for my Mossy. I’ll catch up.”

“You can’t shoot a rifle with one hand, old man,” Fergus said heading for the front door.

“The hell I can’t.”

There was no time to argue. Fergus ran through the door and out into a blustery rain-scented wind — an outflow boundary, the type that precipitated a storm.

As he sprinted down the porch steps, a sudden zig-zag of intense brightness flashed in the east. Ominous rumbles followed the next second, registering inside his chest like the low notes of a bass cello. The storm would soon be upon them and the greenish, bulbous clouds indicated hail at the least — perhaps even a tornado if his good luck had suddenly dried up.

The white siding of the shed peeked through the branches of a copse of pine trees a hundred yards in the distance. He made out movement nearby.

He leaped off the porch and ran full-speed toward the shed, repeating a mantra every time his boots hit the ground:

*Let me beat Lizzy. Let me beat Lizzy.*

Chapter 24

***Willadean***

“Get inside,” Mama said, pointing to the dark interior of a tidy garden shed.

“We won’t be able to see anything from inside,” Willa argued. “What if Otis needs help?” The rifle felt like more than just an impulse decision; Otis and Mama thought she was responsible enough to carry a firearm under adverse conditions. Actual lives were at stake and they trusted her with a killing machine. And she’d survived being the captive of a psychopath. When this was all over, she would definitely ask for extra privileges.

“I’m more worried about this storm than anything else right now,” Mama said, glancing at the greenish sky with a deep furrow between her brows. “I want you all out of sight from the cabin and under a roof in case there’s hail. Or worse,” she added, studying the lumpy clouds that Willa knew were a type called mammatus, not worrisome themselves but almost always a harbinger of a dangerous storm. She had learned this in Knoxville while writing a story about a puppy who ventured out during a tempest.

It hadn’t ended well for the puppy.

“Them’s titty clouds, ain’t they, Willa?” Cricket said as the three entered the small shed.

“The word mammatus is derived from Latin, meaning udder or breast. So yes, technically you could call them titty clouds, and of course you would, because you’re a goober.”

A small window allowed a partial view of Serena Jo standing outside, and the witch’s cabin in the distance beyond. Mama stood very still, like a granite statue of Diana the Huntress. But instead of a bow and arrow, she wielded an AR-57.

Mama had left the door ajar, but because the coming storm had turned daytime into dusk, much of the shed’s contents lay in shadow. Anemic illumination filtered through the small window as well as an overhead skylight. Willa did a slow pivot, squinting into corners and perusing the neat shelves. A witch’s shed should be vastly more interesting. Where were the jars filled with bat’s wing and eye of newt? The poisonous herbs lashed with twine and strung from the ceiling to dry? No primitive broom leaned against a wall. Instead, she saw a garden hoe and a spade. No pointy black hat hung on the hook next to the doorway; in its place, a straw fedora dangled from a leather chinstrap.

Of course Lizzy wasn’t an actual witch. Willa knew that. Lizzy was merely a psychopath. But Willa couldn’t help feeling disappointed at the pedestrian contents of the shed. And when she tried to imagine Lizzy wearing the fedora and weeding a garden, she laughed. No way that crazy broad would engage in such activities. Lizzy’s only interest in yardwork would involve digging a hole for a body.

A rustling sound emanated from one of the dark corners. Willa could make out a woven mat on the floor; several pristine flower pots rested on top. Had a rat built a nest back there?

All three children had been standing with their noses pressed against the solitary windowpane. Just as she decided to search the rat corner, she caught a glimpse of a moving figure through the filmy glass. She recognized the spikey flame-red hair as Mister Fergus practically flew down the cabin’s front porch steps.

He ran toward the shed, waving his arms and yelling something she couldn’t understand. It seemed Mama couldn’t either. She was yelling back, “What? I can’t hear you!”

“What’s he saying, Harlan?” Willa said. Harlan may be able to read Mister Fergus’s lips, even from this distance.

*I can’t tell. Wait, I think he’s saying...*

Willa watched the color drain from her brother’s face as he spun to face the corner. Willa turned as well, dreading whatever had caused that look of terror on Harlan’s face.

The top half of Lizzy’s body extended from the ground where the woven mat had been. She blinked rapidly, like something irritated her eyes, but she wore that awful grin. And she pointed a gun right at Willa.

Willa opened her mouth to scream, but the rifle’s muzzle shifted to Harlan’s head. “I’ll do it, Willadean. I won’t hesitate. Close the door. Do it fast.”

Willa did as she was told.

“Latch it. Hurry,” the witch said.

Willa slid the metal bolt into its housing. She should have noticed that sooner. Why would anyone install a latch bolt inside of a garden shed?

“You came through a tunnel?” Willa replied, switching to her childish voice. “How clever!”

“On some level, I always knew it would end here,” the witch said. “I had the tunnel built as a safeguard against my capture. But you children and your mother bungled everything. None of us will be getting out of this alive.”

It couldn’t have been easy climbing out of that hole with broken fingers and an injured shoulder, all the while keeping the rifle pointed at Harlan. But Lizzy managed it. When she reached the patch of weak sunshine filtering through the skylight, Willa could see which witch she was dealing with. It wasn’t the somewhat reasonable one Willa had managed to charm in the basement. This Lizzy, with her pinpoint pupils and maniacal grin, was the drugged-up psychopathic version. The one with whom there would be no reasonable discussion.

“Put that rifle on the floor, Willa,” Lizzy said.

Willa’s mind raced as she stared into those disturbing green eyes. Problem-solving was one of her talents, but the current situation didn’t present even one good option. After a moment’s hesitation, she complied, setting the Mossy next to the hoe and spade. A sudden pounding on the door surprised her, but the witch didn’t blink or flinch.

“Open up!” Serena Jo was using her overly reasonable voice; it was the one that only sounded reasonable to people who didn’t know her. Anxiety nearing full-blown panic gnawed around the edges of the normal modulation. It was the voice she had used when they’d driven a U-Haul along a Knoxville freeway in the dead of night, dodging stalled cars and bands of armed survivors.

“I have a gun pointed at a boy child,” Lizzy shouted. “I’m guessing he’s your son and the brother of the girl standing next to him. Willadean is your Mini Me.” Lizzy giggled. “So I suggest you back away and position yourself where I can see you from the window. What’s the woman’s name, child?” Lizzy asked the slack-jawed Cricket.

“Serena Jo,” Cricket squeaked. The front of his grubby jeans was wet. Poor kid had peed his pants.

The witch raised her voice. “Serena Jo, I will kill both of your children and the dark-haired boy if I don’t see you through the window with your arms raised and your weapons on the ground in five seconds.”

Willa desperately wanted to turn and watch for Mama through the window, but she didn’t dare. Any opportunity to prevail in this situation would require her to remain focused on the psychopath before her.

“We are at somewhat of an impasse,” the witch said, glancing through the window. “But clearly I hold the upper hand. A good mother will do anything to save her children, and you strike me as...competent.”

The witch was certainly right about that.

“Let them go and we’ll all walk away,” Mama said, her voice penetrating the wooden boards.

“Fergussss,” Lizzy said. “I know you’re out there. I *sense* you, using that talent we both share. Show yourself or I’ll kill them all.”

Willa watched the witch’s face and could tell the exact moment her teacher appeared.

“Where is the old man?”

“You shot him full of enough epinephrine and muscle relaxant to make his heart either explode or stop beating completely, remember Lizzy?” Mister Fergus said.

The air escaped Willa’s lungs.

“And cut off a few fingers as well,” Lizzy said. Her eyes dilated as she said the horrible words. “His trigger pulling days are behind him now even if he does survive the injection.” Another giggle.

Willa barely fought the urge to fling herself at the witch.

“I want to see the two of you start walking away...now. If you don’t, I will shoot one child in the head. Which one shall I start with?”

“You know you won’t do that, Lizzy,” Mister Fergus said. Anxiety nibbled at the edges of the deep tenor.

Willa used her childlike voice again, “Please, Miss Lizzy. You know you don’t want to shoot a kid.”

The witch’s expression was difficult to read, but it looked like Willa had struck a nerve. She actually exhibited a trace of remorse before she swiveled the gun away from Harlan’s head, lowered the muzzle, and shot Cricket.

The world seemed to slow to half-speed after that.

Mama yelled from outside. Cricket fell to the ground like a tow sack of potatoes. The rat-rustling sounds from the corner again started up again, but Lizzy was distracted now. She didn’t notice the subtle noise of a gas mask-wearing Otis as he emerged from the ground behind her.

Willa kept her focus on Lizzy, using only her peripheral vision to watch Otis extricate his arms from the tunnel and take aim at Lizzy’s back.

Whether Lizzy heard Otis or Harlan’s gaze darted to the rat corner, Willa would never know. The witch spun and fired a second round. It exploded through the right eyehole of the gas mask.

Another yell from Mama, then a pounding on the shed door as Willa reached for the Mossy.

“Don’t do it Willadean. I’d prefer not to kill you yet.”

Willa turned slowly. The witch stood in a square patch of weak sunlight. Her gun swiveled to point at Harlan now.

“I have no such qualms about your brother.” The grin unfurled again. A slender finger twitched on the trigger, but Lizzy watched Willadean’s face instead of Harlan. The witch wanted to observe Willa’s horror at the sight of her brother’s murder. She was drawing it out a few seconds longer than necessary. Absolute madness glittered in the poison-ringed orbs.

Willa’s mind rebelled. She’d already lost Cricket. She would never survive losing Harlan too. Flinging herself between the witch and Harlan would only take a second, and she was the fastest kid in the village.

“You’re a monster,” Willa hissed, hoping to distract the witch and give herself the second she needed. Time slowed to quarter-speed as she sprang.

A tendon jumped in Lizzy’s forearm, the one that controlled finger movement.

A thud from above might have been a wind-tossed branch, but a faint whiff of rosemary told Willadean something else had landed on the roof. The next second, crashing glass rained down on them from the skylight.

As Willa landed in front of Harlan, the witch’s head exploded.

Chapter 25

***Fergus***

“I got the crazy gal!” Skeeter said from the roof.

The shed door swung open. Serena Jo ran inside.

Fergus helped the old man climb down, postponing the moment he’d be forced to look upon dead children.

“I’m fine,” Skeeter said. “Go see if you can help.”

The storm passed to the north. A bright shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds, illuminating the interior of the shed.

Serena Jo’s arms were wrapped around Willadean in an embrace that threatened to suffocate the little girl.

Lizzy’s body lay on the ground, her face a grisly Halloween mask. Light reflected off teeth on one side of her gaping mouth. The other side was a nightmare of blood, flesh, and bone.

Harlan sat on the ground next to Cricket. Little-boy hands pressed against their best friend’s chest which still rose and fell in a shallow rhythm. Golden eyes lifted to Fergus, but they weren’t filled with sadness. They were filled with determination.

“Do you think you can do something for him?” Fergus asked as he squatted next to the boy.

Harlan’s blood-stained hands were preoccupied, so he chose this moment to vocalize for the first time. It wasn’t the cracking, rusty intonation of someone who never talked, but the perfectly normal voice of a boy who was anything but normal.

“It’s from my War Chest of Oddities, Mister Fergus,” he said. “It worked on a dog who’d been hit by a car back in Knoxville, and once on a baby squirrel that fell out of a tree.”

Fergus knew then that Harlan possessed enhanced *langthal*, the ability to heal other living creatures. This changed everything.

“I see. There’s a word for it, you know.”

“Yes, the Shift told me.”

“The Shift?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “That’s what I call the voice in my head that helps me work through things...decisions, stuff like that. She told me it was a type of *langthal*.”

“She?”

Harlan glanced meaningfully at his mother and sister. Serena Jo had released Willadean from the bear hug and was preparing to pounce on her son.

Fergus intercepted her. “Your son is fine. You can see that. But Cricket needs help. You will find medical supplies in Lizzy’s cabin. Bring them to me quickly.”

He watched the familiar stubborn expression blossom on Willadean’s tear-streaked face.

“Child, you can’t help. If you want to save your friend, go with your mother. Now.”

“Come, Willa. He’s right. This is our best hope of helping Cricket.”

Serena Jo ushered her daughter out of the shed.

Fergus turned his attention back to Harlan. “Do you feel heat in your hands?”

Harlan nodded. “Getting even hotter now.”

“You said the Shift was a she?”

“Yes. I think her name is...Amelia.”

Fergus couldn’t help himself. He laughed. “I should have known. Very well, connect with Amelia now. If there’s anyone who can help save your friend, it’s her.”

“You know her?”

“Oh yes. A very old friend. Focus now, son.”

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“I don’t understand,” Willa said. “I saw blood. A lot of blood.”

The group stood outside the shed in the light that couldn’t decide whether to be cheerful or ominous. They must be positioned right on the ragged edges of the storm. Fergus could smell the rain in the air, but for now it was skirting them. He hoped it continued to do so. The notion of taking shelter inside Lizzy’s cabin was distasteful.

Cricket spoke then, sounding tired, but otherwise normal. “The bullet just nicked me, I guess. It stings a little, but I feel okay. My breathing is better too. Listen!” He took a deep breath in, then blew it out.

“Let me see your wound,” Willa demanded. “Please,” she added, more gently now, noting Cricket’s pallor.

Fergus used his stern voice. “Absolutely not. It’s cleaned and bandaged. I won’t have your grubby little fingers anywhere near that wound. It could get infected.”

Clearly Willadean was exhausted because she merely shrugged and yawned.

“Let’s go home,” Serena Jo said, stifling her own reflexive yawn. “You sure you can make it, Pops?”

“Yep. What should we do about Otis?” he said.

“We’ll let the tunnel air out before we go in after him. Then we’ll take him home and give him a hero’s burial. Same with Ray,” she added with a small catch in her voice.

Skeeter nodded, brushing at his watery blue eyes. Fergus intentionally looked away and down at Harlan. He gave the boy a conspiratorial wink. It wasn’t lost on Willa.

“You gonna start talking full-time now?”

Harlan shook his head, then signed. *No. That was an exception.* He grinned.

A whistled melody emanated from the outskirts of the woods.

Skeeter whistled a quick five-note response. “It figures the cavalry would arrive after the battle is over.”

Four men and two women emerged from the trees, hillbilly wraiths shrouded in faded denim and flannel. There was to be an escort back to the village, it seemed. Fergus hoped they would make the journey in silence.

He needed some time to gather his thoughts about what had just transpired and how much of it he would report to the Ancients at *Cthor-Vangt*.

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Thirty-six hours later...

“This is the most delicious repast I’ve enjoyed since my arrival,” Fergus said. He dipped the fried cornbread torpedo into its accompanying blackberry chutney, then popped it into his mouth with a moan.

Blue eyes framed by wrinkles sparkled in the firelight. “Them fritters is just the appetizer,” Skeeter said. “Wait’ll we get to the main course.”

Whitaker Holler’s entire population attended the evening’s celebration. A colossal cooking fire crackled next to the kitchen house; its flames licked a hog the size of a Harley Davidson slowly rotating on a boy-powered rotisserie. The scintillating aroma of roasting pork wafted throughout the lamp-lit village. Discordant notes of fiddles being tuned floated from every direction. Children squealed and ran along the dirt-packed boulevards, playing hide-and-seek for a while, then organizing into teams for Red Rover. Willadean, Harlan, and Cricket were among them. Willadean orchestrated the activities like a pint-sized four-star general.

Fergus smiled.

Otis and Lizzy’s remains had been retrieved and buried earlier that morning. There had been some grumbling about giving a murdering psychopath a proper burial, but Serena Jo had insisted. When they had gone back for Ray’s body, all they’d found was blood and mountain lion tracks. According to Skeeter, the big cats had been making a comeback since the pandemic. Fergus tried not to think about the body being dragged up into a tree and slowly devoured. Did mountain lions even do that? Or was that just a leopard thing?

“Shame about your friend, Ray,” Skeeter said, interrupting his morbid thoughts.

“Yes,” Fergus sighed. “Still, it could have been a worse outcome.”

“Yep.” Skeeter’s gaze latched onto the twins as they dashed by, then the bald head dipped forward. Fergus’s *scythen* caught a whiff of prayer.

They sat in the old man’s handmade kitchen chairs, carried outside for the occasion like dozens of others on the sublime autumn evening. Now that he’d gotten used to the moonshine burn, known in the holler as ‘Satan’s Kiss,’ he found it almost palatable.

Almost.

“When are you thinking about leaving?” Skeeter said, giving him a sideways glance. His bandaged hand lay in the lap of his overalls. No matter how quickly these people healed and no matter how high their pain tolerance, humans could not grow new fingers.

At least as far as Fergus knew.

“Who says I’m leaving?” There was no point bothering with a more robust denial. Skeeter would sniff out any lie.

“I’ll miss you,” Skeeter said, looking away.

“And I shall miss you as well. There are a few things I need to take care of before I go, however.”

“You want to talk to my daughter about that warehouse.”

“That’s one item on my checklist.”

“You want to talk to my grandson about going someplace where his talents will be understood and cultivated.” It was always interesting when Skeeter shed his bumpkin dialect and embraced proper grammar.

Fergus began to speak, but Skeeter waved his good hand.

“I don’t want details. And I’m not sure it would be such a bad idea. He’s special, that one. Even more so than his sister. But before you decide, take a look around. Let it sink in what you’d be taking him from. What he’d be missing in that strange underground place.”

Fergus had been contemplating just that. What childhood could be more perfect than one spent here, in this place of intense natural beauty, nurtured by a loving family, encouraged in all creative endeavors and personal choices? Would the *Cthor* allow Harlan to remain mute, or would they see it as a quirky shortcoming to be stifled? Fergus already knew the answer.

Maybe it was the moonshine, or perhaps it was seeing Serena Jo’s gaze follow the twins as they raced around like child-shaped tornadoes. Whatever the reason, Fergus knew he would not be taking anyone anywhere. The *Cthor* would pick up on the fact that he was keeping something from them, and it may well get him kicked out of *Cthor-Vangt*. The defining moment...the second he made his final decision about not taking Harlan there...was when he realized he didn’t mind expulsion.

Amelia had made a similar choice and even now was living her best life — out of many lifetimes — in a tropical paradise. She would enjoy another forty or fifty years doing exactly what she wanted to do, where she wanted to do it. Fergus could picture himself in Whitaker Holler someday when he was ready to settle down. Maybe he and Amelia could become snowbirds, spending the warm months in the Smoky Mountains and the winter months in Jupiter, Florida.

The notion was intensely appealing on many levels, but foregoing virtual immortality was a decision one didn’t make lightly or impulsively.

He would ponder further. Later.

“I’ve been wondering about something,” Fergus said, glancing down to Skeeter’s injured hand. The one with the narrow gold band.

Skeeter’s jaw twitched. “The subject of my wife is off-limits. For now, at least. Maybe when you come back for a visit, and if you bring some more of that top-shelf whiskey in your flask, we’ll get into it.”

“Fair enough, sir,” Fergus replied. “I need to talk to your daughter for a moment. Would you excuse me?”

“’Course. Come on back ‘soon as yer done. We got some drinkin’ to do.”

Fergus laughed. Hillbilly Skeeter was back.

# **Epilogue**

“I don’t care about what’s in here,” Serena Jo said as Fergus punched numbers into the keypad bolted to the entrance of Ray’s warehouse.

“Yet you gave me the code. Interesting.”

“I promised Ray before he died.”

“And you’re grateful to me for my part in rescuing your children.”

“Yes, but my gratitude only goes so far, and I’ve already agreed to let you leave the holler with your hide intact.”

Fergus chuckled as the door screeched open.

For the next hour, they walked the corridors of one of the nation’s largest Strategic Stockpiles; the echoes of their footsteps bounced off the high ceiling. It was a lonely sound. How had Ray been happy here, Fergus wondered. Then he realized the answer lay in the man’s psychology: career bureaucrat obsessed with organization and routine who also happened to be an agoraphobic introvert. Here he had no need to venture out for food beyond the perimeter of the complex, so the set-up became the perfect storm of contented isolation. At least until Lizzy had injected herself into this one-man utopia. If not for her, Ray might never have left the warehouse, living blissfully in the enormous space for the rest of his life.

Fergus sighed, then shot a covert glance at the unflappable Serena Jo. She was impressed. Not that she said anything, but those mesmerizing eyes widened when they scanned the food pallets and then again next to the armory. The sight of the pharmaceuticals summoned a disbelieving head shake.

“So you can understand why Ray was insistent that you come here. Think what a difference these items would make to your people.”

“I am. But consider how well we’re doing without all this.” Her gesture encompassed the treasure within the warehouse.

Fergus nodded.

“Also, consider our society from before. Did all that technology make us happier? Did smart phones expand our world, or did they shrink it down to a tiny screen? Modern medicine might have added a few years to the average lifespan, but if those years were spent in a recliner with eyes glued to a television, why bother?”

“I had no idea you were such a philosopher,” Fergus replied. “I thought you were a flesh and blood, life-size, action figure.”

Serena Jo gave him a half-smile. “Believe me, it’s tempting to utilize all this. We’ve experienced a few winter months when I worried about food shortages. One of the elders died last fall of dysentery, and a weakly child soon after from tetanus.”

“There’s medicine here that could prevent deaths like those.”

“Yes, I see that. But that’s my point. Maybe those deaths shouldn’t have been prevented. I have some antibiotics, but I chose to save them for future events. Sometimes it’s best to let nature run its course.”

“Would you feel that way if the tetanus victim had been your child? You brought antibiotics and other medicines with you from Knoxville. Why would accepting these gifts be different?”

Serena Jo sighed. “That is what I’m grappling with now. A lot has changed in the three years I’ve been here. I’ve come to see how a simpler existence is actually a superior one. I watched you last night at the celebration. You were having a good time. Can you imagine having done that before the plague? Rubbing elbows with a bunch of backwoods hillbillies and actually enjoying their conversations?”

“Yes, I can. I’ve never discriminated against folks because of their education. I’ve run across plenty of fascinating people who didn’t make it past the third grade.”

The golden eyes narrowed. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. Exactly what was your former profession? I know you lied about being a professor.”

“*Lie* is a strong word. Perhaps I bent the truth a bit, but it all turned out for the best.” He was eager to change the subject. “How about this: don’t decide now. Memorize that code in case you change your mind. The setup here is automated. I know Ray performed regular maintenance checks on this place, but I have a feeling all these goodies will be preserved for at least another decade or two. Maybe even consult with some of your people back in the holler. Form a consensus...”

“Absolutely not,” she said, cutting him off. “This is a decision for one person, and for now, that person is me. We’re not a democracy, Fergus. That’s why everything runs so smoothly.”

“Benevolent dictatorship?”

“Call it what you want. I know what’s best and what works for the holler folk as a society. The grumblings of a few short-sighted people don’t matter.”

“They’ll matter if they foment rebellion.”

Serena Jo didn’t reply, but a deep line formed between her eyebrows. The notion had evidently occurred to her before.

“Very well,” Fergus said. “It’s your decision. I’ve satisfied the moral obligation of presenting my case, and now it’s time for me to move on. Before I go, though, I’m curious about your escape from Knoxville three years ago and what led up to it. The contents of the U-Haul were impressive in their detail and foresight. Is this something you’re willing to talk about? I know the journey itself must have been harrowing. I too was out there when the world fell apart.”

He watched her wrangle with the question for a few moments. Finally she began talking.

“I started planning the day US deaths hit thirty thousand, just above a hundred thousand globally. The CDC said the mortality rate of the disease was around two to three percent, but I didn’t buy it. I made a list while the kids were asleep that night. For the next three days, I didn’t slow down for a minute. I rented the U-Haul and gathered every item on my list, in whatever way I could. Everything went into the cargo hold. The kids, wearing jammies and sneakers, were tucked into the back seat. I gave them Benadryl so they’d sleep. I decided to wait for dark before leaving, even though safety-wise, it seemed counter-intuitive. People were getting buggy by then and the real freaks tended to emerge at night. But I wanted the cover of darkness.

“I had a shotgun on the passenger seat and a .38 Special on my lap. We hit a rudimentary roadblock on 441 southbound. People approached us. Each time I fired the gun, I thought the kids would wake up, but they didn’t. That Benadryl is good stuff. They hadn’t done a very good job on the roadblock. Once the people were no longer a...deterrent...our truck plowed right through the wooden barricade. The drive should have only taken a couple of hours, but it took a day. Abandoned cars clogged up the lanes of the highway. I say abandoned, but they probably weren’t. The drivers were most likely dying or dead inside their cars. I didn’t look. Didn’t care to. All that mattered was getting the kids to safety. And so here we are. The mission was a success.”

She took a deep breath. Not a trace of remorse was visible in her smile. Fergus studied the beautiful face for several heartbeats, then forced an answering smile.

They had meandered back to the entrance. As Serena Jo punched in the code again, Fergus was pondering the tearful goodbyes he’d had that morning with Skeeter and the children. He would miss them all, perhaps as much as he missed Dani and Sam back in Kansas. The snowbird fantasy expanded more fully in his mind, then transitioned to a mental image of the map he’d studied back at the village. He planned to leave on the road leading west out of the self-storage complex. A hankering to see another coastline had been needling him for a while now.

He was wearing a smile when the door lifted again, the very door Ray had opened to welcome him just a few days ago.

The smile faded instantly. Lightning fast, Serena Jo’s relaxed posture shifted to defense mode. One of Skeeter’s fancy Mossberg rifles pointed now at the small band of people positioned on the blacktop — specifically at the one who seemed the likely leader of this ragtag pirate-crew of vaguely sinister mountain people.

“Well, if it ain’t Euel Whitaker’s purdy little girl, all growed up and askin’ for trouble.”

Fergus wouldn’t have thought a human could move so fast. The man dropped to his knees and fired a round into Serena Jo before her trigger finger could move. An involuntary gasp escaped her lips as she fell to the metal platform.

Fergus’s hand snaked toward the revolver tucked into the back of his pants.

A high-pitched voice erupted from the crouching man. His firearm pointed at Fergus now.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, little feller. I’ll aim right between your eyes instead of the leg, like I did for this honey bunny.”

Serena Jo gazed up at Fergus, then gave a small shake of her head. *Don’t do it.*

He despised the man’s use of a friendly epithet bestowed by his friend Skeeter.

“Hands up, little feller. Reach for them clouds.”

Fergus glanced down at Serena Jo. “You know these people?” he whispered.

“The Murdock clan from Idlewild.” Her voice shook, whether from pain or fear, he couldn’t tell.

“Higher than that, shorty,” said a second man.

“Bad news, the Murdocks?” Fergus said without moving his lips.

From below, she replied, “As bad as it gets.”

To be continued...

Those Who Come the Last

**Book 5 in the Troop of Shadows Chronicles**

Prologue

Not for the first time during the past few days, Ray tried to open his eyelids only to realize they refused, at least until a bit of rubbing forced them to cooperate. His hands felt wooden against his face. The light that filtered through the opening of a tent carried the golden quality of late afternoon sunshine. He wondered briefly if Lizzy had captured him again and dosed him with midazolam. This mental fog felt different, though, not like the tranquilizing effect of either the midazolam or the mood elevating ketamine.

How long had he been out? Where was he? Then a more urgent question: were the children safe?

He sat up too quickly, and his head swam. After waiting a minute for the dizziness to pass, he assessed himself and his surroundings. He was nestled in a sleeping bag of excellent quality; the North Face logo embroidered on the side confirmed it. He could see his breath, which meant it was cold outside, but he was warm and comfortable inside the bag. The Klymit tent, also top-notch, was the type nature enthusiasts carried on their backs when they scaled mountains. Not that he personally would know anything about that kind of adventuring, but he recognized good brands when he saw them.

He rubbed his eyes again, mentally grasping for his most recent memories prior to blacking out: the children running toward the giant Ponderosa pine, him heading in the opposite direction to lure Lizzy away from them; a sudden slamming sensation in his chest that knocked him to the ground; pain so intense it couldn’t be registered on any known scale; weakness so disabling he could barely lift a hand to write the warehouse security code on Serena Jo’s notepad.

Her beautiful eyes had filled with sadness as they gazed down at him. The painful pounding in his chest — his excruciating heartbeat — had thumped slower and slower and slower. His final thought had been: *Lizzy killed me*.

Then blackness.

As he analyzed the memories, he remembered being certain that he was dying. With the same wooden hand, he reached inside his shirt, wincing in anticipation of the injury he would discover there. Had Serena Jo sewn him up? Was she giving him antibiotics to stave off the inevitable infection of a bullet wound? His fingertips encountered nothing unusual, just the skin of his chest and a smattering of hair. No gaping hole nor injury of any kind.

How was that possible?

“You’re wondering how you could have been shot in the chest and survived with no aftereffects. It’s a valid question.”

The woman who spoke stood in the tent’s opening. Because of her small stature, she didn’t have to stoop much. If Serena Jo were a foot shorter and thirty years older, this is what she would look like.

“Close your mouth or you’ll draw flies,” the woman said, not unkindly.

She stepped inside and squatted beside him. “Here,” she said, thrusting a protein bar at him. “Gotta get your strength back now that you’ve returned to the land of the living.” The voice was low, like that of a cigarette addict but without the raspy, phlegmy quality. Ropy muscles visible beneath the fitted tee indicated more than a nodding acquaintance with fitness. The tanned, lined face spoke of a life lived outdoors squinting at the sun.

“Are you Serena Jo’s mother?” he managed, his voice a croaking frog.

“That I am,” the woman said with a tight smile. “I’m Hannah.” The small hand was veined but otherwise youthful for a woman in her...sixties? There was strength in her handshake. “And who are you?”

“I’m Ray. What happened? How are the children? And your daughter?”

“First things first. How do you feel? Any pain?”

Ray shook his head. “No, which makes no sense. I remember getting shot. In the *chest*. How long have I been unconscious? The wound has already healed, so it must be what? Weeks? Months?”

The woman’s smile was that of a mischievous child, and her laughter sounded like baritone wind chimes on a blustery day. “Forty-eight hours. And you weren’t unconscious. You were dead.”

**Dear Reader,**

I hope you enjoyed this book. I'd love it if you posted a review about it on Amazon or Goodreads. Reading a well-written book in the company of snoring doggies is my favorite pastime; receiving feedback and reviews from readers about my own books is my second favorite pastime. I look forward to hearing what you think! Who was your favorite character (I have a couple), and which scenes did you like best? Did you want to punch the gun store owner in his face? Who is the better pet, Brains or Bruno?

On a side note, if you've spotted a typo, please email me a [nicki@nickihuntsmansmith.com.](mailto:nicki@nickihuntsmansmith.com.) I hate those insidious little buggers as much as the next reader.

If you're a native Kansan and noticed that my fictional Liberty, Kansas is nowhere near the real Liberty, please know that I changed the name from Russell (the town that actually resides there) to Liberty. I just liked it better. I hope you won't find my creative license too annoying.

You can follow me on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorNickiHuntsmanSmith/>or read my blog (Eating the Elephant) at <http://nickihuntsmansmith.com/>.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Nicki Huntsman Smith

***UPDATES***

I have a newsletter for my readers interested in being informed of updates on the Troop of Shadows series and occasional updates on my other new releases. The newsletter is sent out infrequently so don’t worry about me filling your inbox… that’s not going to happen.

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