

# BLACK STAG

WHITE DOE

A NOVEL

TRES CROW

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**BLACK STAG**

WHITE DOE



*This book is dedicated to Seth Fisher,  
without whom this wouldn't exist.*

*It's also dedicated to all the future  
generations, who hopefully won't have to  
live in a place like this.*



# PROLOGUE

## The LEV

Lieutenant Jonathan Randolph of the LEV's 22nd Command Center stood before a wall of monitors. His sweaty hands were clasped behind his back, his thick legs spread. He was aiming for authoritative but the lateness of the hour and the stale air made his clothes cling tightly to the sweat on his back and to the bulge of his belly. It made him uncomfortable and edgy. He mopped sweat from his forehead, his receding hairline standing up like a forest of bare-limbed trees.

Three privates in khaki coveralls manned the monitors in front of him, the monitors flashing and blinking on their grim, tired faces in skittering eddies of color. The screens flipped through the feeds of thousands of security cameras at three second intervals, a vast army of lenses that kept silent watch over the entire LEV.

In the far corner of the room hung a television like a discarded cardboard box, a forgotten relic from the original construction of the LEV almost thirty-five years ago. There was

no sound—the speakers had stopped working long before Randolph started his tour in the LEV—but the screen showed a radar image of a hurricane churning in the Atlantic Ocean, thirty miles off the Georgia coast.

*Hurricane Walter.*

Randolph had been watching the storm's progress for days now, at first with curiosity and now with growing uneasiness as the projected path bent nearer and nearer to his particular quadrant of the LEV.

Randolph walked up to the private seated nearest him, a blond 19-year old named Lister, and patted his shoulder in what he tried as a collegial slap. Lister shrugged out from under Randolph's hand, looking fixedly at the monitors. Randolph looked down the line of privates to see if any of the others had seen. He knew these boys didn't respect him; he could see it in their eyes and hear it in their speech. He supposed they thought he was old and fat and washed up. Randolph plowed through the discomfort by inelegantly assuming an air of authority. He pointed to one of the screens to their right and called Lister's attention to a tiny valve in the middle of the screen.

"Keep your eyes peeled," said Randolph. "The main valve here is probably the weakest spot in the entire quadrant. It feeds the magnet."

The private nodded sleepily, his cheeks drooping in exhaustion and boredom. This was the third time this week Randolph had reminded him of the valve and he was well aware of its importance. After-all, he had endured three weeks of mind-numbing training on the construction of the LEV and its main components before assuming this particular post. He opened his mouth in a long and exaggerated yawn and Randolph leapt at the opportunity to escape from the awkwardness.

"No yawning on the graveyard shift," he chirped, his voice like a splash of cold water. The privates didn't turn to look at him. He plunged on anyhow. "Keep watching those screens, boys. I'll get you some more coffee. Only two more hours and

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we can all get some shut eye. I promise.”

He turned on his heels and marched out of the control room, his chest and belly puffed out ahead of him. When the door snicked closed behind him his composure sagged. He wiped his forehead again, and the full weight of his fatigue settled in around his shoulders. These shifts were beginning to wear him down; like waves lapping over rocks, he was bludgeoned by the hours, his once sharp corners smoothed over. His shoulders and neck were stiff from months of keeping this unnatural schedule, from months of pretending to be in control, from endless nights of coffee and doughnuts, from the layers of fat building day by day over his once tanned and flattened stomach. He unconsciously rubbed the itchy cloth of his shirt and grimaced.

Ahead of him spread a long hallway, which followed the delicate, almost imperceptible curve of the LEV. The white-wash had not been repainted in years and had faded to mustard. There were no windows and the only light came from a thin line of fluorescent bulbs that ran down the middle of the hallway. In several places the bulbs had burned out and the hallway alternated at random between light and dark.

He walked toward the break room, his footfalls echoing. He traced his hand along the smooth, worn wood of the guard rail as he walked and he wondered whether the wood was real, or if it was a plastic composite.

*It certainly feels real*, he thought as he tried to remember the last time he'd actually felt real wood. Of course there was the park; at the park he could feel sticks and bark and the trunks of trees, but when was the last time he'd actually felt something made of wood? Come to think of it, when was the last time he'd gone to the park? Not for years, at least. *This rail must be old.*

He let his hand fall from the rail and walked with his head down. He really hated this hallway. He had spent the last five years of his life in the fluorescent gloom of this levee drinking coffee, chatting with the other patrols, daydreaming, drinking more coffee, and all of it, all the conversations and opining

and drinking and shitting, all that living seemed to amount to nothing more in his mind than this empty, tedious hallway going on and on for miles.

The break room was ahead on the right, marked by a dusty, brown sign adorned with a white steaming cup icon. A few yards beyond the break room was a second door, gray with a flashing red sign that told Randolph he was currently three floors below the water line. He paused with one hand on the break room doorknob and watched the sign flashing. Three floors below the ocean. He thought about all those tons of steel and concrete above him and below him, all that water and weight. The LEV was a great tomb, and he was stuck deep in the heart of it.

A childish thought came to him: he should leave this place, just run out that door, climb the stairs back to the surface, and leave this subterranean treadmill behind. He wanted to feel the sun on his face, he wanted to feel it burning away this sickly tomb-sweat that coated his forehead and kissing his pale cheeks to a healthy rosiness. He wanted to look out on the waves of the Atlantic, not how they looked now—just tiny curdles at the feet of the LEV—but how they must have looked fifty or a hundred years ago as they broke against ocean-side cliffs. Natural and ever-lasting.

He watched the sign flash a few more times, then he sighed and pushed his way into the break room. He was being foolish and he knew it; there were no ocean side cliffs anymore—at least not on the East Coast—now there was just the LEV, and the endless, floating shanty town beyond.

The coffee machine was an old-fashioned model which still required water to be manually dumped in. Half the time all that came out was a bad smelling goop the color of rust or blood. Randolph had put in a request for a new machine twice, but so far he hadn't heard anything. They *did* get a new TV set a couple months back though, and it was murmuring from its perch in the corner. He listened casually as he brewed the coffee.

“38 NAS soldiers were killed this morning in a midnight

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raid on a Chinese munitions factory north of New Beijing,” said the newscaster in solemn tones. “This brings the total of North American soldiers dead in the Chinese operation to just over 3,400 since the beginning of hostilities in March of 2073.”

Randolph paused with the coffee pot poised over the intake as three soldiers on the TV, dressed in the traditional blue fatigues of the North American States, ran across a rubble-strewn street firing their automatic rifles at something off screen. In the background a building exploded and the soldiers fell to the ground.

He couldn't watch the news anymore; it just filled him with a nebulous revulsion and guilt. So many years these conflicts had been going on; if it wasn't the Chinese it was the Russians or the Iranians or the Argentineans. Always there was something or someone the NAS was fighting. Always the NAS was on the verge of collapse. All his life it was going on; it had all just seemed to Randolph like a big show, like a put-on for ratings or votes or something. War as entertainment, as the old saying went.

He poured the rest of the water into the coffee machine and hurriedly placed the pot under the spout before the coffee began to brew. A few moments passed and the newscaster began talking about fighting in the mountains of Eastern Europe but Randolph focused his attention on the dripping coffee. Again he thought of crashing waves and for a moment he almost truly saw himself there. But he knew that place didn't exist. It was gone—just like Savannah and New York City and Florida—washed under the waves of the Atlantic. The image collapsed in a puff.

Suddenly the thin streamer of coffee sputtered and turned the faded rouge of clotted blood.

“*Shit!*” he whispered under his breath and hammered the *OFF* button. “This fucking machine.”

He started to grab the pot to make another but thought better of it. It was a waste of time; only two more hours and their shift would be over. Surely they could last that long without

falling asleep. He emptied the pot in the sink and replaced it in its cradle.

He shuffled out of the tiny break room and into the hallway, and as he left he could hear the weatherman on the TV behind him laugh, "I'd bring a raincoat to work tomorrow, folks. Walter's gonna be a whopper!" He paused a moment, looked both ways, then headed to the surface.

Ten minutes later Randolph pushed open the heavy steel door and immediately felt the strong sea breeze pushing across his face. Although it was as warm as breath, it instantly cooled the sweat on his brow. He leaned against the door frame, clutching his chest, gasping from the ten-story climb up the stairs, letting the air wash over him.

His breathing slowed, and he let go of the door frame and stepped out onto the wide, gray observation platform at the top of the LEV.

"Hmm," he said, "The LEV." He rolled the word over his tongue, tasting it as though for the first time. He chuffed silently as a novel thought came to him. "Sounds kind of like *live*."

That had never occurred to him before, but now it seemed fitting. The LEV was life when you thought about it. After all, it had gone like this: the oceans rose and flooded everything and then the NAS had built a wall, this levee, and then everyone had lived? It was simple, neat, and clean when you thought of it that way. Of course that was the short, short, short version, because it really hadn't happened as quickly or efficiently as all that. It had taken years for the oceans to swallow the coasts and then it had taken several more years for Congress and thousands of engineers to decide on a plan of action. Then they'd actually started building, and that had taken even longer so that by the time the LEV was completed—and the miles and miles of extension levees added to it later—New York was already gone, Florida was gone; California was reduced to an archipelago of mountain islands. Hell, even Savannah, where Randolph had been born, was

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slumbering 30 feet beneath the waves.

But still, the LEV was something special, something to be, if not proud of, then at least impressed with. It was the first, the best, and the biggest of the levees, nearly 800 miles of solid steel and concrete stretching from the rocky crags of New Brunswick all the way down to where the Georgia-Florida line had been. It was the greatest engineering feat in the history of mankind, even greater than the Pyramids of Giza or the Golden Gate Bridge, and it was the jewel in the Americans' global crown. This great barrier, set firm against all the raging of the ocean, was a symbol of the power and prosperity and resolution of the North American people, and it was stark proof to all the world of what Mankind was capable of when pressed by adversity. In the end, the LEV was extended beyond the original length to protect the whole country—although most of Mexico and Canada had to be excised in the name of haste and efficiency—but it was this particular span, on which Randolph now stood, that was held in such high esteem that it carried the simple moniker: the LEV. *The LEV*. All the others were just walls.

Randolph struggled through the stiff wind to the guardrail and he looked out on the ocean. The night was inky black and it swirled around him as if the darkness were a living thing. Below and all around him, Randolph could hear the low buzzing of the giant magnets—the ingenious lynchpin of the LEV technology—which maintained the necessary internal pressure that kept the LEV from simply collapsing on itself. He could feel the massive output of the magnets in his hands as he gripped the railing, like when he used to stick his tongue on 9V batteries when he was a kid. It raised the hair on the back of his neck.

Rising to his right was one of thousands of guard posts, tall incisor-like towers equipped with spotlights and soldiers and more security screens. He could see the spotlight roving along the sea below and a soldier stood shadowing its progress with a low-grade artillery piece.

Randolph watched the spotlight too, and although he'd

seen it many times before, what stretched before him was completely disorienting at first, as if the world had been tipped upside down. Hurricane Walter's growing tentacles had covered the moon and the stars above, and below Randolph, where there should have been gently lapping black waves, there was a rippling sea of twinkling lights. Like a mirror galaxy, the ocean was a giant, brilliantly lit, churning organism, spreading out from the base of the LEV almost to the horizon in all directions. It would have been beautiful—and in a way it *was* beautiful—if Randolph hadn't known what those lights were, what they meant.

### *The Shants.*

Below him spread a massive, floating shanty town, which grew out from the LEV like a vestigial tail dangling from the backside of the NAS. This was the home of the Shants, the remnants of all the tattered nations that had been too poor or had too few resources to repel the flood waters. They carved out short, hard-scrabble lives from the scraps of the old world and built homes from garbage on endless flotillas of metal and wooden planks. They were under constant surveillance. If there was ever to be any real threat to the security of the North American States, it would surely originate here.

Whatever benefit Randolph had thought he would derive from the fresh air vanished in an instant, and he turned away from the ocean. Why had he come up here? He hated seeing them up close. The Shants stood outside in the bitter rain and cold, barely surviving, jealously watching while the NAS danced behind their levees, ignorant—and usually downright hostile—to the unfortunates that hadn't been invited. The starkness between the lives of those within the LEV and those without was clear to everyone, and it made the Shanties a violent place, transforming the LEV into the principal front of an unceasing war between those who had and those who had not.

The NAS, of course, wasn't the only place above water—there was the United European Front, and Russia and Iran and the Indochine Confederation—but the existence of those other places didn't make the NAS any less culpable. In his darker

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moments, Randolph saw everything as part of the same big loop: the LEV, the Shants, the NAS, the floods, war, all of them begat each other in an orgy of ill-will and violence. In the end, everything was interconnected; the floods required the LEV, the sharing of the levee technology with the EU and not the Russians started the first war, and the war caused the border crackdown, which caused the Shants, and now life was just wonderful as long as you ignored the fact that every major world power had their guns pointed at one another and their fingers on the triggers.

The tensions had exploded before. There had been a hurricane and thousands of dead Shants; there had been a suicide bomber last month who blew a chunk out of the outer wall of the Euro South Levee. The damage had been little more than cosmetic but it was clear...the Shants were getting restless.

A distant shout floated to him from the Shanties below. He looked about him, as if surprised by where he was. The spotlights glided more vigorously, trying in vain to locate the source of the sound amid the rabble of metal and wood. Randolph took a last look at the Shanties then turned away.

He walked toward the door. The wind lulled momentarily, creating a small moment of clear silence. Then red lights began to flash and sirens screamed in the night. The guards in the tower above him shouted and floodlights blasted over the observation deck, illuminating every inch and bathing Randolph in a white sheen. Randolph's stomach went sour, and as he hurried to the staircase, the ground below him roared and he stumbled drunkenly to his knees.

Out of the corner of his eye Private Jeremy Lister watched Randolph's considerable backside walk out the control room. The door clicked shut and he wiped his forehead and heaved a sarcastic sigh.

"Thank the fucking *Lord!* I thought he'd never get the fuck out of here," he said, returning his eyes to the monitors before him. "He seriously glitches me out." There was a groan of consent from the other two soldiers as their shoulders slumped

in unison. They'd been sitting stiff-backed in their chairs, making a show of paying attention though their thoughts had been drifting for hours.

"If he mentions that damn valve again I swear I'm gonna kill myself," said the private, terse, mole-like. His name was Jones.

"No shit," sighed the third private.

"He needs to stop fucking touching me," Lister said. "I mean, every time he gets near me he puts his fuckin hands on me. The sooner I get the hell out of here the better. Every fucking night sweating in this shit hole with that stupid Bonnie breathing in my ear."

"One. More. Month. We'll be gone," said Jones.

"I wonder where they're gonna send us? Maybe Europe..." said the third private. He was sweating through his hat.

Lister laughed, "Anything better'n this shit night after night."

"No shit," said the other private.

"Listen here," said Jones, turning away from his monitors to look at the others. He gave them a significant look and whispered, "Jordan on the East Deck told me that we might get sent a little *further* east, if you feel me."

Wide grins spread across their faces as gleams of understanding touched their eyes. "China?"

"Mhmm," Jones nodded, leaning back in his chair. He looked casually back at his monitors.

Lister looked from one to the other. He shook his head incredulously. "Fuck that! No way..."

Lister stopped abruptly. Something had moved in one of his monitors. He squared himself with his control panel and flipped back through the last few camera shots. Jones scooted his chair a little closer and looked at Lister's monitors. Lister said nothing; he just flipped through a few more screens until he reached the camera that showed the main valve.

"Shit!" He pressed the button under his panel board. Red lights began to flash silently in the control room and he jumped to his feet, staring at the screen, frozen with horror. He

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gestured toward the door.

“Get Lieutenant, someone’s at the valve,” he said to no one in particular.

Jones shot to his feet, sending his chair skittering across the stone floor.

“*Go!*” shouted Lister, shoving Jones toward the door. He paused for another frozen moment and then turned and ran out the exit.

Lister watched the monitor, fascinated and horrified in equal measure. Standing in the middle of the room, obscuring Lister’s view of the valve, was a teenaged boy wearing a long, open trench coat. Two rows of interweaving bombs were strapped tightly to his thin chest and he looked frightened, but defiantly so. In his left hand he held a detonator and in the other he held a sign that read, “Weak Shall Inherit!” in large, awkward black lettering. The boy raised both of his hands in the air toward the camera and the sign filled most of the field of vision. A strange look passed over his face, an exultant look, nearly ecstatic. It was like the boy was looking directly into his eyes, as if he could see him, and was mocking him. He watched as the boy lifted the detonator to the camera, smiled like a ghost, and brought his thumb down.

Then everything turned to snow.



# CHAPTER ONE

## Daniel

The Black Wheel. Daniel Fischer hated this bar. With its New Orleans-style motif of skeletons, purple and yellow beads, and old calendars adorned with photos of naked women who'd been buried for decades, the place was a temple to some long dead age. It was morose and dimly lit and even on the best of days it was crypt-like. But Will loved this place—he said it reminded him of home, which puzzled Daniel since Will was from Ohio—so Daniel had allowed himself to be persuaded to stop in for a drink. It was, after-all, Daniel's birthday and, as Will had reminded him, no one should spend their birthday alone.

The two of them were the only people in the bar, save for the scrawny, tattooed bartender, and Daniel was secretly thankful for the privacy. He'd been thinking about Cindy all day despite his best efforts to focus on something else. She haunted the periphery, stealing into his thoughts when he least expected—like the sound of laughter, or the odd lyric of a

song—making him feel as though he were moving through deep water. Everyday things did that to him now.

He absent-mindedly fidgeted with his wedding ring. He sipped his gin and tonic and felt the cool warmth of the liquor spread through his empty belly.

Daniel was not a good looking man, and his sadness made him even less so, but his eyes were the bright, crystalline blue of Patagonian ice, and they gleamed with an almost manic intensity that made prolonged eye contact hard for all but the most ardent. They were two sapphires set in the face of a sandstone cliff, cut by years like wind and water.

He finished his drink and set it lightly on the bar. Next to him Will was speculating about Georgia Tech's chances against Georgia tomorrow afternoon but Daniel heard little of it.

"...I think this is Tech's year, Fishman. Your Dawgs looked like shit last week against Auburn. And the Jackets chewed 'Bama to shreds back in October..." said Will before downing the rest of his drink. He pointed at Daniel's empty glass. "Another round?"

Daniel shook his head, stood up, and said, "Naw. Thanks. It's getting late..." He looked for his jacket for a moment and then remembered he'd left it in the truck. He hated coming to this bar in a jacket and tie, it made him feel like an uppity jackass. Daniel tapped the bar to get the bartender's attention, then held out his hand to pay for the drinks. Before he could scan the bar's auth code, Will waved him off.

"No way. My treat. It's not every day my best friend turns 34."

"I'm your best friend, eh?" said Daniel, trying to carve a grin into his face, and feeling false for the effort.

"Fuck you," replied Will, clapping him congenially on the back. "Of course you are, and, as *your* best friend I'm not gonna let you pussy out on your own birthday. Come on, sit down. Have another drink."

Daniel paused. He really just wanted to go home and go to bed. There was no amount of gin that was going to make him

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feel better tonight, but Will was making such an effort that he felt ungrateful.

“Alright,” he said, sitting back down. “Just one more, though, and then I gotta get outta here. Seriously, it’s late. Besides, the inspection’s tomorrow morning...”

Will looked at his watch and said, “It’s not *that* late, you old fuck.” He signaled for another round, “...and you need to stop worrying about the inspection.”

“I’m *not* worried...” he trailed off, fingering his wedding band again.

Will watched his friend for a moment; it occurred to him that he should say something. Cindy had died over a year ago and Daniel had said nothing about it since the eulogy. At first Will had been content to follow Daniel’s lead, assuming he would talk when he was ready, but as the months passed, her death began to sit between them, like an uninvited guest, strangling their usually good-natured banter and lengthening each awkward silence. Nowadays, as often as not, Will found himself carrying on one-sided conversations and fishing for any subject other than the obvious one, while Daniel stared glumly into the distance and fingered his wedding band. The old desire, which had lit Daniel’s eyes like sapphire flames when he got talking heatedly about a new project or politics or his family, had been replaced by smoldering embers; a brief flare of excitement here, a haunted smile there, but never anything like before.

It worried Will to see his friend like this, not just for the obvious reason—that he loved Daniel and wanted the best for him—but also because they were business partners and since Cindy had died Daniel’s famed good luck and charisma had started to wane. It was as though part of Daniel, perhaps the best part of Daniel, the *most important part*, had been buried with her. Will was beginning to wonder if it would ever return.

He waited a moment to see if Daniel would say something else and when he didn’t he offered, “Well...good...because you shouldn’t be worried. It’s just routine RDO shit. You know the drill: just show the inspectors the site and answer

their questions, and you'll be home before breakfast. Half hour max. There's no way they're gonna shut down a project this big over a few dead Non-Cits. It's not worth it. The only reason they're even making a big deal about this is because the security level's so high right now...and because of..."

"Ram's Head," chuffed Daniel, his eyes flashing in irritation. Will looked down at his drink; those eyes were hard to look at when Daniel was angry. "Of course it's Ram's Head. It's always fuckin Ram's Head. 10 years in this business and the only thing people remember is the one mistake."

And it had only been a minor mistake at that—one worker forgets to tighten one bolt and two days later the roof collapses—but it had cost Daniel thousands of dollars in damages, even more in raised insurance premiums, and pushed back the completion of Ram's Head by more than a month, which cost him even more in lost revenue. No one was hurt, but that hadn't stopped the RDO from using the incident as an excuse to run a full Citizenship Compliance check on his company, which took nearly a month to complete, and during which all work on his other government projects—four in total—was halted at his expense.

That had only been six months ago and Daniel had managed to steer things back on track, even landing a bid for the lion's share of a massive block of government buildings going up in the Westside Village, but then just as the dust had started to settle and they had broken ground, the shit hit the fan again. The facts were clear enough: a week ago two Non-Cits—who were unknowingly working for one of his regular contracting companies—got knocked off the roof by a rogue steel beam at one of his smaller worksites and had died. What was less clear was how this was going to affect his standing with the Regional Development Office and whether this and the Ram's Head affair would be enough for them to revoke his license.

Will snapped his fingers in front of Daniel's face, and said, "Hey! Daniel? Don't start going over all that shit in your head. Ram's Head isn't anything to worry about and neither are these Non-Cits. You know how the government is. Para-

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noid bunch of fuckers. They've been cracking down on Non-Cits like madmen for the last six months or so. Ever since that Shant tried to blow up the Euro." Will watched his friend for a reaction, got none, and so he thumped his hand on Daniel's shoulder and smiled at him. "You don't have anything to worry about."

"Then why are we meeting on a Saturday?" asked Daniel.

Will's grin faltered and Daniel thought he saw a hint of unease pass over his old face, but then Will settled his features into a comical look of faux-gravity and said, "So that when they kill you, there won't be any witnesses."

Daniel looked at Will for a long moment and slowly he realized he was being ridiculous. The RDO wasn't going to do anything to him, not with the Village on the line. This was going to be one of the largest government projects built in the Southeast since the Midtown Towers. To revoke Daniel's license now—or do anything else to slow things down, for that matter—would mean millions of wasted dollars every day this got dragged out. It just simply made no sense. Not over a couple of dead Non-Cits. They would probably just audit his payroll files again and slap him with a hefty fine.

For the first time that evening Daniel smiled and it touched his eyes so that they flashed like lamps. He smacked Will's arm and said, "You need to watch out saying shit like that, if only for my sake. I can't have you getting hauled off by ICE. You're too good a lawyer. I'd be up shit creek for at least...a day or so if you got arrested."

"You're right..." Will replied, taking a huge sip of his drink and grinning around his glass, "...I *am* a good lawyer... and you'd be further up the creek without me than you even know. You're a disaster without me."

They laughed together, their voices mingling in the empty bar, and Daniel was amazed at how good it felt to laugh.

After a while Will said, "As far as ICE...let's just say, I don't think there're any white vans in my future, no matter how ornery I get. The government's got bigger fish to fry than little ole' me and my fat mouth."

“Dunno about that, bud. If Westside Village gets any bigger we’re gonna *be* big fish...”

“Yeah...”

Will looked bemused, and he giggled—a childish, unguarded sound, as was his fashion—and he and Daniel clinked their glasses together.

“Happy birthday, Danny boy,” said Will, taking a deep draught of his drink.

Daniel sipped his drink and looked up at the TV. The bartender had changed the channel from sports to a show called, “Boys Night Out” in which three male contestants were left in a room with 20 beautiful women and a whole lot of alcohol. The one who was able to have sex with the most women in a four-hour period won \$20,000. Daniel had little time for TV these days but he hated this show. It was just a dumber version of the immensely popular “Girls Night Out.” Somehow it didn’t work as well with guys.

A few moments of contemplative silence passed between them, and the longer it lasted the weightier it became. The old tension drifted down between them, only temporarily diminished by their laughter. Daniel could feel Will getting anxious in the quiet and he knew his friend was trying to find some way of bringing up Cindy. A thin note of panic rose in the back of his mind and he scrambled to find something else to talk about, anything else.

He looked away from the TV and said, “I ran a screen on Rosetta.”

Will, who looked as though he was about to speak, was flabbergasted. “Are you serious!? Why?”

“I dunno. You know. She’s not a *natural* Citizen, and it’d never crossed my mind to check before. But running screens on everyone else the last few months, it just got me thinking and I figured it would be nice to know...for certain. I mean, she’s with Andy all day...you can never be sure...”

Will laughed sarcastically and sipped his drink, avoiding Daniel’s eyes.

“It came back positive, of course. She’s a citizen,” Daniel

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added sheepishly.

Will turned on him angrily, “Of course she is. Jesus. After five years working for you, you decide to run a screen now?” Will didn’t wait for Daniel to respond. “You know, this is exactly what I was talking about the other night. Goddamn ICE and the wars and all this propaganda bullshit has everyone so fucked up that no one trusts anyone these days. Pretty soon they’ll have us turning in our own goddamn families. *You’ve* already started. Rosetta’s good as family. Did you really think she was a terrorist?”

“No, I...I dunno,” Daniel spluttered, caught off guard by Will’s sudden anger. “I don’t need a lecture.”

“Then why did you tell me? You know how I feel about Cit Scans. I tolerate that shit with the business because I don’t wanna go to jail, but I can’t believe you’d pull a stunt like that in your own house. That’s just fuckin bizarre, man. And what were you going to do if you found out she was a Non-Cit? Call ICE? Shoot her? What kind of example are you setting for Andy...?”

“Hey, fuck you! I was thinking of Andy. I didn’t want him sitting around all day with some *Shant*. Who knows what she could be teaching him...it’s just, since Cindy died...”

Daniel stopped short, and they looked at each other for a shocked moment. The subject had been broached. Daniel dropped his eyes to his hands, which looked ghostly pale in the half-light of the bar, and fidgeted with his wedding ring. Will drained his drink. Neither of them spoke. The pause grew pregnant. Will waggled his empty drink for the bartender to get him another one and then sighed and pointed at Daniel’s ring.

“It’s been a year, Dan...maybe it would be easier if you didn’t wear the thing...”

As soon as the words left his mouth he knew they were wrong. He tried to stammer an apology, but Daniel’s eyes had already iced over.

“I don’t want to talk about it...” said Daniel, standing to leave.

“No, come on, sit down. I’m sorry, man. That was hard of me...”

He said coldly, “Thanks for the drinks, Will. Have a good night.”

“Daniel, come on. Seriously, I’m sorry...*Dan...*”

Daniel turned and headed to the door but after a few steps, and with his hand on the front door, he looked back. The anger in his face had already dissipated but the sadness that replaced it was worse.

“It’s fine, Will. Don’t worry about it. It’s just...I’m not ready yet,” he paused as though he wanted to say something else, as though he wanted to finally talk about the gaping emptiness Cindy’s death had left in his life, but instead he said, “I’ll call you tomorrow after the inspection.”

He left the bar. The bartender brought Will his drink. He sipped it and miserably watched the remainder of “Boys Night Out”.

The November air was unseasonably cool against his flushed cheeks as Daniel drove north on I-75. He had the windows rolled down and the wind whipped through his hair and filled his head with its roaring. He was thankful for the noise and for the coolness, and he leaned back in the driver’s seat, letting his truck’s Auto-Drive sync with UberDrive. He felt the strangely comforting lurch as the GPS Governor in his dashboard slowed his truck down to the auto-speed of 85 mph and moved him into the far right lane, the UberDrive lane. A soothing female voice with a vaguely British accent cooed from his dashboard monitor, “Auto-Drive synced,” and a soft bell rung twice.

Normally he would have driven the truck himself—he loathed the UberDrive system, it took all the fun out of driving—but he was in a strange mood tonight and didn’t want to have to think or do anything.

All around him rose the towering glass and steel spires of Midtown Atlanta—some of which Daniel had helped design and build—blocking out the stars with the evening glow of

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the city. He loved this part of town, in part because Cindy had loved it—she had always said it reminded her of the way the future was supposed to look in old movies from the 1980's—but also because it was baroque, riotous and overwhelming. With the highway built low into the rolling contours of the Piedmont Plateau, the skyscrapers seemed taller and more forbidding, oddly awe-inspiring in their height and grandeur and brimming electricity. They were like the legs of giants whose heads reached too high in the sky to see. Driving amongst their feet gave him a sort of forced perspective, allowed him to see himself from above and far away. It was what had drawn him to architecture in the first place, that feeling of miniaturization and insignificance next to something as permanent and timeless and graceful as a well-designed building. Some people were frightened to see that they were really very small, but for Daniel it comforted him.

In the distance Daniel could see the tallest spike of the Peachtree Court complex he'd designed five years ago. It was a cluster of office buildings he'd meant to look vaguely reminiscent of Mont St. Michel in France, with its steadily rising peaks, but which had ended up looking more like a post-modern cone with a great, metal toothpick rising out of the top. Daniel had always been disappointed in the final product, but it had been universally well-received—he'd even won a small award from *21st Century Architect Magazine*—and the notoriety it afforded him had, more than any other project in his career, been responsible for lifting Daniel's name out of the miasma of developers and architects that peopled the teeming construction landscape of the Southeast. Without Peachtree Court there never would have been a Westside Village...

*...or a Ram's Head...*

He grimaced, and waved his hand in the air, bringing up his windshield monitor. There was an inaudible thrum and then he was watching the news. A newscaster in a solid blue jacket, broken only by a tiny golden North American flag pin on her left lapel, sat blank and solemn as a mannequin in the middle of the windshield.

She said, “In other world news, Russia’s Tsar Nicholetov issued a strong statement accusing the European Union of using the March terrorist attack as an excuse for interning large numbers of accused Non-Citizens in secret camps scattered across Europe. He said that it was ‘evidence that the EU was losing control of its borders and was resorting to terrorism in order to secure its own defense.’ Reports of these camps have so far only come from unverifiable sources but Tsar Nicholetov strongly urged the UN Security Council to look deeper into these allegations...”

Daniel waved his hand and scrolled through the channels; he didn’t want to think about immigration. All this negativity was oppressive. Everywhere he turned he was told the world was falling apart and there was nothing he could do about it. It was inexorable and inevitable, the entropy; it weighed him down.

It was times like these when he missed Cindy the most. She’d always had a way of smiling at him, or needling him with a sarcastic comment that made him realize how foolish he was acting. She had sparkled, and she’d made him sparkle, and without her he felt worn and tarnished.

There was a time when he would have laughed at an RDO inspection, when he would have spent the night before playing with Andy and chatting with Cindy, instead of sitting in a dingy bar and worrying about the consequences. There was a time when he was so filled with passion for his life and his work that those around him couldn’t help but catch ablaze too, like a bonfire in a room full of dry kindling, making his own luck, making things happen. He was called the Golden Calf—though he secretly hated that nickname—because things happened when he got involved, people let their guards down and things just happened, almost uncannily so, as though he made it happen through sheer force of will.

And his life had rolled like that, no setback too great that he couldn’t overcome it with a handshake and a well-meaning smile. Everything he’d wanted he’d gotten whether it seemed feasible at the time or not. 10 years ago, when he’d decided to

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quit his job and start his own construction firm, it had taken less than three months for his Builder's License application to sail through the RDO, unheard of at the time, considering the average wait for issuance was 2 to 3 years. 8 months later he landed his first government contract and 2 years after that, at the age of 27, he became the youngest person since the building of the LEV to be awarded a Developer's License in the Southeast Region. Each implausible victory built on the last until it seemed that nothing could stop him. His business grew, he met and married Cindy and despite initial problems conceiving they eventually had Andy, he was awarded bid after bid until the company was expanding exponentially year over year. Everything was going better than he ever expected it could. But then...but then Cindy started getting headaches.

And then there were doctor's visits and endless tests and tears and horribly, terribly somber specialists telling him, "Mr. Fischer, the cancer has spread too far, it's inoperable. I'm so very sorry to have to tell you this but she doesn't have much longer."

Ended up she had 27 days. And that's no time at all.

Most nights he dreamed about her, wonderful, beautiful, lucid dreams in which she was alive and smiling and so perfectly present that he could taste her, literally taste her. In the morning he'd awaken and for a brief, heartbreaking moment he'd be certain that the dream had been real but then he would roll over to feel her side of the bed empty and his mood would smash like a brittle pane of glass.

"Exiting on right. Auto-Drive turning off."

His truck shuddered with the combined effects of the slowdown and disengagement from the UberDrive system. The windshield monitor disappeared and he gripped the wheel, coasting to a stop at the red light. He looked in both directions. There were no cars but his own and somehow that just made him feel even lonelier. He just wanted to be home, to peek in on Andy.

He took another cursory glance around the empty inter-

section, and pressed the gas pedal to the floor, accelerating through the red light and speeding home.

Rosetta met him as he came in. She'd heard his truck in the driveway and had waited for him by the door. In her hand she held a small receipt-sized monitor, and as he stepped over the foyer she shushed him with one tanned finger to her wrinkled lips, and a gesture up the stairs toward Andy's room.

"Shhh, Andy's asleep, Mr. Fischer," she whispered in her strange Spanish-flared, Southern drawl. "He's sick."

"Did you...?" he started but she answered his question before he asked it.

"Run a Pedi-Scan? Of course I did, sir. Sent the results to Dr. Keefer and he already sent the results back." She handed Daniel the monitor and said as he glanced at the results displayed in the air above its face, "He's a good man, Dr. Keefer. Always working so late..."

"Strep Throat?"

"Yes, sir. He had a fever earlier but I gave him cold tea and Tylenol and it broke. He's sleeping now."

"You should've called me..."

The old woman waved her hand dismissively at him and snorted, "It's your birthday. I wasn't going to interrupt you unless it was serious."

"And Strep Throat isn't serious...?" Daniel asked.

She waved her hand again. "No, sir. This is the third time Andy's had it in two years. I don't care what Dr. Keefer says, that boy's got weak tonsils. He'll need them out eventually. The only dangerous thing about Strep is the fever and once that broke there wasn't anything to be afraid of." And then she added, as if an afterthought, "Mrs. Fischer always did the same for him."

Daniel avoided eye contact by looking down at the diagnosis. They sat in silence for a moment and then Rosetta said, "I already printed the prescription. It's on the counter. But I can stay for the weekend, if I can be a help."

A little creeper of shame slid through his stomach. Will

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was right; how could he ever have doubted her when she gave so much for his family? She'd been like a saint since Cindy died, taking care of Andy and the house, working late hours and weekends without being asked, always trying to fill the empty space in their lives as best she could.

Daniel slipped the monitor into the breast pocket of his shirt and shook his head, "No, don't worry about it, Rosetta. You've done more than enough. You said the fever's broken? He'll be fine then."

Rosetta offered him a small grateful nod and then shuffled into the kitchen to get her jacket. When she returned Daniel had slinked out of his own jacket and hung it on the staircase banister. Without hesitation she grabbed it off the banister and hung it in the hall closet, offering him a faux-irritated glance. He'd been forgetting to put his jacket in the closet for so long that it had practically become a running joke between the two of them.

"I'll need you here by 7, if that's alright?" he asked, though he knew the answer already.

"Of course, Mr. Fischer," she said, patting her pockets for her keys and moving toward the front door.

"But don't worry about the rest of the weekend," Daniel continued. "When I get back from the inspection you can go home. You've done so much for us lately and I could use a free weekend, anyway. Spend some time with Andy."

He offered a pinched smile.

"I think that'd be good, sir," she said and opened the door to leave.

There was a lingering rottenness in his belly from the Cit-Scan business and he felt as though he needed to say something more. He stopped her.

"Rosetta?"

She turned.

"I just wanted to thank you for all you've done. I don't know what we'd do without you," he said.

Rosetta smiled.

"No problem. I'm proud to do it," she said and then added,

“That boy is special.”

She left. Daniel paused a minute staring wanly at the door and then turned and went upstairs to Andy’s room.

The door was open a crack and the light from the hallway sliced a direct path to Andy’s face, and his open eyes glimmered in the light.

Daniel popped his head in and asked, “Andy? You awake, buddy?”

“Daddy? I tried to wait up, but Rosetta wouldn’t let me,” said Andy, his voice hoarse from illness and disuse.

“I’m sorry, buddy. I would’ve been home earlier if I’d known you were sick.”

Daniel crossed over to his son’s bed, leaving the door open so that the room was split into halves, one dark and one light. Andy tried to sit up but grimaced and placed a weak hand on his throat.

“Throat hurts, huh?” Daniel asked.

Andy nodded but smiled anyway.

Daniel leaned forward and kissed his forehead. It simmered under his lips. The fever had clearly rallied; Daniel could see it in Andy’s reddened cheeks and the light film of sweat at his hairline. He wiped his son’s head with the towel Rosetta had placed on the nightstand next to the bed.

“Well, get some sleep, buddy. I’ll give you more medicine in the morning and then you’ll feel all better,” he said.

Andy nodded and closed his eyes. Daniel reached across the bed and grabbed Andy’s favorite stuffed animal, Elliephont, a ragged red and white polka-dotted stuffed elephant that Daniel had bought for him three years earlier. Andy clutched the doll tight to him without opening his eyes, a small, satisfied curl at the edges of his mouth. With his eyes closed, he looked just like Cindy, a comparison that had crossed Daniel’s mind hundreds, if not thousands, of times in the last year. Andy, save for his piercing blue eyes, was a perfect vision of his mother in miniature, a resemblance which had been beautiful in life, but which now was only cruel.

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Daniel opened his mouth to speak, “Andy? Are you...?” but he stopped, unsure of even his own feelings, let alone how to query for the feelings of others. Andy opened his eyes and they shone out of his pale brown face like spotlights. Daniel shook his head. “Never mind, buddy. Just go to sleep. Tomorrow you’ll feel better and we can hang out all weekend. I’m gonna stay home until you feel better. That sound good?”

Andy nodded sleepily and closed his eyes again, pulling Elliephont close to his face. Daniel watched him as he quickly drifted into sleep, allowing himself this silent moment to feel sad about Cindy. He leaned forward and kissed Andy’s forehead again before tucking him in tighter and leaving his son to whatever dreams played behind his eyelids.

Daniel undressed, letting his shirt and slacks drop to the floor, not bothering to hang them up. His room was the only one he didn’t allow Rosetta to clean and it had devolved to chaos. Wrinkled clothes splattered every surface, looking like streamers of vomit from the opened mouth of his closet. The curtains were drawn tightly shut; a small lamp shone from the nightstand next to Daniel’s side of the bed.

He stood looking at the bed. The covers on his side were mussed and peeled back, his imprint from the night before still as fresh as if he’d just woken up. Cindy’s side was pristinely preserved; as flat and mute as Daniel’s side was riotous. He walked quickly to the bed and snapped off the light, falling into the groove he’d worn in the mattress. He stretched his arms and legs wide, and his hand hit the edge of something soft and pointed.

He held the large, construction paper card Andy had made and left for him to find. Daniel opened the card and as he read it the lump of emotion, which had been resting in his chest all day, rose into his throat and burst from his mouth in a gasping laugh-sob.

Andy had written on the inside of the card:

“Daddy,

## Tres Crow

You are the best Daddy in the world. Happy Birthday! I'm sorry Mommy died. I'm glad I still have you! I don't want you to be sad. I love you.

Love, Andy.”

Daniel reread the card, tears stinging the back of his eyes and his chest hitching, but his cheeks remained dry. Finally, he snapped off the light and fell slowly to sleep, holding the card in much the same way his son held his stuffed elephant two rooms over.





# CHAPTER TWO

## ICE

*I'm gonna be late!*

Daniel leaned forward in the driver's seat of his truck and angrily tapped at his steering wheel, feeling helpless as his truck cruised through the Connector UberDrive zone. Why he'd chosen I-85 with its 15 miles of UberDrive zones was beyond him, but regardless the decision had cost him at least 20 minutes of drive time. Finally, his truck lurched free and began to move under the influence of its own power. He sped up a little, driving with one hand, while his other absent-mindedly flipped through the channels on his windshield monitor.

He'd woken up that morning to Rosetta shaking him frantically.

"Mr. Fischer, wake up. You slept too long."

He'd looked at the clock. 7:15. The meeting was at 8.

*Fuck.*

Fortunately Andy had still been asleep—despite all of Daniel's pounding and cursing as he'd gotten ready—when

Rosetta had finally shooed Daniel out the door, with a small breakfast sandwich in one hand and his best leather briefcase in the other.

He looked down at his watch. 7:55.

*Shit!*

He had wanted to get to the worksite as early as possible this morning to prepare before the inspectors got there, and even waking late he thought he still might be able to pull it off, but then he'd hopped on I-85 and was now...

“Entering mandatory Auto-Drive zone.”

He felt his truck shudder back into UberDrive.

He let loose a string of obscenities, angrily swinging at the air to get the channel scroll on his windshield monitor spinning faster—landing on the morning news—and shook his fists at the tantalizingly empty road before him.

“You can see here that Hurricane Walter is about 20 miles off the Southeastern seaboard,” said the weatherman. He waved his hand wildly in a circle over a satellite image of the Atlantic Ocean. “Now, Walter has already been upgraded to a Category 6 and there is nothing but 20 miles of warm ocean between him and landfall, so I would expect him to remain a Cat 6 or maybe even upgraded to a Category 7 hurricane as he hits land, which gauging by his present speed should be sometime around 7 tonight. NOAA has issued a warning to anyone living along the Southern Quadrant of the LEV to move inland to at least Atlanta. This storm’s gonna be big, folks...”

*Good thing Andy’s sick anyway. Good weekend to stay inside, I guess,* he thought ruefully as he flopped his arm out the open window and floated his hand in the stiff breeze blowing against him.

“End of Mandatory Auto-Drive zone.”

His truck lurched and he pressed the gas pedal hard to the floor, grateful for the shuddering of his speeding engine and the rushing of the road under his wheels. The next exit was his and he sped up as the newscaster who had taken over for the weatherman said solemnly, “32 NAS soldiers died in Syria last night during airstrikes in Damascus.”

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Daniel pulled up the long driveway of the worksite, his head tossing from side to side as the pick-up bobbed in the pitted gravel. Ahead of him a small outcropping of buildings rose. They were tall and bare concrete skeletons, standing solitary and sullen in the morning gloom. In the distance beyond, pillars rose from deep foundation holes in the ground like skeletal fingers. Beyond the holes there was nothing but empty land and forest for miles in every direction.

Through the empty window holes of the nearest building he could see the leading edge of a white SUV parked around the corner, and a small shot of adrenaline dumped into his stomach. He leaned forward to try to get a better look as he coasted closer and closer. Something didn't seem right about this...

*It's white...why is it white!?* And this thought was quickly followed by another: *Will should be here.*

He turned the corner and skidded to a halt behind the SUV and for the first time since all this Non-Cit business had started he became truly afraid.

There on the back of the SUV in bold, black script: Immigration Control Execution.

Both front doors swung open and two men in matching gray suits stepped out onto the exposed earth, their polished shoes kicking dust into the air. The sun backlit them into silhouettes.

The newscaster looked solemnly at the camera. He said, "A small explosion went off in the Southern Quadrant of the LEV this morning, but spokesmen for the Pentagon insist that all damage to the LEV has been localized and poses no threat to security."

Daniel left his truck running and stepped out to meet his inspectors.

The two men moved slowly toward Daniel. They both wore large smartglasses, their lenses darkening in the sun. They were recording this. One was taller than the other and he had his hand poised ominously inside his jacket, but it was the

shorter one who spoke first.

“Are you Daniel Fischer?”

Daniel nodded as the agents moved out of the glare of the sun. He could see his own face in the lenses of their smart-glasses. He tried to rework his face into something more confident, but he knew he looked terrified.

“I’m Agent Gentry and this is Agent Mattison,” said the short agent, gesturing toward his companion. “Are you alone? Is there anyone in the truck?” He rested his hands smugly on his hips, pushing his jacket back so that his holstered gun was clearly visible.

“You know I am. You can see in the truck yourself,” Daniel responded, gesturing absent-mindedly at the truck. He could feel his shoulders tensing and he stretched his back, made an attempt at a relaxed grin. “We won’t be for very much longer, though. The work-crew should be here in a half hour or so.”

He glanced down at his watch but his hands were shaking badly.

“No they won’t Mr. Fischer, and you and I both know that,” said Gentry.

The taller one, Mattison, finally spoke, his hand unconsciously drifting toward the butt of his gun as he did so. “This worksite is officially closed until further notice on authority of the Department of Naturalization Services of the Federal Government of the North American States.”

Anger exploded inside Daniel and he took a step toward the agents. They both clutched at their guns, but neither stepped back.

“You can’t do that!” shouted Daniel. “I was supposed to meet with the RDO. Why the hell are you here? This isn’t an ICE issue!”

“Well, it has become one, Mr. Fischer,” said Gentry. “Are you aware that the LEV was bombed last night?”

“What? No...well, I...I think I heard something on the news this morning, but what does...?”

Gentry continued curtly, “What is your connection to the Non-Citizen Giorgio Romero?”

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Daniel looked from one to the other, his pulse pounding.

"I really shouldn't do this without my lawyer..." he started.

"Just answer the question, Mr. Fischer!" hissed Mattison, leaning toward Daniel.

Gentry reached out a hand to his partner to silence him, "Involving lawyers won't go well for you right now, Mr. Fischer. Just answer a few questions for us, will you? What do you know about this man?"

"I don't know anything about him. He fell off a roof and died. That's it," said Daniel. "I didn't even hire the guy. He worked for one of my contractors..."

"Marten Barzone?" prompted Gentry.

"Yeah, he was one of Marty's guys..." started Daniel but Gentry cut him off.

"How long have you worked with Mr. Barzone?"

"I don't know...maybe three or four years?"

The two agents shared a knowing look. Gentry nodded and Mattison unsnapped the holster of his gun and pulled a zip tie out from the back of his belt. He moved swiftly toward Daniel.

"What is this...?" said Daniel, backing away, his hands raised defensively in fists.

"Daniel Fischer you are under arrest for knowingly breaking the Federal Employment Statute, article 4-32, and for aiding in crimes against the people of the North American States," said Gentry. "You are hereby stripped of your rights of citizenship, pending further review."

Daniel backed away further, his ass ramming into the grill of his truck. "This is crazy! I...I never...*I haven't done anything!*"

"Of course you did; you hired terrorists," said Mattison, moving closer and raising the pistol.

"Terrorists...?"

"Cut the bullshit, Fischer!" growled Mattison. "Barzone was taken in this morning. He's been smuggling Non-Cits into the country for years, and that kid, Giorgio Romero? His cous-

in's the one who bombed the LEV.”

Daniel's mind was a solid sheen of white panic.

“Please don't struggle,” said Gentry. “We just need you to come to the Regional for a few questions. There's no reason to be worried. If you didn't hire that Non-Cit then everything'll be alright.”

“What are the zip ties for, then?” asked Daniel, sliding toward the driver's side of the truck.

This couldn't be happening to him. People just didn't “get arrested” by ICE; they disappeared. He had to get back to Andy. He was sick. Daniel had to buy some time.

He looked out of the corner of his eye at the open driver's side door, scooting his body as subtly as possible toward the door. The panic was deconstructing his perception, turning his eyes and ears and thoughts into a funhouse mirror maze. His head swam, as the distance to the door grew from a few feet to ten to twenty. His hands shook against the heat of the truck hood.

Mattison reached out. It was now or never. Daniel's whole body tensed and then his mind went blank and the blankness animated him, revealing the courage he needed to start for the door.

“I'm not a terrorist,” said Daniel, flailing his arms wildly, and making for the driver's side.

Mattison cried out and lurched forward, reaching down for the gun at his hip.

The next moments were an impossible mixture of agonizing slow-motion. He was at once certain he was moving in reverse, actually getting further away from the door with each step, and yet out of the corner of his eye he saw a glimmer of ice blue light, like the after-image of a flashbulb, splash through the air in front of Agent Mattison and then his pistol was falling to the dusty ground and Gentry was shouting and reaching for his own gun.

Daniel leaped into his pick-up and jammed it in reverse as Mattison scrabbled in the dust and Gentry rushed passed him to the door with his gun raised at Daniel's face. He pulled

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on the handle frantically, though the door had already auto-locked. He pounded on the window with the butt of the gun, a terrifying grimace on his face.

“Mr. Fischer, there’s no need to panic. We want to help you...”

Daniel didn’t wait to hear the rest; he reversed quickly, to the mingled sounds of screeching tires, spitting gravel, and the shouts of the agents.

Bullets sent spider cracks shooting across the passenger side of the windshield even before Daniel heard the pistol’s report. He instinctively ducked. Glass sprayed onto the seat beside him. He heard a second gunshot go wild into the woods as he slammed the truck in drive and squealed down the gravel driveway and out onto the road.

Ten minutes later, Daniel was barking a jumbled litany of curses and pounding on his steering wheel, raging in his panic. Whatever calm had stolen over him back at the worksite had dissipated by the time he was out of shooting distance, and now all that was left was the sickening aftertaste of adrenaline and the growing realization of what a shit storm he was in.

He’d avoided the highway as he’d sped away from the worksite—taking several arbitrary turns in order to befuddle the agents if they were following him—and it had been his first impulse to take as many back roads as he could to get back to the house. If he avoided the UberDrive zones, his dashboard computer would stay disconnected from the regional network for a little bit longer.

20 minutes later he was still 15 miles away from his house and he knew he was just losing time darting from one small, half-forgotten alley to another. The agents could be at his house any minute and he had to get to Andy before they did.

He made a few swift right turns and five minutes later he was pulling onto I-285 heading north toward his house. He tapped his right cheek to prompt the windshield monitor, but the gunfire had cracked it. He tapped his watch and yelled, “William Mathison!”

The watch screen flashed Will's phone number and then there was a simulated rotary phone ring as the number was dialed. The phone rang once, twice...

Then Will's long, lined face appeared on the screen, his eyes blood-shot and his gray hair sticking up and out of the camera's view.

"Danny," Will said looking down at his watch with a hung-over grin. "Shit, man, that was quick. You are a miracle worker. How'd it go?"

"They tried to arrest me, Will. I ran."

The grin melted from Will's face.

"What the hell are you talking about?" whispered Will. "The RDO can't do..."

*"It wasn't the fucking RDO...it was ICE."*

Will paused for a moment; he seemed paralyzed between emotions, as if the image on the screen had momentarily frozen. Finally he asked, "ICE?"

"It was an ambush, Will. I didn't know what to do. They said they'd already arrested Marty...something about smuggling Shants...and they said that Shant, the one who fell off the roof, they said his cousin blew up the LEV last night or something. I didn't know what the hell they were talking about." Daniel's face was taut, at war with itself. "Will, they had guns, man...guns, for Chrissake!"

Will's eyes, bulbous at the best of times, were popping from his face. He ran his agitated hands through his shock of gray hair.

"Daniel, this is bad...this is real bad. You shouldn't have run..."

*"You think I don't know that!?"* screamed Daniel, both terrified and angry. "Fuck's sake, man. I know...*iknowiknow-iknow*...I panicked. But what was I going to do? Let them arrest me and leave Andy by himself?"

"He wouldn't be alone; I would watch him," whispered Will.

"Don't you think they'll be on to you next?" asked Daniel sharply, too sharply. He hadn't even considered Will when

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he'd chosen to run, hadn't thought about any alternatives at all, really. Andy could have stayed with Will until everything got sorted out. Even now Andy could stay with Will; Daniel could just turn himself in and maybe Will could work his magic and then everything would be fine.

But a long moment passed between them, with Will studying his hands. Will looked up at him and he grinned, but it was a lifeless and hollow thing. His face was deadly serious; Daniel had never seen him so serious. There was no reasoning with ICE, no appeals process. There was no other choice now but to keep on running and hope that Will could stop the chase.

"Damn it, man, alright." Will said, shaking his head resignedly. "Just keep Andy safe. Y'all can stay at the lake cabin. Just, Danny...please stay safe."

Daniel smiled briefly and thanked him, but Will just shook his head and said, "Don't mention it. I owe you anyway...I wouldn't've even been able to afford the damn place if it wasn't for you. Just stay there until I call you. I'll see what I can sort out with ICE. And stay in the basement, that damn hurricane is coming straight for us."

Daniel watched as Will's face disappeared and was replaced by a blank gray screen. He felt a little better. The cabin was a great idea. It was only an hour drive but it was far enough out of the way that they could wait out the hurricane and give Will a little time to try to sort through this mess.

The next exit was his and he swerved onto the off-ramp, accelerating through the yellow light at the intersection.

Daniel called Rosetta. It rang once, twice, three times. Daniel looked terrified at the windshield screen. The agents were at his house, he was certain of it; he was too late. It rang four times, five, and then Rosetta's face appeared, calm as ever.

"Mr. Fischer? Done with the meeting already?"

"Yes," he said quickly.

"Is everything alright? You look..." began Rosetta.

"Yes, Rosetta, everything's fine, I just..." said Daniel.

“Listen, if anyone other than Will or me calls or comes to the house, don’t answer.”

“Why...?”

“Nevermind. Is Andy awake yet?”

“No, sir.”

“Get him up. I’ll be there in a minute. Rosetta, could you get a few things together for me, a few changes of clothing for Andy and me? Something’s happened and I need to take Andy away for the weekend.”

“Sure, no problem, but...”

“Please don’t ask any questions, Rosetta, *please*. Just get Andy up. I’ll be there soon. Don’t answer the door, either.”

Rosetta looked at him warily for a long moment, and then nodded her assent and said goodbye.

Daniel pushed the gas pedal to the ground, speeding around cars on both sides. Whatever comfort he’d drawn from Will’s offering of the cabin had melted away as swiftly as it had come, and his insides were roiling again.

He felt the familiar lurch of the truck, as his onboard computer said, “Entering Mandatory Auto-Drive Zone.”

“No!” he shouted and flailed against his steering wheel. “No! Goddamnit!”

He looked down at his watch; 25 minutes had passed since he’d left the worksite. He’d wasted too much time, surely by now the agents had reported back and were headed to his house.

“Exiting Mandatory Auto-Drive Zone.”

He twisted the wheel and pressed the gas pedal hard.





# CHAPTER THREE

## Will in black

When Daniel arrived at his house, he did not find an ICE ambush, just a small black backpack set at the foot of the stairs.

“Rosetta?” he called as he lifted the bag onto a higher step and rifled through it. She’d packed all the essentials: several pairs of underwear, socks, and t-shirts for both he and Andy, and also a few bananas and apples wrapped in a towel. He had to smile despite himself. The fruit was a decidedly Rosetta-ish touch; she was always so insistent that Daniel eat more fruit. “Rosetta? Are you here?”

He replaced the underwear and fruit back in the bag and stood, looking around the banister and in the living room adjacent to the foyer.

“Where are you?” he called. “Andy!?”

There was no response and a tiny seedling of worry bloomed in his guts. He wandered from the living room into the kitchen. No one.

“Hello!? Rosetta!?”

*Did she leave? Did she take Andy?* The last thought worried him most of all. Rosetta was fiercely protective of Andy, and if she thought he was in any trouble...

“Mr. Fischer?” asked Rosetta from upstairs. “That you?”

He scrambled back to the foot of the stairs and saw her standing at the top, looking down at him with her long gray hair draped around her shoulders, torn loose of the bun she ordinarily wore. In her arms she clutched Andy’s tiny body tight to her chest as though Daniel were a thief who would steal him away.

“What’s going on?” she asked pointedly, suspiciously, aiming at the heart of the matter without any pretense. “Are you in trouble?”

Daniel knew it would do no good to lie to her—she would simply pester him until he caved, and time was not on their side—so he said, “Yes, but it’s nothing to do with you. There’s no reason for it to be. Please don’t ask anything else.”

She padded anxiously down the stairs with Andy moaning through his swollen throat, and asked, “Where are you taking Andy?”

Daniel didn’t answer her; he held up the backpack to her and said, “You didn’t grab Elliephont. Andy can’t make it without...”

She thrust Andy at him and snatched the backpack. Andy adjusted seamlessly to the transfer of possession, pressing himself tightly to his father’s chest, his fevered face burning through Daniel’s shirt. Rosetta turned and hurried up the stairs with the backpack flopping in her hand as she walked, mumbling something in Spanish Daniel didn’t understand.

Daniel looked at his son. Andy’s face was flushed, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face slick with sweat.

“Hey, buddy. How you feeling?” he asked, though he could see the answer.

He set Andy down on the lowest stair, so he could look him in the eyes. Andy’s eyes welled with tears, making his irises look like reefs under the surface of a quivering blue bay, but he struggled to set his face. He was trying to be brave.

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Daniel frowned at him, his heart crumbling as it pounded in his chest.

“Throat hurts, Daddy,” Andy croaked. “Real bad.”

Daniel called up the stairs, “Has Andy had a pill yet this morning?”

“No. He only just woke,” came Rosetta’s voice. “They’re on the counter.”

Daniel frowned at his son, then rushed to the kitchen. He drew a small cup of water, grabbed the plastic bag of pills, and returned. He handed Andy a pill and the water.

“Here’s some medicine, And. It’ll make you feel all better.”

Andy put the pill in his mouth and though he grimaced as he swallowed it only took him one try to force the pill down.

Daniel smiled and ruffled Andy’s hair. He leaned in close, the way he used to when Andy and him were pretending to hide secrets from Cindy. For a moment, even now amidst the terror of the morning, he felt a sting in his chest at the thought of her.

“I need you to be brave, buddy. And I need you to do whatever I tell you to do from now on. Can you do that?” Daniel asked.

Andy nodded: “Where’re we going?”

“To Uncle Will’s cabin for the weekend,” said Daniel, then added lamely, “So you can get better.”

“I’ve got Elliephont,” said Rosetta, standing at the top of the stairs. She held the stuffed elephant in one hand and the backpack in the other, as though offering Daniel some veiled choice.

“Thanks, Rosetta.”

She padded down the stairs and handed Daniel the backpack hesitantly, staring at him. He saw the full scope of Rosetta’s love for his family. She’d been with them for years, she’d watched Andy grow up, and had come to regard herself as Cindy’s surrogate. He realized that she wasn’t angry, she was *jealous*; jealous that something was happening to her family that she didn’t understand and couldn’t help and had no right

to stop; jealous in that special mixture of yearning and desire and protectiveness that is reserved only for mothers.

But she was *not* Andy's mother, and she knew it. And Daniel could not afford to offer her any explanations, no matter how badly she wanted one or how guilty he felt about it.

"I'm sorry, Rosetta," was all he could muster as he slung the backpack over his shoulder. "I wish..." he started, but he wasn't sure what he wished so he left the statement unsaid. "I have one more favor...I need to borrow your car."

Will's "cabin" was actually a five bedroom demi-mansion. It looked inauspicious from the front. Set absentmindedly at the end of a cul-de-sac, it seemed from the front to be a small, single-story ranch, but in the back it opened to a sprawling deck overlooking the southern end of Lake Lanier. The lake-side of the property sloped steeply to the water making the house appear to grow upward and outward from the rapidly falling lawn, revealing itself to be remarkably spacious. Daniel had been here several times through the years for Will's "Surf 'N Turf" golf and boating outings when he would gather a few of his other clients together to show off his thirty-foot power boat.

As Daniel turned onto the cul-de-sac he could see the brown brick façade of the house at the end. It looked empty but he slowed anyway as he neared. The entire street was quiet.

The trip had passed largely without incident though Daniel couldn't help imagining swarms of white vans surrounding the car and dragging him away. He'd avoided all UberDrive zones, and stuck to back roads and lesser traveled areas, which made the trip slower but seemed to him more secure. There had been only one moment of terror, when he'd seen a swarm of emergency response drones in the distance, and was absolutely certain they'd locked onto his position and were coming to him. But, they'd turned south and never crossed their path.

Andy had occasionally moaned in his fever, which had not broken with the antibiotics. He'd squirmed in the back seat,

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sweat drenching his shirt.

Daniel pulled into the driveway and pulled up as close to the closed garage door as he possibly could. He shut off the car and stepped out into the surprisingly warm November morning. The air was oppressive and full and held a touch of static electricity that made everything seem on the edge of combustion.

Daniel told Andy to stay in the car and then walked around to the back door, where he suddenly realized that Will hadn't told him how he was supposed to get into the cabin. He reached for his phone but even if Will had remotely authorized his phone eCard to unlock the house, the Card was surely inactive by now, and besides any use of the Card would be easily traceable. He looked around to see if there was a hidden key somewhere but he didn't see anything, and after a few minutes of searching he tried simply opening the door. It swung inward on well-greased hinges.

He leaned his head in the door and called, "Hey! Anyone here? Will?" but no one responded.

The house was stifling, and the heat hit him in the face the minute he crossed the threshold. The cabin hadn't been used by Will in three months and the morning's heat had been allowed to run rampant within its silent confines, until it was nearly tropical. Daniel waded through the garage and raised the door.

Glamour lines shimmered off the hood of the car as he got in the driver's side and guided it into the murk of the garage. He walked around to the other side and took Andy into his arms, his son clutching at his neck and burying his face in Daniel's chest. He scooped up the backpack in his other hand and walked into the house, as the early afternoon sunlight was snuffed out behind him by the closing garage door.

Daniel hurried down the hall, through the kitchen to the living room and set Andy down on a large, plush couch, whose girth and gaudiness dominated the otherwise tastefully decorated room. He reflexively felt Andy's head.

"Daddy?" asked Andy as he squirmed on the couch. "My

throat hurts...”

“I know it does, buddy,” said Daniel, heading toward one of the back bathrooms. He could hear Andy moaning behind him. He called back, “Let me see what I can find.”

He searched through the drawers and counters in the bathroom, his head pounding, rubbing his eyes. It was just so hot in here. He pulled out a drawer and rustled through it. He couldn’t give Andy an antibiotic pill for another two hours, but there wasn’t any reason he couldn’t give him a painkiller. Anything that would help him fall asleep so Daniel could think a little.

He pulled out another drawer...nothing but Band-Aids. He opened the medicine cabinet but there was just a shaving kit and a lone condom. He pulled the last drawer and finally found a single dose of Tylenol. Daniel grabbed the package and headed back to the front room.

Andy looked wretched. He lay prostrate on the couch, his face buried in one of the pillows, a sweat stain spreading across his back. Hearing Daniel, he looked up. His face was red, his curly, black hair matted to his head, and his eyes had a glazed, watery look that made Daniel uncomfortable. He tried to smile but couldn’t bring himself to do more than grimace.

Daniel poured a glass of water in the kitchen and then kneeled next to his son, tore the package open and gave it to Andy to swallow.

“This’ll help you sleep,” said Daniel. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

Daniel lifted Andy’s limp body in his arms and carried him to the back bedroom, sliding him gently under the covers. He could feel Andy’s heat pressing on him through their shirts.

“Now go to sleep, And,” said Daniel, wiping sweat from Andy’s forehead. “When you wake up you’ll feel better. I promise.”

Daniel turned to leave but Andy called to him, “Daddy. Elliephont.”

“Right. I’ll get him. You go to sleep.”

Ten minutes later, with Andy sleeping soundly, Elliephont

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clutched tight in his arms, Daniel paced back and forth from the living room to the kitchen. He'd turned on the air conditioning but the house was still unbearably hot, and sweat was dripping off his stubbly chin and pooling under his arms. He was starving but his stomach was so tied in knots that he couldn't bring himself to eat. Will didn't have anything anyway. Daniel had absent-mindedly studied the meager contents of the refrigerator three or four times before resigning himself to his gurgling belly. Rosetta had packed that fruit, but fruit didn't sound appetizing to him at all.

He paced back and forth across the living room, his eyes scanning the floor unseeing, his hands locked behind his back. The adrenaline and terror that had driven him all morning were beginning to recede and in their place an exhausted, twitchy emptiness had risen. Everything had happened so quickly that it wasn't until now that he'd been afforded any opportunity to process it. His mind kept running and rerunning the meeting with the agents, but no matter how many times he thought it through he couldn't quite understand how everything had unraveled so quickly. One minute he was the head of an extremely busy and successful development company, and the next he was on the run from ICE, holed up in his lawyer's cabin.

But what option did he have? His mind kept coming back to that. They had meant to arrest him, and they'd made that clear, but for what? For his alleged connection to some terrorist? This couldn't be real. It seemed so implausible. He was a proud North American citizen. Hadn't he shown that by now? He was never late with his taxes, he always ran Cit-Scans on new hires, hell, he'd designed and built four of the main Government buildings in downtown Atlanta for God's sake. What the hell more did they want from him?

He ran his hands angrily through his hair, and they came away slicked with sweat.

"Why is it so goddamn hot in here!" he hissed.

The helplessness he felt, through a sort of emotional alchemy, had converted his anxiety into anger and it roiled inside him as a burning snake. He trembled with it.

He mumbled to himself as he paced. The unfairness of it all was the most galling part. He'd done absolutely nothing wrong, except use a contractor who wasn't thorough enough with his Cit-Scans, and now all this. All this trouble, and he'd done nothing wrong!

*Then why'd you run?*

He paused mid-step and looked dazed out the two large glass French doors which opened up onto the deck behind the house and out to the lake. Through the doors he could see the black tendrils of the hurricane snaking across the blue sky. The sun was still brilliant on the trees and the surface of the lake, but in a few hours that blackness would certainly swallow everything.

*You ran. You didn't have to do that.*

Suddenly and horribly, the truth of it came to him, and he felt like crying and laughing hysterically at the same time. The room was too close, the heat was too clinging, his pulse galloped against his ribcage. He needed to breathe; he couldn't. He felt like he was drowning in sweat and guilt and shame.

*What have I done?*

He threw open the French doors and burst out onto the deck, desperate for the wind to blow on his face, to hear its rushing in his ears. But the air was still, and only a little cooler than inside. The only sound was the secret whisper of the trees as their mingled leaves tickled one another.

He paced to the edge of the deck and looked through the trees at the gently lapping water fifty feet below. The deck jutted out high in the air, at the tops of the trees. He couldn't see it, but he could hear the sound of Will's power boat nudging the small, rickety wooden dock below.

That sound, the THUD-WASH...THUD-WASH, reminded Daniel of the last time he'd been at this very spot, looking out on these very trees. It had been a few summers ago, right before the cancer. Cindy of course had been with him and she'd been watching the sunset and trying to get him to enjoy it too. But he had been upset about something or worried about something (which he didn't remember now), and he

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was being bratty and disconsolate. She'd grinned knowingly at him and sipped her wine, dismissing his mood like one of Andy's tantrums. Though at the time he'd been irritated with her, he remembered now how beautiful she'd looked, with the sunset behind her making a corona of fire.

His anxiety and anger froze inside of him, creating a longing so deep that he didn't just ache with it, no, his very bones moaned with it.

He needed Cindy. Right now. He needed her to stand on this deck with him and watch as the hurricane bore down on them. He needed her to stand with him and dismiss all these worries as easily as she'd dismissed whatever worries he'd carried that summer day last year.

He needed her.

He couldn't take any more and he went back into the house, collapsing onto the couch in a heap. He stretched out on the couch, kicking his shoes off. He had no answers. He had no idea why any of this had happened or why he'd done what he'd done. He was Hansel; Gretel was lost to him. He was wandering in the woods, and he'd run out of bread crumbs.

He looked flatly at the silent TV which hung on the wall opposite him, and he could feel all the weight pressing down on him. He wasn't angry or sad or frightened; he just let himself go and he drifted further and further from himself. His eyes drooped and the room drifted with him, lurched and then he was gone.

As he floated away he thought, *This is all just a misunderstanding. That's all. Will'll know what to do... Will'll know... Will...*

When the ICE agents came for Will, the only other person at his house was Sheila, his gardener, something he was secretly thankful for as the agents yanked him from his couch, put the black bag on his head, and dragged him from his house. Sheila shrieked the whole time, and asked why this was happening and told the agents to stop or they'd hurt Will. For his part, Will felt compelled to calm her down and try to reassure

her that everything would be alright. The black mask over his head and the armed ICE agents, though, hollowed his words and so Sheila just went on shrieking long after Will was loaded in the van and had disappeared out of her sight.

The van ride was pure, white pain as blows from the agents fell on him from all directions. They would stop for a moment and everything around him would be still and expectant, and then a boot would slam into his jaw or his ribs, or an elbow would plant in his neck and he would be certain he was going to die. He didn't, but after about ten minutes of this he eventually passed out and went from one blackness to another.

Will woke up hours later with his head still in the bag. Nearly every part of his body was screeching, but his ribs and jaw were the worst. It hurt to breathe and something warm and sticky was oozing from between his lips and down his chin. He heard a whimpering noise and it took a moment before he realized it was him. He tried to make himself stop, but he couldn't.

Long moments passed and Will listened to the sounds around him: the hollow rebounding of his shallow breaths off the walls, echoing, metallic; the whistling of an exhaust duct somewhere above and to the right of him. Finally the door to the room opened and he stole himself for the blows that were surely coming. The footfalls stopped and several more moments passed. He could feel the presence of the other person, but couldn't hear anything. The person stood there. Breathing.

Eventually, "Mr. Mathison, I'm Agent Gentry of Immigration Control Execution. I suppose you know why you're here." The voice was smooth and serene, with a barely perceptible southern lilt.

Will shook his head and the bag made a crinkling sound. His hands clutched at each other white-knuckled, handcuffed behind his back. They shook.

"No?" said Agent Gentry. "I find that hard to believe, but I'll explain everything to you very clearly anyway, just so you understand how much trouble you're in." There was the shuffling of papers and the scraping of a chair as Gentry seated

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himself near to Will. “At approximately 4:17 this morning a bomb went off in the Southern Quadrant of the LEV, near an important tension valve. The intent was clearly to weaken the structural integrity of the LEV, but like everything the Shants do, it was pathetic. The LEV still stands, and whatever political goals the Shants were attempting to achieve remain irrelevant. The American public will learn of this only as a cautionary tale, nothing else, and we will fix the damage. The Shant died in the blast but not before we could ID him as a member of Al Ishariya, which I’m sure you’ve heard of by now. Even by their standards this was a ridiculous charade.

“But that is not what I’m concerned with at this moment, Mr. Mathison. No, what concerns me is that your client, Mr. Daniel Fischer, employed several illegal aliens at one of his worksites and one of those aliens was the cousin of the LEV bomber. As I’m sure you’re aware, hiring illegals is subject to a minimum of five years in prison with the possibility of citizenship revocation. But knowingly aiding terrorists? That means elimination...”

“Daniel didn’t hire those guys...” interjected Will but Gentry shushed him.

“Hush, hush. I’m sure you believe that...”

“He didn’t...”

“Shut up! Mr. Mathison, you’re a lawyer, you know how this works. You only get one shot. I’m not the police; I don’t have to read you some Miranda bullshit or let you see your lawyer. There is only one round with me, so keep your mouth shut until I ask you to open it.” Gentry paused for a moment and when he started talking again his voice was icy. “Now I explained all this to you to make you understand that we had no intention of causing Mr. Fischer any harm, we simply wanted to ask him a few questions. Clearly we were concerned about his apparent connection to Al Ishariya, but we had no reason to suspect him of anything except poor Cit-Scan procedures. That all changed, of course, when he refused to answer our questions and then resisted arrest. No one runs from ICE unless they are concerned about what we’ll find.

“And this is why I’m talking to you now, Mr. Mathison. We’ve already scanned your video phone records; we know that Fischer called you immediately after he left the worksite, and after a little bureaucratic red tape, we will have downloaded and viewed the call and know what you said to him. Your citizenship has already been revoked for not turning Fischer in immediately, but I’m going to give you this one opportunity to save your life. What did you tell him when he called? Be honest with me—I’ll know either way. Lying will not do you or Mr. Fischer any good.”

Gentry stopped talking and the room became silent. Will sat in the silence and the blackness of his death mask, and a million things flew through his head at once and became jammed: his practice, his ex-wife in Colorado, his dog waiting for him at home. He knew there was no way to do anything for himself. He’d wandered into very murky legal waters of which he neither knew the appropriate precedents nor the proper channels to take advantage of these loopholes. All he knew was that the agent was mostly correct; except in very specific cases, the rights of suspects in immigration cases were practically nonexistent. If he and Daniel were being accused of doing what he said they were, then there was very little hope for either of them.

It became clear what he had to do, then.

“I apologize, Mr. Gentry, but there must be a mistake with your information,” said Will, his voice muffled from the canvas of the bag on his head. “I haven’t spoken to Daniel since last night.”

He heard the sudden scraping of the Agent’s metal chair on the cement floor and Gentry stood over him. The door opened and someone walked over to Gentry. There was whispering Will couldn’t understand and the whisper of a screen swipe and the other person left.

“Well, the good news is that you’ve just made everything a whole lot easier for me. I don’t have to worry about any sleepless nights now,” said Gentry and he pulled the bag off Will’s head. The overhead lights were bright and orange, and

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Will had to close his eyes against the dilation of his pupils. Gentry was holding a tablet in his hand. “I have the transcript of your call to Mr. Fischer right here, and of course you lied to me. We know where Mr. Fischer is; we know you helped him. We know everything. Things would’ve been a lot more complicated for me if you’d told the truth. Then I would’ve felt bad. As it is...well...”

Gentry shrugged noncommittally and then turned and headed for the metal door in the far corner. He looked back as he opened the door.

“I don’t believe you had anything to do with the LEV, Mr. Mathison, but that doesn’t matter. Not during times like these.”

Agent Gentry left.

When the soldiers entered, Will knew Gentry hadn’t been lying. His heart dumped blood into his arteries, rushing furiously as if trying to get the most out of its last few seconds of operation. Will was terrified, more so than he’d ever been in his life, but somehow the inevitability of it all imbued him with a preternatural calm, and the ghost of a mirthless grin touched the corners of his wrinkled mouth. The soldiers raised their guns and the barrels looked like the eyes of some cold, calculating beast. Will took a deep breath and despite everything managed a small laugh.

They threw the black bag back over his head and dragged him from the room.



# CHAPTER FOUR

## Flight

Two hundred miles away from Atlanta, and 20 miles inland from where Savannah moldered under the waves and floating shantytowns, Fort Stewart was tucked under the tall, gray monolith of the LEV like a child wrapped in the crook of its parent's arm. Fort Stewart had once been small, before the floods, but with the building of the LEV, the old fort had swollen to four times its original size, filled to the bursting with contractors and construction workers and military personnel.

Once the LEV was completed, Fort Stewart lost much of its teeming masses but none of its new-found prestige. Placed as it was near the southeastern curve of Georgia, where the old Florida-Georgia line used to be, Fort Stewart was perfectly positioned to house the surveillance headquarters for the entire southern quadrant, and so the base had continued to grow as military personnel and their families moved into the grid of squat, 2-bedroom houses that clung to the barracks and military offices. The fort became a lynchpin for the southern

security forces, charged with both the protection of the LEV and monitoring the border between the Shants and the NAS.

Now, the inhabitants of Fort Stewart sat nervously awaiting the oncoming hurricane. Most had been evacuated ahead of the storm to areas further inland, like Atlanta and Athens, but a few remained to carry on basic security and maintenance operations. They were huddled in small groups in command centers and underground bunkers, keeping one eye on their duties and another on the television, which constantly reminded them of the impending storm. It sat like a heavy fog over the soldiers' thoughts.

There was little chatter, except the rare occurrences when it was necessary to report to a superior. The tension of the base was punctuated by the eerie sounds of the digital burps and screeches of the computers, beating as one like an inexorable funeral march. Five hours till landfall...four hours, fifty-nine minutes till landfall...four hours, fifty-eight minutes till landfall...

The unlucky few who were set to watch in the LEV itself, animated by the awfulness of their position, took to the top to marvel at the juxtaposition that could be witnessed there. While the North American citizens who stood guard in the LEV were humbled into silence by the approaching hurricane, those who floated in the Shanty towns below were terrified.

Thousands stumbled along the uneven surface of the Shanties, desperately clinging for footing as the ocean waves, larger and larger as the storm approached, made the entire mass of floating buildings jerk brutally. With each swell the entire weight of the Shanties, trillions of pounds of pressure, grinded against the retaining wall at the base of the LEV with a sickening screech. Women in drab tunics carrying crying babies on their hips screamed for their husbands and sons, but their voices were lost in the din. Many of these lost men were congregated around places they deemed to be the safest, like wide ships and sturdy metal shacks, and increasingly violent fights erupted like blooms of upheaval at these spots. Everywhere, chaos ruled.

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“Look at ‘em,” said one soldier to his companions as they stood atop the LEV, their clothes whipping about them in the wind. “They look like maggots on trash.”

None of them replied, their young faces reflecting the smallest specter of guilt.

Daniel dreamed about his father. In the dream he laid in his childhood bed, his body and mind on fire. His father stood in the doorway to the bedroom, dark and imposing, a silhouette against the backlighting of the hall lamp. He watched Daniel, and his shadow made grotesques in the lighted square on the floor. Daniel couldn’t be sure it was his father at all. And then eyes flashed from the face of the silhouette and Daniel exploded into a tiny galaxy of broken glass.

*Welcome, Daniel, we have been waiting for you...*

“Daddy?”

Daniel pushed through his sleep like a wall of cotton and the dream fell from him.

“Yeah? Buddy?” he mumbled, still not fully sure of where he was.

“Someone’s here, Daddy?” Andy said. He stood at the edge of the hallway between the living room and the back bedrooms, holding Elliephant loosely in his hand. His silhouette reminded Daniel fiercely of his dream, but then Andy came into the bedroom and his face was lighted and was blessedly less fevered. Outside the window the light was failing, and the room was wreathed in a dull bluish glow.

“What do you mean?” asked Daniel, struggling to a seated position.

“There’s a van outside...”

“A van...!” Daniel asked, springing off the couch and scrambling about the living room for the backpack.

He rushed to the front of the house and pulled back the curtain a few inches, looking out onto the cul-de-sac. Two flowers of light shone in his eyes and then blossomed, blinding him

temporarily, and then the van turned and its headlights showed toward the end of the street. And then two more lights shone, joining all the other lights pooled at the end of the cul-de-sac. Three...no, four white vans were at the end of the road, not thirty yards from the house. All four vehicles turned off their headlights and cut their engines in unison, slowing to barely an idle as they approached the cabin.

Daniel turned away from the window, and moved through the semi-darkness of the living room, the backpack flopping against his back. He grabbed Andy in his arms and burst out onto the patio.

To the West, the sun still struggled to light the earth but the clouds swirling in the East covered nearly all of the sky in an inky, impenetrable darkness. The wind shook the tops of the trees. He stood at the edge of the deck, looking out into the blackness, holding Andy in his arms, his mind turning over what few options he had remaining.

*We're trapped.* He thought, scanning the ground below him. He heard the gentle whirring of drones overhead, but the trees provided cover.

He started to pace, counting the wood planks under his feet. 1, 2, 3...

*How did they find me here? Where can I go?*

*We need to get out of here...7, 8, 9...*

*Daniel! Stop pacing and think!*

The wind roared around the house and Daniel heard two things in that sound: several car doors shut on the other side of the cabin, and Will's speed boat thump hard against the wooden dock below them.

He stepped quietly down the patio stairs to the uneven ground below and then, once under the cover of the thick underbrush, hurried toward the dock at the bottom of the steep decline. His plan was desperately short-sighted, and he knew it. They could hide in the boat, but if the agents came looking for them...then what? Once they'd searched the house, certainly the boat would seem the obvious next choice, but where else could they go? They were out of options. They would

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have to hide out in the boat, and pray that somehow the trees and the winding path would mask their escape route. It was possible ICE wouldn't even know the boat was there at all.

He felt sharp pains in his feet and was suddenly aware that he hadn't put his shoes back on. The sticks and roots of the path poked at the soles of his feet. Branches smacked at his face as he passed and caught on his jacket and pants, slowing him, then the path's sharp descent flattened and the path widened. The ground became softer and sandier providing Daniel some relief.

Nearer the water, and under the cover of the trees, the darkness was almost complete. Daniel could just make out the dock ahead of him, glowing white as bones. The boat thudded hollowly against the dock, and he followed the sound in the darkness.

"Daddy, what's happening?" asked Andy, but Daniel pressed his free hand to Andy's mouth and hushed him, stepping gingerly onto the first planks of the dock. It was very old and the wood, though worn smooth in most places, had begun to splinter along the edges.

The boat came into view, red as a blister with gaudy gold racing stripes on each side of the hull. He held Andy and the backpack tighter to him and sprinted the last few yards, his feet thumping on the planks of the dock, the sound of drones moving closer.

The boat was tethered to its moors by two ancient looking ropes. A thick canvas tarpaulin covered the open cockpit of the boat, attached by heavy snaps. Daniel set Andy down gently and traced his hands along the edge of the boat front to back, trying to find a seam in the cover. He reached the back without finding it and swore under his breath, and then retraced his steps.

The hum of the drones got closer, and Daniel tore at the boat cover and heard it loudly pop free in his hands. The force sent him tumbling backwards, nearly off the other side of the dock, but he caught himself just in time. Pain tore through his foot as a large piece of wood jabbed in his heel. He bit his lip

to stifle the cry, drawing blood.

The wind gusted and the boat slammed into the dock. He heard the motors of the drones grind in the wind.

“Andy! Get inside! Quick!” he whispered, pulling the cover enough away that Andy could crawl into the cockpit.

Andy wiggled under the cover and down onto one of the white plastic bench seats that ringed the cockpit, looking back at his father with wide, excited, terrified eyes. Daniel tossed the backpack onto the seat next to Andy and ducked into the cockpit after him.

To the left of the steering wheel was a small door that led to the tiny living quarters in the bow of the boat. Daniel pointed to the door and lowered Andy down into the boat. A moment later he followed, pulling the cover of the boat back into place above them. He heard the sound of a drone buzz very close to the boat.

They threw themselves onto plush beige seats, heaving silent sighs of relief, looking around and trying to acclimate their eyes to the gloom of the quarters. The room was unlit, but portholes were placed at odd intervals in the hull, which allowed beams of dishwater light to swaddle the darkness in thin rags of gray. From what they could see, the quarters were tight, little more than a few seats around a circular plastic table that could be converted to a bed.

“We’ll be fine right here for now,” he said. “We’ll be fine.”

Andy’s fever seemed to have crawled back into his cheeks. Daniel felt his head, and then pulled the backpack onto his lap, rifling through it for the bag of pills. He gave Andy one.

On the far end was a small galvanized steel sink. Wine glasses clinked above it. Daniel limped over to the sink. The ceiling was so low that he had to duck as he tottered drunkenly from one side to the next, as the boat trembled in the water’s current. He bent and looked in the fridge for something to drink, but there was only a lonely bottle of tonic water seated on the lowest shelf. He considered it for a moment, decided that it would suit him well enough right now and brought the bottle to Andy.

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“Here you go, buddy,” he whispered. “Swallow it up. I promise they’ll start working. You’ll feel better real soon...”

Though the carbonation aggravated his tender throat, Andy drank deeply anyway and then gave the bottle back to Daniel.

Daniel looked down at his hands. They were shaking and were pale in the gray light, unnatural, deathly. He clenched them into fists and stiffened his jaw. He was so filled with terror and excited anger that he felt he would burst from it.

*How did they know I was here?*

He was angry at being hunted, frightened of being caught and what that would portend for him and Andy, and under it all there was a smoldering sadness like radioactive particles drifting through the ghost wind of his chest. If they knew he was here, then they knew Will had helped him.

*Will...*

He didn’t want to think about it, he didn’t want to think about anything. He offered Andy a strained smile but Andy was lying with his eyes closed, using Elliephont as a pillow.

The pain in his foot had dulled to a low throb but he pulled his foot up and examined it, if for no other reason than to have something to focus on. A bloom of crimson spread out from his heel, looking like a splatter of ink in the gray. He pulled off his sock, grimacing. A razor thin gash stretched from the bridge of his foot to his heel and blood pulsed from it in a sluggish push, dripping onto the floor. He tied the bloody sock around his heel in a make-shift bandage, cursing under his breath and then leaned back against the cushion. Andy shifted and buried his face in Daniel’s stomach. Daniel held his son tightly and stared vacantly across the boat through one of the portholes. The gray sky deepened to a bruised purple.

They were stuck; there was simply no way this was going to end well. If the agents found them here they would be dragged off to God knows where, split up, and likely tossed out of the country. With Daniel’s only advocate likely in jail himself right now, any thought of appeal was squashed. And if the agents didn’t find them...well, they would eventually. They couldn’t hide here forever. Most likely ICE would sim-

ply never leave the property unprotected. They would be able to tell he'd at least been here recently and they would certainly keep a close eye on the cabin from now on.

It was either be caught now, or be caught later. Either way he was screwed.

Daniel heard whispered voices and thudding footsteps on the docks outside.

"Dad?" Andy asked but Daniel quickly covered his mouth.

"Hush!" hissed Daniel.

Andy clutched Daniel tighter as the footsteps moved closer.

"Captain, we have eyes on the boat, over," said a low, muffled voice from outside of the boat.

A radio crackled and a fuzzy, male voice responded, "Copy. Check the boat and report back, over."

"Copy."

The footsteps stopped next to the boat and Daniel heard a light tapping against the hull, and a rustling as the cover was pulled back. Their backs were to the dockside, and Daniel lifted his head and peered with one eye out the nearest porthole. Something moved in front of the porthole. He saw a black-suited leg and the barrel of a large gun. The boat sank and swayed with the weight of the boarding soldiers. Daniel's limbs were paralyzed, frozen to stone around his son's trembling shoulders. They held their breath, and through their shirts and skin Daniel could feel his son's beating heart, like soft fluttering wings against the bars of a cage.

Once the rain started to fall and the wind came in gusts so harsh they could nearly blow a man off the observation deck of the LEV, the last of the soldiers finally retreated to their command centers, or the underground bunkers that spread underneath Fort Stewart in a tight fist of tunnels. They sat at their chairs, watching the edge of the storm hurl itself against the white stone bulwarks of the LEV, the winds howling so loudly outside that it seemed as though packs of wild hounds were baying in the very halls around them. Every few minutes a

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heart-shattering thud would sound, cutting through the shriek, as the churning of the ocean rammed the nearest edge of the Shanty towns into the retaining wall at the LEV's base.

On their monitors, the soldiers watched horrified as each crash of the Shanty towns against the retaining wall sent shock waves through the flimsily built buildings. They crumpled like so many toothpicks and pieces of aluminum foil. Shants scrambled chaotically through the rubble, crawling from the wreckage of their homes to seek shelter in one of the few remaining buildings. Many simply lay in the rubble and covered themselves with chunks of corrugated steel or strips of tarp. Hundreds lost their footing and were tossed overboard into the water as the floating metal base below them was forced upward by the roiling waves. The water was frothy with their blood. It swirled at the foot of the LEV, staining the white stones crimson as their broken bodies floated in the whirlpools that formed little galaxies between the base and the wall.

At the furthest reaches of the Shanties, a mile beyond where the NAS-built concrete foundation ended and the Shanty towns were the sturdiest, Walter's winds had begun to simply lift the floating houseboats and driftwood homes out of the water and toss them further inland. Blood spattered the ground, and the screams of the dying mingled with the howls of the wind.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## The deluge

Daniel reacted without thinking. The moment he heard the soldiers land heavily in the boat, he scrambled toward the front, dragging Andy after him. They ducked into a tiny bathroom on the right, falling back onto the toilet seat and closing the door as they fell. Daniel sat with his feet propped against the inside of the door, Andy on his lap, both of them staring terrified at the door. A brief moment of silence passed and then the door to the quarters burst inward and they heard several tramping feet crunch down the stairs.

Andy yelped in surprise at the sounds, Daniel clapped a hand over his mouth, whispering shhh silently into his ear. The wind gusted outside, and the boat bumped against the dock. They listened for the approach of the soldiers.

The foolishness of leading them here, to this dead end, burned through Daniel's arteries like a fever. All he'd done is buy them a few more minutes before the end came. He was an idiot. He'd been an idiot since he'd woken up this morning,

every stupid choice leading him here, a daisy chain of stupidity that ended with him and his son trapped in a bathroom. He mouthed a silent apology to Andy and held him tighter, breathed in Andy's fever.

The footsteps got closer. Daniel prepared for the last moment. He stood and set Andy on his feet on top of the toilet cover. He grabbed a toilet brush and turned to face the door. Outside, the wind gusted again and the boat smashed even more violently against the dock. Daniel nearly lost his footing, but he braced himself against the wall.

The boot steps moved closer and the boat rocked with each footfall. Adrenaline and fear and anger rose to red splotches in the pallor of Daniel's cheeks. He gripped the toilet brush tighter with sweat-slicked palms. The footsteps were just outside the bathroom door, and he could hear the light hum of a radio crackling.

One word blinkered in his mind: *Please...please...please...*

He closed his eyes, his body went rigid. The radio crackled. There was the rapping of cold metal.

*...please...please...please...*

He raised the toilet brush.

*...please...please...*

A hand grasped the bathroom door. The moment rushed in on him and he could feel something white and blue and so strong he couldn't contain it rising like steam in a kettle through his chest and out his head and mouth and eyes and ears, his whole body. He screamed toward it, like jumping off a cliff. It was a feeling alien to him, and yet vaguely familiar, like an echo across time. He felt himself falling and cut loose and falling into blackness, and he reached for it, though he didn't know what it was, and just as he thought he could touch it, there was a blue flash in his mind and his eyes went black.

A massive gust of wind battered the boat against the dock, and Andy was thrown so hard into Daniel's back that the bathroom door buckled a little under their combined weight. On the other side of the door there was a loud thud and a sicken-

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ing crack as the soldier was tossed hard against the panel walls behind him.

From the other side of the door: “Oh shit! Tomlin! Tomlin!” Several sets of feet shuffled over to the bathroom and there was a loud rustling and a slapping sound. “Dude, wake up! I think he’s knocked...oh shit, he’s bleeding...look at his neck.”

Two hundred miles away, hundreds of thousands struggled, clutching at their tenuous streamers of life as they were extinguished in the sea like briefly lit matches under a faucet. After a twelve hour overture, Hurricane Walter finally reached the apex of his fury, flinging his wretched arms wildly around him, attacking the coast of the North American States with a hostility that could not be matched but for the great hurricanes of fifty years previous. He grabbed up the ocean in his mighty hands and heaved its waves at the walls of the LEV, the majestic symbol of the NAS’ indomitable hubris, and the last thin membrane of protection for a way of life that had long ago descended into xenophobic lunacy. He splattered upon its walls the bodies and blood of all those who had been doomed to wait patiently at its doorstep, like starving dogs, while the masters of the world continued unbothered by pity or humanity. Walter used as his tools all those pathetic structures and hopeless metal altars of desperation the Shants used to quell the gluttonous torments of disease, famine, and climate. And in his rage, Walter beat at the very doors of the NAS until finally, uncomprehendingly to those on the inside of those staid walls, he achieved that for which he had presumably been sent; he broke through.

It would have been beautiful to see the LEV fall, in the way that all wanton destruction can be beautiful. It would have served as a gratuitously delicious statement, a useful allegory for the temples men build to their own greatness. College students could be shown videos of its destruction in Art History classes as a performance piece demonstrating the fu-

tility of trying to preserve a dying way of life. As if building a wall could somehow translate to immortality. As if building a wall was enough to keep the inexorable stream of time from flowing. In its final moments of servitude, no one was really around to watch the LEV's demolition but an army of cameras and satellites that would soon be either under water or woefully obsolete. It happened so quickly and unexpectedly that none would have been able to prepare for it even if they had been tipped off.

Like most destructive things it began small, with only a tiny crack that ran from the top of the LEV and traced its spidery leg downward to the ground, cleaving the smiling face of a child painted there. It seemed innocent enough, even difficult to perceive, but then all at once the LEV exploded and water poured onto the relatively dry land of the NAS. It cascaded in black, green, and crimson plumes that splashed about briefly and then stampeded across Fort Stewart and the open, steadily inclining landscape of Georgia.

Someone within the LEV had the forethought to sound the emergency siren, but all those who would respond were underwater before they heard it, crushed beneath a raging wall of water, blood, steel and stone. As the ocean pushed through the gaping hole, it was widened and more water and debris clambered over the land, tearing down trees, houses, and tall buildings and pushing them ahead of the crest like pikes before a cavalry.

Water covered the countryside all the way from Athens and Augusta to Macon and further south, crawling along the inward facing wall of the LEV to engulf Waycross and New Albany. The edges of the Levee crumbled, further widening the entry point and making staunching the flow utterly impossible. The flood gurgled over the rusty clay and climbed up the Piedmont Plateau to the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and surrounded the city of Atlanta.

The minutes passed slowly as Daniel and Andy waited cramped in the dark, tiny bathroom. They'd listened to the

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soldiers' unexpected retreat, and through the porthole lightning flickered and etched streaking flashes across the sky as the boat shivered in the gusting wind and thumped like tribal drums against the dock. With each explosion of wind Andy, who was sitting on the toilet with his hands clenched in his lap, drifting in and out of sleep, would cry aloud and then sink back into a morose, brooding silence. They knew the soldiers would be back, and when they came...

Another crack of lightning shimmered through the porthole. Two beats, and then the thunder followed, rocking the boat with its concussion. The constant vacillation of dark and light made it impossible for their eyes to adjust, leaving them helpless and blind in the night.

Daniel felt Andy's head, more for something to do, for some reassurance that his son was still alive and was near, than to check his temperature.

"How're you doing, buddy?" he whispered.

Andy's breath whistled in his throat as he croaked, "I'm scared, daddy."

"I know. I know. I'm sorry, but we have to wait in here for a little while longer. Can you do that for Daddy? Can you be brave for just a little while longer?"

He felt Andy nod.

Distantly, over the sounds of the storm, he heard a rumbling wash of white noise, like a great blowing wind heard through feet of insulation. Daniel looked toward the window, but the night was so complete, both inside the boat and out, that there was no discernible difference between the sky and the bathroom. The sound thickened into a heaving cacophony that wrapped its jarring arms around their ears and filled their heads with an aural clutter that made their teeth chatter. A fork of lightning split the sky and for one infinitesimally small moment Daniel thought he saw something large and white on the horizon, and then it was gone.

Andy cocked his head curiously toward the sound and asked, "Daddy? What's...?"

"I don't know..." Daniel mumbled as he strained to see

outside the window, catch another glimpse of what he'd just seen.

The lightning flashed again.

"Shit, Andy! Quick! Get up!" he yelled and groped in the darkness for Andy.

He grabbed him up in his arms and turned his back to the window just as the wave slammed into the side of the boat. The concussion tossed Daniel hard against the far wall and then down on his knees as the floor rose violently upward. Andy cried out as Daniel tried to shield him with his body, but the boat writhed so fiercely in all directions that Daniel's grip was broken and both of them rolled like clothes in a washer, at the mercy of the tumbling wave.

The boat turned over in the surge and they were thrust upwards onto the ceiling. There was a terrifying crack in Daniel's neck as his head connected with the white plastic ceiling and his whole body went limp. For one frightening moment he was certain he was paralyzed but then his limbs slowly began to work again and he tried to push his head off the ceiling. There was a loud splintering as the boat abruptly righted and Daniel crashed back to his feet.

"Cover your..." he tried to warn Andy but the wind was knocked out of him as the boat began to roll again.

He heard Andy yelp in pain and then his voice was snuffed out with a grunt.

"Andy...?"

All around was the sound of water and broken glass and his own heartbeat as the boat was flipped end over end until Daniel could only close his eyes and try in vain to protect his battered body and son. The whole world turned around and over and around, and he could hear the sound of the boat being smashed to bits and he was certain he was going to die. Surely, this was the end.

And then, just as suddenly as it had all begun, everything became still.





## CHAPTER SIX

### Adrift

*Daniel woke up in his childhood bedroom. There was a moment of numb freedom and then all at once his ear began throbbing with the knife prick of some long-past infection. It came back to him; his entire childhood Daniel had been perennially battered by horrible ear infections, each one seemingly worse than the last, but this one, in December of his fifth year, was the worst. It had throbbed so hard that he'd felt the ache all the way in his throat.*

*He heard his five-year-old self cry out for his mama, the sound clawing out of his inflamed throat, and he was at once the listener and the listened to. After a moment a shape appeared in the doorway, a silhouette block. It was tall, with long, strong arms, rough hands, and broad shoulders that were tight and scrunched, as if he was warding off an attack from above. His father, not his mother.*

*His father moved into the room, and stood over Daniel, looking down at him. The light from the hallway shone par-*

tially on his face, and in the muted light he looked careworn, his salt and pepper beard belying his late middle age. His eyes were cold and hard, and though they looked black in the dark Daniel knew they were the same Patagonian blue as his own.

Daniel became nervous looking into those eyes.

His father leaned down and passed a heavy, calloused hand over Daniel's forehead.

"Ye've still got a fever, but the medicine should start to work soon," he said, his voice scarred from tens of thousands of cigarettes.

Daniel looked up into his father's granite face and nodded. He tried to swallow but the pain was so intense it made him whine. His father's face winced at the sound, and Daniel chided himself for making it.

George Fischer patted him once roughly on the shoulder and said, "Be a good boy. It's only an earache. By morning you'll feel better. Now just go to bed." Then he pulled Daniel's blankets tight around his throat and turned to leave, but Daniel reached out a small hand.

"Daddy...could you stay? Just for a minute?" he asked tentatively, not sure why he was asking, not sure he actually wanted his father to stay. He added, "Just 'til I fall asleep?"

His father paused for a moment, his shrugged shoulders unreadable. Then his father walked to the other side of the tiny bed and sat down heavily next to him.

He looked uncomfortable with his feet hanging off the end of the bed, but he leaned back against the headboard and folded his hands amiably across his lap. Daniel was eased by the weight next to him. Though he was hard as stone, George Fischer was solid, and solidity could bring its own type of rough comfort.

Daniel turned his back, both grateful and ashamed for this small, begrudging kindness, and closed his eyes, drifting back to sleep with the sound of his father's deep baritone as escort.

"Remember, son, everything passes in its own time. Nothing, not even this, will stay for very long."

At some point later Daniel awoke with the thin wisp of a

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*half-remembered dream sliding out of his mind.*

*The pain in his ear had lessened to a dull throb, but his throat still hurt and he could feel the fever still burning in him. He shivered and pulled the blankets tight around his throat. Behind him he could still feel the weight of his father's body.*

*The thinnest sliver of sunlight had begun to creep over the edges of the trees but the overcast sky masked much of its early morning glory. Instead of oranges and reds, the room was cast in gloomy shades of gray, as if the world had become black and white during the night. The crossbars of the window were silhouetted on the wall in front of him, but the corners of the room were otherwise deeply shadowed.*

*Daniel's eyelids fluttered closed again, but before he drifted back into sleep he thought he saw a shadow move across the sunlight on his wall. Believing the shadow to be his father—although he had not felt him get up—Daniel rolled over.*

*Lying where his father should have been was an ancient skeleton, swabbed in densely woven cobwebs. Spiders crawled over and through the dry and dusty bones and Daniel could hear their spindly legs skittering, like the tiny scratching of mice behind a wall. He tried to scream, but he had no voice. He tried to move; he couldn't.*

*Something shifted out of the corner of his eye, a shadow within a shadow and Daniel's eyes were drawn in that direction. A black shape, ominously tall, emerged, as if all the darkness of the room had joined together to form an inky, vaporous figure. The specter floated slowly toward the bed, pale eyes glowing from under its black hood, like sapphires suspended in a field of blackest lace.*

*Daniel...*

*The creature held out its long arms, its black cloak billowing in streamers as though blown by a light breeze. All the spiders on the skeleton raised into the air and hung there, suspended for a moment, their legs working and working. Then they burst into fireworks of green and red and blue, and through the smoke the figure rushed toward him, calling his name.*

...I've been waiting for you...

*...Daniel walked down a darkened hallway. The hallway was familiar in a way that seemed vague and unrealized, like a fading dream. Brown wood paneled walls shimmered like smoke as he passed old wooden doors with brass knobs, drifting, drifting. He became aware that this was he and Cindy's first apartment. He became aware that he remembered this day, this feeling, this place.*

*He'd come home early because it was raining too hard to get anything done at the worksite and he'd found Cindy upstairs...*

*Cindy!*

*He hurried to the end of the hall where a slim stairway snaked up to the second floor so sharply it was almost a spiral. He stamped up the stairs to another thin hallway with rooms opening to either side.*

*He heard himself call out, but it was as though it was another's voice.*

*"Cindy!?"*

*There was no response.*

*He traced his hands along the doors on either side of him, relishing the feel of the wood under his fingers. How he'd loved this place; its quaintness and its bustle. Nestled on a small side street in Midtown Atlanta, the apartment building had been old and nothing had worked, but it was home...it was their home, their first and he'd loved it dearly.*

*Ahead of him, at the end of the hallway, was a bright green door which led to their bedroom. Cindy had always hated that door, and she had teased him until the day they'd moved out to paint it, but he never did.*

*"Cindy!?"*

*No answer.*

*He pushed open the door and looked around. The lights were off but a soft aquatic glow pulsed from the bathroom on the far side of the room. He walked to the light and stopped short in the doorway. There in the bathtub was Cindy, listening*

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*with her eyes closed to a pair of vintage headphones, a thick film of foam swirling around her pregnant body. At each corner of the tub were short, thick candles that cast a warm glow about the white tile and infused Cindy's usually dark complexion with a glistening pallor that was both beautiful and ethereal. Her pregnant belly protruded like a solitary atoll from the water, the bubbles the sea licking at her shores. Her small, delicate hands interlaced over the bump, absent-mindedly caressing the taut skin there, and the smallest ghost of a satisfied smile touched the corners of her mouth.*

*His heart quailed as he watched her. He'd forgotten this day, for so long he'd forgotten this day, his most cherished memory of her, and now he remembered and it was sweet and bitter as tears.*

*He was reminded of a painting he'd once seen on the internet, an old, beautifully ornate painting of a character from Hamlet...Ophelia her name was. He couldn't remember the artist, but in the painting the girl lay dead in the water, with multi-colored flowers draped over her as if the train of a wedding gown. The poor girl had been so beautiful in her repose, and Daniel had thought it seemed morbid to find such beauty in death.*

*But now here was the opposite, life instead of death, hope instead of despair, the beginning instead of the end...yet the feeling was the same...somehow the same...*

*Suddenly the walls began to shake and break up like the hull of a shipwreck, splintering and cracking. And beyond the walls he could see the bright sun and beach and the sea washing against white sand.*

*No! Please, just another minute! Please!*

*He reached out and tried to touch his wife, just to feel her skin for a moment before the dream faded, but she became smoke and disappeared as vapor on the surface of the rolling surf.*

*NO!!!*

*The walls were gone. Cindy was gone. In the distance rose a ghostly ship, black as the carcass of some rotting sea beast.*

*Daniel looked around him but he was alone. The sea whispered to the shore in some secret language only the two of them understood. His feet moved against his will, walking him faster and faster, impossibly fast, toward the boat. A feeling of dread groaned in his belly and he groaned in protest, but still he moved closer to the ship. The sails blew up and out in the breeze, then settled. He could feel the beast waking up; he could feel something had changed.*

*Then a great moan burst from the ship and all the broken pieces strewn about the beach began to snap back into place and reassemble. The decomposed wood of the hull grew rigid and pushed the ship aright. The mast rose and the sails billowed, unfettered by their previous rot. The portholes, black as marbles, stared at him as he was pushed inexorably toward the reassembling ship.*

*He was stopped just mere yards from the ship, which now rose tall and imposing from the sand, no longer broken and destroyed, its sails rippling with heavy whacks of canvas. All went silent and he didn't breathe. The portholes were like the eyes of rats, black and sinister.*

*Then brilliant blue light exploded from the portholes and blinded him and he stumbled backward from the blinking, rippling boat.*

*...Andy...!*

Daniel opened his eyes, not all at once because the sun was like glittering icicles stabbing into his brain, but slowly. His head didn't hurt; it shrieked and throbbed as though his brain were trying to burst out the top of his skull. He grimaced, and closed his eyes again. He tried to bring his hands to his face but found that he couldn't move either of them. It was as if some great weight lay on them. He was pinned to the ground and too weak to struggle.

His thoughts were confused, a jumbled mixture of his fleeing dreams and other memories and thoughts of the flight and the flood and the rolling, tumbling hell that had followed. He

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tried to simply drift back to sleep.

*Later...later I can worry, but now I need to sleep.*

Several minutes passed and he became aware of more pains: his neck, his shoulders, his foot. He was lying crumpled on the ground, his head cocked at an awkward angle to the wall, and he was too weak to try to reposition himself. He couldn't sleep. He tried opening his eyes again but the sun blinded him with solar flares that burned his retinas. He moved his arms but they were stuck.

*What's wrong with my arms?* He thought vaguely, though the idea frightened him. Why weren't his arms working? Was he paralyzed? Was he dead? Where was Andy?

*...Andy...*

He opened his eyes again but this time squinted until the brightness of the sun faded to a dull glare. As his vision cleared he tried lifting his head to look around and was met by a screech of protest from his neck. His body hurt too much to move so he scanned the bathroom with roving, bleary eyes. Everywhere was the evidence of violence. Holes were punched in the ceiling, the walls, the door behind Daniel's head. The tiny porthole was cracked in two, allowing a fractured beam of light to shine through to Daniel's sweat-grimed face. He lay in two or three inches of warm, scummy water and his clothes were soaked through. His skin was chilled and pruned.

*Where is Andy?*

He struggled against the pain in his neck and shoulders and the weakness in his limbs, and pushed himself to an angle at which he could look down at himself. He could feel his fingers and he could feel his feet, so he wasn't paralyzed. But there was a heavy weight on him and instinctively he knew it must be Andy. What had happened to his son? He needed to see.

Fear stole over him, an overpowering primal fear and he used what strength that fear awarded him to push himself up with one heaving grunt. His entire body sizzled with the pain of it and there was an ice-pick stab in his foot which sung over the rest of the chorus. An uncontrollable whine of anxiety and

fear and pain gurgled in the back of his throat as he looked around.

Andy laid face-down over Daniel's lap, as if he were awaiting a spanking. His arms were splayed at his sides and the top of his head was in the brackish water. His black, wavy hair drifted slowly in the water like seaweed. A large splash of gummy, drying blood was caked on the back of Andy's head and sprayed across the back of his shirt. The water was stained blackish red from all the blood. Andy didn't move.

*All this blood. Too much blood.*

"No!" he screamed through vocal cords that were dry and crusty.

Daniel rolled Andy over and stared down into his gore streaked face. Andy's eyes were closed and his face looked peaceful, as though he were sleeping. Daniel patted his cheeks first softly then with increasingly frantic slaps, until he was shaking Andy and screaming unintelligibly, making baleful noises like that of a trapped and agonized animal. He pulled Andy's lifeless body up into his arms, clutching him to his chest and rocking back and forth and patting Andy's back the way he did when Andy was sick.

"Come on, buddy. *Please!* Don't be dead, please. Please, And, just be sleeping, just be dreaming," he cried and whispered and groaned, kissing Andy's bloody forehead. His tears mingled with the blood, softening its crimson to a sparkling rose which glittered in the afternoon sunlight.

His heart pounded so violently that he grew dizzy and he leaned his head back against the wall and screamed against the dizziness and the pain and guilt which welled inside of him like water in an air tank. The pain he felt was so total, so unbearably complete that it threatened the very life of him. He could feel it bursting in his veins and dripping down his spine. He sobbed in great hitching breaths that burned his throat and forced so much blood to his head that his headache was tripled in intensity. But he couldn't stop, he was overcome.

*"Please no...I can't take it, I can't...WHY!? Whywhywhywhy...!"*

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He buried his face in Andy's hair and squeezed his red-  
dened eyes tight.

Then suddenly Andy stirred.

"Daddy? My head hurts."

For a long moment Daniel was certain that he was still dreaming. Andy was dead, and this dazedly squirming body in his arms was merely a dusty skeleton, an empty shell where life and laughter used to be. But then Andy reached up and touched his face and looked up at him with his painfully blue eyes and it became clear that this was not a dream. All his pains and agonies disappeared and he clutched at his son so tightly that Andy squirmed and fussed against him.

"Daddy, stop it. Daddy," his mouth muffled by Daniel's shirt.

He didn't stop though and he held Andy close and kissed the top of his grimy head and whispered silent prayers.

*Thank you, thank you, thank you...*

A few silent moments passed with the two of them like that, Andy wriggling in his father's arms while Daniel held him close, happily. Eventually Daniel let him go and pushed himself up to a seated position.

"Come on, buddy. Here we go," Daniel said as he set Andy on the busted toilet seat and painfully got to his feet.

His cut foot ached so badly that he couldn't put any pressure on it. So, he stood with that foot just barely hovering above the floor as he grabbed Andy into his arms and pushed on the bathroom door. The door had jammed during the violence of the flood so Daniel had to shoulder it with his entire weight. It gave way more easily than he thought it would and he stumbled into the hallway, landing heavily on his hurt foot. He limped into the galley with Andy clutching at his neck like a small monkey, and rubbing his blood-sweaty face into Daniel's shirt.

The galley was a disaster. The wave had tossed nearly everything from one side of the room to the other. Cushions, glass, cupboard doors, all were strewn indiscriminately about

the floor where they soaked like bloated corpses in six inches of green, icy water. A massive, feet wide gash tore through the roof from the stern to the bow of the boat, opening the galley wide to the brilliant sunshine which glinted off the water and the buffed chrome of knobs and handles.

The backpack was floating seemingly undisturbed next to one of the cleanest of the water-logged cushions. Daniel grabbed the backpack and replaced the cushion on the bare sofa. He set Andy down like he was placing an egg in a nest.

Andy leaned back, unbothered by the wetness of the cushion; his clothes were already soaked so much he didn't notice. His face was streaked, and his hair matted, with dried blood, his arms tinged purple with bruises, and there was a particularly nasty cut right across the bridge of his nose. Yet his eyes were the same brilliant, ebullient blue, like snatches of sky through clouds, and they shone from his dark-skinned face like sea pearls.

Daniel searched hastily through the backpack for the small, orange bottle of antibiotics. He handed one to Andy, who swallowed the pill with a grimace. Then Daniel set upon him, searching every inch of him for cuts and injuries, Andy complaining loudly and wriggling under him, his face pinched with displeasure. Ten minutes later, Daniel was at a loss; all that blood and yet, other than the jag on his nose, Andy didn't have another scratch on him.

*Where did all the blood come from?* He wondered.

Andy provided the answer.

"Daddy, your head..." he said, pointing at Daniel's face.

Daniel brought his hand to his face and it came away sticky with blood. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt and winced at the pain. Fresh blood oozed down his face.

"Hold on a second, ok?" he said to Andy as he stood and started toward the bathroom.

He took a step and his knees buckled as his cut foot sang out. He dragged himself back to the couch cushion.

*Alright, first thing's first then...*

He pulled his foot up to examine it and was horrified at

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what he saw. The cut on the heel of his foot was even wider, like a pink, leering mouth with empty gums. A thin sliver of glass jutted from the eye of the wound and he thumbed it out, suppressing a shout as he did so. It was nearly an inch long, with barnacles of clotted blood clinging to it, and instantly his foot felt better and he could apply a small amount of pressure to it.

He tugged off one of his sleeves and used it for a bandage, tying the white cotton around his heel and ankle. Then he stood again and limped to the bathroom to inspect his head.

The bathroom mirror had a crack extending diagonally across its face but was otherwise intact and Daniel looked at his gaunt, pallid, and fractured reflection. The gash on his forehead was small. He held a wad of toilet paper to his head and looked himself over, turning gingerly in the mirror. He could find nothing else.

He came back out to the galley and found Andy sprawled across the cushion where he'd left him, snoring loudly, his arms and feet twitching just slightly. Daniel saw something pink out of the corner of his eye. Elliephont was perched upside down in one corner, one ear torn nearly off. Daniel grabbed the doll and set it snugly in the crook of Andy's arm, then backed away and looked down at his son for a long time, his thoughts tangled and torn and impossible to sort out.

*It's better to let him sleep,* he decided.

After another moment of watching Andy sleep he decided it was finally time to go to the top of the boat and see whatever there was to see.

The sun was dazzling. It glinted off the rippling, churning sea like chiming diamonds, blinding him, his mouth stupidly agape and eyes half closed for nearly ten minutes. As his eyes adjusted he turned a complete circle and tried to take it all in. There really was nothing that could have prepared him for seeing his entire world, everything he'd ever known under tens of feet of water. It was incomprehensible, like being born or like dying and then rising from the grave only to find the

world you'd just left had suddenly changed completely. He was conscious, though only vaguely, that something fundamental had shifted, something elemental, as though a counterweight to all that he'd understood before had been cut and a new balance which he didn't understand at all had been struck.

He twirled around and around, scanning the horizon for anything he might recognize, anything that might make this new world recognizable to him, but in every direction there was nothing but blue-green water as far as he could see, the tops of trees drifting like giant lily pads, birds skimming the water. Wood and leaves and larger debris which he couldn't quite discern floated listlessly on the surface. On the horizon hazy fog shimmered like steamy mirages just above the surface, obscuring his view.

It was a lonely and desolate landscape and Daniel shivered, though the air was warm.

He turned toward the East, where the sun burned low in the brilliantly cloudless sky, and tried to peer through the distant mist. For reasons he didn't quite understand he was absolutely certain that was the direction in which Atlanta must lie. The flood had certainly originated from the Southeast which meant the tide must have carried them northwest of the city. How far northwest he couldn't be sure. He squinted against the sun's glare. He thought he saw something. Were those buildings on the horizon...? No, his mind must be playing tricks on him. The sun was too bright, and the heat lines and mist coming off the water turned everything into glimmering hallucinations. Yet...it did look like there was something there. And if those were buildings then they couldn't be more than five to ten miles away from the city.

He smiled wildly, and excitedly balled his fists, looking every bit the frightful, dirty refugee he was. Five miles wasn't far at all. He searched around him, scanning the twisted and broken rabble of the cockpit, saw the deep gash in the bow where the engine was, and his brief flare of optimism puffed away like silt in a pond.

The engine was busted; the boat was barely afloat. They

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weren't going anywhere.

He collapsed onto the seat nearest him, digging his fists into his eyes in frustration. He was suddenly very tired and very lonely. He missed Cindy, he missed Will. Hell, he even missed his mother...

He coughed out a sarcastic, bitter laugh and shook his head incredulously as another flood of wretchedness turned his stomach into molten acid. He'd left his crazy, broken mother back at the Brookhaven Retirement Home, and certainly they hadn't had time to evacuate. His grin was desolate.

A litany of other names came to his mind, names of all those other people who were likely floating face down in this endless ocean, stranded in basements, trapped in attics, or simply crushed against trees, or walls, or lampposts.

"Jesus..." he whispered under his breath.

He felt as though he could hear all their voices, could feel all of their death-pains all at once, and he squirmed in his seat, filled to the brim with the full awfulness of this disaster. It crashed in on him in waves—actual physical waves—of awfulness which he couldn't escape.

*Everyone I know is dead...everyone.*

But, of course, that wasn't true, and as soon as he thought of his slumbering son cuddling just mere feet from him, a tiny measure of his anxiety was cooled and hushed. He slunk out of the sunlight and onto the cushion next to Andy and the muted darkness of the boat's galley. It was cool in here and he was thankful for the coolness.

He relaxed and he wandered. He drifted out onto the wide ocean with Andy sleeping next to him and breathing in soft half-whispered wheezes of sea breeze. He could feel Andy's body next to him like low burning embers on a spring evening, warm, but not hot. Not too hot. He fell backwards into himself like falling into a deep, cavernous hole, black as night and burning with a lightless flame. He was that lightless fire and through him and all around him and because of him was Andy, cool as a wind, calming as a wind.

Calming him. Calming.



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## The work begins

“No!”

“Daddy?”

“No, please, I don’t wanna see. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean it...”

His first thought as he woke, and saw Andy’s pale blue eyes watching him in the darkness, was that the Dark Man had become real and he was instantly more terrified than he’d ever been in his life.

*Who’s the Dark Man...?*

He didn’t know and even as these thoughts materialized they became confused and disappeared, swept away like silt in a rushing stream. He breathed heavily and sat up. Andy stood awkwardly, with one leg crossed over the other.

“Gotta go potty?” croaked Daniel, passing a greasy hand over his face. It sounded like a dry twig as it scraped over his two day old stubble.

Andy nodded and Daniel stood, nearly tipped over, stead-

ied himself, then grabbed Andy's hand.

"Alright, come on. I gotta go too."

They stepped gingerly through the galley up to the cockpit and into the crystal clear night that spread over them like a silver-sequined blanket. Daniel led Andy to the diving platform that jutted from the boat like a pouting lip of fiberglass, and gestured that they should just go off the back of the boat.

Andy looked up at his father with astonished embarrassment, and asked, "Off the back, Daddy?"

"Yeah, buddy, right into the water," Daniel replied but Andy was still too shocked at this bald rule-breaking to move. "It's ok, And. Go ahead. See...here...I'll go first."

Daniel unzipped his pants and urinated into the water. Andy stood for another moment and then, convinced his leg wasn't being pulled, followed his father's lead and turned to the other side of the boat, a malevolently gleeful grin on his face.

They finished and stepped back up to the cockpit. The air was chilly, with a slight bite which hinted at the impending winter weather that would come in the next month or so. Andy shivered quietly, self-consciously trying to hide it from Daniel. Daniel leaned in close and put his arm around him.

"You gotta keep your Daddy warm. It's chilly tonight," Daniel grinned, pretending he was cold for Andy's sake. Andy grinned back. Daniel asked, "How you feelin?"

Andy looked considerably better than when they had entered the boat, but he still had a hectic, feverish air about him. He offered a smile, "Feeling better. My throat still hurts a little."

Daniel hugged him.

"I'm sure it does. You're a brave boy. I'm proud of you for being so brave. Before we go back to bed, I'll give you another pill. In the morning you'll feel 100% better."

Andy smiled but shivered again, this time unconcerned with whether Daniel saw or not.

The drop in temperature had dissipated the haze from earlier, turning the night as clear as new glass. The stars shined

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obscenely in the blankness of the sky and imprinted indistinct replicas in the blackness of the ocean below. Everything was jet and glinting points of light.

Andy pointed to the sky and said, “Look, Papa. The man’s face. It looks weird.”

Daniel followed Andy’s tiny finger up to the pallid face of the moon peeking out of its starlit bed. It did look different, somehow more sinister. The eyes and mouth were still there, as usual, but something seemed to shine in that face that gave it a manic look. It made Daniel feel uncomfortable. He smiled at Andy and ruffled his hair again.

“Just a trick of the eye, buddy,” he said as he snuck another look at the moon.

Lower, on the horizon, he thought he saw something move but when he focused he saw nothing. Then, suddenly, some of the stars along the horizon to the southeast shifted, ever so slightly. He looked closer and realized the lights weren’t stars at all, though their distance from him made them the same size and consistency of starlight.

“And?” he asked, and Andy looked up at him. He pointed at the lights and continued, “There, where I’m pointing, do you see lights moving?”

Andy squinted and wrinkled his nose in concentration, and then his face brightened and he smiled up at Daniel.

“Uh huh. I see ‘em, Daddy, I see ‘em,” he said and his blue eyes flashed excitedly. “What are they?”

“I dunno,” said Daniel, eyeing the lights—which now that he noticed them, were steadily moving across the horizon. “Maybe it’s help.”

He paused pensively and the two of them sat in silence. After a moment Daniel came back to himself and grinned sheepishly, and added, “Well, if something’s moving over there it can’t be all bad. Unless it’s aliens...”

He tried a charming smile, but Andy didn’t smile back. There was something about the water, both black and star-stained all at once, which seemed like a graveyard; it was no place for jokes.

Andy yawned and Daniel followed suit.

“Tired, buddy?” he asked and Andy nodded. “Yeah, me too. Let’s go back to bed. Here, let me get you another pill.”

Five minutes later Andy was sound asleep, snoring lightly on the soggy cushion. Daniel stayed up a little later, brooding darkly on the meaning of the lights. But eventually he too drifted away to distant shores behind heavily lidded eyes.

Andy spent most of the night squirming and coughing. The strep throat rallied in the night and kept him in and out of restless sleep. Daniel spent most of the night half awake, watching him, worrying. By the time the sun peeked over the horizon, both of them were bleary-eyed and cranky. Andy, after obstinately receiving another pill, complaining of hunger and thirst, unsurprisingly slept heavily through the remainder of the morning. Daniel found sleep impossible—the sunlight was too bright, the mystery of their predicament too insistent—so he went to the top of the boat and watched the sun finish its rising.

He found himself balefully wishing for a cup of coffee. Whenever he’d had to get up early in the morning Cindy would always wake just before him and hand-brew two cups, one for each of them. It wasn’t about the coffee—if she didn’t make it for him, he never drank the stuff—it was the effort, it was the time it afforded them. He’d never had a chance to tell her, but he sensed that she’d known how much those mornings had meant to him.

The sun grasped at its full glory while Daniel tried to shove those thoughts and memories aside. He had to focus; there was too much to do. He’d woken that morning, hard night’s sleep or no, with a fully-formed plan lodged in his head and he knew now what he had to do.

He allowed himself a few more bittersweet moments and then he struggled to his feet and started on the morning’s work.

Andy slept through it all.

The first thing Daniel did was search the boat thoroughly

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for anything that might be of any use to them. He checked the shelves under the sink next to the small, barren refrigerator but like the fridge they were empty. He turned and checked the cupboards behind him, and in the very last one he found a single unopened box of granola bars. He tossed them onto the counter and continued his search.

After thirty minutes of overturning every cushion and opening every drawer, he was only able to add a six pack of bottled water to his pile, as well as the quickly rotting fruit Rosetta had packed. Though the scant supplies distressed him, they justified the obvious determination he'd already made; they needed to find some help.

He went back to the top of the boat to confirm what he already knew; the boat engine was destroyed. He peered into the gaping hole where the engine sat half-submerged in water, with a large, fiberglass plank shearing through the top. He was going to have to row then. Daniel grabbed the fiberglass plank and tossed it onto the cockpit floor, then went into the galley.

Andy was awake. He looked up to Daniel and said, "I'm hungry, Daddy."

"Ahhh!" Daniel said and trundled over to the counter. "It's a good thing I found these then, eh?"

He displayed an over-ripe apple and pear like prize gems.

Andy reached out for the fruit but Daniel held it away from him.

"Hold yer horses, buddy. This is all we have, so we have to ration it. Do you know what ration means?" asked Daniel.

Andy nodded but shook his hands to the fruit anyway. Both of their stomachs growled stubbornly.

"First, you need to take your medicine," Daniel said and produced a pill from the bottle in his front pocket.

Andy quickly swallowed the pill with one of the six bottles of water, then held his hands out for the fruit again. Daniel gave him the apple and he greedily set upon it.

"Slow down," he said, but Andy was done practically before he finished the sentence.

Daniel tried to set a better example. He ate his pear mod-

estly. When had he last eaten? Two days ago, at least. The pear did little to satisfy him, but at least Andy seemed content with his apple. Six granola bars, two more apples, and 5 bottles of water wasn't much to last them however long it took Daniel to get to the buildings on the horizon, but they would have to be enough.

Andy handed him the stripped bare skeleton of his apple core and Daniel asked, "How are you feelin'?"

Andy shrugged complacently. Though he was dirty, and greasy, and his hair was still matted with crusty gobs of dried blood, he really did look better. The fever had retreated from his cheeks and his eyes were bright and clear.

"My throat still tickles, and my chest is achy, but..." He shrugged again and cast about for Elliephont. The doll was lounging on the cushion behind him and Andy quickly snatched him up.

"Well, a few more pills and you'll be back bouncing off the walls, I expect," said Daniel, grinning at his son. "Listen, buddy. I need to do some important work today. I could use you and Elliephont's help. Y'all wanna help Daddy out?"

Andy nodded his head eagerly. He held Elliephont up as though the doll were awaiting instructions too.

"Good," said Daniel and pointed up to the cockpit at the piece of fiberglass planking he'd liberated from the broken engine. "You see that board there? Well, I need y'all to help me find another one like it. It doesn't have to be exactly like it, just similar. You understand?"

Andy took to the task enthusiastically and within 15 minutes he struggled up to the top of the boat, where Daniel was rummaging through the various holds under the seats, with a heavy plank of plastic wood. Andy's tongue stuck out through the gaps in his smile as he concentrated hard on both lifting the board and maintaining his grip on Elliephont.

"Hey! Look at that! You two are awesome!" said Daniel as he examined the board. It had once been one of the running boards along the wall in the galley and it was thin but sturdy. It widened considerably at one end; it would make a perfect

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paddle.

He smiled at Andy, whose chest was puffed out as though he'd trapped a bear. Daniel had of course earlier seen this particular piece of running board, but he'd wanted to get Andy involved somehow, make him feel important, since the rowing was not something Andy would be able to help with.

"Alright, buddy. Now listen. You and Ellie did really good. I'm really proud of you," he offered Andy a congratulatory pat on the shoulder and continued. "Now, Daddy has to do some work today. *Daddy* work. Do you understand? It's going to be hard so I need you and Elliephont to stay where you won't get hurt. Do you think y'all can find some things to do for the next little bit?"

Andy was incredulous. He pouted.

"No, Daddy, we wanna help you..." he started, but Daniel shook his head.

"I know you do, and I want you to help, but this is Daddy work and it'd be dangerous for you."

Andy didn't respond for a moment, but then he gave a curt nod and looked at his shuffling feet, Elliephont dangling at his side. Daniel nodded too and stood, patting Andy on the shoulder again.

"Alright, well, be safe. And don't play with anything sharp," said Daniel, picking up the two boards in his hands and climbing onto the bow of the boat. He called over his shoulder, "Maybe we'll go swimming a little later."

Daniel stood tall on the boat, stretching his arms and legs and chest. He'd had a friend in college, Billy Jordan, who'd been on the crew team and Billy would always say, "The trick is to be consistent...and keep breathing, always keep breathing," whenever anyone would marvel at the difficulty of rowing.

*Just keep breathing...*

Daniel looked to the east. With the late morning's heat, the mist had returned, but he was certain he could see buildings on the horizon. The wind was blowing steadily against them, which would make things more difficult, but from everything

he could tell it looked like the current was pushing them slightly northeast; at least he wouldn't have to row against stream.

He breathed heavily as he settled into a groove at the bow of the boat and squeezed his feet under the grab rails. The paddles were unwieldy. They were two different lengths and the fiberglass plank was difficult to hold, but they also were long and flat and they gripped the water like honey. He started to row, slowly at first since every time he would pull the boards to his chest one or both of them would slip from his grip. He nearly dropped them in the water twice before he got a good start, but as the minutes turned to hours he slid into a rhythm that was exhausting but strangely pleasurable. It was like the feeling when you sink a shot in basketball, like everything had lined up correctly and followed in a straight line. Most importantly he was doing something. Action was always preferable to inaction.

After a few hours Daniel was dripping sweat and needed to take a break. He hadn't allowed himself to check on his progress the entire time he'd been rowing, but now that he was stopped he permitted a small peek. His shoulders slumped in disappointment; it didn't look like they'd moved at all.

He cursed under his breath and dragged the paddles out of the water and threw them into the cockpit. They clattered with a hollow bang and for a terrified moment he was certain one of them was going to skip right out of the boat and into the water. Andy, who had been playing in the galley poked his head out of the quarters and blinked up at his father.

"Daddy?" he asked.

Daniel's shoulders softened as he dropped down into the cockpit and collapsed into the nearest seat.

"Nothing," he wheezed and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Daddy's just a little tired, that's all."

That seemed to satisfy Andy, and he retreated back into the gloaming.

Daniel called after him, "Hey! And! What have you been doing all afternoon?"

Andy emerged from the darkness again, this time with El-

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liephont in tow.

“We’ve been playing War,” he replied.

Daniel nodded.

“Well, be careful,” he said.

Andy looked at him awkwardly, as though he’d said something ridiculous.

“You can’t be careful in War, Daddy,” he replied.

“Yeah, but you can make sure you aren’t playing around sharp things. Make sure you check the water before you go throwing yourself around, k?”

“Ok, Daddy,” said Andy, his body quivering to get back to his play.

“Alright, have fun.”

Andy let out an exuberant shout and disappeared again, and Daniel closed his eyes against the brilliance of the mid-day sun. His head ached. He was dehydrated, but they had so little water that he couldn’t risk drinking it this early. He still had a long way to row.

He rested for another fifteen minutes, letting the sun bake away his sweat, his muscles growing turgid from overuse, He forced himself to stand and stretch his arms and legs again. He snatched up the paddles, climbed back to the bow and began rowing again, and within minutes he found the same monotonously satisfying rhythm he’d known earlier.

The sun began to dip low against the horizon before he allowed himself another break, and by that time Andy had quit his play and had fallen asleep behind Daniel on one of the cockpit cushions. He let the paddles clatter to the floor of the cockpit and collapsed next to Andy.

His entire body ached, his arms and legs and chest blazed from hours of straining, blisters bubbled on his ass where it had chafed against the smooth fiberglass of the bow with hundreds and thousands of repeated strokes. His skin burned and itched from hours of hot, sweaty exertion.

Andy stirred next to him and his eyes fluttered open and lighted on his father’s fevered face.

“Daddy? I’m sorry I fell asleep,” Andy said groggily. “El-lie and me were going to come help you but...”

“It’s alright, buddy. It looks like you two did more than enough today.” Daniel smiled wanly, exhausted. “How many bad guys did you get today?”

Andy looked sad and ashamed suddenly as he said, “None. It was a hard day.”

Daniel laughed in spite of himself.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” he said. “I guess it was a hard day for both of us.”

Andy laughed as well, and it warmed Daniel’s heart.

“Hey, what d’you say we go for a swim?” he asked suddenly, unaware he was going to ask it before he did. “We need to take a bath anyway.”

He grabbed at the congealed blood in Andy’s hair and looked faux-disgusted. Andy sat up and his eyes lit up.

“Yesyesyesyes!” he said.

“Alright. Cool your jets,” Daniel laughed.

He sat up straighter. He shook his head and stood up. Andy leapt excitedly from the cushion and stood next to him.

“Alright. We need to get into our bathing suits,” said Daniel, slowly regaining his playfulness through his fatigue.

Andy looked at him puzzled. Daniel grinned and ruffled his hair.

“We need to get into our bathing suits,” he said and stripped off his shirt and pants, standing in his boxer briefs. Andy, getting the hint, also peeled off his shirt and pants.

They moved out onto the diving platform and stood poised. Daniel looked at his son.

“Ready?” asked Daniel. It sounded like a dare.

Andy nodded, and his body was taut and ready and fearful and excited all at once. He tiptoed at the edges of the platform, doing a small dance of anticipation.

They stood on the edge of the great ocean, with the sensuously cool water licking at their toes, the new moon poking over the horizon, the sun retreating on the opposite side of the sky. Daniel was overcome by the moment; he felt young

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again, impossibly young again. There was this massive body of water that surrounded them, and defeated them, and cowed them, reminded them over and over how small they were, how out of place, foreign, alone. And yet they would jump in, and disturb the glassy calm and make their marks, even if those marks disappeared the moment they were made.

He turned to his son, grinning like a wild child, and patted his head. They were in this together.

“OK, on the count of three. One...” Daniel started but Andy stopped him with a grab of the hand.

“Papa, will there be sharks?”

Daniel wondered for a moment if there were sharks in these waters; it hadn't occurred to him. A wry, sarcastic voice at the back of his head suggested that at least being eaten by sharks would be quicker than starving to death.

“Of course not,” Daniel replied and then added with a smile, “You've got nothing to worry about, buddy. Just stay close to me and stay close to the boat the whole time.”

Andy nodded.

Daniel asked, “Ready?”

Andy nodded again and Daniel counted off, *One... Two... Three!*

They leaped wildly into the air, with their arms splayed out above their heads, landing with a rush of surprising coolness in the water. It washed over them, and it enveloped them, and it swallowed them all at once and it was delirious, delicious.

Daniel kicked upward, momentarily and happily lost. He felt as though he were the water and the water were him in a way that was deep and expansive like nothing he'd experienced before. He was aware of the depths below him and though such depths frightened him, he laughed in their face and broke for the surface, shaking his head as he grabbed hold of the diving platform. He felt exuberant and giddy, refreshed, and freer than he had in years.

Andy bobbed next to him a brief moment later, spluttering and floundering in the endearingly unselfconscious manner of young children. Daniel grabbed his hand and guided it to the

boat. Andy wiped his tangled, matted hair out of his eyes, and he smiled wide and unabashed.

Daniel ducked himself underwater a couple of times and felt the stress and exhaustion of the day wash from his skin, even as the blood and grime and sweat washed from his hair. He wiped the water from his eyes then grabbed Andy and dipped his head backward into the water, ringing out his hair and washing its dirty black curls of the blood and grime. He grabbed up handfuls of cool water and splashed it gently on Andy's face, and Andy splashed Daniel back.

They spent the next ten minutes in a water-fight, dashing sprays into each other's faces and laughing as the water sizzled against their skin. It suddenly felt good and powerful to laugh in the face of such overwhelming destruction.

After about thirty minutes, their teeth began to chatter and they got out of the ocean and laid lazily on the front of the boat for another half hour, letting the still warm air dry them at its own pace.

Night fell in earnest, and though Andy was snoring next to him and Daniel could feel fatigue settling on his shoulders, he resisted the urge to sleep. It was still too early. The evening air had cooled considerably reviving in him a sense of purpose. He carried Andy down to the cockpit and laid him gently in the seat cushions, placing Elliephant in his arms. He climbed back up onto the bow and settled into the groove at the head of the boat, wincing at the blisters on his butt and the palms of his hands.

All around him the world faded from gray to black, but the stars, unencumbered by any clouds or competition from the city below, were brighter than anytime Daniel remembered and they provided more than enough light to go by.

His progress through the day, though agonizingly slow, had brought him near enough the shapes on the horizon that not only was he now certain he was headed in the right direction, but he also knew exactly where it was he was headed to. Even at this distance, Daniel—who had spent nearly his entire adult life studying and designing buildings—recognized one

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of the buildings as the new Alpharetta Arts and Science Tower which had been completed last year to tremendous fanfare. He had thought the building was ugly back then, but found it even more repugnant now, with its white cement face rising out of the ocean like a tooth in a diseased jaw.

The tower was tall, certainly taller than any of the other buildings around it, and the whiteness of the building stood out in obliging contrast to both the day and night skies, making it easy for him to spot. So, for lack of any better landmark, he struck out for the tower, leaving whatever ill feelings he had toward it in the past.

Things started slowly as he battled the tightness in his limbs and the tenderness of the blisters on his hands. Every stroke hurt all over his body; his hands, his butt cheeks, his shoulders, his back, all of it burned and sizzled. He bit back screams of pain, not wanting to wake up Andy.

More than once, as the pain ratcheted to a screeching fever in his body, he nearly quit, yet somehow each time he mustered the strength to continue. He forced himself to row two more times, three more times, five more times, always the stopping point just a few more strokes ahead of him like a mirage he couldn't quite reach. He thought of Andy sleeping behind him, and what would happen to him if he was not able to get to the buildings in a few days. He thought of the bounty of supplies which surely must be held in such buildings. And when his will seemed on the very edge of breaking he even thought of Cindy and what she would think of him if he quit now, when all he had to do was row just a few...more...times.

Hours passed and the new, somber moon rose high in the sky, its face as pallid as porcelain, the hollows of its eyes as dark as the night that surrounded it. Daniel didn't look at the moon; he struggled on.

His shirt soaked all the way through with sweat. Blood coated the handles of both paddles like grisly paint as the blisters broke into open sores and began flowing, lubricating his sliding hands. He grunted openly now, no longer caring whether Andy heard him or not, no longer noticing that he was

making noises at all. His mind, useless and unhelpful, wandered both far and near at the same time, walking the rows of Cindy's funeral and his father's funeral and the mental home in which he'd stashed his mother so she would die in a flood he never knew was coming. He couldn't let himself stop; he couldn't let the pain stop. It needed to continue. He needed to feel this. He counted the strokes to pass the time.

...1,034...1,035...1,036...

The wind blew off the water, cooling his brow, and flapping his hair around his head. He heard voices in the wind bubbling over one another, like a theater just moments before the picture started. And just like in a crowded room, he heard his name spoken over and over and over again. He let the voices bathe over him, whispering his name like snakes, as he let his blood drip onto the fake wood of the paddles.

...1,167...1,168...1,169 ...

Blood dripped onto the boat, onto his thighs, into the water around him. He filled the sea with his blood and it rose around him and sloshed in the boat and covered him with wisps of watery, running blood. He tried to scream but he couldn't, he could only row on and on.

But the boat never moved. The sea rose higher.

*Andy! I need to get Andy!* He thought and he turned to look. But his son was gone. In his place was a man dressed in shadows. They whipped around him like tattered rags. They moved against the wind and with the wind and yet did not move at all.

"No, please! What'd you do with Andy!?! What'd you do with my son!?" he pleaded.

The man laughed, a deep, unnatural sound and the boat rocked back and forth violently with the sound. The ocean roiled and boiled under him and the boat began to melt like an ice cube in warm water. Daniel clung desperately as the ship slipped away under him, grasping at the plastic and fiberglass even as they melted in his hands. The man floated in the air above the water, laughing and waving his pale hands wildly in the air.

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“Please! Why are you doing this to me? What’d you do with my son?”

The man stopped laughing and suddenly everything went still; the sea, the boat, the very air around them was absolutely still.

*My child, you have everything you need right here,* said the man and then he disappeared, leaving Daniel floating on a thin board of plastic, terrified and alone.



# CHAPTER EIGHT

## The tower

“Daddy? Daddy, why’d you sleep out here?”

Daniel opened his eyes and looked into Andy’s worried face. Andy had crawled onto the top of the boat and was kneeling next to him and shaking him.

“Huh?” grunted Daniel, trying to sit up.

His shoulders and back screeched with the effort. He looked down at his hands and winced. They were puffy and pink and plastered with dried blood. His fingers were bent into aching claws.

“Daddy? Are you ok?”

“Yeah...yeah, I’m fine, buddy. I just...” He paused a moment. He really wasn’t certain what to say next so he just repeated, “I’m fine.”

Andy helped him into a sitting position, pushing on his back as Daniel gripped the side rails loosely with the tips of his fingers, grunting at the pain.

“Thanks, And,” he said and waved Andy gingerly away.

He sat for a moment and looked out at the sea. The sun hadn't really begun to rise, but a glimmer of orange bulged at the horizon, and sent glittering streamers along the tops of the waves. The buildings in the distance were noticeably closer and that lightened his heart a little.

The night pieced itself together for him, and he remembered rowing for hours and hours until his hands were so blistered that he just laid back and...well, he must have fallen asleep because the next thing he remembered was...

*The Dark Man.*

...Andy waking him up.

He turned to Andy, tried a wan smile and showed him his battered hands, "Well, I guess I'll need to use gloves today, eh?"

Andy grimaced at the sight of Daniel's hands and looked away toward the buildings in the distance.

"You must have rowed a lot last night, Daddy. They're a lot closer," he said wistfully, almost to himself. "Do you think we'll get there today?"

He looked back at Daniel hopefully. Daniel patted him on the shoulder gingerly.

"What d'you think, buddy? Think we can do it?"

Andy paused a moment and looked back at the buildings, his brow furrowed in thought. Daniel couldn't help but laugh at him, and Andy looked back at him, first surprised and then giggling along.

"I do think we'll get there today, Daddy," he said and patted Daniel on his shoulder very much the way Daniel always did to him. "You did a good job yesterday, and I think you can do it again."

Daniel laughed again, and it felt good for him to laugh. He stood up, and wobbled on his feet for a moment.

"Well, we ain't going nowhere without a good breakfast," he said and moved down into the cockpit. Andy followed after him.

"Look at me, Daddy!" he shouted as he leaped, giggling wildly and waving his hands in the air.

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Daniel laughed and hugged Andy close to him.

“You wanna get breakfast started while I get a Band-Aid for my boo-boos?” asked Daniel and Andy leaped into the darkness of the galley as Daniel stepped onto the diving platform and kneeled painfully. He held his hands inches above the salt water and paused for a moment, dreading the sting he knew was coming. He plunged his hands into the water.

The pain was worse than he’d imagined. Every inch of his hands burned with a fire that didn’t extinguish when he pulled them out of the water again. He dried them on his shirt and pants and waited patiently as the pain continued for a long minute as his hands slowly began to feel better.

Andy leaped up into the cockpit, holding two apples triumphantly aloft, and shouted, “Breakfast’s served!”

“You must be feeling better,” laughed Daniel, standing and reaching for his apple. “But that doesn’t mean you get out of taking your medicine.”

“Daddy! No!” retorted Andy, stomping his foot.

“Sorry, buddy. It’s just the way it is.”

Daniel reached into his pocket, shook the bottle of pills jokingly at his son and then grabbed a loose bottle of water sitting on one of the cockpit cushions. He handed Andy the water and a pill and Andy swallowed one with the other and then set voraciously upon his apple. Daniel watched him for a moment then starting eating his own apple. It did nothing to settle his aching stomach. He thought longingly of the granola bars down below but then looked at the distance he still had to cover and shoved his hunger aside.

“You still hungry, buddy?” he asked Andy and Andy nodded.

“Alright, then, you can have a granola bar,” he said and then added as Andy rushed eagerly down below, “But only one! We need to save some for later.”

Andy emerged moments later with the granola bar half eaten and Daniel handed him the bottle of water.

“You need to drink the rest of this, buddy. I don’t want you to get dehydrated.”

You oughtta be taking your own advice, he thought to himself and considered drinking one of the remaining bottles. He was extremely thirsty, but they'd already gone through three of the six bottles in one day and since he couldn't gauge how much further they had to go, it would be stupid to drink another. Besides if anyone was going to drink, it would be Andy. So, he contented himself by going down under, taking a few sips from one of the bottles, and then emerging back out into the rising sunlight.

Already the morning was growing warm; he really needed to start rowing before things got much warmer.

"Ready to start the day?" he asked, as much to himself as Andy.

Andy nodded and sat on one of the cushions in the cockpit as Daniel climbed back up to his groove in the bow and picked up the paddles. His hands burned the minute he touched them and he set them down quickly.

There's no way I can do this all day, not with my hands the way they are.

He looked around him for anything he might be able to use as gloves. He peeled off his shirt and wrapped the cloth around his right hand, gripping the paddle with the covered hand. It felt instantly better so he called back to Andy.

"And? Give Daddy your shirt."

Andy didn't ask any questions, he just peeled off his shirt and handed it to Daniel, who wrapped it around his left hand and picked up the other paddle. There was still pain, but Daniel was surprised at how little. He gripped the paddles, placed them in the water and began to row again.

While there may have been little pain with his blistered hands, his shoulders and back were another matter altogether. They never warmed up to the renewed exercise; he simply had done too much the previous day and night and his body was worn out. But he struggled on, keeping his focus on reaching the outcropping of buildings before nightfall, which, as the morning drifted to noon and then early evening, became an

## Black Stag, White Doe

increasingly unlikely prospect.

They were getting closer, so much so that he could make out where the pounding of the waves at the base of the Arts and Science Tower had broken through, creating a small inlet where they might be able to dock. But they were at least a day or more away from the buildings, and Daniel was quickly despairing.

After hours of rowing, he threw aside the paddles with a groan and fell onto his back. He was so exhausted. He decided to knock off early and hope a good night's sleep would give him more push for what he hoped would be their final day at sea.

For dinner Daniel let Andy have another granola bar but he ate nothing himself, instead splitting with his son the remainder of the fourth bottle of water and tightening his proverbial belt. He gave Andy another antibiotic pill, breathing a sigh of relief at how much healthier Andy looked.

An hour later they slid easily into sleep, lying nestled beside one another in their small, make-shift bed in the galley, while the moon watched them from above.

The next morning Daniel woke with his throat so parched that it was all he could do to stop himself from draining the last bottles of water himself. But he did stop himself and handed the second half of the fifth bottle to Andy.

One bottle left. A sinking depression bloomed bitter in his stomach. He felt miserable within and without. His back, shoulders, and hands, even with the night's sleep, were throbbing and stiff. His head pounded from the beginnings of dehydration and starvation. His stomach was a tight fist, spasming loudly and mutinously. Even the light of the sun seemed veiled and cheerless; it filtered through the gash in the ceiling in gray muted tones, staining their faces the color of smeared ash.

Andy had woken up that morning looking inexplicably ill again. Though he was trying his best to hide it, three days without sufficient food and water was taking a ragged toll on Andy despite his apparent healthfulness only the day before.

There were hollow crescents under his eyes, making them look pale and haunted. He'd lost weight, though he was never very big to begin with, and his thin ribs stuck through his bare skin like the wires of a birdcage.

"Ready for breakfast?" asked Daniel, trying to muster some semblance of cheerfulness. His voice sounded thick and crusted.

Andy bravely reciprocated, though the smile just made his thin face look like a skull.

Daniel's stomach burred painfully as he pulled out the last two granola bars, handed one of them to Andy, and held the other in his own hands.

"Bon Appetit," he said, and the two of them downed their bars in three bites each.

That was it; the last of their food. As it slid into Daniel's stomach, a thin, panicked vein of guilt grew there. He should have given Andy the last granola bar; he shouldn't have eaten it himself.

He shook his head against the thought. It had been three days, all he'd eaten were a few apples and a granola bar, and he had miles and miles left to row. Though he knew he needed his strength or else they would both be dead, it didn't make him feel any better.

"Listen, And," he said, kneeling next to his son. "Are you feeling bad again? You look terrible."

"I'm fine, Daddy," replied Andy but there was a weariness in his eyes and voice.

"You need to take it easy today. Why don't you go back to bed?"

Andy didn't even have the energy to argue. He simply nodded vaguely and held Elliephont close to his chest. Daniel smiled and ruffled Andy's hair, wincing at the pain in his red, raw hands.

"Alright, buddy. Well, I'll be up top if you need me."

Daniel went to the top of the boat and looked around. They'd drifted a little to the northeast in the night, but the drift

## Black Stag, White Doe

had little effect on how far they had to travel this day. He could see the Arts and Science Tower standing tall, closer but still an indecipherable distance away. It gleamed pearly white though the sun's light was half-hidden behind mounting clouds from the east. A storm was coming and the air was charged with an electric tension which only added to his miserable mood.

He mounted the bow of the boat like a man convicted, gripped the paddles in his wrapped hands and began to row, trying his best to muster a relish for the task. But he'd mostly blown himself out that first day and evening. He was simply too exhausted now, beyond anything he'd ever felt before.

He rowed steadily, with no pretention, grunting like an animal, each stroke exactly like the last and exactly like the one after. His back screamed and so did his hands, a tiny note of pain which grew eventually to a chorus. He ignored it just as he ignored the building clouds in the east and the forks of lightning which licked silently at the horizon.

Rouge flowers bloomed through his hand wrappings, but still he rowed on with the same steady pace, watching without seeing, as the buildings, which had seemed so far away two days before, began to grow closer and more defined.

Andy troubled him little throughout the morning, spending most of that time sleeping within the galley. By mid-day he began to grow restless, and Daniel could hear him talking and rustling about in the cabin below. Though he couldn't make out any words, Andy's voice rose and dropped low as though he was having an animated conversation. Eventually Andy quieted and in the contemplative silence that followed Daniel's mind drifted elsewhere listening to the rustling water, and dreaming desperately for the end of this.

The storm clouds swallowed all of the eastern sky and crept toward him, stirring up a vapory breeze which blew in his face and made his work even more difficult. He grew increasingly panicked as he considered the consequences of not reaching the buildings by the time the storm hit. The boat had already taken on considerable water during the flood and, though the front of the small cabin would provide enough initial shelter

for them, the large holes in the ceiling of the cabin would allow so much water in that the boat might actually sink.

He allowed himself a peek at the buildings to see how far he'd come and was shocked to find they seemed only a mere few miles away. He shouted exuberantly despite himself and shook his fists in the air. Only a few more miles. They might actually make it; they might actually get there.

He grabbed excitedly for his paddles and began to row again just as a firework of white lightning exploded across the sky. The thunder came just a few seconds later and Daniel flinched instinctively at the sound, throwing his hands protectively over his head and yelping in surprise.

As the thunder trickled to a dull grumbling in the distance he straightened cautiously, scanning the horizon for the next bolt of lightning. He was about to grab his paddles again when Andy burst from the cabin with an animal cry and brandishing a small piece of wood like a sword. Daniel shouted in surprise for the second time, and turned to tell Andy not to yell like that, but something stopped him when he saw his son.

Andy was a boy possessed. He danced around the cockpit, waving the makeshift sword about his head, and orchestrating intricately choreographed ballets in which he taunted and bested an invisible adversary. He laughed and screamed and shouted, his eyes flashing like blue flames within his brown face, the gray storm-light imbuing them with a restless desperation that was unsettling, like nothing Daniel had ever seen in his son's face before.

Andy lifted the board high in the air and gave a ferocious scream.

"Stay away from him!" Andy screamed as he brought the end of the board down hard on the cockpit floor as though piercing the chest of a fallen enemy. "He's mine! He's mine! He's mine!"

All of a sudden, as though something had given way and was spewing out of him, Andy began to smack the cockpit floor and cushions hard with the board, his screams becoming indecipherable. The wood made a hollow thudding noise

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against the fiberglass of the boat, like the sound of hollow pipes banging together. Andy waved the board wildly around his head and brought it down hard on any surface he could reach.

In the distance, but noticeably closer, two crackles of lightning shimmered together, sending shockwaves of thunder rolling over the boat. Daniel tried to call to Andy but his voice was drowned out by the roar of the thunder.

“Andy!?”

“He’s mine. You can’t have him. He’s mine, he’s mine, he’s miiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnne!!!”

“ANDY!?”

Daniel dropped the paddles to the bow of the boat and sprang toward his son. Andy swung the wood at Daniel’s head as he leaped into the cockpit, but Daniel reacted quickly and smacked the board away. It clattered to the ground with a hollow thud as Daniel snatched Andy up in his arms. Andy screamed and thrashed in Daniel’s arms, beating at Daniel’s face and chest with his tiny hands and shouting, “NOOOOOO!!!!”

“Andy! Wake up!”

Daniel tried to restrain Andy’s arms with his free hand but Andy just bellowed, wriggling in his arms.

“Leave me alone! I won’t, I won’t...” he screamed.

Daniel grabbed Andy’s face and forced his son to look at him. They locked eyes and they were not blue, they were black, as though his pupils and irises had fused into solid black orbs, as cold as dead flesh and deeper than anything Daniel had ever seen. Daniel tried to back away—this wasn’t his son, this was...something else—but before he could react Andy reached out his hands to both sides of Daniel’s head and touched him.

A blue flash rippled through Daniel’s mind and a tremor like an electrical current sizzled between him and Andy. Snatches of images and memories blew through him. He saw Cindy lying in a casket, her face serene as a wooded pond, everyone crying and hugging and wailing. He saw the moment his father died, the very moment the truck split him in half,

and he heard his mother screaming as she sprawled over his broken and bleeding body. He saw Andy crying and crying. He had an ear infection and Daniel was angry and frustrated. He wanted Andy to stop crying but he couldn't stop, he just couldn't...stop...fucking crying. *Goddamnit! Shut up! Shut up! Won't he just shut up?* And Daniel saw the figurine next to him and he saw it move a little, and then it smashed against the wall behind Andy.

*No, I didn't do that! It wasn't me. I didn't do that! That wasn't me.*

Someone spoke and Daniel turned to see. Pale eyes floated in the darkness, watching him and he fell and he fell and then...

...he was holding his limp son in his arms and shaking his head in confusion.

"Andy?" he asked, shaking him and patting his cheek. "Andy, wake up."

Andy's eyes fluttered open and for a brief, terrifying moment Daniel was sure they were black, but then Andy's bright blues locked on his and Daniel hugged him close and frantically kissed his cheek.

"Thank God, Andy. I thought...I..."

Already the images were warping into shades of unreality and he was no longer sure any of it had happened. Andy struggled against him, wriggling to be let down.

"Daddy! Stop," said Andy, batting away Daniel's hands. "Let me down."

Daniel reluctantly let Andy slide out of his arms to the cockpit floor, and watched as he nonchalantly went into the cabin and emerged again with Elliephont clutched in his arms. Andy walked passed Daniel and sat down on one of the cockpit cushions, looking up at the storm clouds.

"It's going to rain soon, Daddy," he said and his face was calm, as if nothing at all had just happened.

"And..." started Daniel, but he wasn't sure how to continue. Andy looked away from the storm and surveyed his father

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with a bemused look.

“Andy, did something...? What just happened?” asked Daniel.

Andy shrugged and looked back at the storm. He sat quietly for a moment as if he had nothing else to offer, and then he added, “I had a dream...and then you woke me up.”

“Do you remember your dream?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What was it about? Was anyone else in it?”

Andy nodded and a small hint of fear clouded his face.

“Do you remember anyone else in your dream?” asked Daniel.

“Uh-huh. You were in my dream, Daddy.”

“Was anyone else?”

Andy nodded again but he sat quietly for several moments. He fidgeted with Elliephont. Daniel was growing impatient and he kneeled in front of Andy, gripping his upper arms.

“Who else? Who else was in the dream?”

For a moment Daniel was certain Andy wouldn't say anything else. He was obstinately avoiding eye contact, gazing into the distance as though desperately interested in something far away.

“Was there anyone else in your dream?”

Andy reluctantly nodded and then looked Daniel directly in the eyes.

“Uh-huh, but I don't like him. He visits me sometimes. He feels bad.”

“Who visits you?”

“The Shadow Man, Daddy.”

The first chill drops of rain began to fall. Daniel raised his face to the air, as though he was only suddenly aware of the imminent storm. A few fat drops of rain plopped on his cheeks and ran away like tears.

“Dammit!” he hissed, looking longingly at the buildings, which had seemed so close just minutes before, but which now were an eternity away. The storm had arrived earlier than he'd

thought and he still had so much distance to cover. “Come on, buddy. Let’s get you out of the rain.”

He urged Andy into the galley, sitting him down on the conglomerate of cushions and pillows they’d been using as a bed. He turned to leave and Andy reached out for him.

“No, Daddy! Stay!” Andy said sharply.

“And, I can’t. I have to get us to the buildings before the storm comes harder.”

“Please don’t go, Daddy,” pleaded Andy, his bright blue eyes beginning to swim with tears. He looked around them terrified, pulling on Daniel’s pant leg. “I don’t wanna be down here alone.”

Daniel followed the sweep of Andy’s gaze and suddenly realized how dark the galley was. The storm clouds had swallowed the sunlight completely, leaving the corners of the galley swaddled in black and bruised cobwebs. For a terrified moment Daniel imagined he saw pale eyes watching him from one of the corners of the room, but when he looked back they were gone.

You’re hungry, he told himself as he turned back to Andy, ruffled his hair with showy bravado, and said, “You’re still sick, big guy. The last thing you need is to sit out in the rain. You stay down here and let Daddy finish getting us to the buildings. There’ll be food there, and we can get us a proper dinner. Aren’t you hungry?”

The idea of dinner seemed to brighten Andy’s spirits and Daniel turned his back and headed out to the cockpit with Andy’s comically toothless grin imprinted on his mind’s eye.

The rain was little more than a tickle at the back of his neck when he assumed the paddles again but it was clear the storm was close at hand. Daniel rowed vigorously toward the crop of buildings, hoping that he would somehow get the boat safely docked before the downpour began.

A crackle of lightning licked the distance...

*One... Two... Three...*

...and then thunder rolled across the sea. Water roiled at the helm of the boat where Daniel sat, sea foam exploding to

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either side of him like sprays of bluish cotton candy. He was tossed high in the air as he rode the crests of ever-larger waves and then sped down their backsides, crashing headlong into the front of the next crest. Each time he was certain he would be tossed overboard and yet each time his footing held and he spent the next frantic, surprised moments paddling furiously up the next wave.

This cycle continued for what seemed an hour and even though he was already exhausted from the effort he didn't feel he was any closer to the buildings. They still remained tantalizingly distant, wavering in the haze of the pre-storm light like mirages. He could see clearly the jagged hole where the waterline had battered away at the base of the Arts and Science Tower.

*And what if the boat doesn't fit?*

He shoved the thought away and focused on rowing, feeling the ache in his arms and back, and the rawness of his butt as it chafed against the hide of the boat. His hands had already begun to bleed into the paddle wrappings again. His throat burned and his stomach was in knots of discomfort. Still there was something morbidly comforting in the pain; it kept him both clear-headed and focused, yet swimming in a myopic soup of panic and irritation. It kept him rowing.

There was another crackle of lightning but this time it was followed almost immediately by an ear-splitting roar of thunder that slammed into Daniel's eardrums. The rain followed only moments later, as if a shower had been suddenly turned on, drenching Daniel thoroughly within seconds. The air became a humid smog of waves and splashing rain as the wind screamed passed him.

The waves grew larger with the increased wind, so much so that as Daniel reached each crest his paddles were lifted from the water, leaving him momentarily stranded at the top of the wave. He could only row as the boat skimmed down the backside of the massive waves, hoping his momentum would carry him to the top of the next wave and beyond.

The long hours passed and the darkness deepened with the

coming night. The buildings ahead existed only as black shadows rising ominously out of the sea. At the top of the Arts and Science Tower, Daniel swore he saw tiny lights glinting, and though he wiped his eyes many times in disbelief the lights remained. Excitement fluttered inside of him but he quickly squashed it. He focused desperately on keeping the line on the northwestern corner of the building. The waves tossed him violently, as he paddled furiously up the front of each wave, and crashed down on the other side.

Throughout all, Andy made no sound below.

Steadily, Daniel found himself at the feet of the Arts and Science Tower. He rode the next wave to the very top and was suddenly overcome by a sickening sense of vertigo as he realized just how high each wave was rising in relation to the building now only tens of yards away. With each crest the waterline would climb up the building nearly to the top of the opening and then recede to almost two stories below.

He was only one or two more wave crests away, each one tossing him inexorably toward the building, and he began to understand the difficulty of docking within this building with all the sea raging around him. After days of paddling and looking forward to this moment, Daniel now desperately wished he could slow down a little bit. He was going too fast; he was going to speed through the opening and crash, or simply miss it entirely.

He rode the next wave to the top and watched as the building swallowed the sea ahead of him. His stomach lurched as he skidded down the back of the wave, digging his paddles into the water in a futile attempt to slow the boat. His paddles ripped from his hands and he clutched frantically to the railing as he crashed into the bottom of the wave. Water rushed over him in torrents, filling his mouth with salt and nearly knocking him off the boat.

He breathed in sharply as he was tossed atop the last wave's back, coming face to face with the gaping mouth of the Arts and Science Tower's opening. It was like a great fish, the jagged rim of glass, the teeth, waiting to swallow him. It

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grinned at him, lurched forward. He had barely enough time to shout a half-articulated warning to Andy before they were swallowed completely.

His only thought: *We're going to miss...*

They didn't.

Daniel ducked right before his head would have been severed by the sharp edges of glass at the rim of the opening, and scrambled backwards, aided by the forward momentum of the boat. As he leaped into the cockpit he felt a jarring crunch as the boat slammed into the nearest wall and was forced upward by the rising tide into the ceiling where it lodged itself with a screech of warping metal. Daniel was thrown forward and smacked his head, his neck popping ominously. Stars blinded him as he clutched at the nearest object he could find and held on tightly, waiting for the boat to inevitably be washed back out into the storm.

The great wash receded back out of the building and the boat sank and wobbled with the tide. Daniel felt the water tugging hard on the boat but whatever the hull was caught on in the ceiling held, and they remained solidly wedged into the building. He breathed a hitched sigh and lay back against one of the cockpit cushions with his eyes closed, listening indifferently to the garbled sounds of the rain on the water outside and the heavy waves which rolled into the make-shift dock, and forced the boat up and down with every fresh crest.

“Andy!?” he called without opening his eyes. His head was throbbing with his heartbeat, and each pulse burned the back of his eyeballs. “Andy!? You ok?”

At first he heard nothing but then there was a rustling from inside the galley and Andy's voice wafted weakly from the darkness.

“Daddy?”



# CHAPTER NINE

## Lay of the land

Andy's face emerged in the galley doorway, pale and wan in what little light filtered through the thick storm clouds. A thin trickle of blood, which looked black in the night, dribbled from a large lump on his forehead.

"Daddy, my head hurts," he complained as he crawled into the cockpit, dragging Elliephont behind him, and curled up next to Daniel.

Daniel hugged him close and looked at the bruise on his head. It was large and purple and bleeding but otherwise harmless, so Daniel kissed the edge of the lump and patted Andy's back, an uncontrollably giddy grin of relief and pride and happiness spreading across his otherwise grim face.

"I'm sure it does, buddy. You got a pretty nasty bruise," he said and held Andy out to look at his face. He smiled brightly. "But look! We made it! We made it, you and me. We did it!"

Andy returned a weak grin and clutched at Daniel's neck. They hugged each other again and then Daniel set Andy aside

and crawled to the edge of the boat.

He looked around and in the half-light he was able to make out the dim shapes around them. Their temporary dock appeared to actually be a small lobby with two silver elevator doors and one blue metal door leading to a stairwell. The boat had smashed through the soggy drywall of the ceiling and had punched almost through to the floor above. The impact of the crash had cracked the hull, producing a large divot in the fiberglass which had caught on a steel beam in the ceiling. As a result the boat was suspended on an incline just mere feet from the stairwell door, but in order to get to those stairs, Daniel and Andy were going to have to swim.

Despite the torrential rain outside, the ebb and flow of water into and out of the building remained constant and predictable, and frighteningly powerful. Every thirty seconds or so the ocean filled the lobby, raising the water level high above the top of the stairwell door, lifting the back of the boat nearly even. Then the water would empty back out into the ocean, the water level lowering to only about three feet and leaving the boat hung on the steel beam like a drying carcass.

Daniel leaned over the railing for several minutes, observing this cycle, calculating the time between peaks and trying to decide if it would be enough time to swim to the stairwell door. It was clear that if he misjudged even a little bit they would be no match for the powerful surge emptying out of the building. They would only get one chance at this.

He watched the ocean for a few more mesmerized minutes. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Andy lean dangerously over the railing and for a terrified moment Daniel was certain he was going to topple over the edge. Daniel whipped out his hand to hold him back, shouting, "Hey! Stay back, buddy!"

Andy took a few steps back, clutching Elliephont like a shield over his chest.

Daniel softened his voice, "Just hold yer motors for a second. Can you do that for Daddy?"

Andy shrugged and Daniel looked around him again, mak-

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ing sure there wasn't anything he was missing. In the darkness it was hard to make out anything, let alone any fine details.

"Alright, we're gonna have to swim for it. There's no other way," he said as much to himself as to Andy.

Daniel steeled himself on the edge of the boat, his sweating hands gripping and regripping the rail. The ocean rose and then fell, like the breathing of a great beast.

*Maybe we should wait 'til daylight. 'Til the storm's over?* He thought briefly.

The loud screech of metal on metal rang through the lobby and the boat dropped two full feet lower into the water.

"Shit! Andy, come here! Quick!" he shouted, waving with one hand and holding onto the rail with the other. The incline was not steep, but Daniel had to hold on in order to keep from tumbling off the back of the boat. Andy held onto his leg. He pointed at the stairwell and continued, "Alright, here's the deal, buddy. You see that door? We need to swim through and get to the stairs."

"Leave the boat," said Andy. Daniel couldn't tell if it was a statement or a question.

"We have to. We can't stay here."

The ocean swelled and the boat evened out, forcing Daniel and Andy to shift their weight. Daniel gestured for Andy to grab hold of the railing too.

"I need you to listen to me closely, ok? I need you to hold on tight to the railing. When the water lowers I'm going to swim to the door and open it. When I tell you *jump*, I need you to swim as fast as you can toward me. But stay where you are until I say *jump*, ok?" Andy nodded tentatively. "This is important, buddy. Do you understand everything?" Andy nodded again, this time more firmly. "Ok. Remember. If I can't get the door open on the first try don't jump in after me, we can just wait until the next wave, alright?"

Andy didn't nod this time, but Daniel could tell he understood. Daniel grabbed Elliephont from Andy's hand, stuffed the doll in Andy's waist belt, and then set Andy's newly freed hand on the railing.

“We need to make sure Ellie makes it there safe as well, right?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The water lowered and rose again and the boat evened, giving them a moment to renegotiate their grips on the railing and steel themselves for the swim. The hull creaked ominously and the boat dropped even lower in the water. Daniel could feel Andy quivering with excitement and nervousness next to him.

The ocean leaked from the lobby and when it reached its lowest point Daniel counted loudly, “Alright! One...Two... Three!”

He flung himself forward into the water, with the sound of Andy’s voice crying in his ears, “No, Daddy!” Daniel’s legs buckled under him as he landed and he was driven to his knees with a heavy grunt. The current of the waist-deep water as it rushed back into the lobby was far stiffer than he’d anticipated and immediately he was pushed hard toward the elevator doors and away from the stairwell. He tried to swim against the tide but he was no match and he found himself pressed inexorably against the elevator door, the surge dunking him under. The water was icy cold, and froze the air in his lungs. He grunted in surprise and panic, and tried desperately to push his head above water, but he was caught in a slip stream of converging, embattled tides. He was so much floundering jetsam, his mind a blank sheet of terror.

And then the tide turned and his head was thrust above water as he drifted increasingly, alarmingly fast out of the lobby. He gasped a deep breath, paddling in the foam, and watching horrified as he was swept right passed the door toward the gaping hole of the ocean.

Both he and Andy shouted, “No!” in unison as Daniel swam against the pull of the ocean with the little strength he had left. He could feel the moment rushing toward him, the raging and wide sea beyond the lobby. His heart thudded in his chest, choking off his throat, and squashing his thoughts to a single, panicked stream, *savemesavemesaveme...*

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Suddenly he felt the carpet of the lobby beneath his feet and slowly he managed to gain purchase. He broke free of the water's pull and started toward the door, at first lurching and water-logged, but then gaining speed as the tide began to flow back into the lobby. He leaped forward and grabbed hold of the curved, metal handle of the door.

The handle was freezing cold and it wiggled freely in his grip, but when he pulled on the door it was stuck, wedged hard into its frame by the repeated beating of the ocean and the swelling of the frame. He pulled harder and lifted on the handle, trying to loosen the door, panic rising in the back of his throat. Behind him he could hear the roar of the ocean's renewed attack. Water pooled around his waist and with the few remaining seconds of leverage he pulled hard on the door, but it remained fixed. He was overcome, and his feet were flung before him like seaweed in the surging sea, his freezing fingers barely holding their grip on the handle.

“Daddy!”

Daniel could hear his son shouting his name through the churning water, sounding like garbled songs through the gurgle. The water reached the height of its surge and began its descent and Daniel raised his head out of the water as his legs were swept in the other direction. He scrambled for solid footing, but the water moved too quickly and for several moments he could do no more than flounder in the current.

There was a terrifying snap and splash as the steel beam supporting the weight of the boat let go and dropped the boat into the escaping water. Andy cried out in surprise as his grip slipped and he fell head-first into the water.

“Andy!” screamed Daniel, his open mouth inviting a surge of salty water. As he spluttered and watched powerlessly, Andy bobbed to the surface and tried in vain to paddle toward him. The distance between them grew wider as the current rushed back out to the wider sea. Daniel stretched his free hand out as far as he could, gripping the door handle tightly with the other. Their fingers touched, nearly locked, and then Elliephont pulled free of Andy's waist belt and floated out be-

hind him quickly, escaping to the open sea. Andy looked back only a moment but it was enough that their hands broke apart and Andy started to follow his doll.

“Andy! Swim!”

Andy’s eyes were wide and terrified as his tiny hands splashed in the water in front of him, desperately trying to swim against the powerful current. Daniel stretched to reach his drifting son, feeling his hold on the slippery door handle failing. Andy drifted further...six inches...a foot...two feet, and Daniel, realizing there was no life worth living for him without Andy, let go of the handle and then he was floating away.

The water embraced him greedily, icy and harsh, utterly humiliating as he was tossed about like a cord of wood. In the blind riot his flailing arms somehow connected with his son’s and he hugged Andy to his chest. They floated several feet more toward the awaiting sea.

He tried to scramble to his feet, tried to find a grip on the carpet, but he was slipping. He could feel Andy struggling against him. He was holding Andy underwater in his panic, drowning his own son. He loosened his grip and Andy spluttered to the surface.

...*SAVEUSSAVEUSSAVEUSSAVEUSSAVE*...

He closed his eyes, held onto Andy and waited for the rain to patter on his head and for his feet to suddenly tiptoe over the dark and empty depths. He didn’t want to die; he was absolutely petrified to die. He was paralyzed by it. All he could do was clutch ever more tightly to Andy, as if by holding his son in this moment he could transcend it. They were going to die, and he was helpless to stop it. This is what it looked like. Death just happened; one moment you were alive, and the next you weren’t. There was a guilty sense of relief at having it all figured out at last. This was it, this was how it would happen and he wouldn’t have to think about it anymore, or worry how they were going to survive the next day. It was all about to end.

He felt the water roll over him and obliterate him and de-

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feat him all at once, and he drifted into a darkness that was not entirely unwelcoming. And he swam in that abyss as though he were a child again swimming at his uncle's lake, diving deeper and deeper into the blackness, searching for something. Searching for something. But he didn't know what and he kept going, kept diving, kept searching. And the water swept over his face and streamed his hair behind him and he felt like he was flying. He was grateful for the moment away from his father and his mother and he dove and dove deeper and deeper until he saw something glowing, a pearl, pale blue. This is what he was looking for; this pale light in the darkness. And he swam toward the light and reached for it as though touching the light would change him, would obliterate him and reform a new Daniel, a stronger Daniel, an invincible Daniel.

He reached out, and as he saw his hand aglow in the light thrown off by the pearl he was suddenly filled with a dread he'd never known. The pearl was thrown wide, revealing itself to be a bulbous eye, pale blue and crackling with some horrible electricity.

*Daniel, you have come.*

“NO!”

There was a flash of blue lightning that passed behind his closed eyelids and then a loud crash exploded ahead of him as the boat, freed of its ceiling perch but still trapped in the lobby, twisted in the current and slammed into the stairwell door, blowing the door inward through its frame.

Then Daniel and Andy were traveling in the opposite direction, spinning in concentric circles through the now open door. Water rushed down the stairwell, running madly to fill the empty space, and they tumbled down the stairs too. Daniel's shoulder crunched against the stone steps and he hit the side of his head, cutting his ear. He screamed into the water, black bubbles floating lazily to the surface, his arms temporarily limp. Andy pushed away from him and disappeared into the icy, sable darkness.

Daniel's lungs burned as he searched for the surface. A thin

light shimmered above him and he kicked hard in that direction, struggling to keep conscious as the last of the oxygen in his lungs dissolved into his bloodstream and purple spots appeared before his eyes. The muffled boom of the boat against the wall rung in his ears, his vision was blurred, burned by the saltiness of the ocean, and his limbs felt like they were pushing through quicksand. His mind went as blind as his eyes, becoming nothing more than white hot panic bells and then he broke free, splashed through the surface of the water and breathed deep the frigid air in the stairwell.

He could hear Andy breathing in frightened, hitching bursts next to him, but his eyesight failed him. All was broken splotches of flashing light.

“Andy? Are you alright?” he asked through gasps of his own. Andy squealed excitedly and Daniel heard him splashing toward him, and then he was upon him, gripping his neck tight and kissing his cheek. Daniel laughed at the relief he felt, and he hugged Andy back with one arm, treading water with the other.

As his vision returned, he let go of Andy, and looked around. The pallid light he’d seen in the water was from a series of battery-run service lights placed on the wall at each turn of the stairs. It was dim, but it showed Daniel the way they needed to go.

As the ocean retreated, dragging the boat hard against one of the steel support beams, they felt the tug of the water but were able to brace themselves against the frame of the door, holding onto a railing and waiting for the ocean to surge again. The boat slammed against the wall. The tide turned and water began to flood the stairwell again, and they used their temporary advantage, scrambling through the knee deep water, Daniel carrying Andy, and leaped onto the higher ground of the next floor.

They sat on the landing for nearly fifteen minutes, watching as the water rose then fell, always just out of reach of their soggy feet. They were both exhausted; it seemed like years since the morning. Andy lay on his back, groaning intermit-

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tently between coughing jags. The cold water and excitement had used every last ounce of his energy and already he seemed sicker than he'd been in days. He shivered, his teeth chattering a thin beat, his face blue in the phantom light.

Daniel stood up, wincing in advance of the pain in his injured foot, and lifted Andy again into his arms. Andy laid his head on his shoulder and panted like a dog, his eyes rolling up in his head. With his arms and legs spent beyond weariness Daniel climbed three flights of stairs, escaping the persistent sound of the restless sea, and exited through a metal door marked Floor 16.

Floor 16 was a large, open room, with a maze of cubicles stretching from end to end. It was a shrine to corporate efficiency, frozen as it was forevermore in the act of production, every cubicle once the home of a buzzing worker bee, and now an empty hive. In the darkness and solitude this space seemed haunted and unfamiliar, as if the kinetic energy of all the dead workers lingered still in the empty faces of the computers.

Daniel stumbled to the nearest cubicle, where he set his son down under the desk and grabbed a suit jacket off the back of a swivel chair, tucking Andy into his makeshift bed and rolling the chair in place to hide him. Andy didn't stir and Daniel looked around to be certain he would be safe for a few moments while he went in search of food and medicine.

Daniel walked down the nearest aisle toward a blank, wooden door. It was closed but the handle turned easily and the door opened onto a utility closet. He searched hastily through the shelves but found nothing of use except a small, blunt hammer, which he stashed in his belt loop before moving down the hall to the next door. He thought he saw urinals in the gloom and assumed it was the men's bathroom. He could see little in the darkness; he would have to wait for the day to search around in there.

A few yards from the bathroom, a thin hallway, with open doors lining each side, stretched away from the cubicles. He

followed the hallway slowly, his hand tracing his progress along the wall, until the first door opened on his left. He could see a sliver of windows on the opposite end of a thin boot lace of a room packed with chairs and tables. The rain splashed angrily against the glass, casting ominously watery shadows on the surface of the table and linoleum floor. It was a kitchen. On the left, cupboards hung above a small Formica countertop. There was a sink. There was a refrigerator.

Daniel went to the refrigerator, pulling open its door and rummaging through the contents. It was mostly empty; there was a lone stick of butter and a carton of rancid milk. He grabbed the butter, opened one end and took a greedy bite, chewing briefly and then retching at the salty-creamy taste of it. He kept it down though, and took a second, more modest nibble. The rest he stuffed in the backpack and then went over to the faucet, testing it without any real hope of its working. Something below him hummed but, predictably, no water came out. He snapped the faucet off.

He searched the cupboards and found boxes of instant cocoa, plastic knives and sporks, napkins, a smattering of glasses, but nothing to eat. He stashed a few of the cocoa packets in the backpack and slammed the cupboard doors in sudden frustration, swearing loudly and kicking the refrigerator with the inside of his foot.

Across the room another three lonely cupboards hung awkwardly on the wall and he rummaged through them. The first two were empty, but in the last, he finally found something helpful: a small first aid kit. It was the kind that was mostly just for passing federal regulatory standards, but it contained disinfectant, bandages, and a few small packages of Ibuprofen. It was enough medicine to cut the infection in his foot and help clean their wounds. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

As he was about to leave, with a backpack full of cocoa and butter, he saw a small water cooler hiding in the corner. He shouted excitedly and grabbed one of the glasses from the cupboards, filling it until it overflowed on the ground with luke-warm water. He guzzled the water down and then filled

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two more glasses and drank them as well. Eventually, he filled the glasses and headed back to Andy.

Andy lay exactly as Daniel had left him: under the cubicle desk, chattering and shivering, but asleep. Daniel hated to do it, but he shook him awake and sat him up. Andy looked so miserable—sitting there with no shirt, and wet pants and shoes, his hair kinky and matted to his forehead—that Daniel almost couldn't look at him. He handed Andy the water and searched in the backpack for the bottle of antibiotics, but in the darkness he could only fumble blindly so he settled on the packet of Ibuprofen. He indicated for Andy to take the medicine, and then sat down exhausted in the swivel chair.

Daniel shivered too, barefooted and bare-chested as he was, and looked Andy full in the face.

“We were brave today, weren't we?” Andy nodded blearily. “Yes we were, but you were the bravest, buddy. I couldn't have asked more...and...look! We made it, And.” They sat in brooding silence for a few long moments, both too exhausted to truly revel in the miracle of their survival. Daniel drifted in and out, his body whirring with fatigue, as Andy sipped listlessly on the glasses of water Daniel had brought him. Eventually Daniel rose out of his fog and croaked, “Finish the rest of that water, there's plenty more. Let me see if I can find us some blankets.”

A few minutes later Daniel returned with no blankets, but he did find five more suit jackets, and a snug-fitting pair of dress shoes under a desk. Andy was already snoring so Daniel laid two of the jackets on him, covering his entire body, and then lay down next to his son, covering his own shivering shoulders with the remaining three jackets. Daniel was exhausted, but he stayed awake long enough to clean out the wound on his foot with a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide and re-bandage it. Then he laid down next to his son and pulled a coat onto himself.

With lightning flickering and the calming roar of the storm outside, Daniel closed his eyes and slept dreamlessly for the

## Tres Crow

first time since the collapse of the LEV.





# CHAPTER TEN

## The locals

“You.”

A sudden hard shake.

“Hey, you. Wake up!”

Another hard shake and Daniel groggily opened his eyes, wincing at the sunlight pouring through the windows. He sat up and smacked his head on the bottom of the desk he’d been sleeping under.

“Shit,” he mumbled, holding his head as he lay back down gingerly. “Jesus Christ.”

“Now you leave him outta this, son,” said a sandpaper voice and then a rough hand shook him again, “Rough night? By the look of ya.”

Daniel opened his eyes a second time. A squat shape stood over him holding an axe aloft, silhouetted against the blinding sunlight.

“Jesus!” said Daniel, backing away in sudden alarm.

“Like I said, you leave him outta this,” said the man and

then, as if he had only just noticed the axe in his hand, he lowered it and added, "I ain't gonna hurt ya. Don't worry about that."

The man shuffled his feet and the sunlight behind him suddenly refracted off the glasses he wore, brilliantly lighting his face. He was a short man with a round belly that rested lazily on top of his kneeling legs. His face was equally round, filled with robust, indulgent features, capped by two comical tufts of gray hair that protruded out from either side of his head as though he were a doll losing his stuffing. His eyes, though, half-hidden behind small, round glasses told the truth about this man. They were deep and dark and hard.

He dropped the hatchet casually into one of the loops of his jumper, his demeanor cool and relaxed. He eyed Daniel for a moment, and then grinned broadly and asked, "You a Shant?"

Daniel looked hard at the man, and he thought of a million things to reply, but after a long moment, he said simply, "No."

"Daddy?" Andy woke up and rolled over, looking like a bundle of suit jackets suddenly sprung to life.

The man stood and backed away, raising the hatchet, but then Andy's small head emerged from the pile and the man immediately relaxed and grinned again.

"This your boy?" he asked, half laughing as he spoke.

"Yes," responded Daniel.

The three of them looked at each other and none of them seemed certain how to proceed.

Eventually the man asked, "What are your names?"

"Umm, Stan...Stan," Daniel lied, unsure of whether his real name might trigger some vague memory in this man. "And this is Andy."

"And what's yours?" asked Daniel.

"I'm Mark Jackson."

"Are you bad?" asked Andy.

Mark burst out laughing and shook his head.

"No, sir, I suppose I ain't. Are you?"

Andy shook his head, and Mark, still laughing, held out his

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hand for Daniel. Daniel scooted out from under the desk, slipping into one of the suit jackets. It was too tight and stretched at the seams along his back, but it cut the chill a little. Andy followed his lead, wearing one of the suit jackets as well, the arms dangling to the ground. Daniel snatched up the backpack from under the desk and held it tightly in his hands.

Daniel was easily six inches taller than Mark, but the man stood somehow prouder than his stature. Daniel absent-mindedly put his hands in the pockets of his jeans and shivered. Over the cubicle wall, he could see through the outside windows at the rising sun beyond. The orange light filled the entire room with its pleasant glow, but imparted no heat. He shivered again as Andy coughed hard into one of his overgrown sleeves.

“I suppose we might be able to find you somethin’ to wear upstairs. You been here all along or did you just arrive?”

Daniel didn’t respond, unsure of whether the question was a trick or not. Mark waited a moment, then nodded and said, “Alright, I get it. I suppose ya been hidin. Natural enough... under the circumstances.” He held out his hand for Andy, but before he could take it Daniel grabbed Andy’s hand and the two men stood facing each other awkwardly.

“Well,” said Mark, his grin resurfacing, though with a much diminished shine. “I suppose we should get goin, then. Follow me. I have to introduce you to everyone.”

He led away toward the stairwell, but Daniel and Andy stayed put. He turned and looked at them, shaking his head.

“No sense in being obstinate,” he said. “I can’t let you stay down here now I know y’all’re here. Times’re different. You can’t stay down here.”

Daniel paused for a moment longer then followed him, pulling Andy along behind.

“That yer boat?” Mark asked.

He was standing on the landing two floors above them and pointing out the window. He fidgeted nervously with his glasses as he waited for them to catch up. Daniel followed the line of his pointed finger and saw the back of Will’s speed boat

bobbing out of a hole in the building several stories below them. It was half underwater.

“Yes,” he replied simply. He couldn’t lie. This man already knew the answer.

“So you just arrived then,” said Mark. It wasn’t a question. “Well, I guess you’re stuck here.”

“Where are you taking us?”

“To breakfast,” said Mark. “We’re having sardines.”

Mark headed back up the stairs and Daniel followed.

They went up twenty more flights, all of them breathing in sharp, jagged puffs and clutching at stitches in their sides, until they reached the 43rd floor—the last floor before the roof, where Mark finally stopped and looked back at them, his hand poised on the door handle.

“We’re here,” said Mark.

He opened the door and Daniel’s first thought was that the room was coated in blood. Everything—the desks, the cubicle walls, the floor—was the bright crimson of fresh, arterial spray. He was horrified, certain he’d paddled Andy and him right into the high-rise lair of some crazed, hatchet-wielding murderer. But as his eyes adjusted and he looked around, he realized the rosiness of the room was due to hundreds and hundreds of sheets of red construction paper taped to the windows.

“The Army told us to do it,” said Mark, gesturing at the construction paper.

“The Army...?” asked Daniel, but Mark didn’t elucidate. He just walked passed him into the wide room.

It was another large office, similar to the one twenty floors below, with thin, bland carpet, equally bland walls, and tiles like fire-retardant wafers checkering the ceiling. There was one marked difference between the two rooms, though: all of the cubicle walls had been knocked down and were riotously piled in the middle of the room as if in preparation for a bonfire.

There was a hallway across the room in much the same

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place as the one that led to the kitchenette downstairs, and as Daniel walked across the threshold a smattering of laughter burst from the hallway.

Mark straightened his glasses, “Looks like they started without us.”

He shuffled forward, round the outside wall, avoiding the mess of desks and chairs in the middle of the room. They followed Mark into the hallway as another explosion of laughter erupted from within.

The survivors were gathered around a small, round table, divvying between them a few cans of sardines and a sleeve of soda crackers. They were all men, of varied ages, and dressed in some variation of casual business attire. Some wore polo shirts now untucked from their khaki pants; others were in unbuttoned white shirts which billowed out, exposing white tee shirts beneath. All of them looked bedraggled and dirty, and worn out.

They hushed as the three of them entered the room, eyeing Daniel and Andy warily. No one spoke for a long time. Eventually, Mark started, “Well, uh...I’d like...everyone, this is...”

One of the men closest to Mark, a tall, greasy-haired switchblade of a man interjected, “Where did you find these two?”

Mark’s face grew red.

“Downstairs,” he replied.

The man replied, “Did they come from that boat?”

Mark didn’t answer. The man looked passed Mark at Daniel as he asked, “Did you check if they were cits?”

Daniel moved in front of Andy slightly.

“How would I do that, Ron?” asked Mark.

“Ask him for his phone or something? A Cit Card...”

“Is *your* phone working right now? Is anyone’s?”

Ron looked back at Mark and said, “Don’t fuck with me. We all worked in this building; we know we’re clear.” He pointed from Daniel to Andy and back to Daniel, “But we don’t have any fucking idea where these two came from. You

heard the sergeant. Keep an eye out for stowaways.” He took a step toward Daniel, and Daniel pushed Andy further behind him. “Where were you when the first patrol came through? Were you on that boat? Were you hiding? Huh? Answer me.”

There were grumbles of agreement from some of the other men. Mark fidgeted with his glasses, standing behind Ron.

Mark said, “You know they were on the boat. What difference does it make? Come on, Ron. He’s got his boy with him.”

“I don’t give a fuck who he’s got with him. They look like Shants to me. Where’re your clothes? How’d you get passed the patrols?”

There were more murmurs and a few of the other men stood up. Mark looked around and he looked very small and unimportant.

“We were fishing and we got stranded,” said Daniel.

“How do we know that’s true? You coulda stolen that boat for all we know,” said Ron. He took a step toward Daniel and raised his hands. “Show me your Cards.”

Daniel clenched his fists tight at his side, flipping in his mind through the few options he had. They had no Cit Cards; he had no phone; he was barely clothed. He had nothing to identify them.

Mark lifted the hatchet from his pants holster and said, “Ron, come on.”

But Ron ignored him. He snapped his fingers at Daniel and said again, “Show me your Cards! Now!”

He was taller than Daniel and he stood upright to appear more so. Daniel remained firm, leveling Ron with a smoldering look.

Mark said, “Ron! For goodness sake...” but he didn’t step closer to them. The hatchet bobbed in his hand.

Daniel’s face flushed red from tamping down his growing frustration. He held out his hands to show he meant no harm but Ron flinched and balled his fists.

Daniel said, “Jesus Christ, just calm down. We were fishing, like I said, and we got stranded on our boat. I don’t see what’s so hard to understand about this. My son is sick...”

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“I don’t care about your son,” said Ron. “I don’t know what’s so hard to understand about *that*.”

“Why are you being such an asshole...?”

“Because you look like a couple of Shants. Where are your fucking Cards!?”

“We don’t have them,” said Daniel. Andy coughed behind him. “We don’t have any...”

“We need to get them back on the boat,” said Ron, starting to reach for Daniel. “Now! We can’t take any chances.”

Daniel backed away, keeping himself between Ron and Andy. Ron grabbed Daniel’s shoulder and he shrunk away from it.

“NO!!” shouted Mark, with a loud crash as he smashed the hatchet onto the kitchenette counter. “No! Ron, let them go! This is not how we’re going to act here!”

Ron paused and took a long look at Mark, eyeing the hatchet. Eventually, he backed away a step.

“Ron...” said Mark, but he didn’t finish. No one said anything; some of the others went back to eating. The tension in the room was starting to deflate. Ron turned and went back to the table, keeping his eyes locked on Mark. He sat down hard on his chair and grabbed some sardines. He tossed them in his mouth. He grabbed a tin of sardines and threw them at Daniel. The sardines hit the wall and clacked to the ground.

“I don’t believe you,” said Ron. “I don’t want you two eating in here. Go out in the main room or another floor. I don’t give a shit where.”

No one else protested. Daniel stood a long time before picking up the sardines and herding Andy out of the kitchenette and into the main room. He heard Mark say something behind them, but he couldn’t make it out. They went back down to the 16th floor and ate alone, the waterlogged light of the early morning sun washing over the walls.

Eventually Mark found them, holding shirts in his hands. He looked sheepish. Daniel waved him away.

“No. No. I don’t wanna talk to you...” he said.

“Of course you don’t. I know. I’m sorry. I don’t know what was wrong with him,” Mark said.

“You don’t have to say...”

“I do, though,” interjected Mark. “There’s no reason for us to act like animals. Things’re bad enough as it is. Here, I brought y’all some shirts and some crackers too.” He held out the crackers to Andy, who eyed them eagerly, and the shirts to Daniel. “I dunno if they’ll fit, but...”

Daniel begrudgingly reached for the shirts and nodded for Andy to take the crackers. “Thanks,” he said. He and Andy tried on the shirts. Daniel’s fit alright, but Andy’s shirt was practically a dress. He looked very frail.

“Where did you get these?” asked Daniel.

“On one of the floors. Scavenging.”

They sat in silence for some time, the only sound the crunching of Andy with the crackers. Daniel tried to think of something to say, to broach the subject of what had happened up in the kitchen. Eventually Mark spoke.

“Ron’s an arrogant son of a bitch. I knew him a little, you know, before the flood and he was always that way when I’d see him. But being stuck in this building’s just made him worse.” Mark paused and smiled a little at Andy, who was eating crackers greedily. “Since the Army came, it’s like he’s appointed himself supreme commander. I dunno...”

This was the third time someone had mentioned the Army.

“How long ago was the Army here?” he asked, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“A day or so ago,” said Mark. “Just one boat, a couple of guys. They were too small a group to do anything really, but they told us to put something in the upper windows and light a fire on top of the building and they’d send help our way.”

“Did they say when?”

“No. But we got plenty of food and water. It should last us awhile anyway.”

Daniel chuffed sarcastically but didn’t say anything. He looked out the window for a long time. The windows at the top of a few other buildings were covered in red. He saw smoke

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rising from their roofs.

“We aren’t alone, then?” he said, pointing at the buildings.

Mark shook his head, “No, we ain’t.”

They didn’t say anything for a long time.

Finally, Mark broke the silence, “Listen, I don’t think the rest of the guys are as sweet on excluding you two as Ron. I ain’t the only one who thinks he’s an asshole. I think if y’all helped us a bit, then it might get you in the group’s good graces, so to speak.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, help out a bit, collect some stuff. Every day we search the building for anything that might be useable. This is a big building, and there’s a lot of stuff in here. Maybe if you just got some stuff for the group, it might help. It might not, too, but who knows how long we’re all gonna be here. I don’t know how feasible it is for y’all to hang around by yourselves.”

Daniel thought about this. It rankled him, the idea that they needed to pay tribute to this band of assholes. But he could see the truth of it; they couldn’t hide out alone, pretending they didn’t know the others were here. It’s very hard to unsee things once you know they’re there.

“What sort of stuff are you looking for?” asked Daniel.

“Anything we can eat or burn.”

“Do we have a choice?” asked Daniel.

“You always have a choice.”

“Not always,” said Daniel. He turned to Andy. “You up for a scavenger hunt?”

They followed Mark down two floors where they found another twisted maze of cubicles and bad carpeting.

Mark turned to them and said, “This is our floor. It’s cooler down here and there’s more privacy, but it’s hell on the back for an old man like me lifting stuff all the way to the top.” Mark laughed and added, “But, hey, I got you two now so I won’t have to work so hard. Here, take this,” he handed Daniel the hatchet. “You do the chopping.”

“What’re we chopping?” asked Daniel.

“Desks, chairs, doors, anything that we can find that’s real wood. Anything that’ll burn.”

“How many floors have y’all, umm, harvested?”

“Four,” said Mark, wiping sweat off his forehead. “It takes a long time.”

Daniel looked around at all of the furniture in the room. He said, “I can imagine.”

“I wanna chop,” said Andy but Daniel smiled at him and waved his hand.

“I don’t think so, Buddy,” he said. “Too dangerous.”

“He can look for food,” offered Mark. “We’ve found some on almost every floor. Start in the kitchen, but people keep a lot of stuff in their desk drawers too.”

Daniel turned to Andy. “Sound good?” he asked.

Andy shrugged. He was eager to help, but a little miffed about not getting to use the hatchet.

“I guess.”

“Alright, then. Start marching. Start in the kitchen, like Mark said.”

Andy nodded and trotted quickly out of sight. Daniel watched him go and stared a long time after him.

Mark said, “He’ll be alright. No one else’s down here.”

Daniel didn’t respond. He just nodded and lifted the hatchet.

“Where should we start?”

They began, working slowly, in no hurry. They had the whole day, or their whole lives, whichever was longer, and for once Daniel didn’t feel like he needed to be anywhere or do anything more than what he was doing at that moment. It was a complicated mixture of freedom and loss and irritation, like the pulsing of some phantom limb. He felt like there should be more, but there wasn’t, and somehow that seemed enough.

They started by pulling the walls of a cubicle apart and then sorting through that which could be burned and that which couldn’t. They put them in different piles. The wood

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was chopped into one or two foot pieces and stacked neatly. Everything else was just dragged into a pile. Daniel did most of the chopping, his body and hands protesting at first but slowly loosening up as the hours dragged on. Sometimes he and Mark talked; most times they did not. Occasionally Andy would come trotting back into the room to show them some treasure he'd found. He found precious little food, but lots of knick knacks and that made him happy.

Daniel found a pleasantness, a calmness, in this manual labor, similar to how he'd felt rowing in the boat. Only this feeling was cleaner, free of the panic and urgency of the rowing. There was only this moment, and each swing of the hatchet. Everything else could wait, *had* to wait because they were stuck and the future was so unknowable that worrying was useless.

Hours into the afternoon, Mark stopped and asked, "Everything alright with your boy?"

"Why?" asked Daniel.

"Well, you said up in the kitchen that he was sick, but he looks alright to me. A little rosy in the cheeks maybe, but alright no less."

Daniel stopped and let the hatchet drop to his side. He wiped his forehead. He wondered what Mark was really asking.

"Do you wanna know if he's contagious?" asked Daniel but Mark didn't say anything. "He's not. You don't have to worry. He has strep throat, but he's on antibiotics. He should be fine."

Daniel grabbed at the wall of a cubicle and yanked hard and the wall clattered to the ground with a loud snap. He pulled off a piece of fiberboard paneling and chopped it in half and carried it to the wood pile.

"He'll be fine," he said again.

Mark just nodded and replied, "I'll pray for him."

"You need to pray for all of us."

Mark nodded and dragged the cubicle wall to the pile of junk.

They broke for lunch when the sun was high above the buildings, after noon though the exact time was impossible to tell. They ate the few things Andy had been able to find: an apple, a bagel, some packets of cream cheese, and airplane packages of peanuts. The cream cheese especially seemed decadent, even warm.

Daniel didn't talk much as they ate, but Mark told them about his experience in the flood. Andy listened intently, though occasionally he looked out the window, a glassiness in his eyes that made Daniel uncomfortable.

"I been cleaning buildings as long as I been working, this one in particular since it opened. Most weekends I gotta work and this one wasn't any different, and there're rotations set out each week about what floor each person gotta do. God is good, my friends, God is mighty good because he got me outta bed early and he got me in the office on a Saturday instead of waiting til Sunday, and he gave me a rotation at the top of the building."

Mark laughed suddenly, but it did not touch his eyes. And then just as suddenly he stopped laughing and the rest of his face matched his eyes.

"I seen the whole thing happen near about. I mean I ain't but cleaned one toilet when I heard somethin screamin in the background, loud as hell itself, like a train...no, more like a airplane...or, I dunno, well, you heard it so you know what I'm talkin 'bout. So I look out the window, and I seen in the distance the ocean comin right for me, Like a wall of water, 100 feet high. It scared me half to death and I climbed under a desk and just started prayin to Jesus to save me."

He stopped talking and took a handful of peanuts in his hand and held them there for a long time. He looked out the window at the sun shining through. There were no clouds in the sky. Water went out to the horizon in all directions. Buildings poked out of the ocean, spired atolls. A ghost of a smile touched Mark's lips.

He said, "I suppose Jesus listened to me this one time.

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Here I am. And you too. He saved us all. I dunno why He'd want to save an old man like me, but...I suppose there's purpose in everything, even the purposeless."

"Maybe," offered Daniel. He looked at Andy. His son's cheeks looked flushed. "How you feeling, buddy?" Andy shrugged. "Time for another pill?"

Daniel grabbed the backpack and gave Andy a pill.

Mark asked, "Wanna know the funny thing 'bout all this?" Daniel didn't answer, and after a moment Mark continued anyway. "For the past two years, ever since Juana died, I been prayin for God to take me outta this place, but the first opportunity He offers me to die, all I could think of was livin just a little bit longer. Men are strange creatures, ain't we? The last three days I been feelin this thing growin inside me, ya know? Like some kinda power to keep goin on. I dunno. I know it sounds like craziness, I expect, but...I...I dunno. Something feels different."

"It *is* different," said Daniel. "You *should* feel that way. Everything's changed. I mean, look around you. If Atlanta looks like this, what about the rest of the country?"

Daniel threw the last of his peanuts into his mouth and chewed very slowly, trying to savor the last of his food.

Mark looked out the window and said quietly, "It's a miracle."

"What is?" asked Daniel sharply. "All this? All the ruined buildings? All the dead people?"

"No. Our being here. You, me, Andy. It's a miracle that we are here at all. Seems like everyone else's got a similar story as us. We all got touched by the grace of Jesus when we woke up that morning."

"I don't think 'miracle' is the right word."

"Then what is?"

"Depends..."

"On what?"

"Everything. We have no idea what's happened or how it's going to affect us. Or even how long we're gonna be stuck here. How do you even know the Army's coming back?"

“They said they would,” replied Mark, and Daniel laughed sarcastically.

They sat in silence for a long time until Daniel broke it with the question he really wanted to ask, “And who knows where they’re gonna take us when they come back?”

“To safety.”

Daniel didn’t reply.

The rain came back in the mid-afternoon and splattered against the windows, making a white noise hum that whirred in the background. It was very dark in the building, especially deep in the cubicle mazes. Daniel and Mark worked as long as they could but eventually they stopped and looked back at the impressive pile of wood they’d stacked over the course of the day. Andy had even managed to find a few more packages of peanuts.

Mark wiped his forehead and sighed, “I think that’s enough for today. Now the fun really begins.” He laughed but Daniel didn’t join him.

The two of them loaded up as much wood as they could carry and then headed up the stairwell, Andy following behind.

It took them well after sundown to carry all of the wood to the pile on the top floor. After a few hours of sloughing back and forth between the two floors, they were joined by a few other guys who had completed their work for the day and felt guilty watching Daniel and Mark work so hard. No one talked to one another; they worked. Andy, after joining for a few of the trips, hung around on the top floor and chatted with a young man who looked to be about 22. His name was Skylar and he looked trustworthy (or at least scared, which Daniel felt was the right response to all this mess), which allowed Daniel to relax enough to let Andy out of his sight for the remainder of the workload.

Mark had been right; the work had done wonders for loosening up the rest of the group. While it was impossible for anyone to really trust anyone they hadn’t known before the

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flood, volunteering to work for the common good, and working so hard, was a hell of a good foot to get started on. Most everyone Daniel passed nodded at him, or smiled at him. No one said anything about the earlier altercation. Daniel loosened as well.

When the last armload of wood was dropped onto the large pile near the stairs to the roof access, Daniel, Mark, and Andy joined the rest of the group in the kitchenette for dinner. Skylar and another young man named Seth had found an entire bag of potato chips and a few strips of beef jerky. They passed the bag around and tore off a piece of jerky. They ate as slowly as they could. While they ate no one talked, but then the food was gone and conversation emerged in its place.

At first they cataloged what they'd found, each of them offering up a hodge-podge of items like buried treasures, waiting for a reaction. Some items got *oohs* and *ahhs*. Others were greeted with laughter or groans. The mood lightened as they did this. It was a ritual, Daniel could see, a nightly exorcism of the demons that stalked between them, that whispered in their ears, and tickled their spines.

Eventually, it was Daniel's turn, and he looked at Mark, hoping he would speak for them both. Mark didn't say anything. Daniel looked at the ground and he said, "We found wood. Basically, that's it."

"That's it?" asked someone Daniel hadn't met yet. "Shit. You're being modest. Y'all musta dragged 15 armloads up here."

"Closer to 25," interjected Mark proudly, clapping Daniel on the back. "Man is a beast. You shoulda seen him. He was a good find if I do say so myself."

There were murmurs of agreement, and Daniel looked sheepish. Mark eyed Ron in the corner, who stared out the window at the rain. Someone mumbled something about wishing he had a cold beer and there were groans of sadness and giggles and *Jesus Christ's*. They wavered between conversation and contemplation, the natural ebb and flow of human mood.

Eventually one of them asked, "I wonder how many peo-

ple died.”

The thought was greeted with silence and the spitting of rain against the windows.

“I mean, I wonder how far this went. Cross country, or just here? How many of us are left?”

“Gotta be thousands.”

“More than that. If there are 13 of us here, and there are at least 13 in most every building in the city, in every city across the state, that’s gotta be tens of thousands in just Georgia alone.”

Skylar added, “And I heard the government had a bunch of bunkers in the mountains prepared for this type of thing.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“No, I heard it too,” added Seth. “Read it on the internet. Bunkers stocked with everything imaginable.”

“There’s gotta be plenty of places that didn’t get hit as hard as here,” piped in one of the older men, his name was Bill Johnson, or Johnston, something like that. “I bet there’s a 100,000 people just hanging around in office buildings and in the mountains.”

“100,000, Bill?” asked Ron, turning from the window. “You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about. Y’all are just pulling this shit out your asses. You don’t know if we’re the only ones, if this destroyed the whole country, the whole world. Who did it? Y’all don’t know a fucking thing. And even if you’re right and 100,000 people survived, why the hell do you sound so happy about that? 100,000, for fuck’s sake? That means 14 million people died. 14 goddamn million. Does that strike you as something to laugh about? To be all happy about?”

“I...I was just saying...”

“I don’t give a shit about what you were saying,” said Ron. “I just want to get the hell out of here and find the son-of-a-bitches who did this and...and...shit down their throats.”

Mark said quietly, “We all do, Ron...wanna get out of here.”

“Don’t start in,” said Ron, standing up. He started to leave.

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“The rain’s letting up. We need to get the fire started again.”

He paused for a moment next to Daniel. They didn’t look at each other, but there was something kinetic between them. Daniel wanted to smash the guy’s head into a wall. Ron opened his mouth to say something, but he just smiled ruefully, shook his head and left.

Hours passed, and the rain passed with them, only to be replaced by an early sunset. Inside the building, night fell hard and shadows spread from every corner, every cubicle, every doorway. Without the aid of artificial light or candles, the refugees were plunged into complete darkness, cut only by what few solar-powered lights remained, in stairwells, exit signs, *emergencia*.

The group headed to the roof, where they’d spent every night since the flood, huddled around the fire until, one by one, they retreated into the office to curl up and sleep in uncomfortable beds made of bundled jackets and seat cushions. This was another ritual, methodological incantations that ordered daily life, that focused their attention on something other than the sea that went to the horizon in every direction.

The clouds were gone and though the moon had waned slightly, it still glowed brightly in its black swaddling clothes. It grinned darkly. The stars were brighter than any time Daniel had ever seen in his life. The Milky Way cut the sky in half. It was magnificent, as though Daniel had been transported to another planet, somewhere very similar to the one he’d lived on for so many years, yet slightly different, more peaceful, a raging beauty, more mysterious.

From this height, the seascape looked even more bizarre, gorgeous but ominous. The buildings poked out of the water like black, charred trees, the remnants of some flaming cataclysm instead of the watery one that had actually befallen them. The waves whooshed below, creating a steady wind in their ears. There were real trees that rose from the water too, but only their tops shown, making them look like scrub brush, or patches of grass on an otherwise barren, suede savannah.

Daniel looked out at this world, Andy on his lap, holding him tight, and hoping that the water receded eventually, at least a little bit. This was not a world he could learn to love. This was too foreign. He was tethered to the earth in ways he'd never understood until now. All daily activities would need to be reorganized. New agriculture. No walking on streets, no driving.

He hugged Andy and kissed his head, and Andy leaned back into him, yawning. It was late. Daniel looked around. No one was talking. They watched the fire. Daniel tapped Mark's shoulder.

"We're gonna head to bed," he said, standing up with Andy in his arms.

Mark stood too, an unnecessary pleasantry.

"Do you need me to...?"

"No, we're fine."

"You'll be where I found y'all this morning?" asked Mark.

"As good a place as any, right?"

Mark smiled, but it was late and some of the joviality had dissipated. His age showed this time of night, around his eyes and lips, his forehead.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," he said and he sat back down, the smile staying in place as though frozen, as though he was a corpse who'd died smiling and now was stuck with it.

Daniel left. No one else said goodbye.

Daniel remade their pallet of jackets and old clothes under the desk on the 24th floor. He gave Andy one of the remaining pills, feeling his forehead. He felt normal. He was almost better. Something tight in Daniel's chest unclenched. He hugged Andy and gave him a kiss on his forehead and tucked him in with an oversized jacket.

"Have a good sleep, buddy," he said.

"Have a good sleep, Daddy."

"See you in the morning."

Daniel stood and watched his son sleeping in the darkness

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for a long while, then he walked over to one of the windows and looked out at the moon and stars and the sea. He found a chair and sat down, his legs propped up on the sill. He thought about Cindy. What would she have thought about all of this? If she hadn't died would he and Andy even be here, or would they be two more corpses floating on the waves? Would he have run from the ICE agents if Cindy had been home with Andy, there to take care of him after Daniel was carted to jail? It was a wrinkle in all of this he hadn't thought of before, hadn't had the time to think about until now. There was nothing left to do but think. Events were what they were and he could only react now. The age of plans was over. One foot in front of the other, one oar stroke begets another.

He didn't think Cindy would like all this very much. She was a beautiful, kind woman, but she was stubborn and patterned. She didn't accept change very well. This was a big change.

*Change.*

He thought about the word, about the meaning, about the times. He thought. He thought a lot.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Miss Gertrude

*She kissed his neck. In the dark it was electric, every nerve ending gloriously exposed. Her lips felt like satin on his skin, as delicate as flower petals. They were wet, a sensuous humidity that cooled his skin the moment her lips moved on, like a neon imprint on his neck, his shoulders, his chest. His hands went to her hair, plunged deep in her hair, felt its whispering ends dangle down his forearms, raise goose bumps. Something soft, fleeting, touched one of his nipples, it could have been her fingers, the tips of her hair, her own nipple. The darkness raged around them.*

*The dream made everything brighter, more alive, softened the edges of real life. He knew he was dreaming. He didn't care. He wanted this; he needed this.*

*He traced his finger along the line of her jaw, felt the muscles contract as her lips worked over his chest. His fingers drew paths over her face, moved to her eyes. Her lashes fluttered on his fingertips. He pulled her up level with him and*

*kissed her, wrapping her entire body in his arms, feeling her chest against his chest, the hammering of her heart.*

*She sighed into his mouth when they started, a longing, hopeful sound as if she had held her breath her entire life for this moment. He needed this. Daniel breathed it in as she breathed out, holding her, looking in her eyes and seeing her, really seeing her, all of her. In that moment they understood each other as well as any two people ever have; they were together, in rhythm. It was only the two of them. There were no pregnancy troubles, there was no flood, no boat, no dead Non-Cits, no Levee. Cindy was alive, still there, still touching him.*

*He didn't know if it had actually been like this, the first time, the real time, but he didn't care. He held onto her tightly and he felt all of her and his heart hammered against its cage and chipped and then shattered and he was crying and he held her and held her but she was smoke, she was smoke, and he breathed her in one last time and she smelled like cinnamon and like something else, like, like menthol, like hospitals, like sanitized linen, like rubber.*

No...

*She was smoke and she was gone and he held her and he held her and then he was holding only himself, a death grip around his own neck. He saw pale eyes in the darkness.*

Andy...?

*Pale eyes and then the darkness lifted and there was a path through the woods, but it was smoke and it lifted and it rose and it drifted away and he went with it and he cried out and he cried out and...*

...Daniel heard something rustle next to him and he jerked awake. There was something dark standing next to him, and he rolled away, falling off the chair. He looked up. It was Andy, standing silent, watching. Daniel sighed and laughed, relieved.

"Jesus, Andy," he said. "What are you doing?"

"There was a woman," said Andy.

"What?"

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“Over there. There was an old lady. In the hallway.”

Andy pointed through the gloom of the office to the darkened hallway. There was no one.

“A woman?”

“Yeah. She wanted me to come with her.”

Daniel looked hard at the hallway. There was no one there. He stood up and grabbed Andy’s hand.

“In the hallway? Are you sure? Was this a dream, Andy?”

“No dream. She was real.”

“Where’d she go?”

“She disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

Andy nodded and waved his hands through the air like he was performing a magic trick. He said, “Like smoke.”

Daniel smiled and he hugged Andy to his legs. He rustled his hair. It was a dream, then.

“It was just a dream, buddy. There’s no one else in the building. The rest of the guys would have told us. They would’ve found them.”

“She was real, Daddy.”

“I know. She must’ve seemed very real. Come here.” Daniel leaned down and gave Andy another hug. He kissed his forehead. “I know you miss Rosetta, I miss her too, but you don’t have anything to be scared of. Not from anything in this building. I’ll protect you. I’ll keep you safe. Ok?”

Andy looked over at the hallway for a long time and his face was very sad.

He said, “She didn’t scare me,” and looked back at Daniel. Tears stood out in his eyes.

“I miss Mama, Daddy,” he said, his face splitting into a grimace. “I dream about her every night. Every night.”

“Oh, buddy...”

Daniel hugged Andy hard and rocked him, hushing him quietly as Andy sobbed into his shirt. Daniel squeezed his eyes tight. He leaned his cheek on his son’s head and whispered, “I miss her too, buddy.” He kissed Andy’s forehead once more and repeated solemnly, “I miss her too.”

Eventually they fell back asleep, Daniel with his neck cocked awkwardly to the side, and Andy resting on his chest. The morning greeted them with a heavy hand and a stiff neck. As Daniel tried to sit up his arms screamed at him. Andy sat up and rubbed the crusted remains of the night's tears out of his eyes, blinking sheepishly at the brightness of the sun gleaming at them from the eastward facing windows. They stood and stretched, yawned, Daniel cracked his neck, trying to massage the crick.

"How you feelin, And?" asked Daniel, feeling his forehead.

Andy wiped his face once more and said he felt fine.

"How's your throat?"

"Better." As if to prove the point, Andy took a deep swallow and stuck out his tongue to show him his throat.

Daniel made a show of looking at it, saw that it was still pink, but did in fact look better. He reached in his pocket and gave Andy another pill. There were four left in the bottle.

"Here you go, buddy."

Andy swallowed the pill without water and grimaced.

"You're becoming a pro ain't ya?" remarked Daniel and Andy grinned and puffed out his chest.

The two of them made their way up to the top floor. They went to the kitchenette but it was empty, so they continued to the roof. Mark was there, alone, warming his hands by the fire.

"There ya'll are?" he said, smiling.

"Where is everyone?" asked Daniel.

"Working," said Mark. "I figured I'd let ya'll sleep in a bit. We're on wood duty again. Ya'll hungry?"

"Of course."

"Good," replied Mark, clapping his hands and walking over to them. "We got Cheetos this morning. I saved ya'll some."

They ate: Cheetos and water and some of the previous night's jerky. It gave Daniel heartburn, but he ate it anyway.

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He was hungry and food was food.

“Your boy looks a lot better, even since yesterday,” said Mark.

Daniel nodded, but didn’t reply.

After a quiet moment, Mark asked, “What were you, before all this? What is it you did?”

Daniel tried to think of a story he could tell, something far away from who he was or the fix he’d been in before the flood, but it had taken all of his imagination to invent a name for himself. His mind was blank. He ate a few mouthfuls of Cheetos. He decided that the truth was no less damning than fiction.

“I was a builder. I built buildings,” he said.

Mark smiled and nodded.

“That sounds about right,” he replied. “You have a look about you. Like someone who can make things happen. Someone who can conjure things from thin air.”

“I dunno about conjuring, but I guess, yeah, I guess construction’s a little like that. I can see it.”

Mark clapped his hands and stood up.

He said, “Alright, well, it’s about time we stop loafing and get to work, don’t you think?”

Daniel turned to Andy, “You ready, buddy?”

Andy nodded. Mark grabbed the hatchet and the three of them left for the lower levels, searching for somewhere they hadn’t smashed up yet.

The morning passed more slowly than any since they’d been on the boat. They didn’t talk much. Daniel’s muscles ached as he tore apart cubicles and chopped desks and dragged debris into sorted piles. Some of the novelty of manual labor had bled out over the last several days of rowing and chopping and carrying. It was beginning to feel tedious. The questions that swirled in the air were unanswerable, and every possible speculation had already been discussed and analyzed and re-analyzed. There was nothing left to talk about, save for themselves, the past, personal stories, anecdotes, the sorts of things

Daniel was hoping to avoid.

They broke for lunch as the sun crept behind a long stream of gray clouds, but there was nothing to eat, so they all sat in the kitchenette for a half hour staring at different places on the walls or out the windows. The gray clouds built up in the sky and threatened rain. The silences built up in the kitchenette.

The afternoon moved faster if only because the darkening sky made the evening feel as though it was coming on sooner than normal. Daniel looked out the window every few minutes, watching the clouds, marking the time. Mark was uncomfortable with silence. It felt like an absence to him where something vibrant and collegial should be. Daniel could sense him struggling with the quiet all day, a vibration coming from him, changing the air, tensing it.

Eventually Mark spoke because he simply had to. He said, "I know you were in trouble. Before the flood."

Daniel's shoulders tightened. He paused briefly, his back turned to Mark, then he continued hacking at a desk.

"You don't know anything," Daniel said.

"You don't have to tell me, Stan. I don't care. Everything's changed," said Mark, taking off his glasses and cleaning them. "But don't insult my intelligence. It's written all over your face. Every time anyone mentions the Army or the government..."

Daniel turned sharply and took a step toward Mark, the hatchet tight in his hand.

"Enough! You don't know what you're talking about," he barked.

Mark didn't flinch or back up. He slowly put his glasses back on his face and shook his head sadly.

"Have it your way," he said. "I'm not gonna tell anyone. It's none of my business." He pointed at the hatchet and at Daniel's aggressive stance. "But you're gonna have to get *that* in check. There's no place for violence here. There can't be. It's only gonna get you in trouble."

Daniel lowered the hatchet and turned away, softening his demeanor. He grabbed a cubicle wall and tore it to the ground.

## Black Stag, White Doe

Mark continued, "I know how hard this is for you. The other guys probably don't, but I do. That boy is special. He's a gift, Stan. I know you know that." Mark paused as though waiting for Daniel to speak, but he didn't say anything so Mark continued, "I remember when my boy was his age. Best years of my life. Most nights I'd stand at the top of the stairs and watch him sleeping, just to make sure he was still there, that it wasn't all a dream.

"He got himself killed over in China. I told him not to enlist, told him he could do more with his life, but...you can't tell a young man nuthin'. It killed Juana. She was never the same. It killed me, same as her, but I had to pretend. Not a night goes by when I don't wake up wishing I coulda protected him." Daniel stopped struggling with the cubicle wall and looked at Mark. "The rest of these guys don't understand what that feels like, they don't understand what must be laying on your heart all the time. But I do. Your life ain't your own. God's given you the chance he never gave me. He may have taken his mother, but he's left you your son...and that's a great gift. That's a real great gift. You keep him safe. I won't do nothing to jeopardize that."

Daniel nodded silently, then went back to pulling apart the cubicle.

They knocked off a few hours later. They'd managed to cobble together a fairly sizable pile of wood again, and they stared at the pile and dreaded the multiple trips it was going to take to get it upstairs. Daniel looked around and Andy wasn't near them. He'd last seen him near the hallway.

"Nothing for it," said Mark, loading up an armful of wood.

"You go ahead, I'm gonna find Andy," said Daniel. "I'll meet you up there. See if you can get a couple of the guys to help us. This'll take the two of us forever."

"No problem."

Mark left and Daniel looked around the office for Andy, calling his name.

"Andy! Buddy! Where you at? We're not playing hide and

seek. It's time for dinner.”

There was no answer. Daniel searched the bathrooms and the closets. He went in the hallway and he thought he heard whispered voices.

“Andy?”

The voices stopped. Daniel turned the corner into the break room. Andy was standing facing the far corner, doubled over as though he'd just stopped talking to someone. He looked back at Daniel.

“Who're you talking to, buddy?” asked Daniel.

Andy didn't say anything at first, then he said reluctantly, “Miss Gertrude.”

“Miss Gertrude? Is she your new friend?”

Andy nodded. Daniel held out his hand.

“What were y'all talking about?”

“Nothing. Just stuff.”

“Alright, well it's time for dinner.”

Andy crossed the room and grabbed Daniel's hand, looking back at the empty corner as he did so. They headed back to the pile of wood and then up stairs, Daniel eager to leave the empty break room behind.

When they got to the top floor they dropped the wood on the pile. They heard sharp voices they couldn't quite make out coming from the kitchenette. It sounded like Ron; it sounded like someone else, maybe Mark. They went into the hallway and turned into the kitchenette. The voices stopped. Ron and Mark stood next to each other. They'd been talking and they looked back sheepishly at Daniel and Andy. Others around them looked away.

Mark said, “Seth, Skylar, come on. Help get the wood.”

The three of them left the kitchenette. Daniel looked at Mark as they left, but Mark wouldn't look at him. Ron stood awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Y'all talking about something?” asked Daniel, looking at Ron hard.

“Nope,” replied Ron. “Nothing.”

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Ron left too, passing unnecessarily close to Daniel. Daniel looked around the room at the others but none of them would look him in the eye. He grinned icily at them.

“Well, keep on talking about nothing then,” said Daniel and he grabbed Andy by the hand and they went back downstairs to grab more wood.

Ron came late to dinner, but Mark had set aside his share of the day’s spoils: chocolate cakes, Diet Coke, and a bag of half-browned apples. Conversation was light, mostly powered by those few who couldn’t stand silence: Mark, Seth, Skylar. But they talked low, as though the silence of the others was a physical thing that their voices couldn’t quite move out of the way. They talked of trifles, silly things to pass the time. Daniel, of course, said nothing, and Andy took his cue from his dad.

Ron slunk into the kitchenette, and Mark pointed at the small pile of apple and cakes lying on the edge of the counter. Ron scooped it up and leaned against a wall, eating his apples loudly. He shot furtive glances at Daniel that Daniel could feel on the side of his face. Daniel unconsciously leaned closer to Andy. Mark looked between the two of them, his face drawn and sad and uncomfortable with the tension.

Seth said, “The rescue ships have to be coming soon. They *have* to. It’s been a week since they came through the first time, hasn’t it?”

“It’s only been a few days...” started Mark.

“But they said they’d be back in a few days,” said Seth.

“Well how long have y’all been here?” asked Skylar, pointing at Daniel. “They came the day before you two arrived.”

Daniel may have imagined it, but there was something accusatory in Skylar’s tone, as though Daniel had intentionally avoided the government ships. It seemed like Skylar looked over at Ron. Daniel looked between the two of them, and opened his mouth, but Mark answered first.

“It’s been three days,” he said. “That’s technically a few, but look out the window, guys. There’re probably thousands

of buildings that need rescuing. There's no way they are prepared to deal with this."

"How could they *not* be?" asked Ron suddenly. "This whole fucking country is surrounded by water. On all sides. How could they not be prepared for the levees to break? That's fucking ridiculous, Mark."

"Maybe the damage is greater, or how quick it happened caught them off guard," suggested Mark.

"Bullshit!" spat Ron. "This is the NAS we're talking about. They're prepared for anything." Ron paused, bits of apple hanging from his lips. He looked directly at Daniel. "No, I bet this was some coordinated attack by the Shants and the Russians. I bet they blew up the levee and this whole state is filled with Shants. That's what's taking them so long. That's probably where *they* came from."

Daniel stiffened and put his hand on Andy's shoulder. Mark moved between Ron and Daniel and held up his hands.

"Hey, Ron. Come on. Give it a rest," he said. "There's no need for this..."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Daniel, and Ron laughed loudly, sarcastically.

"I don't?" he barked. "Prove it! You know better? You know what happened? Why? Cuz you're a goddamn Shant?"

Mark put a hand to Ron's chest, but Ron slapped it away. Some of the others started to move in toward the three of them.

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Daniel a little louder. He could feel whatever restraint he had inside of him tearing loose. He was going to kill this man.

"C'mon, guys, let's be civil..." began Mark.

"Civil? What the fuck for?" asked Ron wildly as he pointed out the window. "Look out the window, for God's sake. I want to see whoever the fuck did this hanging from a street light. I want to know what happened, and if this asshole knows something, he needs to tell us!" Ron looked in Daniel's eyes and said, "If you aren't a Shant, then you're a Shant lover and that's the same fucking thing. You and your bastard son."

Daniel pushed Mark out of the way and rushed at Ron, his

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fist cocked behind his head.

“You leave my son out of this!” he screamed as he grabbed Ron by the collar of his shirt and forced him backwards into the wall. Ron clutched at his throat but Daniel was much stronger than him and Ron’s hands found no purchase. Daniel pulled him forward and then slammed him hard into the wall hitting Ron’s head with a sickening thud.

“Get this fucker off of me!” Ron pleaded.

Several of the men stood up to help, but Daniel looked back at them and roared, “SIT BACK DOWN!!!” The men sat down quickly, looking bewildered, as if the force of Daniel’s words had shoved them back into their seats.

Daniel grabbed Ron’s face and forced him to look him in the eyes. Ron tried to look away but he couldn’t.

“You look at me,” hissed Daniel, his eyes wild, on fire. “Look at me and tell me we’re Shants again.”

Ron’s face tightened, his resolve reinforced and he looked over at Andy, smiling maliciously. Through pinched lips he whispered, “You look like Shants to me.”

“I’M NOT A FUCKIN’ SHANT!!!”

Daniel’s mind flashed blue, and he couldn’t see anything, not Ron, not Mark, not anything. He slammed the back of Ron’s head into the wall and a small spot of blood appeared on the wall. Daniel heard others moving toward him from behind and he roared at them without looking and they were pushed back again, some falling over the table and chairs.

Mark put a hand to Daniel’s shoulder and Daniel shouted, “You stay out of this!” Mark shrunk away as if burned.

Daniel clutched Ron’s cheeks so hard that red fingerprints shown out on his face. The two of them stood there, face to face, eyes locked. The other men just stared at them aghast. Daniel was a force that none of them could control. They were terrified.

Daniel whispered to Ron, “You say that word again, I’ll kill you.”

“Jesus, Stan,” said Mark behind him.

“Daddy,” said a small voice from behind him. He felt a tug

at his shirt.

Daniel looked down into the horrified eyes of his son, and all the anger and frustration, fear and resentment inside him collapsed in a puff. His shoulders slumped and he loosened his grip. Ron shoved his arms away and scrambled across the room to the other men, mumbling under his breath that Daniel was *fuckin' crazy*.

Grabbing Andy's hand in his, he turned to face the stunned room for a moment. No one would look him in the eyes except Mark, but Daniel couldn't look at him. The anger was gone, but in its wake he was now more terrified than he'd been since they were on the boat. He'd crossed a line that could not be uncrossed. Whatever they'd thought of him before, whatever suspicions they'd had, he'd just confirmed.

He didn't offer an apology. He didn't say anything at all. He just held Andy's hand tightly in his, and then turned and left the room. No one said anything for a long time after he left.

Three hours passed, and the rain passed with them. By the time the clouds left, night had come, and inside the building shadows spread from every corner, every cubicle, every doorway. Without the aid of artificial light or candles, Daniel and Andy were plunged into near complete darkness. The rest of the refugees went to the roof to sit by the fire and warm themselves and chat until, one by one, they retreated into the office to curl up and sleep in uncomfortable beds made of bundled jackets and seat cushions.

But Daniel and Andy stayed twenty floors down, hoping that that would be sufficient buffer between them and the rest. Daniel worried that they might eventually get their courage up to come find them anyway. It was stupid to have attacked Ron that way. Daniel understood that now, and he wasn't angry anymore; he was just scared. They were stuck on an island with a group of people that no longer trusted him, and may actually fear him.

He laid Andy in a bundle of jackets and gave him the

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last pill for good measure. Andy was no longer feverish; his throat no longer hurt him, and Daniel was thankful for this. He kissed Andy's forehead and told him not to worry about what had happened, to go to sleep and dream of Mama. Andy smiled and closed his eyes, but it would be a long time before he fell asleep. He could feel the anxiety in his father and it made him anxious too. He watched Daniel for an hour as he sat leaning back in an office chair, looking out the window at the moonlight on the rippling ocean. He watched his father and he thought he felt like something had changed. He was six years old so he couldn't have put it into words, but it was there no less. Like a cloak around his father that was thin and threadbare, but growing stronger.

Eventually Andy closed his eyes for good, and he did indeed dream of his Mama. She kissed his cheeks and tickled him and told him that everything was going to be OK. She told him that though the world had changed, change was inevitable and there was nothing to be afraid of. She told him to sleep tight and warm and to not be afraid, and Andy believed her. She was dead, so she should know about things like fear and change.

Daniel stayed up late into the night, watching the moon as it traced its path across the sky and disappeared beyond his view. Slowly he drifted into a fitful sleep that was filled with dreams he wouldn't remember.

When he woke again even the moon had gone to bed and the office was as dark as any night since they'd been there. He woke because a shapeless dread had spread throughout his chest and he looked around the office, blind and afraid. He didn't hear Andy breathing. He scrambled to his feet, sending his chair flying into the nearest cubicle.

"Andy!" he shouted, but there was no response.

He went to where Andy had been sleeping and padded through the jumble of coats there. Andy was gone. He shouted his name again but again there was nothing. He wandered around the cubicles, looking under desks, pulling open closet

doors, shouting into the bathrooms. As he headed toward the kitchenette, he heard voices whispering, and he stopped and held his breath and listened. He couldn't make out what the voices were saying, but one of them was small and high and he knew it was Andy. They were coming from the kitchenette. There were two of them; Andy was talking to someone.

Daniel padded down the hallway and turned the corner, and there was Andy, sitting on a chair and looking into the empty corner. There was no one else in the room. Andy turned around and looked at his father.

"Who are you talking to, And?" asked Daniel.

Andy looked back at the empty corner and then at Daniel.

"Miss Gertrude," said Andy.

Daniel went to Andy and bent down, and looked him in the eyes. The empty corner was filled with shadows, silent and ready. It made Daniel uncomfortable, so he grabbed Andy's hand and said, "Come on, let's go back to bed."

Andy was reluctant to leave, but he stood up and he looked back at the empty corner.

"Say goodbye to Miss Gertrude," said Daniel, a chill running along his chest and upper arms.

Andy waved but said nothing and the two of them left the kitchenette.

"Does Miss Gertrude talk to you a lot?" asked Daniel.

Andy nodded, "Yes, when it's dark."

"At night?"

"And in the bathroom, or the stairs," said Andy. "Whenever it's dark."

Daniel thought about what to say next. Andy was being strangely secretive about his new imaginary friend, and her night time appearances made her seem...*dark* somehow. But mostly she made Daniel feel guilty for all that had happened to them. Most of it wasn't Daniel's fault, obviously, but a parent's ability to feel guilt is endless. He could sense something hardening in Andy, and he felt helpless to stop it. Whatever came of the LEV breaking and the flood, it was bound to make life harder. Whatever had been before was gone now, and Miss

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Gertrude seemed to reflect that, if only as a projection of the changes in his son's consciousness. What could he say to stop the inevitable?

"Do you like her?" Daniel asked.

Andy nodded again.

"That's good."

"She said that she likes you, too, Daddy. But she said you have a temper."

Daniel laughed, "Did she?"

"Yeah."

"Do you agree with her?"

Andy was sheepish, but he nodded.

"I suppose I do," said Daniel and he shook his head, bent down and hugged Andy. "I suppose I do. But it's 'cause I love you so much, Andy. I'm protective of you. I don't want anything bad to happen to you. Do you know that? I love you more than anything in the world."

"I know, Daddy. I love you, too."

They went back to the bed of jackets under the desk and Daniel tucked Andy in and he lay down next to his son. He was suddenly exhausted. It felt like he hadn't slept properly in months.

"We need to get some sleep, buddy," said Daniel, curling onto his side and bunching a jacket under his head for a pillow.

The two of them lay quietly for several minutes, and Daniel was nearly asleep when Andy spoke again.

"She told me to tell you that you that she knows who you've seen, the dark man," said Andy. "She said she sees the same man."

Daniel rolled over and looked into Andy's eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"I dunno, Daddy. She told me to tell you. She said he's bad, he's a bad man."

"What are you talking about?" repeated Daniel, his heart racing. How did Andy know about those dreams?

"I don't know. That's just what she said."

Daniel looked at his son for a long time, but it was clear

## Tres Crow

Andy wasn't lying, or didn't think he was lying. He believed this woman had told him about the dream. How he actually knew was beyond Daniel's exhausted mind to comprehend. They needed to just go to sleep and he could worry about this in the morning. He probably just talked in his sleep.

"Just go to bed, Andy," said Daniel, rolling over and adjusting the jackets again.

Eventually Andy slept, but Daniel stayed awake for a long time after that.





# CHAPTER TWELVE

## The ships come in

Daniel must have eventually slept because when he opened his eyes, the sun was burning bright through the office windows and he could hear stamping and shouting coming from the stairwell. For a brief moment he was certain the others were coming for them, that they'd stewed through the night on what Daniel had done and had decided Ron was right, that they were Shants and should be gotten rid of. But the voices were not angry or violent, they were excited.

“Finally! Finally!” said one voice louder than the rest. It was Seth, and Daniel knew only one thing that could get Seth so excited.

Daniel rolled to his feet and ran to the window. A massive tanker, belching black smoke into the blue sky, straddled the horizon well to the north. Eight smaller boats sped from the tanker toward the building, leaving white tails of wake behind them. They looked like legs on a big, smoking spider. The blue and red flag of the North American States flew high

above the deck of the tanker.

Daniel pressed his forehead to the glass, watching the legs of the spider inch toward him. Doubt gnawed at him at the same time that excitement and panic poured through him. His only option was to take his chances on the boat with everyone else and hope that he went unnoticed, that the flood had created enough chaos that the Cit status of one man hardly mattered.

The closest boat to the building looked to be about five miles away but it blasted its booming foghorn. Daniel heard the cheers of the refugees from another building a few hundred yards away, distantly fluttering in the wind. The boat blasted its horn again.

“Daddy?” asked Andy. The horn had woken him up. “What was that?”

“Government ships. They’re here for us.”

“For us!?”

“Not *just* us. Everyone. They’re here to rescue us,” said Daniel reassuringly, though he felt much less so in his heart.

He went to Andy and lifted him to his feet, and threw one of the jackets around him. He grabbed up the backpack though there was nothing in it. The pills were gone; the food was gone. But he didn’t know if they would need it at some point. He put a jacket on himself and then they moved to the stairs, drifting evasively behind the group, nearly three stories higher. The mingled cries of laughter and joy echoed like the cackling shrieks of carrion birds in the stairwell. He wasn’t sure exactly how this was going to work. It looked as though you only got one pass at this. When the boats left, they left. Yet he was wary of being trapped on a government boat with Ron. What would Ron say?

An explosive horn blast shook the windows and Daniel looked down to see that the boat, much bigger close up than it had appeared just moments before, was nearly to the building. Across from them he could see the refugees of another building scrambling to meet the boat.

“C’mon, buddy, we need to hurry,” said Daniel as he

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reached out for Andy's hand.

There was no right answer, but they would surely die in this building if they stayed behind. The only option that offered them any chance of survival was to get on the boat, and take their chances.

They sprinted down the last few flights of stairs and nearly slammed into Skylar's back as they rounded the last bend. The other men were spread out over the stairs, with the vanguard waist deep in the icy waters of the ocean. The water was calmer than it had been the night they'd come to the building. The tide rose and fell only a few inches. Ron and Mark waded toward the open door that led to the lobby and the boat beyond. Ron turned his head to look back at the others and saw Daniel standing at the back of the group, high on the stairs.

"No. NO! You and your Shant son're staying here. You're not coming!" he shouted, rushing through the waist deep water toward Daniel.

Daniel's worst fears about Ron were instantly realized and the fear crystallized immediately to anger, blue and blazing. He grew rigid and reached back for Andy.

"If you touch me or my son, I will kill you!" shouted Daniel, and his voice was calm and icy and so matter of fact that Ron paused at the foot of the stairs. Daniel had the higher ground.

"You're not getting on this boat," said Ron through gritted teeth.

"Daddy," said Andy, pulling at Daniel's hand.

"Not now, Andy," said Daniel, freeing his hand from his son.

"Daddy! Miss Gertrude!"

"Jesus, not now!"

"Who the fuck is Miss Gertrude?" asked Ron, suddenly suspicious.

Daniel didn't answer the question, "You can't stop us from getting on the boat."

"Yes, we can."

Daniel's anger bubbled over and he leaped down the stairs

at Ron. If he had to kill every single one of them, he would. He saw nothing but a flaming blue and anger and a week of frustration. His hands felt like lead weights at his side, heavy and destructive. He felt hands on him but he threw them off, and he felt like the ground was shaking and he grabbed Ron's collar and lifted him off his feet. He felt the ground shaking. The ground was shaking.

"Andy!" shouted Mark behind them. "Get back here!"

Hearing Andy's name immediately sobered Daniel and he threw Ron into the water and looked back. Andy was gone.

"Andy!"

He ran up the stairs and no one stopped them. The kid had solved everything for them. Daniel called Andy's name over and over and he could feel the ground shaking. Why was it shaking? Jesus, what was going on? Andy didn't answer, but three stories up he saw a small shape move in the shadows and he followed. The ground shook as though the building was coming down.

"Andy, get back here! What are you doing!? Andy!"

Andy ducked into the bathroom and a few moments later Daniel followed behind.

The shaking of the building stopped. Andy stood in the middle of the bathroom. A single column of white light poured through a high window to the dusty tiles of the bathroom floor, and a thin, old, graying woman stood in the middle of the light, dust and particles swirling lazily around her. Andy reached out to her and she took hold of his hand and she smiled at him and her eyes were kind and warm and ancient.

Something moved in the shadows behind the two of them, something dark and shrouded, tall, with black arms that reached in all directions at once.

"Andy!" shouted Daniel, taking a step toward his son.

The dark shape rushed toward Andy and the old woman. She looked back at the figure and then turned and looked directly at Daniel and there was anger and resignation in her face, and then the blackness wrapped its arms around her and Andy and they were all plunged into darkness.

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“Andy!”

The ground started to shake again and Daniel groped in the darkness for his son. He crawled on his hands and knees toward the middle of the room, and his hands felt something soft and small, and grabbed Andy into his arms and hurried from the bathroom.

In the light of the office he could see that Andy was half-dazed, his cheeks pale and bloodless. Daniel threw him over his shoulder and sprinted to the stairs, the ground shaking, panic jittering his insides.

Out the window he could see the top smokestack of the boat and the flag waving in the wind. The boat blasted its horn again and the boat started to move. Daniel looked out the window and he could see the men on the deck of the ship. He could see Ron, sitting on a bench and looking out to the sea. The boat was leaving. Daniel rushed down the remaining flights of stairs and plunged into the ice cold water at the bottom. The water woke Andy up and he groggily asked where Miss Gertrude was.

“She’s fine. She’s fine,” said Daniel repeatedly. “Can you swim, Andy?” And even before Andy could respond Daniel thought better of it. “No, of course you can’t. Can you hold onto me? Tight. There you go.”

He shifted Andy onto his back, and Andy’s grip on his throat was too tight, but there wasn’t time to worry about that. Daniel waded out into the lobby where they’d crashed just a week before and he saw that the boat was too far away. There was no way they were going to swim to the boat. He let his legs go limp and let the tide take him out into the open ocean, his breath hitching in the freezing water.

He started to swim even though he knew it was hopeless, furiously at first, but as the ache of his arms and legs caught up with him, and the adrenaline wore off he slowed considerably. He looked up at the ship, and it had pulled away from him; he could no longer see any people clearly; the soldiers on the ship’s deck were nothing more than blue specks moving purposefully about.

Andy gagged and sputtered behind him.

Daniel yelled, and raged to the sky, treading water in the deep ocean, 500 hundred feet from his building, his limbs ragged with exhaustion. He had to go back. They would be stuck in the building until another ship came, or until they died.

He turned to go back. The ocean was relatively calm and the current was moving toward the buildings so he had a slightly easier go of it on the way back than on the way out, but his heart was so heavy it wearied his limbs and weighed him down like an anchor. Eventually, he reached the opening and swam through it, the current forcing him abruptly against one of the jagged edges and the edge bit through the sole of his shoe and burst open the mostly healed cut on his foot. He cried out, but scrambled across the soggy lobby carpet and stood up as best he could. He waded to the stairwell.

A horn blared behind him, close. Daniel spun around. He could hear the boat moving toward them before he could see it, but the engine was too loud, too present to be speeding away. He ran-swam to the edge, waving his arms and calling for help, Andy dangling from his neck. The boat zigzagged back and forth in the alley between the rows of skyscrapers, carrying on its back four or five soldiers with large automatic weapons, and one man dressed in a white uniform, an officer most likely. The man stood at the head of the cockpit, surveying the scene around him, his arms resting rigidly on his hips. Daniel's waving caught the eye of the officer and he waved at the driver to head to the building. The boat slowed to a halt twenty yards from where Daniel and Andy stood with a whoosh of water that nearly knocked them over.

The officer walked to Daniel's side of the boat, appraising him with wrinkled eyes that seemed to be looking through, as much as at, Daniel.

"Where were you when the last boat went through?" shouted the officer across the twenty yards of ocean.

"My son...I couldn't find him. We were too late," started Daniel.

"Obviously," said the officer. He gestured up at the build-

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ing. “Are you the last two, or is there a whole orphanage eating lunch up there?”

“We’re it.”

“Well get the hell over here. Someone dies for every minute we waste.”

Daniel obeyed, leaping into the water and swimming over to the back of the boat. He helped Andy onto the swim platform and into the waiting arms of two of the soldiers, and then pulled himself onto the boat.

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” said the officer, once Daniel and Andy were seated safely on benches.

The boat headed swiftly back to the great belching spider in the distance. The officer turned his attention to his new passengers. He stood above them, his head moving up and down as he looked at them, as if he was reading a large tablet on a wall. He addressed Daniel first.

“You’re fortunate we were coming through, were you not?” he asked.

Daniel nodded.

The officer looked above their heads at the diminishing skyline. He had a protruding, overly masculine jaw, a stern, protruding nose, and flat cheekbones. His soldiers watched him in polite reverence.

“What’s your name?”

“Stan.”

“Stan what?”

Daniel cleared his throat and then responded, “Mathison. Stan Mathison.”

“Do you have your ID?” asked the officer.

Even though Daniel was prepared for the question, he was still caught off guard when it was asked.

“I...,” he started, making a show of patting his shirt and pants. “I...the flood. I...”

The officer waved his hand.

“I assume you don’t have his, either...?” he asked and then added before Daniel could respond, “Of course not. Jesus Christ. No one has their IDs. What a mess. What a fucking

mess.”

He started for the front of the boat.

“I’m sorry...we’re doing the best we can.” He thought another moment and then added again, sadly, “I’m sorry.”

He walked to the front, and while it was only a few feet, it was as if he had walked into a different room and shut the door.

The tanker drew closer, swallowing up all of Daniel’s field of vision. It was huge. They pulled up next to the ship, and its black sides raised several stories above them. The officer called someone over the radio and told them that they had a few more refugees for the Mother and to let down the gangplank. A light, flexible metal gangplank extended from the main deck of the Mother ship and glided its way toward them.

The officer turned to them and said bleakly, “We’re here.”

He gestured to all of the other soldiers who stood straight away and, pointing with the barrels of their guns, signaled for Daniel and Andy to lead the way up the gangplank. Daniel stood and helped Andy to his feet and the two of them, followed by three guns pointed at their backs, stepped up the gangplank, which swung dangerously from side to side. They entered the Mother ship.

Behind them the officer mumbled, “Good luck.”

They were some of the last in a line that stretched from six evenly-spaced gangplanks to the middle of the ship where they joined together in a jumbled braid of humanity. They were all walking toward a gaping mouth of a hatch that stretched at least twenty feet high. There were hundreds of other people on the deck with them. They looked happy, hurt, sick, all at once. Daniel was surprised by just how many had survived. If there were this many from just this small area of Atlanta then that meant tens or hundreds of thousands were alive in Atlanta.

The surface of the deck was uneven, made of large sheets of flat steel riveted together, but twisted and made awkward by years at the whim of the ocean. Daniel kept catching the bottom of his hurt foot on the edge of one of these uneven

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sheets and his foot would cry out. His shoes were soaked from the swimming, so he couldn't be sure whether his foot was bleeding or not, but by the way it burned and groaned, he was certain he'd torn it open again. In a different time and under different circumstances, he would've needed stitches. Others tripped on the steel sheets as well. Stubbed toes, surly tempers passed over the crowd, competing with the fading pleasantness of their discovery. Soldiers lined their path, their weapons held limply at their sides, watching them. Most pretended not to see the soldiers; they simply looked forward at the darkness that grew and grew and then eventually—and perhaps happily for some—swallowed them into the gullet of this steel beast.

They walked toward the hatch. The gradient declined as they approached, and the air grew dank and stale, the sea breeze choking off nearly the moment they crossed the threshold. Daniel gripped Andy's hand tightly in his and whispered for him to follow close, to keep hold of his hand, no matter what. The change was sudden. One moment they were in brilliant sunlight and the next they were in darkness. It became alternately quieter and louder; fewer sounds were actually being made, but they echoed and reverberated, and there was a swell of noise from below them, in the depths. Andy leaned close into Daniel, stepping on his foot occasionally. It hurt, but he didn't let on. He wrapped his arm around his son and they leaned close together, heading into the unknown darkness, using one another as a crutch or a guide stick with which to gauge the depths. Abruptly the ground evened out and they took a few tentative steps forward.

Out of the gloom and shuffle a voice rose high and authoritative over a PA system, "PLEASE MOVE FORWARD UNTIL YOU HAVE COME TO THE PERSON IN FRONT OF YOU. PLEASE MOVE FORWARD AS FAR AS POSSIBLE AND MAKE ROOM FOR THOSE BEHIND!"

They did as they were told and they walked slowly, Daniel with one arm around Andy and the other stuck out in front of him to feel the way. He clumped into a heavy, dense body and he apologized. There was no response. They stopped, assum-

ing they had come as far as they could go.

“Are you OK, buddy?” asked Daniel.

“Yes, Daddy.”

It cheered him and broke him in half all at once to hear Andy’s voice in the gloom of this place, as clear and lonely as a single bell chiming across an empty square. Silence sizzled around them. No one else spoke, and Daniel realized suddenly how terrible it was to be in a vast room full of other human beings too miserable to speak. The human spirit is vocal, it is song, it is story, it is words.

The engines of the tanker revved and they whistled and churned, a rising, grinding note that seemed to go on and on and on, until Daniel wondered if this ship maybe didn’t even have electric power. The sound of grating metal worked into his brain, mincing him until his ears actually started to hurt. He shouted for Andy to cover his ears, but he couldn’t hear his own voice over the din. He pressed Andy’s head to his hip.

Abruptly the engines switched to electric power with a harsh clang, and the thousands of people fell into a shocked and embarrassed silence. Then slowly, as if the ice had been broken and they were free to be more themselves, people began talking again, their mingled commotion a raucous thing that seemed to fill the dark air above like a hissing fume, like steam erupting from a kettle.

Andy coughed, and Daniel held him close. They stood like that for a long time, not talking, unaware of the passing of time.

It grew hot, slowly. Sweat rings formed under their arms and on their backs, and eventually Daniel felt himself panting and wiping sweat from his forehead and fanning himself with his hands. The combined heat and energy radiated off everyone, filling the hold with their rancid, unwashed stink. A man a few feet from them screamed about needing a goddamn drink, and his outburst was met by a few amens. Then everyone was screaming about water, food, doctors. It was a frenzied wailing sound that was too disjointed to be heartbreaking, but loud and frantic enough to be more than a little frightening.

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“PLEASE KEEP CALM!!!”

“Keep calm!?” responded another man, further away. “How can we keep calm standing like fucking pigs in the dark!?”

The crowd responded with violent approval. Andy was shoved hard into Daniel, and both of them pressed into the people standing shoulder-to-shoulder next to them. The whole sea of bodies drifted like kelp back and forth in the darkness. Individuals fell and were trampled, but the group continued to wash from one side to the next, hungry, angry, steadily growing hysterical.

There was no response from the PA system and after another fifteen minutes of raging the crowd simmered to a dull roar. A few children cried. A man screamed for a doctor, said his wife had been trampled. His cries were buoyed by others, carried like a ripple away from him, but as far as Daniel could tell no doctor came. An older woman said something garbled about God’s wrath. A younger voice, could have been a teen-aged boy or a young woman, whispered a hushed prayer in a hurried, anxious tone.

Andy coughed again.

“You feeling alright, buddy?” asked Daniel.

Andy didn’t answer right away, but eventually said yes. Daniel’s foot burned in his shoe. He needed to sit down and get off his foot. He probably needed a doctor himself, but he knew that was a long-gone luxury.

A child cried loudly from far away and though Daniel knew it wasn’t Andy, it made him very lonely. He clutched Andy tighter to him still. The child’s cry elicited other cries and soon people were jostling and pushing and rioting again. Daniel was knocked back, this time plowing so hard into the people next to him that they all fell to the ground. He felt something snap with a sickening pop under him, and someone screamed hoarsely.

“My leg, my fucking leg, *ohmigod!!!*”

Daniel rolled off the man and tried to stand up, but he was knocked back down by a hip or an ass bumping him in

the forehead. He sat down hard and bent his wrist back, nearly breaking it. Someone stepped on his foot and he hissed through his teeth and scrambled to his feet, buttressing himself against the person standing next to him. An elbow cracked him in the ribs.

“Andy!?”

He was completely disoriented; he’d lost his grip on Andy. He fumbled in the dark, calling Andy’s name. The man with the broken leg quieted to a shivering, hissing mess, mumbling, “Fuck” under his breath in an unending chant of profanity.

“Andy!” shouted Daniel, bumping into people, frantic, blind.

“Daddy? I’m right here,” responded Andy from right next to him.

Daniel turned and grabbed in that direction and he accidentally hit Andy in the face. Andy started crying, and Daniel grabbed him into his arms and whispered he was sorry. He told him to hush, that he’d be alright. It’s gonna be alright.

Hours passed, and Daniel grew exhausted. His foot and wrist throbbed, an alternating current of hideous pain that sizzled between the two parts of him. Andy had slumped from his hand, but Daniel could feel him leaning against his lower leg, wrapping his thin arms around his shins.

Suddenly, squealing metal reverberated through the hold, and bright sunlight smacked their eyes. Daniel looked up, but the light pouring through the opened hatches in the ceiling was simply too harsh after several hours in this hot, sticky darkness. There was a hissing sound from above, like the warning of a massive snake or a balloon emptying into the hold, and cascades of warm water landed on the crowd.

It took a moment for them to realize what was happening; many tried to run away at first, fearing that the boat had sprung a leak. Then, slowly, they saw that soldiers were blasting them with fire hoses through large hatches in the ceiling, and there was a desperate turn of the tide as everyone tried to get under the jets. It stung and left welts on their exposed

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skin, but most were so grateful for the coolness that they tried to follow the spray as it passed away from them. Steam rose from the crowd, clouding the air and rising through the hatches in white billows.

Daniel lifted Andy in his arms and rushed toward the nearest spray, lifting his opened mouth to the water. Andy cupped his hands and drank over and over and over. They caught as much as they could, but it was really only just enough to realize how thirsty they were. The misty haze above them created strange shadows on the walls of the hold, flapping curtains of light rippling on the metal. The crowd whistled blissfully, sighing en masse.

Then, as quickly as it began, the water choked off and the hatches slammed shut. The boom that rumbled through the hold was depressingly final. They were plunged back into a humid, cramped darkness, which was all the more uncomfortable because of the steam. The crowd hissed their displeasure, and Daniel hissed with them.

Eventually, the sodden and discomfited masses began to smell like wet sneakers left in a hot car, putrid and decomposing, the stink of them so pervasive and overpowering that Daniel coughed every time he took a deep breath. He could only breathe through his mouth, though even that did not spare him; the stench was something he could taste. His head pounded; his stomach twisted and turned, always on the edge of vomiting. Several people around him weren't able to control themselves, though, and the smell of their vomit mixed horribly with the air, galvanizing the reek into something palpable, something with weight.

As disbelief turned to a slow, grinding desperation, people began to piss and shit on the floor, and when the first sour whiffs came to Daniel he thought of Andy. It had been hours since either of them had gone to the bathroom; Daniel didn't have to go, but Andy was 6 years old, surely he couldn't hold it much longer.

"Andy," whispered Daniel. "You have to go potty?"

“No,” said Andy.

“No? Really? It’s been a long time...”

“Daddy...,” said Andy, pausing, Daniel couldn’t see his face but he knew the look he was making just by the sound of his voice. His eyes were scrunched, his lips pursed, his childish attempt at holding back the power of his emotions. “I...I went already, daddy.”

Daniel hugged Andy to him and said it was alright.

Andy coughed, a sharp, dry cough that, as it went on, morphed into something wetter and more troubling. Daniel shivered despite the heat. His foot throbbed. He tried to lean mostly on the other one, but it was starting to hurt as well. All around them people moaned, mournful, heartbreaking sounds. The man with the broken leg groaned occasionally or whispered things to himself just mere feet away from them. He was alone, Daniel assumed, because no one said anything back to him. He alternated between loud cursing and mewling, and silent prayers, litanies, strings of unintelligible words. He was in terrible pain, and he was beginning to lose his grip. He couldn’t stand, so he laid on the ground in the muck, his back propped on a wall, holding his broken leg, moaning into the darkness.

Eventually, Daniel had to piss. It made each passing minute slower than the last. People pressed into him, or nudged him, pressing his bladder, making him groan against the pressure. Still he held it.

Occasionally the ship slowed enough that the engines clicked from electric to coal power and the teeth chattering noise would start again. The noise and the stench and the discomfort sent the captives into a great riot of shouting and exasperation, roiling, pushing, and pulling. Daniel and Andy were knocked down several times, their hands and knees squelching in the piss and water on the ground, but they held onto one another and they got back to their feet before they could be trampled. Others weren’t so lucky. Screams filled the air as people’s feet, legs, hands were stepped on and broken.

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Faces pressed into the muck.

Daniel's bladder screamed at him, reminded him with every step, every shove, every checked hip that he couldn't hold it in forever. All other thoughts were shoved from his mind. He crossed his legs like he was a little child and pressed his hand into his crotch.

Eventually he gave up, and he felt relief like he'd never known before. He actually felt lighter, but he also felt ashamed and angry. He looked around as if someone might have seen, but the darkness covered all sins. He moved a little to the side, stepped out from the puddle of his own urine and tried to shake out his rapidly cooling pants. The man with the broken leg moaned a few feet away, pathetic and mournful. Andy coughed.

All at once Daniel felt so much discomfort and anger and frustration that he screamed as loud as he could and his voice echoed across the hold, silencing people, becoming louder still, echoing, growing big, encompassing everything. The people around him moved away and he felt some of the pressure on him release and he felt like he could breathe, a little bit, just a small air pocket. He lifted Andy up so he could breathe for a second, and he pressed his face to Andy's and held him tight. Andy's cheek was burning. Daniel out his hand to Andy's forehead, his cheeks, the back of his neck.

"Andy," he said. "You feeling alright?"

Andy shook his head. Daniel pressed his hand to Andy's forehead again. He was on fire.

"You have a fever, buddy. How long've you felt bad?"

Andy shrugged.

"Does your throat hurt?"

Andy nodded.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Into the light

For reasons he couldn't quite place, Daniel knew that it was night, was completely certain of it. It made no difference really; it had been night all day in the hold of this massive ship, but somehow it made the passing of time a little easier when it was in context.

An hour or so ago, Daniel had moved him and Andy over to one of the steel-lined walls so they would have something to lean against. Daniel couldn't bring himself to sit down in the inches of shit and piss and vomit, but his good foot was getting so tired he needed a break. The fever overtook Andy so quickly Daniel hardly had time to absorb the news before Andy was shivering and pressing against Daniel, leaning against him too, one more weight weighing on his foot.

Daniel had never known a level of discomfort as keen as this. His skin was littered with goose bumps; it wriggled over his muscles as if at any moment it might tear free of him and walk away. His slightly shaggy hair—he'd had a hair-

cut scheduled for next week—was matted to his forehead in thick, sticky clumps. His hands were covered with slime that wouldn't wipe off on his pants and got caught under his fingernails. But more than that, the darkness and fatigue isolated him, built up a wall between him and those around him, trapping him in his head. He was tossed about on a sea of emotions, one minute on the verge of hysterical tears, the next shaking his head and chuckling at the ridiculousness of his predicament. The only time he was released was when Andy squeezed him or moaned, and those moments hardly made things better. For the first time, it occurred to him that they could die in here.

Around him several people had simply passed out from the heat, stench, and general stress of the whole ordeal. Three times someone next to him had clumped listlessly into him and then thumped to the floor with a splash. Others had set themselves down in the muck of their own accord, too tired to stand any longer, and had resigned themselves to bitter murmuring. The man with the broken leg had started to shriek uncontrollably, horrible sounds that echoed throughout the chamber and made others shriek too, just to deal with the horribleness of it all. He shrieked that he needed a doctor, that his leg was on fire, that it burned.

Andy coughed hard, and it drew on far too long, wet and mucousy. It hurt Daniel's throat to just listen to it. His coughing had gotten even worse in the last hour or so and with every bout he swooned. Daniel felt Andy's head. He was still on fire. Andy leaned hard against him and breathed in deep, ragged breaths.

He was exhausted; Daniel was exhausted. Someone snored a few feet away from them. The man shrieked about a doctor, about fire, about his leg. Still, Daniel could feel waves of fatigue crashing on him. His eyes drooped, and he flirted with sleep, standing up, his knees buckling then straightening then buckling again. His mind floated along. He was just so tired.

*He drifted on an open sea. He was in an empty boat. Andy wasn't there.*

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Stay awake! Don't sleep, stay awake for Andy...

*The boat was crude, made of an un-sanded, pale wood, the color of fish. There were oars, the same color of fish, resting on the sides of the boat, their flat ends dragging in the water like the bloated fingers of a drowned man. He was alone. The day was bright, cloudless, the water blue and traveling on and on into the distance. A mast, like the gnarled trunk of an ancient tree rose from the middle of the boat, and a battered square of canvas hung limp. There was no wind.*

*He was alone. The boat was small, little more than a row-boat, a fishing boat, like he used to fish in with his father when he was a boy.*

*He thought of an old nursery rhyme.*

*...merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily...*

*The sun twinkled in his eyes, blurred his vision.*

*...life is but a dream...*

*He held up his hand, its shadow fell over his brow. He squinted.*

*Suddenly everything went dark at once, the sky, the water, his vision. A dark, swirling shadow sat across from him, bright, crystalline, pupil-less eyes shining from the blackness. He heard laughter and it surrounded him and filled him, and then he realized it was coming from him and the creature's eyes twinkled and the water rose up over the sides of the boat and crashed down on Daniel.*

Tiny, fevered hands anxiously shook him and he tried to open his eyes but they were bludgeoned by harsh, yellow light. He splashed in water, thinking he was still in the boat and the vast ocean, but then all at once he remembered where he was. He lifted himself from the muck. His senses were assaulted by moans, the creaking of steel, a mass of shuffling feet, his own screeching bones, the greedy pleading of thirst on his tongue. He closed his eyes again and stood up, his cut and infected foot howling.

"Daddy, daddy," croaked Andy. "We've stopped."

Andy coughed, and Daniel patted his back and looked at

what the night and the dark had done to his son. He looked terrible. His eyes were sunken deep in his sockets, surrounded by black crescents, his pupils contracted to tiny pinpricks. His skin seemed to hang from his skull, almost translucent in the cruel morning light, except two pink spots on his cheeks. His hair was matted to his head in clumps. His breath rattled ominously in his chest. Daniel hugged Andy to him and then looked around.

The light he was just now getting used to, shone through the reopened hatches in the ceiling of the hold, creating thin, yellow pillars, like giant bamboo shoots in the gloom. The silhouettes of soldiers hovered about the hatches, watching them. Faces looked at Daniel from within those shoots of light. They were wan and desolate, turgid masks of misery. He saw a man carrying a young child in his arms. The child wasn't moving.

“PLEASE MOVE TO THE EXIT CALMLY!” blared a voice over the PA as the massive doors of the main hatch were lifted on their hinges and slammed aside with a booming roar. Light spilled down on them, glinting off their grimy heads like sunlight on the tops of waves. Soldiers formed two long lines on either side of the exit, shouting at the refugees nearest them to move, move, move. The refugees followed the funnel created by the soldiers, to six gangways that led off the ship. The soldiers were horrified at what they saw. They shifted nervously, fingering their guns.

“PLEASE MOVE QUICKLY BUT CALMLY TOWARD THE EXIT!”

The crowd erupted as one, sensing the light and land like starving dogs smelling garbage. Daniel was caught off guard, and he and Andy were knocked to the ground. Daniel was kneed hard in the head as he tried to get back to his feet, and he fell back down. A foot crunched on his wrist, another on his stomach. Someone tried to step over him, got their sneaker caught in his shirt, and fell to the ground next to him. Two more people fell on him, driving the air out of his lungs. He heard Andy moan next to him as his fingers got mashed, but did not break.

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“GET OFF US!” Daniel yelled suddenly, and his mind was bright and blue, blank, blind panic. His voice was ferocious with fear and anger. The people around them stopped suddenly, and put their arms out to stop those behind them, creating a protective ring around Daniel and Andy, and the others that had fallen with them.

“Hey, hey, watch out. Hold up,” shouted a tall, greasy young man who stood over Daniel. “Let these people get up!”

He grabbed Andy up, and Andy gripped at his neck, whining in his ear. Daniel looked at the young man, and their eyes met briefly. The man’s eyes were curiously blank, empty, like he was sleepwalking.

“Thank you,” mumbled Daniel, and started moving toward the exit.

“PLEASE MOVE QUICKLY BUT CALMLY...”

The voice trailed off as they emerged into the warm sunlight, heat waves rippling off their steaming heads. Despite the aches and pains that wracked his body, or Andy’s heaviness on his shoulders and arms, Daniel closed his eyes and turned his face to the sky, relishing the feel of that warmth on his skin. It burned away the slime that coated his forehead, replacing it with a healthy sheen of sweat. The sun lit a fever in him that burned away all the impurities of the rancid dark.

To their left the ocean spread out to the horizon; to their right, tree-covered hills rolled and bunched upon one another until they crashed into the feet of sheer cliffs. Someone yelled behind them, and a tangle of bodies moved toward them.

“Let me go. Let me go. I’m a citizen for Christ’s sake...”

One of the soldiers smacked the man in the face with the butt of his gun and two others dragged him to the edge of the ship, where they left him, blood dripping from his cracked skull onto the gray steel of the ship’s deck. Daniel kept walking, unconsciously keeping his head down.

Andy coughed into his ear, and Daniel held him tight, feeling the heat of his returned fever through their clothes. Daniel closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. It had been weeks of running, and hiding, and rowing, and he just went from one

horror to another, with no end in sight.

Several more people tried to leave the line only to receive the same rifle-butt warning. Violence moved in the air like a fog. Daniel and Andy moved slowly, Andy growing heavier with each step. He coughed again and moaned about his throat.

“It’s gonna be alright, buddy,” whispered Daniel. “Just hold on tight. I’m gonna get you some medicine.”

They followed the group to the left and down onto one of twelve gangplanks, and the entirety of the scene unfolded in front of him. The tanker was anchored in what appeared to have been a steep valley before the flood. The sheer edges of the valley walls and its depth provided a near perfect docking station for extremely large ships like this. The tanker rested alongside a hastily constructed embankment of concrete that rose up to meet the end of the gangplank like two fingers touching. Beyond the embankment was a ten foot tall metal fence that stretched between two teeth of rock that rose high above the deck of the tanker. The fence widened like a funnel as it reached for the tanker, ready to receive the teeming mass of refugees as they stepped off the gangplanks and onto dry land. There were what seemed like hundreds of soldiers and ICE agents, scurrying back and forth through the growing crowd, pushing, yelling, pointing.

The gangplank swayed in the early morning sea breeze, and Daniel held onto the unsteady guardrail with one hand, Andy with the other. His arms were so tired. They’d grown numb. Andy groaned, and Daniel had to suppress an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness and of restlessness. He wanted to shout and push everyone in front of him out of the way, throw them overboard and run and run until he was as far away from this nightmare as he could get. But he walked slowly like everyone else, his teeth aching from his clenched jaw.

They stepped off the gangplank onto steady earth for the first time in days and the ground seemed to lurch underneath him. He walked unsteadily forward at the prodding and push-

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ing of soldiers.

“Hey! Move! Move!” shouted a soldier, pushing Daniel in the back with the butt of his gun.

Daniel struggled forward, passing through the long tunnel of people and fencing and soldiers to the awaiting mouth of the open gate. Two small guard towers—little more than hastily built tree forts, really—stood on either side of the gate doors, like miniature versions of the larger, and more severe, pillars of rock behind them. Two guns passively surveyed the crowd, moving first one way then the other, like sated lions languishing on the edge of the savanna.

The sheer rock walls built up around them and made the place even more claustrophobic, turning their echoing voices and shuffling feet into ocean waves crashing and crashing. He was briefly reminded of an exhibit he’d seen at the Natural History Museum in New Savannah when he was four or five, Andy’s age. It was in the Flood Wing of the museum, where there were exhibits on the way life used to be before the flood. As he wandered through the various dioramas and displays showing the architectural styles of early 21st century Florida, he wondered what it would have been like to live on the ocean, to feel the beach sand under your toes every morning, to build sand castles, and listen to the roar of the surf as it chewed on the beach.

One diorama, showing a family of mannequins, one boy, a mom, a dad playing on the beach, caught his eye and he walked over to see it. In the painted background, seagulls fluttered against a baby blue, cloudless sky. In front of the display was a table with several shells placed at even intervals. A particularly large one, coiled with sharp spines protruding from it, sat right in front and he picked it up, doing his best to decipher the small explanation on the table. A conch shell. It said that if you put the shell to your ear you could hear the sound of the ocean. Daniel hurriedly did just that and was amazed as the wash of waves on sand and sea breeze flowed into his ear. He closed his eyes and he could practically see the ocean before him, the seagulls and waves and the endless horizon.

He felt like crying and laughing and shouting all at the same time, a spectrum of emotion he was entirely too immature to understand. A whole world opened to him in that moment, one that perhaps had never existed at all, but one that felt very real to him. Like something he'd seen in his dreams, had wandered the edges of his subconscious mind, a memory of something he'd never actually seen in life until now. He grinned and sat in silence, listening to the phantom ocean for several minutes until his mother tapped him on the shoulder and told him to put it down so the other children could take a listen. As he walked away, he could still hear the ocean washing through his mind.

And now, listening to the echoed whispers of the captives' feet on the ravine walls he was reminded of the ocean, not the way the ocean really sounds, but the way it sounded to him in that shell. It was a horrible sound now, mocking and achingly bright on these new-formed rocky shores.

They slowly worked their way around a long curve in the gulch and teams of soldiers marched with them, eyeing them warily, their guns poised, periodically urging wayward stragglers back in line. And then a sliver of brilliant sunlight shone projected on the far wall, growing with every step. The path inclined steeply to meet another, more severely reinforced, fence and gate that reached across the ravine, barring their passage. Two more tree-fort guard posts rose above the gate, bearing on their backs yet more armed soldiers.

The steep walls on either side of the ravine steadily drooped back to earth ahead of them, revealing a massive bowl shaped valley. The gate blocked one of only three passageways into the valley, which sat nestled in the bosom of a large, craggy mountain range. Daniel guessed they must be in the Blue Ridge Mountains, since surely they hadn't traveled nearly long enough to reach any other mountain range.

The group came to an abrupt stop just as he and Andy came fully around the bend, and he stood on his tiptoes again, trying to decipher the reason for the halt. He saw two guards chatting animatedly with the soldiers in the guard posts on

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the other side of the fence. The wire meshing of the fence, or maybe it was two or three fences, he couldn't tell, was so confused he couldn't see beyond, but he heard a great upheaval rising from the valley. So this is where they were ultimately leading them.

Daniel pulled Andy closer, and cradled his head.

They shuffled forward through the gate, another small courtyard and then a third gate. As they walked toward this final, heavily-guarded entry, the sounds from the valley erupted around them, the sound of shouts, moans, curses, even yelps of joy as lost loved ones were inexplicably reunited. The crowd of captives in front of them seemed to dissipate as they were assimilated into the mass of people that populated the valley floor, the tattered remnants of the Eastern North American States. The guards, who had chaperoned them for nearly a full 24 hours now loosed their hold on their miserable charges and emptied the line of captives like water in a balloon into the valley.

They were swept up in a fast moving current of bodies. Voices assaulted him.

“Join the NAS navy, help fight...”

“Food here...Just follow...!”

“Please register at the Survivor Registration Panel...”

A greasy teenager, with two black eyes and a stilted mouthful of cracked teeth handed him a creased, and half crumpled piece of paper. He took it absent-mindedly with his free hand and was quickly whisked away by the raging rip tide of people. He stumbled forward, trying just to stay upright, Andy barely clutching onto him. Several minutes later he managed to find a small pocket of inactivity, like a miniature eye of the hurricane. He crumbled to his knees, and laid Andy on the ground, and then lied on his back next to him, the dust soaking up the sweat on his cheeks and forehead, the back of his neck. For what seemed like hours he lay there, trying to control his breathing, staring up at the brilliant sky, his aching arms coated in a fine sheen of sweat, quivering like shimmering heat lines.

He unfolded the crumpled piece of paper in his hand and raised it in front of his face. It was a roughly constructed map of the refugee camp. The flying eagle crest of the NAS, one of the enduring vestiges of the old United States, was stamped on the lower right hand corner. He tried to locate where they were but there were very few landmarks. In the upper left hand corner was a small circle that read *food station* and not far from that was another small circle labeled with a red cross. He wondered how far away these two places were from him. He lied there studying the map, thinking about distance and where they were in all of this, and he started to slip seamlessly into sleep. One moment he was gazing at the map and the next he was back in the boat, as if he had blinked and the entire world had shifted under him. He looked around for the cloaked man, but he was alone, surrounded by a vast ocean of water.

Andy coughed and Daniel was jerked awake. He looked over at him and saw he was keeled over, his face red with exertion, his tiny chest heaving and struggling. Green phlegm dribbled over his pursed lips, down his chin, and collected in a dusty mess on the ground. Tears plopped next to the puddle.

Daniel sat up quickly and uttered, "Jesus!" He scrambled on his hands and knees over to him, put his hand under his filthy head and lifted Andy up into his arms.

"I've got to get you to a doctor," he said, and he rocked back onto his feet and lifted Andy up, as if carrying a newborn. Andy feebly clasped at his neck with his weak hands, as Daniel looked down at the crumpled map in his hand. He located the approximate direction of the medic station and walked as quickly as he could.

People passed him like ships on a cold winter night, no one looked at him, everyone keeping their heads down, their eyes averted. Daniel's arms were lumps of dried paraffin, frozen, however painfully, under Andy's small weight. It seemed to him that if he were to disappear his arms would remain in this position; he would forever look as though he were holding his hands out in defeat.

He wandered for ten, fifteen minutes, and he seemed to be

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no nearer the medic station. The pain in his arms, and Andy's pale face and dark eyes started him panicking.

"Medic! Does anyone know where there's a doctor!" He yelled helplessly at passersby, but they turned away disgusted or shrugged with embarrassed indifference. He wasn't the first to be screaming for a doctor.

"Can someone help me!? I need a doctor!"

There was a small gaggle of rough looking teenagers standing in a protective circle a few feet from him. He crashed into them and pleaded, "*Please*, can any of you help me find a doctor?"

A thin girl with deep brown eyes and buck teeth she might one day grow into if she could survive this ordeal, shifted from one foot to the next and looked to the others out of the corner of her eye, as if asking for advice. They just watched him and Andy with a mix of curiosity and revulsion. She pointed to her right, her eyes never leaving Andy's sallow face.

"It's just over there, follow the signs," she said, as if he had asked a stupid question.

And he *felt* stupid when he followed the line of her hand and saw a red cross painted on a large wooden sign not twenty feet from where they stood. The sign had an arrow pointing to the right. He left without thanking the girl, and she watched Daniel walk away for a few moments before she turned back to her friends. One of them laughed, but it was jittery and humorless, the sort of laugh you laughed just before you lost your mind for good.

Daniel followed the sign and within minutes he was being accepted by a mountain of a woman in a white smock. She hurried him down a long aisle. Rows of hurt, sick, dying people, old and young, moaned and wriggled on either side of him. His arms were cramping up. An old man, withered as a stick of driftwood, sat up in his bed as Daniel passed, reached out to him and called a name that wasn't his, and then he was behind him. A child screamed, its arm was black with gangrene. A woman lay dead in the cot next to the child, an IV sticking out of her arm, her eyes glazed, flies hovering like buzzards over

her head. Was it the child's mother? Daniel doubted it.

Twice he thought he heard someone call his name.

The fat lady in the smock turned suddenly to him and indicated with an urgent wave of her hand at an empty cot. He set Andy down as politely as he could, but the blood had stopped pumping to his fingers and they refused to work properly. His head smacked one of the wooden corners of the cot, and this started a fit of coughing that ended with a spat of phlegm on the ground next to them.

The nurse rounded on him, "How long has he been like this?"

Daniel pushed his hand through his hair, looked at them, they were glistening with grease.

"Uh, he's gotten a lot worse since yesterday...um, he was taking antibiotics for Strep before, but..." he said, the sheer weight of the last 12 hours sliding in on him at once. "I...he was better, but...he just got a lot worse on the ship...over the night."

The nurse closed her eyes bitterly and clenched her fist. She'd heard this story so many times by now. She looked solemnly down at Andy and then hurried away with a small, "I'll be right back."

Daniel watched her go until she disappeared in the chaos, and then he looked down at Andy. He clasped his hands at his chest as if he was pulling a blanket tight to his chin. He looked so small and tired, so frail. It broke Daniel's heart to look at him. Behind Daniel there was an empty cot, and he sat down and watched Andy's lips work, his eyes fluttering behind his eyelids. The moans of the sick, injured, and dying filled the air like a rolling thunder. He thought he heard someone say his name, but when he turned there was no one he recognized.

He leaned forward and lifted Andy's head, gingerly positioning the pillow under his crown. He laid him back down and the pillow gave way to his small weight, wrapping around his head like loving arms. His eyelids fluttered but did not open and a spot of green stained drool dropped from the corner of his mouth.

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The nurse returned carrying a small IV bag filled with a clear, syrupy fluid. She hooked the bag to the loop at the top of the metal stand next to Andy's cot, and stuck a needle in his arm. The liquid immediately began to flow down the long rubber tube into Andy's body.

The nurse said, "Some antibiotics and fluids. He's very dehydrated."

She flapped a thin, navy blanket into the air and brought it to light perfectly over Andy. Taking a step back, she gazed down at Andy with a hopelessly sad look, a mixture of guilt, angst, and deep sorrow.

"He's lucky," she said. "Antibiotics and fluids are about all we actually have here." She shook her head with obvious distaste, her hands resting on her hips. "I can't believe they're carting people around in the dark like they are. What the hell is the point? I know we're at war, the flood, but...but treating everyone like they're criminals?" She stopped for a moment, recharging and then gestured absently around her, "We're completely swamped here, absolutely up to our eyeballs. This is a mess. We don't have enough help..." She spoke like a tea kettle, her pitch rising steadily as she gained momentum, her chin lifting as she spoke, but then she ended softly, delicately, sadly, "...not enough by far. Your poor child. Treating everyone like criminals."

She paused, looking sadly at Andy, then she raised her eyes to Daniel and something in her eyes made his stomach go cold.

"Sir," she said. "Can I see your citizenship papers?"

Here it was; the question he'd been fearing all along. His mouth worked as his mind raced.

"I..." he stammered. "The flood...I..."

"Mel!? Hey, we need your help over here!"

A tall woman of about twenty-five, with her hair harassed about her face had her arm around a young boy with a nasty gash across his cheek. The nurse, or Mel as she was apparently called, gave Daniel an apologetic look, and then started toward the child. She turned back to Daniel before she got too

far away.

“I know you don’t have them. No one does. This is such a mess,” she said. She gestured off to her right. “There’s a station about 100 yards that way. You can try to register there, but they’re having to verify everything manually. There’s no guarantee they’ll find you.”

She started away again, but then paused and turned back. She couldn’t look Daniel in the eyes.

“It’s just...without verification, I can’t give him more than this bag,” she said. Then: “I’m sorry.”

She turned and left.

“Fuck,” he said to himself, and he sat back on the cot, frozen for another moment, unsure of what to do next. “Well, fuck.”

He couldn’t leave Andy, not while he lay here unconscious. But, when he woke up, *if* he woke up, what then? Surely, he couldn’t risk registering. Even if the system were down, there was no way he was going to voluntarily tell the authorities where he was. The system would be back up eventually.

*But, this one bag of antibiotics isn’t going to be enough.*

He clenched his hands into fists in his lap, and tears of frustration and exhaustion welled at the corners of his eyes. They didn’t fall, though; he was too dehydrated to produce enough water for tears.

“Daddy?”

Daniel looked down at his son. Andy’s eyes were open and bright, watery with tears that spilled over her lids and tracked through the mud on his face. His lips moved but Daniel couldn’t hear anything, and for a moment he thought he had gone deaf. His ears were ringing, or maybe all the screaming voices had become like a ringing. But Andy wasn’t speaking at all, he was trying to speak.

“Shhh,” said Daniel, wiping sweat and tears from Andy’s forehead and cheeks. “Shhh. Don’t speak. They’re giving you medicine. Shhh.”

Andy swallowed, and started coughing horribly. Daniel leaned in close and held his son.

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“Shhh,” he said. “I’m here.”

“Everything’s changed, daddy,” croaked Andy, his breath rattling in his lungs. “Can you feel it?”

Daniel sat up. Andy’s eyes were closed, black crescents indented in his cheeks. His forehead glistened. He coughed.

“Don’t worry, An...,” started Daniel, but Andy opened his eyes just enough so that the brilliant blue shown a little out from under his eyelids. They were so bright, glittering. It stopped Daniel cold.

“The Shadow Man,” said Andy. “He’s bad. Please stay away, daddy. He’s really bad. Miss Gertrude told me...”

Andy started to cough again, and Daniel shushed him and wiped his hair from his forehead until the coughing ended.

“I promise I’ll stay away from him,” said Daniel, pulling the blanket back up to Andy’s chin and kissing his forehead. Inside, Daniel was cold.

*Miss Gertrude, the Shadow Man. How does Andy know about...?*

Andy nodded and closed his eyes, his hand reaching out for Daniel’s. Daniel squeezed it back. Steadily, Andy fell asleep and Daniel sat back in the cot next to him. He felt hollowed out, shattered. He wanted to cry. For his son, for everything he’d lost in the last week, for his life, for Cindy, for everything everyone had lost. But no tears came.

Someone called a name that seemed familiar.

*Stan!?*

He didn’t turn around. He’d been hearing weird noises in the chaos ever since he’d entered the camp. It was a trick of his over-wrought mind, nothing more.

*Stan!*

That sounded real, closer. He turned around, scanned the crowd, but saw no one he knew among the sick, injured, dying people.

“Stan!?” the voice was right behind him.

He turned around. A short, squat man, wearing an unruly beard and round glasses was walking toward him with a quiz-zical smile on his face.

“Stan!” he called again.

*Mark!!*

Daniel shot to his feet.

“Holy shit! Mark!? Is that you!?” he shouted, and Mark opened his arms wide. They strode toward one another, clutched each other in a quick embrace, then Daniel held him at arms length. “I never thought I’d see you again.”

“Me neither,” Mark said with a laugh. It was a hearty laugh; the ordeal on the tanker had robbed him of none of his vitality. “How on earth did you get out of the building?”

“There was a second boat,” said Daniel. “We just barely made it.”

Mark looked down and saw Andy for the first time. His face dropped, horrified.

“Dear Lord. Your boy.”

Mark leaned down and touched Andy’s face affectionately.

“The fever came back on the boat,” said Daniel, and that was all Mark needed to know. He sat down heavily on the cot.

“This is such a mess,” said Mark, watching Andy’s sleeping face.

They sat in silence for several moments until Mark looked up and said, “Have you eaten anything?”

At the mention of food, Daniel’s stomach gurgled and he was suddenly, irrepressibly aware of how hungry he was. When had he last eaten? Hours? Days? He couldn’t remember, but his stomach was protesting as if it had been months.

“I don’t know, honestly,” he said.

“There’s a food tent just passed the registration area,” said Mark. “Have you registered yet?”

“No,” said Daniel. “We just got here and Andy was so sick, I...”

“I understand. Well, it’s a total disaster at the registration area. It’ll take you hours to put in your application.” Mark pulled out a small piece of plastic with the NAS flag on a blue background. he held it out to Daniel. “Here, take it. It ain’t even chipped so they have no idea who this belongs to. All it

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means is you've registered."

Daniel didn't reach for the card, but Mark grabbed his arm and pressed it into his hand.

"Take it," he said. "Go get yourself some food and something to drink. I can watch Andy. Go. You could use the break."

"I can't..." started Daniel, but Mark hushed him with a wave of his hand, and Daniel knew there was no objecting.

"I can't thank you enough," said Daniel. "You've been so good to us. I owe you my life."

Mark waved the compliment away and looked back down at Andy.

"I ain't done it for you," he said.

Daniel nodded, and stood. His infected foot groaned under him and he made a mental note to use Mark's card to get his foot cleaned when he got back. But first, food. His stomach screamed at him.

He leaned down and kissed Andy's forehead again. Daniel wiped his nose with his shirt sleeve. He had Cindy's nose, her nose, such a strange feature to borrow from a mother, but there it was, plain as day. How many times had Daniel kissed that nose, be it hers or his? Thousands? Millions? He kissed it once more, and whispered, "I love you buddy. I'll be right back."

Andy never heard him.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## The food station

Daniel wandered deeper into the maze of cots and tents absent-mindedly, periodically checking the crumpled map to make sure he was going the right way. He had no idea; the medic station was just a blob on the map, a blob he was currently lost in the middle of.

The minute he'd walked away from Andy he'd started to feel uneasy, as if a low note was struck inside of him and it just hummed and hummed. He tried to discount it as paranoia, understandable paranoia. He'd lost almost everything he cared about in one afternoon and his brain was on fire, expectant of some new horror around every corner. Surely, Andy was safe with Mark, at least long enough for Daniel to get some food.

Still that low note hummed.

*It's not time yet...* Andy had said. What had he meant by that? Had he meant *anything* by it? Was it just the ramblings of a tired, sick, and scared child?

The cots ended abruptly, and he popped out of the med-

ic station into brilliant sunlight, and wide patch of sand and rock. It was impossibly hot for a November, especially in the sun. With so much water and humidity, dirt and anguish, Daniel started to sweat instantly, but the heat cleared his mind. It was somehow easier to dismiss his uneasiness standing in so much light. Across the patch of sand, there were a cluster of tents and a small alley that headed northwest to what Daniel assumed was the food tent.

As he crossed over to the alley, a young man shuffled dazedly past him, the right side of his face checkered with oozing cuts. He mumbled quietly to himself. Two young boys with sweat-shiny faces ran by on the other side, laughing and throwing tiny pebbles at each other. A gaggle of ten or so teenagers were huddled in a corner, scowling. They watched him as he past, pulling sour faces at him as he ducked into the shade of the alley.

He tried his best to follow the crude map, but after walking for 15 minutes or so, he found a woman who was standing sullenly outside a tent, absently chewing on a brown bar of some sort. He tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned to him with terrified eyes, raising her hands instinctively into fists.

“I’m sorry, I...I just wanted to know where you got that,” Daniel said to her, pointing at the bar in her clenched fist. “I just...my son is sick and I...”

The woman softened just a little and pointed the direction Daniel had been headed.

“That way,” she said in a husky, hoarse tone. “Just past the registration tent. It ain’t far.”

Daniel started in the direction she’d pointed. She called after him.

“You better hurry, though. I think they’re running low.”

He moved faster, past desperate looking, dirty people. They peered at him out of the gloom of tents, from dusty blankets laid on the ground, from boxes used as makeshift stools. Every one of them looked scared and tired and sad, and it felt like they were all looking at him. The humming dread crept

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back. He fingered Mark's registration card in his pocket and kept his head down.

The alley narrowed, turning into a thin dirt path bending west. It ran like a rivulet of dust between the hastily constructed rows of tents. Through the tiny spaces where the tent sides billowed out, he caught tiny vignettes that came and went like a patchwork of misery. He saw a woman trying in vain to brush the grime out of their hair, a man staring blankly at the tent wall, his hands splayed before him like they were covered in blood; he even thought he saw one couple making violent, hasty love.

And then he popped out the other side of the alley and onto a major thoroughfare, one that had already been beaten down in just a matter of days by thousands of feet. The road took Daniel northwest again, and he thought he could identify it on the map, a thin black line heading straight for a black blob labeled *food*. He turned right and merged into the general traffic of stinking bodies heading that direction.

Now that he was on the right path, he let the flow of people take him where he was going, relieved at the anonymity of all these people. He caught snippets of conversation as he passed, partial stories, survivor tales, murmurs about the weather. He found out the path they were walking on was called *Broadway*. It cut right through the heart of the camp and ended in a large, brutal swath of razor wire where those of undetermined citizenship were being kept. They called it the *Big Show*. It was just beyond the food station.

Ahead of him, hovering above the crowd in the distance, he saw two large, wooden signs with *Food Station* painted on them. They sat on either side of the road like scarecrows, straddling the line of blue and white tents of the food station. The station was nestled below a sheer wall of rock, with ten foot tall metal fences spreading out to the left and right to the horizon. At odd intervals along the perimeter of the fence, scaffolded guard posts had been erected, each carrying one or two soldiers who scanned the tumult of half-starved refugees

with their guns. Razor wire looped along the top of the fence, and beyond he thought he could see people milling around or sprawled on the ground.

Daniel's heart lurched at the sight of the soldiers and the guard posts, and he struggled against an irresistible urge to turn and head back to Andy and Mark. He moved ahead anyway, carried along by the sea of people heading toward the food. The roar of the crowd was deafening, and people on both sides of him were shouting now. *Broadway* narrowed as it collapsed in on its terminal point, and people started to press in on Daniel. He nearly lost his footing and stumbled into the person in front of him, who did a horse kick backwards into Daniel's thigh and grumbled for Daniel to get off of him.

The soldiers in the towers loomed over them, and more soldiers appeared on the edges of the crowd, pushing people with their guns and shouting for everyone to keep moving. One of the soldiers, a small, wiry thing with a tic of the eye, looked directly at Daniel for a long time. Daniel stiffened, and lowered his head, trying to move as quickly as he could. The throbbing note of dread in his stomach lurched and grew stronger. He shouldn't have come here. None of this was right. There were too many people, too many soldiers.

Suddenly a roar erupted ahead of him, and all the soldiers turned to look. The soldiers in the towers raised their guns.

There was a turmoil of sweating bodies near the fence, bulging from the outskirts of the crowd. A young man, maybe in his mid-twenties, was trying to escape a small mob of three older men who clutched at his shirt. He held a small sandwich in one of his hands, condiments from the sandwich falling to the ground. He squealed as he pushed through the crowd, swatting at the hands holding his shirt. But they dragged him to the ground and kicked him in the stomach and head until blood dripped from his mouth and ears. Soldiers hurried over, and pushed the crowd back to make a circle around the fight. They watched for a brief moment and then moved in, using the butts of their guns to knock the attackers to the ground. Three more soldiers emerged from behind Daniel and pushed

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passed him to the center of the circle.

The soldiers formed a perimeter around the four men splayed out in the bloody dust, holding them steady with their pointed guns. They shouted at the crowd to get back. The young man with the sandwich tried to sit up, and was cracked in the face with a boot for the trouble. He collapsed onto the ground, his eyes rolling in the back of his head.

The crowd beyond the circle of soldiers pressed in close, trying to inch closer to the action. A horrible mixture of excitement and morbid curiosity rose in the air as the crowd started to shout and stamp. They moved closer, several bumping hard into Daniel as he tried to back away from it all. It was becoming a feeding frenzy; the tiniest spot of blood it seems had brought about a bizarre transformation in the crowd. They swarmed around the downed men, stood on their tiptoes to catch a better look, shouted amongst themselves for some sort of justice, their shouting coalescing into a rough hewn chant.

“SHANT! SHANT! SHANT!”

Daniel was horrified. He had to get away from this place. He backed into the people behind him, trying to push hard against the stream, but hands pressed into his gut. Shoulders gouged into him and pulled him inexorably toward the mob and soldiers.

The crowd erupted as the soldiers pulled the men to their feet, and started to drag them away toward the razer-wired gate of the *Big Show*. Two soldiers had to carry the unconscious young man between them, the sandwich still hanging limply from his hand. His face was bloodied and bruised, one of his cheek bones clearly, hideously broken, his head lolling from side to side. The two soldiers pulled him roughly out of view and the entire crowd shifted, ballooned outward toward the gate.

Suddenly there was more shouting as one of the men pulled free and tried to escape into the crowd. The response was immediate. Two of the soldiers in the guard towers started shooting into the crowd, hitting the fleeing man and several other people nearby. The soldiers on the ground started to fire

as well, hitting several more people as they tried to flee. Blood spattered into the air, combining with the cries of the crowd as a thousand people stampeded away from the gunfire.

Daniel was knocked down as the flow of the crowd abruptly shifted direction and carried him rapidly forward. His hands splayed out into the gravel and dirt, tearing at his palms and drawing blood. He tried to stand up, but several more people tripped over him and flattened him into the dust, his cheek grinding on the ground. Another body landed on him and the air was pushed out of his lungs. He gasped for breath and reached forward to pull himself out from under the weight of the bodies. He made animal noises in the back of his throat, unaware he was doing so.

Slowly he pushed to his knees and the momentum of the crowd brought him rapidly to his feet again. He stumbled forward, swept in the sea of people. Gunshots continued to hammer the air behind him.

He had to get back to Andy. He never should have left. Ahead to his right he saw a small alley between two tents, and he pushed hard through the crowd and leaped into the alley, losing his feet again and crashing into the side of a tent. Something hard and sharp jabbed into his back, and fell to the ground, wincing in pain. He laid there for several minutes, waiting for the spasms in his back to calm down, the sounds of the stampede thundering on.

He stood up and headed southeast, back toward the medical tents. Eventually his back loosened and he started to run, his breath hitching in his chest. He took a couple of quick zigzags through the spaces between tents, hoping to put as much distance between himself and the chaos of the food station.

He emerged into a makeshift courtyard, and saw a wider alley to his left and headed that direction. There were more people on this path, and they watched him as he hurried by. Ahead there was a red cross painted on a piece of scrap metal, an arrow pointing to the left, and he quickly turned in that direction.

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A tall man emerged suddenly from a tent, and Daniel smashed full tilt into his chest, both of them tumbling to the ground. Dust kicked up around them, and Daniel's elbow landed pointedly in the other man's gut.

"Jesus! Watch where you're going asshole!"

Daniel recognized the voice.

The man tossed him angrily and sat up. Daniel rolled onto his hands and knees and looked up into the man's red, flustered face.

It was Ron.

They both got their feet quickly. Ron's hands had tightened to fists.

"You," said Ron accusingly.

Daniel mumbled an apology with his hands held in front of him like he was facing a wild animal.

"I didn't mean to," said Daniel. "I have to get back to my son..."

He started to walk past Ron, shrugging his shoulders, his hands out in front of him. But Ron grabbed him by the right arm and turned him around. Daniel slapped his hand away and the two of them looked at each other, squaring off. Daniel's eyes, encircled by sickly black crescents, were fiery blue shards of ice.

"Where's your card?" demanded Ron, glowering down at Daniel.

"I'm sorry I knocked you down," Daniel said. "I need to go."

"No, where's your card?" asked Ron again. "Show me it now."

"I don't have to show you anything. I have to go. I don't have time for this..."

Daniel tried to push past Ron again, but Ron shoved him hard, and then moved in close to him. Daniel could smell his stinking breath. Daniel reached into his pocket and pulled out the registration card, pressing it into Ron's face.

"Here!" shouted Daniel. "Here, you fucking prick. HERE! Now let me go!"

Ron didn't stop him this time, and Daniel started to walk away. Ron turned to watch him go and then suddenly his face broke open with understanding.

From behind him, Ron said, "Where'd you get that card? That's not yours."

Daniel took a few more steps, trying to disappear into the flow of people. But the two of them were beginning to attract attention. Ron didn't care and he shouted after him,

"Where'd you get that fucking card? Huh? I knew I recognized you, back in the tower. I knew it! I saw you on TV. The Shant lover who ran away from ICE...because you hired the cousin of the kid who blew up the LEV. You helped the terrorists do this to us. I *knew* it"

Daniel whipped around and rushed toward Ron, his face a snarl. His eyes shined with tears that seemed to be pushed out of his face by the very momentum of his anger. Ron collapsed on himself like a dead spider, doubling over as he tried to protect himself from Daniel's bull rush. Daniel grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, lifted him up and pounded his fist into Ron's cheek, his mind so consumed by fury that he didn't even register the sting of his knuckles. Ron's cheek split open and blood cascaded down his jaw. Daniel clutched Ron's shirt collar, stood him up, brought them face to face.

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!," Daniel whispered venomously, a small stringer of spittle alighting on Ron's cheek. "I'll kill you if you say one more word."

He released Ron's shirt, stared at him hard in the face and backed away slowly. Ron's face was inscrutable. A small crowd had gathered around them, murmuring excitedly, smelling more blood, and yet, miraculously, the soldiers hadn't noticed. Daniel looked around at the faces that surrounded them, surveyed their blank, vaguely idiotic expressions.

He turned his back to Ron and started pushing through the crowd. He just wanted to get out of here and back to Andy. His knuckles stung. Tears stood at the corners of his eyes.

He heard the crunch of gravel behind him, and knew that Ron was coming. He heard the low whistle of air as Ron's fist

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glided through space, heard his own hasty intake of breath as he shrugged his shoulders and tried to dodge the blow. Ron's fist connected with the back of his head and he saw sparks dancing in front of his eyes. He stumbled to his knees, and grabbed his head, bending forward to protect himself. His thoughts were confused, a jumble of sticks doused in gasoline. Ron kicked him in the back and he stumbled forward on his hands and knees, and the gasoline of his rage lit. He leapt to his feet just as Ron crashed into him and the two of them went sprawling into the dirt.

The crowd closed in, their numbers swelling and growing more animated. They started to chant. Daniel bucked his hips and sent Ron sailing wildly onto the ground. Ron stood up quickly, his face bloodied from the fall, and dealt Daniel a swift, hard kick in the ribs. Daniel let out a howl of pain and curled up into a ball. He could feel the press of the crowd, the roar of their blood lust.

"STOP!" Daniel shouted, and tried to get to his knees. Ron kicked him the ribs again.

"Stop!" someone shouted suddenly from the crowd. A crackling energy rippled through the air, and the crowd pressed in tighter. Daniel's ears grew full like he needed to pop them to relieve pressure. The air buzzed. Someone else to his right shouted, "Stop."

Ron brought his leg back to kick Daniel again, but paused a quick moment when someone else shouted *stop*. Daniel seized on his hesitation, and lunged at Ron's legs. The two of them fell hard into some of the crowd. All of them hit the ground hard and someone shouted in pain from the bottom of the pile. Daniel was on top of Ron and they locked together, grimacing and grunting. Ron reached up and grabbed Daniel's neck, gaining a frighteningly tight hold. He squeezed.

"You Shant, you fuckin' Shant lover! I'll kill you!" Ron was crying and mumbling at the same time, his eyes black with fear, pain, and anger.

Daniel tried to break his grip, couldn't, tried to breath, couldn't. Panic rose in him. He kicked out, tried to bring his

knee up to Ron's groin but didn't have enough leverage. He couldn't breathe; his eyes were going blank, his heart thudded in his ears.

*THUDTHUDTHUDTHUDTH...*

*NOOOOOO!!!*

The crackling heaviness in the air seemed to rise to an audible pitch, and there was a sizzle of electricity and then suddenly the crowd erupted around him. The crowd leapt on them at the same time, and Daniel felt rough hands dragging him backwards. Ron's grip loosened on his neck and suddenly he could breathe again. Everyone was shouting, "No!" Daniel fell back into space, landing on his back, where his new found breath was knocked back out of him. Before he could regain his sight stars burst in his head. One, two, four blasts of gunfire thudded behind him. He rolled over and covered his head. Someone tripped over him, their knee dug into his aching ribs. There was another blast of gunfire. There was screaming and feet tramping around him, and he could hear his own voice among them. He was disconnected from it; it was like the voice of another, floating hoarsely around him like smoke. More gunfire and someone fell heavily on his head. He heard his neck crack and then everything went black.





# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## The Shadow Man

*Daniel was back in the tiny boat. The creature in the black cloak sat on the bench across from him. He sat casually, a silhouette against the setting of the sun. Daniel couldn't see his face; he could never see his face. The oars hung limply off the sides of the boat. Daniel's heart thudded in his chest. Something terrible had happened. Where was he? Was he dead?*

*"Where am I?" shouted Daniel, leaning forward aggressively in his seat. "Where is my son?"*

*The creature leaned forward, its pale hands clasped in its lap.*

*"What son? You mean the one you left all alone back in the tent."*

*The creature was smiling. Daniel couldn't see it, but he knew. He stood suddenly and tried to lunge at the creature. It held up one of its pale hands slowly, as if telling a small child to stay back, and invisible forces sat Daniel back down and bound his arms and legs as tightly as if with ropes.*

“This the guy?”

*Daniel struggled against his bonds. “Where the hell am I? Am I dead?”*

“I think it is. He’s been screaming about his son for the last five minutes.”

“Who cares? Does he have a registration card?”

“Couldn’t find one.”

“Alright, alright, let’s just get this over with. Stand him up.”

*The sun crept lower in the sky, dipped behind the creature, creating a horrifying corona of light behind its black, swirling hood.*

*“You are not dead. Not yet, at least,” said the creature calmly.*

Rough hands grabbed Daniel under his arms and dragged him to his feet. Two soldiers stood in front of him, their fingers twitched at their triggers, their eyes darted back and forth.

*“Who are you?” Daniel demanded of the creature. “What do you want from me?”*

“Sir? Sir? Do you know where you are?”

Someone slapped Daniel’s face. Daniel’s eyes rolled groggily around in their sockets. His head was on fire. He was in a cage, or something like that. He didn’t really know where he was.

“Don’t bother with that shit, Michaels, just stand him the fuck up so we can get this over with. Who gives a shit if he knows where he is?”

“Ok. Shit. Chill the fuck out.”

*The creature leaned back.*

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*“I want nothing,” it said. “The question is what do you want, Daniel?”*

*“I want to go back and find Andy...”*

*“That’s not true. Or at least it won’t be true, some day. At any rate, your son is gone now. You made a choice, and you must live with it.*

*Daniel struggled against his invisible bonds.*

*“Besides, you have much more pressing concerns at the moment,” said the creature.*

“Alright.” The soldiers stood back and pointed their guns at Daniel’s head. One of them, no older than 18, paused briefly before raising his gun.

“Sir? You have been charged with inciting a riot and with improper identification. The penalty for these crimes is death. Do you understand?”

*“No! I didn’t know...I didn’t know this would happen... please! I need to get back to Andy...” Daniel trailed off to whimpers, two tracks of tears gleaming on his dusty cheeks, spit hanging on his lips.*

“What the hell is he talking about?”

“Sir? Can you hear us?”

“It doesn’t matter. Michaels. Come on, let’s just get this over with.”

They raised their rifles to their shoulders and took aim.

*“You did what you thought was best, Daniel,” said the creature. “That is true, yes. You are a survivor, and you take risks. But sometimes those risks don’t pay off. Sometimes people die. That is the way of things. You are still alive.” It looked up at the sky, seemed to measure the distance to the sun. “... And you have approximately ten seconds left to do something so that you remain so.”*

“Ready...”

*“I want to die,” mumbled Daniel.*

*“No you don’t.”*

*“...aim...”*

*The creature leaned forward and grabbed Daniel by the shoulders. Its hood swirled around and over its face so that even now Daniel couldn’t see its features. A dense, earth-like smell drifted out of the hood, slightly rotten and when the creature spoke again there was a hollow clicking sound, like the scraping of bones.*

*“Daniel...you have too much to do. You have everything you need right here before you. Everything. And I won’t let you mess it up. I’m sorry, but your son is gone, your wife is gone, the life you thought you knew is gone. It’s a new world out there; the old rules no longer apply. Take what is rightfully yours. Take it...”*

*“You don’t have long.”*

*“...FIRE!”*

Daniel screamed and swooned to his hands and knees in front of the two soldiers. They both took a startled step back, their guns shaking in their hands. Daniel looked up at them, and for a moment the youngest of the soldiers, an 18 year old straight out of basic training named Michaels, swore he saw Daniel’s eyes go dark as rotten wood.

The other soldier, named Tellis, raised his gun at Daniel.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s get this over with. Ready?”

The two soldiers steeled themselves for what came next.

“Ready?”

“NO!” shouted Daniel, rising to his knees. “No, please!”

“Ready?” asked the soldier again, his voice faltered.

“Please!”

Michaels had never killed anyone before. He’d had his orders to go to China, and he’d been ok with it. He was scared, but then the flood happened and now he found himself wan-

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dering around a prison camp interrogating tired, hungry Non-Cits, most of which couldn't even speak English.

And now, he was an executioner.

“Come on!”

Michaels' stomach dropped into his shoes and he couldn't breathe. His heart thudded in his neck and in his trigger finger. His mind was a white sheet, blank and horrible. He wanted to scream. He heard a voice in his head...

*It's a new world out there; the old rules no longer apply.*

The words coiled around his brain, strangled his thoughts. What was he doing here? What was happening?

“Please...” whispered Daniel.

“NOW! FIRE!”

“NO!” Michaels yelled and dropped the barrel of his gun. “Stop, stop! I can't, Tellis. I can't do this.”

Tellis rocked forward imperceptibly and squeezed his eyes shut, as if he'd expected a blow to his face, and then lowered his own gun and looked at Michaels angrily.

“I can't. I can't do this. We don't have to,” said Michaels, his voice cracking.

“They'll kill us,” said Tellis.

“No. No, they won't. Let's just...” Michaels looked down at Daniel. He had fallen onto this hands and knees again and drool dripped from his slack lips. “...Let's just send him to the work camp.”

Tellis shook his head and started to raise his rifle again. “No, absolutely not. We have orders.”

Michaels grabbed the barrel of Tellis' gun and said, “Come on. No one will know.” Michaels pleaded with his eyes.

Tellis, who had never killed anyone either, who had spent every night since the flood dreaming of his mother, took a lengthy look at the pathetic, sickly, dirty man kneeling before them. He slung his rifle hurriedly over his shoulder and smacked Michaels' arm hard.

“Come on, let's go,” he said as he strode over to Daniel and gripped him under one arm.

Michaels grabbed the other arm and they lifted Daniel to

his feet with muffled grunts. Tellis looked guiltily over his shoulder as the three of them stepped gingerly out of the tiny wire mesh pen that had been turned into a sort of way station for soon-to-be-executed prisoners. Daniel's head lolled back and forth, his eyes rolled under his eyelids, a thin sliver of white showing. His lips moved soundlessly, from all appearances he was asleep, but his feet moved slowly, jerkily in rhythm with the soldiers on either side of him.

Daniel drifted off. He felt himself lifted to his feet, dimly, far away, as if it were happening to someone else. The creature in the cloak was gone and what remained was a writhing, thudding pain in Daniel's head that beat not just at his temples but from back to front, like a two beat drum rhythm.

*Thud THUD, Thud THUD...*

They walked and walked and walked, Daniel blindly, barely conscious, the soldiers struggling, sweating, and swearing under their breaths. He tried to speak but all that came out was a garbled, hollow mess that resembled the strangled mewling of a cat in heat. A hissing voice whispered in his ear for him to shut the fuck up and one of his arms was jerked hard in that direction and then he was floating in air. He had the most pleasant sensation of flying and then his stomach lurched into his throat as he fell and thumped hard to the ground. His head crunched in the gravel and the pain of it was like a brief flash or siren. He rolled over, preparing to be struck by angry fists, holding his zip-tied hands in front of his face.

"Get up, get up for fuck's sake."

Daniel got unsteadily to his feet. The soldiers turned him around violently and then he felt two insistent gun barrels pressed into his back, like accusing fingers.

"Walk."

Daniel walked, trying to open his eyes to see where he was going, squinting against the pain in his head. He turned and tried to look at the soldiers but their guns pushed him forward.

"Please, let me go," he mumbled to them.

"No. Just walk, we're almost there."

## Black Stag, White Doe

“Please, I need to get back to my son,” pleaded Daniel, weeping openly now.

Daniel tried to look at the soldiers again, but one of them roughly faced him forward and kicked him in the back of the legs.

“You face forward or we will kill you. We won’t save your life again.”

They walked down a thin, winding tunnel of metal fencing. On either side of them were coils of similar tunnels, creating a riotous web of metal as far as Daniel could see. Ahead of him was a single, thick metal door that completely blocked their way.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Daniel mildly, he’d closed his eyes again, wishing he were dead.

“North, into the mountains,” said one of the soldiers.

“If you’re lucky you’ll work...” said the other.

They had reached the gate. One of the soldiers reached forward and grabbed the receiver of a radio hung on the fence next to them.

“This is PFC Tellis. Open up, we’ve got another one.”

There was muffled rustling behind the door.

“And what if I’m not lucky?” asked Daniel.

“What the hell are you talking about?” asked Tellis.

“You said, if I’m lucky I’ll work...what if I’m not lucky?” repeated Daniel, miserably.

The metal gate clanged hollowly and creaked open. The soldiers urged him over the lip of the door and into a claustrophobic holding pen, really nothing more than a small space between the two gates. Two more soldiers emerged from the gloom and grabbed Daniel’s arms. He looked back one last time at Michaels and Tellis, who were nothing more than silhouettes in the gathering dusk.

“What if I’m not lucky?” called Daniel over his shoulder as the second gate opened.

Tellis called the guard to close the gate. He didn’t say anything. He just watched as Daniel was dragged through the gate and into the *Big Show*.



