

SPORE

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a brown leather jacket and blue jeans, stands with her back to the camera in the center of a city street. She has a white cross-shaped mark on her back. The street is filled with debris, including a crushed car on the left and a mangled car on the right. In the background, several people are seen in various states of collapse or struggle. The sky is a hazy, orange-brown color, suggesting a toxic atmosphere. Tall brick buildings line both sides of the street, and the overall scene is one of desolation and survival.

SPORE SERIES
BOOK ONE

KENNY SOWARD | MIKE KRAUS

SPORE

SPORE Series

Book 1

By

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Special thanks to my awesome beta team, without whom this book wouldn't be nearly as great.
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Preface

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim Shields scrolled through emails on her iPhone as she hurried along Maine Avenue SW. It wasn't the smartest way to work, but she was late for a lunch meeting with her assistant and needed to be up to date on the latest internal CDC announcements by the time she got there.

She read through an update on a viral outbreak at a hospital in Maine and scanned a scientific announcement about a new fungus that had sprung up in the Midwest and was affecting crops. Something about a mutation caused by an unusually wet spring.

Approaching a corner, she glanced up at a crosswalk sign and saw the blinking orange warning hand. So, she stopped and returned to reading her emails. A moment later, the sign made a whistling noise to show it was safe to cross. Kim glanced up to make sure the light was green and stepped into the street.

Someone snatched her by the arm and jerked her back onto the sidewalk.

"Hey!" Kim cried out in surprise. She fumbled her phone and caught it as a truck roared by, whipping her hair around. She glared up at the Durant-Monroe Chemicals truck for a moment, watching as it sped through the intersection before she turned to see who had saved her.

"Sorry about that, ma'am," a man said, holding up his hand to show he meant her no harm. "It looked like you were about to get smashed flat."

"Oh, wow," Kim said as her cheeks blossomed red with embarrassment. "Thank you so much. The crosswalk light was green."

"Well, that driver ran right through his red light," he said, offering her an unsteady smile. "I can tell by your accent you're not from around here. You can't depend on the signs. Look twice."

"I will next time." Kim's heart was pounding as she put her phone into her purse. She gave the man a weak smile, saying, "Thanks again." Then she turned back to the street, looked both ways, and crossed.

"You have a nice day!" the man called after her.

"If I don't accidentally kill myself first," Kim murmured in her slight twang.

Kim continued walking until she reached Pearl Street, a quaint outdoor shopping center with a cobbled lane, hip storefronts, and a bustling crowd. She turned left and angled toward the Lupo Marino Restaurant.

Kim reached for the door handle of the restaurant but was forced to step back when three men wearing white coveralls and carrying canisters crossed in front of her. She stepped back to let them pass and watched them walk to the corner and enter through an "Employees Only" door. Kim hadn't caught the company name on the front of their coveralls, and she almost called out to them to see for whom they worked. However, they'd already disappeared inside, and she was late.

Kim entered the restaurant and looked around. Her assistant, Shelly, sat at a table near the door, and Kim crossed over and flashed the blonde a big smile.

Shelly returned the ear-to-ear grin. Then she rose from her chair and gave her boss a cordial embrace. "Hey, Kim."

"Hi, Shelly," Kim said. "It's good to see you."

"You, too. How was the drive in?" Shelly broke off the embrace and sat down.

"Very long." Kim placed her purse on the table and plopped into the chair opposite Shelly.

“Twenty-six hours from Ft. Collins to Washington D.C. is no joke, although I have to admit the drive helped clear my head.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better,” Shelly said, “I picked up your apartment key from the landlord then contacted Dr. Flannery. He’s at the CDC offices today and will give you a tour of the facilities around 2:30.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Kim said with a relieved sigh. “That’s a load off my mind.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” Shelly shrugged, smiled, and took a sip of her water. She leaned back in her chair. “Have you read your email today? There was an update on the *Campylobacter jejuni* outbreak. Thirty people across several states. No deaths, but lots of upset stomachs and diarrhea.”

“I did read that.” Kim frowned. “Every person infected had recently purchased a puppy from Happy Pet Farms.”

“And Happy Pet buys puppies from three separate puppy mills. I’m tracing the culprit now.”

“Great,” Kim nodded. “When you find who it is, I want someone down there right away. I want every animal tested.”

“You got it, boss.” Shelly made a note on her phone.

“Anything else today?”

“Just the new fungus hitting those Midwest farms.”

“I read that. Sounds nasty. What’s the damage?”

“In summary, it’s *everywhere*,” Shelly said with a sigh. “Total destruction of thousands of acres of crops and shipments of produce all across the country. It’s one of the worst outbreaks I’ve seen in a long time.”

“And it’s the perfect season for fungi,” Kim said with a shake of her head. “We’ve had tremendous storms all spring, and I must have driven through dozens of flooded fields with stunted crops on the way here. Are we going to get samples of this new fungus?”

“I requested some yesterday,” Shelly said. “But, fair warning. Several chemical companies are already saying they solved the problem and are ready to spray.”

“Of course, they are.” Kim shook her head. “Anything to bump their stock price.”

“It’s like the Wild West out there. Soon as they hear about a new fungus, it’s spray-chem first, ask questions later.” Shelly scoffed. “But that’s why you’re the sheriff.”

“Hello, ladies.” A short waitress with a bob of blonde hair and bright blue eyes skipped up to the table. “Now that your friend is here,” she said, flashing Kim a smile, “can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll have a Coke,” Shelly said.

“Just water for me,” replied Kim.

“Want to put in for any appetizers?” the waitress asked.

Kim found the menu sitting in front of her and picked it up with an apologetic smile. “I haven’t even looked.”

“No problem,” the waitress smiled back. “Take your time. I’ll go get your drinks.”

Kim perused the menu as Shelly continued to talk about work and getting adjusted in Washington after their move from Fort Collins. Kim tried to focus on the menu, but nothing looked appealing. The stress of their new challenges on top of the relocation dropped her appetite through the floor.

She glanced up at the swinging doors that led to the kitchen, and a nearby table drew her eyes. A waiter had been taking someone’s order when he produced a rough cough from deep inside his chest. The force of it caused him to fall forward and throw his hand on the table to

catch himself. The waiter coughed again, and then again. Soon, it was an uncontrollable hacking accompanied by a wet sound like he was trying to disgorge a quart of water.

Kim jumped up and wove between several tables until she was standing right behind the coughing man.

“Sir?” she said, reaching to help him. “Are you choking on something? Nod yes if you can —”

Kim looked down. A wet, red puddle with pieces of pink and black tissue glistened on the table, and the customers were pushing themselves away from it with expressions of horror on their faces.

The man was literally hacking up a lung.

Kim hesitated. The black particulates in the coughed-up tissue might mean something infected him. Instead of touching him, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911.

The doors to the kitchen burst open, and their waitress staggered into the dining area, followed by a faint drift of light, dusty-black filament. The woman ran straight at Kim, coughing and rasping with violent lurches. Kim backed up in surprise as the waitress clutched at her own throat, her bloodshot eyes bugging out of their sockets.

Shelly must have been right on Kim’s heels, because she ran into her assistant in her attempt to get away, knocking both of them to the ground. She kicked backwards, using her arms to crab-crawl away from the gasping waitress.

“Come on, Shelly!” Kim stopped crawling and grabbed at her assistant. “Stay away from her. She’s—”

The waitress took three more steps, slipped on the damp floor, and face-planted on the tile with a crunch of cartilage. A broken nose wasn’t the worst of her problems. Her neck contorted, ligaments and veins popping out as she seemed to suffocate on something. She clawed at her neck until her skin was minced and bleeding, and blood ran from her broken nose to puddle on the floor. Her eyes pleaded to Kim and Shelly as if they were her last hope.

“Heeeelllp...me,” the woman sputtered, saliva flying from her lips. “Heeeelllp!”

Shelly got on her hands and knees and crawled toward the woman, but Kim grabbed her arm and yanked her backwards, eliciting a yowl from her assistant.

The waitress coughed a puff of black dust and fell forward to quit breathing all together. Stretched out on the floor, eyes bulging out, the woman stared at Kim with a glare of accusation. Black particulates stained her lips and the edges of her nostrils like some deadly black drug.

“She’s dead,” Shelly whispered with a sob. “How did she die—”

Kim’s attention jerked to the kitchen doors as they flew open, followed by more coughing restaurant employees and that ominous black dust floating in the air. Tables and chairs crashed to the floor as customers scrambled to get away, some of them coughing, too. Heart hammering in her chest, Kim had a moment of clarity.

“They’re infected,” she whispered in slack-jawed disbelief. “All of them are infected and dying.” She didn’t know what they were infected with, or how it spread so fast, but she was sure of it. She was also sure that if she and Shelly didn’t get out of the restaurant immediately, they would be dead, too.

Kim got to her feet, pulling Shelly up with her and snatching her purse off the table as they headed for the door. Once outside, Kim took a deep breath of fresh air and staggered toward the center of the street.

“What just happened?” Shelly exclaimed, turning in a circle and slapping her hands on her legs. “I’ve been around you long enough to know that no contagion spreads that fast.”

“It doesn’t,” Kim said. She looked around as patrons burst from stores and restaurants, clutching their throats as they gasped for air. Black dust swirled up from the entrances, not dispersing like a cloud but clustering into long, snaking tendrils.

“We can’t breathe that stuff,” Shelly pointed out, eyes darting from one black tendril to another.

“We better back farther off,” Kim said. She backed toward Maine Avenue SW, pulling Shelly by the arm. Pearl Street was beginning to feel far too claustrophobic and deadly for her taste. “I’m parked nearby, and I’ve got filtration masks in the back. We need to get them on and get a rapid response team here, now!”

As Kim and Shelly ran, the black tendrils spread from restaurant walk-ins and fruit stands through building ventilation systems. The tendrils floated on air currents as they spread, curling like the tentacles of some expansive creature out into the streets. Those they touched gasped and choked, crying out for a single fresh breath of air. A faint breeze lifted the dark tendrils from their corpses, reaching for those left alive like the hand of death itself.

Introduction

The Microbiology Society estimates that fungal infections kill around one and a half million people every single year. With the spread and discovery of super-fungi – able to withstand anti-fungal treatments – those numbers will increase. One such super-fungi is *Candida Auris*, which was first discovered in South Korea in 1996, spread to Japan in 2009, and arrived in the United States in 2016. The CDC considers *C. Auris* to be of an urgent threat level, and still doesn't know how or why four separate strains of the fungus have appeared worldwide around the same time, though all four strains appearing in the United States are likely because of international travel and further spread through hospitals and other healthcare facilities.

C. Auris infections occur much like other fungal infections. Spores released by the fungus into the air enter through the respiratory system, or through skin-to-skin contact with people or objects that have the spores on them. *C. Auris* infections present with flu-like symptoms, including fever, chills, persistent coughing and sneezing.

The genuine danger occurs when the fungus enters the bloodstream and crosses the blood-brain barrier, at which point it can cause impaired memory, sepsis and death. Because *C. Auris* is highly resistant to anti-fungal and sterilization treatments, an infected patient in New York taken to Mount Sinai hospital, brought about the migration of the fungus into the walls and ceiling tiles. The man died after ninety days, after which specialized sterilization equipment was brought in, and workers had to remove and replace part of the walls, ceiling, and pieces of medical equipment to eradicate the highly contagious infection. Although *C. Auris* currently only affects those with auto-immune deficiencies, experts believe it's only a matter of time before fungal mutations cause it to affect the general population.

Imagine a future where *C. Auris* is a larger part of our daily lives than it already is, threatening not only to infect us, but rot our crops and destroy our stockpiles of foodstuffs. In this near-future world, chemical corporations keep one step ahead of Mother Nature, anticipating the next biological threat and eradicating it before it gets out of control. The cost of maintaining such an effort keeps these companies always on the lookout for cheaper and better solutions.

What if science stumbled, allowing nature to not only catch up, but sprint ahead?

What if a proposed "cheaper, ultimate solution" did the opposite of good?

What if this miracle cure caused a dangerous mutation in a widespread, already contagious fungus like *C. Auris*?

As scientists scrambled to get control over the outbreak, millions of people in “wet zones” would die, causing the degradation of the world’s infrastructure and the population to be nearly wiped out. The survivors would flee to hot, dry areas, joining forces or turning against each other as they fought over the precious resources that remained. Such a super-fungus outbreak would bring the world to its knees, leaving only the strongest and most prepared able to survive.

Chapter 1

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim led Shelly to her car three blocks away as distant and near screams played like the introduction of a nightmare symphonic piece. She rushed to the driver's side door of her Toyota SUV and reversed direction, remembering that her emergency equipment was in the vehicle's trunk.

She clicked the unlock button on her key fob and heard all the door locks snap open. She lifted the hatchback and faced a packed truck. There were three suitcases and a laundry basket filled with odds and ends stacked on top. Digging between two suitcases, she stretched her arms and grabbed her box of emergency supplies, but she couldn't pull it out.

"Hurry, Kim," Shelly said. The woman's head swiveled back and forth, her eyes glancing up at the sky. "That weird dust is in the air. It's all over the place."

Kim looked up to see tendrils of dust from the restaurant riding on the breeze, clinging together like the fingers of a hand, the tips sniffing and prodding the air for a place to invade. Where they touched pedestrians or motorists, the world turned to chaos. Cars crashed nearby, adding to the hellish symphony of screams, and Kim's stomach roiled with dread.

"I'm serious, boss."

"I know," Kim snapped, the panic causing her Kentucky accent to thicken. She grabbed her laundry basket from the top of the pile and flung it into the road. She tossed out two pieces of luggage behind the basket to open the equipment bin.

"Help!"

Kim looked to her left. Across the street, a woman was helping a man stay on his feet. The man clutched at his throat like the people in the restaurant, choking and suffocating. The woman leaned close to him, eyes wide. Then she lifted her cell phone and dialed a number. Before she finished, the woman's eyes widened, and she gasped for air just like the man.

Adrenaline surged through her body. Kim pulled the plastic bin closer and popped off the lid with shaking hands. She grabbed the filtration masks from inside and handed one to Shelly before she took one for herself. Kim fitted the mask to her face and adjusted the straps to form a tight seal. Shelly did the same, though Kim had to help her.

Shelly stepped back and took a deep breath.

"Make sure the seal is tight," Kim said, her voice muffled as she gestured to the edges of her mask.

Shelly nodded and tried to get her thumbs between her mask's seal and her skin. The seal tight, she gave a thumbs up to Kim.

A screech of tires jolted Kim like lightning as she reeled to see a sedan skidding toward them in the road. Kim leapt back to avoid the car as it slammed into the back of her Toyota. Metal, glass, and plastic erupted in every direction. Shelly was sandwiched between the two cars in a sickening crunch of metal and flesh.

Kim fell into the middle of the road, blinking up at the mass of metal as it jumped the sidewalk. It plowed over a bench and several signs before coming to a stop. Kim stumbled to her feet and walked toward the mess. Her eyes couldn't make sense of it. Her brain couldn't register it. The driver of the car lay slumped over the wheel, face swollen and neck bulging. Kim spotted the blood splattered across the back of the Toyota. Shelly's upper half lay sprawled on the hood of the sedan, arms thrown upward with the impact.

“Shelly!” Kim screamed inside her mask, as she stumbled forward. Her legs seemed filled with concrete, her knees unwilling to bend. Reaching the steaming, hissing wreck, Kim leaned over and put her hand on Shelly’s back. The woman’s spine was twisted and broken. Blood was pooling on the crumpled hood.

Kim brushed aside a lock of tangled blonde hair to reveal her assistant’s wide, dead eyes staring back at her through the plastic of her skewed mask. Blood trickled from her nose and the corner of her mouth.

Kim gasped and backed away from the vehicle, tears stung her eyes. Despite the chaos growing around her, she couldn’t stop looking at the wreck and the shattered body of her dead assistant. They’d been together since Kim’s first position at Ft. Collins, and Kim had been proud to call the woman a friend.

A hand grabbed Kim’s face from behind to rip her mask off. But Kim had fixed the mask tight, so the fingers slid across the plastic with enough force to pull Kim’s head to the side. With a cry, she threw her arms up and spun around, knocking the attacker away. Not to be deterred, the attacker swung at Kim in a blur of fists, and Kim stumbled backwards against the sedan in retreat.

She raised her arms to protect herself, catching sight of a woman’s tangle of inky hair and a pair of mad-looking eyes. Pressing her left hand against her filtration mask to keep it on her face, Kim balled up her right fist and blindly punched the woman. Her fist struck something hard, and pain lanced up from Kim’s wrist to spike in her shoulder. It hurt, but it got the woman to stop her attack.

Kim peeked over her hand and saw that same desperate, suffocating expression in the woman’s eyes that she’d seen in so many others. Tendons stood out on her neck, and black slime traced the edges of her nostrils and lips. With a soundless scream, the woman grabbed for Kim’s mask with both hands, fingers desperate to take it for her own.

With nowhere to retreat and her hand bruised, Kim raised both of her arms and charged forward, knocking the woman backward into the street. The woman hit the ground and tried to jump right back up, but she didn’t have the strength. Robbed of precious oxygen, she could only sit up and glare at Kim as she clawed at her neck and chest weakly. The woman’s hateful expression dissolved into terror and the desperation of a person who knows they are about to die.

Kim glanced up and down the street to ensure no cars were coming and fell to her knees beside the woman. The woman clutched at Kim’s arms, staring into her eyes as if Kim could absorb the pain and confusion of her passing. Finally, the light left her eyes, and Kim laid the woman down gently.

Tears blinded Kim as she stood and turned in a circle. Her car was totaled. More people were wandering the streets in distress. Anyone who tried to help those in need became victims themselves as the affliction passed between them. Or was it only from the air?

The smartest of them turned away from the trouble and sprinted toward the center of the city. One man burst through the doors of a nearby bike shop, stiff-legged and stumbling. His head whipped back and forth, eyes hunting for a safe place from the suffocating tendrils. He spotted Kim and her filtration mask and lurched in her direction.

The terrifying possibility that he might take her mask was enough to put her legs in motion. The question was, where to go? She wasn’t far from the CDC building. Probably less than ten blocks. And while she’d only been there twice before, Kim thought she could find the building without too much trouble.

With a deep groan, Kim left the dying man behind and sprinted north toward what she hoped

was safety.

Chapter 2

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim ran along the left-hand sidewalk, tennis shoes pounding on the concrete. She kept glancing over her shoulder, expecting a car to come careening onto the sidewalk and run her down.

She ran past groups of confused people, many looking up at the sky as the wind blew the dusty tendrils over them. Others died where they stood, hacking up pieces of lung into their hands. A group of people pounded on a man's car as he squealed out of his parking spot to get away.

Kim couldn't stop to help them. Her senses were on high alert, every cell in her body prepared to fight at a moment's notice. Two blocks up, the street split between a baseball field on her left and a tall block of condos on her right. A handful of corpses lay in the street, and there were no immediate threats that she could see. Kim slowed to a fast walk, keeping beneath the shadow of the trees while she caught her breath.

Moisture from her feverish face condensed around the edges of her mask, blocked her peripheral vision, and made her face itch. All she smelled was stale plastic. She reached to pull her mask up to wipe the inside, then caught herself with a curse and drew her hand away.

"Don't be stupid," she told herself. "Be *very* careful, Kim. Once that stuff gets into your lungs, you're done for."

Even as she understood the lethality of the situation, another part of her wondered how it could be. She avoided the wind-blown tendrils where she could. The ones that settled on the ground in front of her created what looked like patches of scorched concrete. She didn't stop to study any of them, though they reminded her of forest fungus or a house with walls overrun by mold stains. The tendrils were likely spore clusters. Several types of fungal strains ran through her mind, but her brain's analytical ability had reset in favor of pure instinct.

At the bus stop at the end of the block, a group of people were fighting. Kim squatted low as she approached and peered through the moisture of her mask to see what they were fighting over.

The curious treasure was a long canister about the length of her arm, with a thin pair of hoses connecting it to a breathing apparatus. The people were shoving and kicking at one another to take the canister for themselves, not seeming to care if they tore the hoses free.

An oxygen canister?

Someone in the crowd snatched the canister free, slammed the breathing apparatus to their mouth and took a deep breath. The crowd tussled to get it back, the entire group scuffled into the middle of the street and left a wheelchair-bound man behind. He appeared to be dead, with his puffy red face thrown up at the sky and his arms down stiff at his sides.

Kim made a disgusted sound and ran across the street. She approached 7th Street bridge, moving toward Capitol Hill and hoped she was close to the safety of the CDC building. The sound of sirens echoed through the city, and the faint rotor buzz of a distant helicopter touched her ears.

As she reached the end of the block, a group of teenagers popped out of an apartment building and stood on the front stoop, jostling one another and laughing. One young man held a radio in his arms, blaring loud music to drown out the surrounding noise.

Several tendrils floated above the kids' heads, coming dangerously close. Two girls sat down

on the top step while two other boys passed around a 2-liter of cola, too caught up in their party to notice the immediate threat.

On a whim, Kim stopped at the bottom step and shouted at them, gesturing with her hands. The two girls who'd sat down saw Kim, though they regarded her with expressions of amusement.

"Hey, get back inside," Kim shouted. "Cover your face."

The two boys on the porch shared an uneasy smile as Kim tried to get them to listen.

"Get back inside," Kim shouted again. "The air is poison."

The kids blinked at her and burst out laughing. Kim must look ridiculous. There was no way they heard her with her mask on, and they were probably used to the sirens since they lived downtown.

One boy breathed a spore tendril, and his humorous expression faded. His mouth fell slack, eyes confused. He swallowed and swallowed again, gagging, slamming his hand to his throat as something cut his air off. The kid's eyes ticked to Kim, confusion turning to panic as he stretched and twisted his neck. His friends had stopped laughing, too. The girls sitting on the top step stood and tried to help the boy while his male friend backed away, unsure.

However, the choking boy had already collapsed on the porch, his body starting to convulse as it cried out for air.

The other boy started coughing, too, jerking back against the rail as if something had him by the throat. Eyes darting around in a mad panic, everything else forgotten, the kid leapt off the porch, knocking past Kim and running into the street. He spun in a circle, slapping his chest, clutching his neck and throat as he ran out of precious air. With a heart-wrenching croak, the kid collapsed to his knees and fell flat on his face. He convulsed once and lay still.

By the time Kim turned back to the kids on the porch, they were all coughing on the spores. All of them spitting their lungs into their hands and trying to voice their horror in screams that never came.

Kim closed her eyes and backed down the steps. Then she turned up 7th Street, swallowed down an enormous lump of dread, and ran.

Chapter 3

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim crossed the 7th Street Bridge over I-395. Cars sped by below her, the drivers oblivious to the nightmare spreading all around them. Above, the black tendrils drifted and undulated through the sky.

Glancing back, Kim saw several dozen people chasing her. No, not chasing her, but running from whatever was back there killing everyone. She thought she recognized one person from the bus stop, but she couldn't be sure with her mask fogging up and dripping moisture. Several people ran with their shirts pulled up over their mouths, understanding the danger and doing their best to keep the deadly spores out of their lungs. Still, they fell on the concrete, one by one, dropping like flies against a wall of insecticide.

Kim faced forward and kept running, the road ahead seen through a few inches of tunnel vision. Her ears, separated from the rest of her senses, absorbed the rising sounds of chaos: a crash below on the expressway, more screams, sirens, and frantic cries for help that echoed off the buildings.

Reaching the end of the bridge, Kim approached the intersection of 7th Street and Frontage Road. A car engine roared on the bridge behind her, and Kim leapt to the side, grabbing the chain link safety fence to hold herself up. She turned in time to see one of the pedestrians bounce off the hood of the sedan and go tumbling over its roof. A male driver leaned over the wheel, gripping it tightly with his wide eyes pinned straight ahead.

The car flew past Kim as the crescendo of sirens reached its peak. An ambulance swung into the intersection from Frontage Road, only to be T-boned by the reckless driver. Kim cringed at the bone-crunching impact, ambulance and sedan spinning around in a spray of metal and glass.

With a grunt, Kim sprinted toward the wreck, stopping only long enough to make sure there was no one else flying through the intersection. She saw the driver of the sedan choking and pounding the steering wheel with his fists. He was as good as dead, so she moved on to the ambulance.

The front driver's side door had been smashed shut in the wreckage, so Kim stepped on the running board and peered inside. The passenger side medic appeared unconscious, but the driver was blinking at the front window as blood dripped from her head. Her airbag lay draped and deflated over the wheel, smeared with blood.

"Do you have an air filtration mask?" Kim asked, peering at the equipment spilled inside of the cab.

"What?" the driver asked, dazed as she dabbed at her bloody head with her fingers. "My head."

"Never mind your head!" Kim shouted, enunciating clearly. "Do you have something to cover your face?"

"I...I don't understand."

A black tendril landed on the window, stretching out in a lengthy line of spores that clung to the glass. It seemed to pulsate and give off a faint, crimson radiance Kim hadn't noticed before. It looked angry and merciless.

Kim pointed at the spores, shouting, "Do you want that stuff in your lungs?"

The ambulance driver shook her head, snapping out of her daze as she reached for a box that

had toppled over in the crash.

Satisfied she had the woman's attention, Kim pointed to the ambulance radio. "I know you're in pain," she shouted, "but you have to call this in. Let emergency personnel know to wear air filtration masks. Let them know that the air is dangerous. I repeat, the air is dangerous."

The driver lifted a mask free and tossed it into the passenger's lap. Then she found one for herself and started to pull it on over her head. "Got it," she said with a slow nod. "The air is dangerous."

Kim looked the woman in the eyes once she had her mask on. "And be careful." She tapped the plastic visor of her own mask. "People will kill for one of these."

The driver nodded and leaned over in the seat to attend to the other medic.

Kim stepped off the door runner and turned in a circle. People in the parking lot across the street had turned to watch the ambulance wreck, and a few were jogging over to help. Others stared back the way Kim had just come, watching cars fly out of the contaminated zone, skirt the wreckage, and zoom toward the far side of town. That wasn't good. If those cars, or the people inside, were contaminated with spores, they could be carriers of the infection.

As the people coming to help the ambulance approached, Kim waved them away. She shook her head, shouting, "Get inside, cover your faces!" They stopped, some of them making confused gestures, but Kim was insistent. She waved them toward the fleeing cars and pointed back the way she'd come. A man and a woman turned to the south and caught sight of the tendrils drifting in the wind. They shared a knowing look with one another and sprinted down the street.

The others weren't so quick or fortunate. Those who remained in the street and parking lot were caught by the wispy tendrils. They turned their faces upward, swatting at the drifting spores and dispersing them like a cloud of gnats around their heads and shoulders. They breathed it in and were assailed with chest-wrenching coughs, their faces turned into gasping, gagging visages from some nightmare tapestry.

Some ran back inside the buildings while others did the spinning, hacking dance Kim had become so used to seeing.

Turning north, Kim put herself into motion and ran hard. She thought the CDC building was one more block north and two or three blocks east. But even as fast as she ran, the wind blew the tendrils faster. They alighted on everything in long, rope-like strands, swelling and spreading almost immediately.

Kim sprinted to the next block which was the corner of 7th Street and East Street. She turned right on East Street but then stopped cold when she saw a bus load of students staggering in the narrow, two-lane street. They were clearly afflicted, clearly dying, when a police car shot in from the other direction and plowed through the line before swerving to smash into a tree.

Her vision clouding with tears, Kim resumed running north. She huffed and pounded past a building that stretched an entire block, its ends curved toward the street like a giant embrace. A glance up told Kim this was the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Already, people were scrambling away from the spore tendrils, and Kim ticked off control procedures in her head. Normally, she would have been thinking of a way to quarantine sick people from the healthy population, but this was an opposite situation. She had to quarantine healthy people away from infected bodies and keep them from breathing contaminated air. They may need to shut down all air conditioning units and ventilation systems in every building in the city.

And what if the spores spread outside the city?

A sudden anxiety spurred her on. She needed to get to the CDC office where she might do

some real good for the people of the city. Angry resolve settled in her chest. And even though she could barely see out of the sweaty, dripping mask, her long legs pumped harder, carrying her across the concrete jungle with long strides.

She arrived at the northwest corner of a large building that housed several federal agencies, none of which she remembered from her tour of the city months ago. Etched out of the corner was a small park with benches and bushes.

Kim cut across it, leapt a park bench, and nearly ran into an overturned popcorn cart. The owner lay sprawled on the sidewalk with telltale signs of death by infection.

The street stretched ahead of her with neat squares of grass on the sidewalk, centered by trees. Between them were benches a dozen or more people had occupied. Their bodies were sprawled on the ground in front of the benches, some leaning back as if the tendrils had caught them napping.

She focused on the sidewalk, on running. There were objects ahead—bodies, street signs, garbage cans—that would knock her flat if she ran into them. And if she fell or somehow lost or broke her mask, she'd likely die.

The gentle clicking of her breathing apparatus was like the beat of a metronome, and the mask's rubber seal itched her skin like mad. But she couldn't take it off. Couldn't so much as put her finger between the mask and her skin. Halfway down the block, sirens blared as three police cruisers whipped around the corner, tires squealing as they raced past her in the opposite direction, heading west. Kim turned to watch them fly by in her tiny window of vision, and she noted spore tendrils spread across the windows and police lights, windshield wipers stirring it up like black powder and whipping it up into the sky to continue spreading.

Kim's foot caught on something big and soft and heavy. She cursed, toppled forward, and threw her hands out to catch herself. Furious fire ignited her palms as they struck the concrete with all her weight behind the landing. Her shoulder jolted, and she clenched her teeth down on a cry. Kim jerked her hands to her stomach, unsure if the spore tendrils could get into her bloodstream through an open wound.

Still in pain, she tried to rip her blouse to use as a bandage, but the material was too thick and strong. Her fingers found a spot on her shirt that had been torn during her flight from the restaurant. Fingers placed into the holes, she ripped two long strips away and wrapped them around her hands, balling them into fists to protect the scrapes.

Kim got to her feet and staggered a few steps forward when the faint sounds of a child crying reached her ears. She lurched to a stop, turning slowly to see a little boy of about five laying with his arms stretched across a woman's corpse and a scarf wrapped tightly around his face. It was the corpse Kim must have just tripped over.

Glancing around for any immediate signs of danger, Kim approached the boy and knelt beside him. The youngster looked up, tears cascading down his cheeks over spots of black that had broken out across his skin.

"My mom—" The boy coughed and swallowed. "My mom. She won't get up."

Kim glanced at the lady laying on the sidewalk, her flower dress twisted around her legs and the contents of her purse spilled out onto the sidewalk. "She's sick," Kim said with a sad smile, a smile she wasn't even sure the boy saw behind her mask's moisture buildup.

"My throat is sore." The boy put his hand to his neck and rubbed it. He sucked in a deep, wheezing breath through the scarf and coughed. The mother must have tied the scarf around her son's face even as the spores claimed her, and her actions had kept him alive for a few spare minutes.

Wincing, the boy rubbed his throat harder and coughed twice more, his body sliding sideways off the corpse with the force of his hacking. His eyes lifted to Kim, confusion filling his face. "It hurts. It hurts bad."

"I know, baby," Kim said. Tears blinding her, heart-wrenching sobs heaving in her chest, Kim lifted the little boy in her arms and didn't let go until his coughing and shuddering stopped.

Chapter 4

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Fists clenched tight, jaw locked, Kim sprinted down Virginia Avenue. She was blinded by tears and the ever-shrinking window of vision in her mask—it wasn't made for people trying to run a marathon.

She shook her head to send drips of water flying off the plastic where they pooled along the bottom of the mask. That helped a little.

A tall retaining wall made of old blocks of stone ran along the left side of the road. A line of cars coming the other direction had rear-ended each other, the occupants out of their vehicles arguing, coughing, or dying.

Kim ran until she reached the corner of Virginia Avenue and 4th Street. She turned in a circle, hands on her hips and panting as she tried to regain her sense of direction.

Sirens ripped through the city, what must have been an army of ambulances and firetrucks, and Kim could imagine the shock and confusion as the local authorities tried to handle the situation. The phone lines would be jammed with callers, with mass confusion everywhere. And when emergency personnel arrived at their destinations, they would be woefully unprepared to deal with the outbreak unless the ambulance driver had gotten her message to them.

Kim shook her head and walked south down 4th Street. At least, she thought it was south. If her guess was right, it should put her near the CDC office building where she could get inside and reach the department head, Tom Flannery. There was a good chance he was already aware of the outbreak, though he could have gotten caught in the city's mess like her. Kim might be one of the few people left who could mobilize some response.

She took out her cell phone, holding it up in front of her face as she walked, wary of the nearby traffic.

While her mask would make it impossible to speak to Flannery, maybe they could text. She turned her head left and right and moved her phone around, trying to get an unobstructed view of the screen to open the text application. Through the mist, she spotted a red dot over the text icon which showed someone had been sending her messages, though she couldn't make out what they said.

Raising the phone higher, she finally read the texts through a clear, one-inch window in her mask. There were messages from her husband, Bishop, and also from Dr. Flannery. Her heart lifted with hope. If Dr. Flannery was in the CDC building, the offices would be secure and he'd be working on a solution. She clicked on Dr. Flannery's message, hoping to read it and reply that she was on her way.

The thumping of helicopter rotors startled Kim as a chopper zoomed over her head. She ducked and looked up at the underside as it banked south between the buildings ahead. Thousands of spore tendrils followed in its wake. She caught sight of big letters written on the undercarriage, the call letters of a local news station.

The chopper swerved left and right through the tendrils, swinging in a wide arc that grew wilder by the moment. Kim clutched her phone to her chest as the chopper smashed into the side of a building. It plummeted five stories to the street and exploded in a ball of flames.

Kim ran the last fifty yards to the end of the block, head swiveling in search of something that looked familiar. The city was growing more dangerous by the moment, and she needed to

find shelter, not waste precious time trying to text people.

A dozen soldiers with air filtration masks jogged toward her on East Street, though they were on the opposite side of the road. Kim shoved her phone into her back pocket and sprinted across the street as the soldiers turned to follow the helicopter crash.

“Hey!” she cried, waving her hands in the air as she ran toward them.

At first, the soldiers didn’t notice her, then one dropped back. He turned and raised the barrel of a very mean looking rifle in her direction. Kim stopped immediately and fished her CDC security access ID out of her pocket and held it out to the man.

Seeing her air filtration mask and ID, the soldier lowered his weapon. He said something Kim could not understand, and the troop of soldiers pulled to a stop. Kim noticed the soldier’s mask wasn’t fogged up like hers.

The man approached, narrowing his eyes at Kim’s ID. He looked back and forth between Kim and her picture on the plastic before deciding Kim was a legitimate CDC employee, though she had no idea how he could tell. Her face was hidden behind the fogged-up mask, and her hair was a tangled mess.

When he came within a few feet of her, he pointed at the ID. “You’re with the CDC?” His voice carried loud and tinny from his military-grade mask.

“Yes!” Kim shouted. “But I transferred from the Fort Collins branch today. I’m supposed to meet with Doctor Tom Flannery!”

“I don’t know the doctors,” the soldier shouted back and pointed over Kim’s shoulder. “But the CDC building is right behind you.”

Kim glanced over her shoulder and looked into a courtyard cut into the side of a five-story building. There was a single plot of grass in the center with a tall tree sprouting up. A stone bench encircled the tiny plot of land. Several corpses lay on the grass. Scattered styrofoam boxes spilled their contents everywhere. They’d fallen over dead right in the middle of their lunches.

The courtyard was familiar to Kim, and she recognized a block of security doors at the far end as the CDC entrance.

“Yes, that’s it,” Kim said, turning back to the soldier. “Thank you so much!”

“No problem, ma’am,” the soldier shouted back. “Any idea what’s going on here?”

Kim shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. But I’m going to find out.”

“Good luck then.” The soldier gave her a brief wave and backed up before turning to join his fellow soldiers.

Kim sprinted for the courtyard. The mask was becoming unbearable, and the urgency to get inside and work on a solution twisted in her gut. A moment later, Kim stood at the CDC security doors. On the right side of the frame was the badge reader glowing red around the edges. She peered through the glass, surprised to see a half dozen bodies sprawled on the floor inside. They seemed to have just gotten through the doors before collapsing. Kim imagined they’d gained entrance before the guards knew what was happening, releasing the spore contamination inside the building.

With a glance down at the badge reader, Kim bit her lip, tasting salt. What if her ID had not been activated yet and she couldn’t get inside? On her first visit, Dr. Flannery had escorted her through the building the entire time. She’d not tried any of the badge readers with her own ID.

There was only one way to find out. Kim flipped open her CDC ID like she’d done with the soldier and pressed it against the reader. An eternity passed before the glowing red light around the badge reader turned green. The click of the magnetic locks releasing filled her with relief.

Kim pushed through the first set of double doors and then another set before entering the

lobby area. A bank of elevators lay ahead, and hallways leading to various administrative offices branched off to her left and right.

It was deathly quiet inside, which did nothing to steady her nerves. The only good news was that she was inside and safe from the chaos growing in the streets.

Kim strode over to the row of elevators and pressed the down button. A moment later, there was a ding, and the elevator doors in the middle spread open. Kim stepped inside, thankful to see no dead bodies for once. She placed her ID against the badge reader below the elevator buttons.

The reader switched from red to green. Kim pressed the button that would take her to Sub Level One, the entry point for the underground CDC research facility housed five stories below. The fully outfitted, state-of-the-art lab had everything the CDC would need to combat and contain the outbreak; provided there were any scientists left alive. The entire complex ran on its own separate ventilation, power, and communication systems, and had a secure satellite link directly to other highly sensitive government agencies.

Kim breathed easier as the doors slid shut and the elevator lurched into its descent. The cool air-conditioning was likely not contaminated at the source. However, she left her filtration mask on. There might still be some dangerous particulates floating around, clinging to her skin or clothing.

The elevator reached Sub Level One and dinged. The doors slid open, and Kim stepped into a round, sterile-looking chamber with smooth walls. Spray nozzles jutted up along the floor and ceiling, and on the far wall hung a mounted monitor and control panel next to the door.

The monitor flared to life, and the face of Dr. Tom Flannery peered back at her. His dark eyes studied Kim for a moment before he presented her with a relieved smile.

“Hello, Kim.” Dr. Flannery spoke with calm professionalism. “I’m glad you made it. Please do not remove your mask.”

She nodded at his instructions, saying, “Hello, Dr. Flannery.” Her voice sounded dead, her legs shaking from exhaustion, palms stinging from being scraped on the concrete.

“I can’t hear you too well,” Dr. Flannery said in apology. “Let’s walk you through the decontamination chambers so we can get that mask off. Then we’ll talk.”

Kim started to say, “Yes,” but simply nodded her head.

“Hold out your arms,” Dr. Flannery said.

Kim did as she was told. Something hissed in the walls before a cold mist shot at her from every direction. She winced when the mist struck her exposed skin, although part of her was relieved by the cool chemical feel of it. Anything was better than having that creeping, pulsing dust on her.

After ten seconds, the spray stopped, and the doors in front of her slid open with a hiss. Dr. Flannery asked her to step into the next chamber which was identical to the last.

“Please remove all articles of clothing,” he said from the wall monitor as Kim stepped to the center of the room. “But leave your mask on.”

Starting with her hands, Kim removed the bloodstained strips of shirt and tossed them to the ground. She held up her palms to show her scrapes.

“We’ll have anti-bacterial and anti-fungal creams ready when you reach quarantine.”

Kim peeled off her sweaty, chemical-soaked clothing, except for her under garments, and dropped them on the floor. She stood there shivering in the sterile room, only her face remaining hot in the mask.

“No time to be shy,” Dr. Flannery said, glancing up. “You need to remove everything.”

Kim nodded and removed her undergarments and was subjected to yet another chemical

spray. Once complete, the doctor asked her to come ahead once more. Kim groaned and walked, stiff-legged, to the next chamber. It was smaller than the other two, with a long sink that ran the full length of the far wall along with several soap dispensers. Dr. Flannery gazed at her from above the sink.

“Please step to the center of the room and remove your filtration mask,” he said. “Then drop it in the bin to your left and walk immediately to the sink.”

Kim stepped to the center of the room and tore off her mask, gasping as cool air struck her itching skin. She tossed the filtration mask into the bin and went to the sink. “Okay, I’m here.” It was wonderful to hear her own voice again and to breathe the cool, sterile air.

“Using the soap from one dispenser,” Dr. Flannery continued, “wash your hands, face, and hair as you would at home. When you’re ready, step to the center of the room and I’ll rinse you off.”

Kim followed the instructions to the letter, understanding that failing to do so meant going through the process again. When she’d finished lathering herself in the chemical-smelling soap, she backed up to stand over a drain. “Go ahead, Dr. Flannery.”

The doctor smiled grimly at her from the monitor. “Tom is fine.” He hit a button on his side of the screen, and ice-cold water blasted over her.

Chapter 5

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Center Township, Indiana

Randy Tucker got out of the old pickup truck, slammed the door shut, and met his sister in the yard. Jenny grinned at her brother and held out her hands. He took a Coke out of the grocery bag and handed it to her before turning to gaze across the corn field that stretched on to infinity.

“Want to watch them spray the fields?” Randy asked. “Dad’s got the new system installed, but you know Harvey and his boys will be out in full force in the other fields.”

“Are you kidding?” Jenny replied. “I love air shows.”

“Especially Harvey’s,” Randy chuckled. “Amazing the guy hasn’t crashed yet the way he flies.”

Sharing a laugh, the red-haired twins walked out to a picnic table in the yard and sat down on top, resting their feet on the bench. They popped the tops off their Cokes and each had a drink.

Randy stared out across the field. The corn wasn’t quite knee high, and the bright green plant leaves shined in the sun. There was no sign of fungal growth on the stalks or leaves, but last year’s fungi could be growing deep in the soil in a wide fungus patch. It was important to spray as a preventive measure before the infection interfered with the crop yield.

“There’s Mom and Dad,” Randy pointed to the big Durant-Monroe Chemical truck at the far end of the field. Their parents sat inside with the chemical company worker, a giant tank of Harvest Guard resting on the truck bed behind them.

Hoses ran from the tank and connected to the crosshatch of pipes and tubes that covered their entire field. The system would disperse the chemicals quickly and evenly across the plants.

“Seems like a lot,” Jenny said, squinting at the field. “Pipes and hoses everywhere. Should have just hired Harvey.”

“Dad said the Harvest Guard system gives him more control,” Randy replied. “The application will take less than thirty minutes, and he can spray again any time he wants. Plus, it only costs a little more than hiring a plane. Everyone is doing it this year. Well, maybe not here, but everyone east of Fowler.”

“Think it will work?” Jenny asked.

“It’s got to work,” Randy replied. “We had terrible yields the last three years. Dad says...” Randy hesitated. He didn’t want to scare his sister. On the other hand, she deserved to hear the truth.

“We might lose the farm,” Jenny finished for him in a flat tone.

“Is it that obvious?”

“I’m not blind,” Jenny said. “Plus, I overheard Mom and Dad talking about it.”

A small, single-engine propeller plane flew low over their farmhouse. Randy and Jenny ducked as the plane skidded by, kicking up a wind that whipped Jenny’s long, red hair around.

A hand waved at them from the cockpit before the plane banked toward the next farm over.

“Harvey is nuts,” Jenny laughed, waving back.

“There are his other boys,” Randy said, pointing around to other farms in the distance where helicopters had lifted off and were preparing to spray.

Harvey’s plane flew in low toward the field, wings locked and steady as he released a perfect line of spray over the corn plants.

“Say what you want about Harvey,” Randy said, “but that man can spray.”

The plane came to the end of the field and lifted higher, banking around for a second turn as the helicopters began dispersing their payloads as far as Randy could see.

“What is that?” Jenny asked, pointing to the field Harvey was working on.

Randy’s eyes drifted back and squinted. At first, he thought it was a trick of the light. It seemed like wisps of black smoke were rising from the part of the field Harvey had just sprayed.

“Is the field on fire?” Randy asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s happening in the other fields, too.” Jenny pointed toward the horizon where black wisps were rising from the fields, reaching for the choppers as the breeze blew them about.

Randy watched as Harvey’s plane flew back into the drifting wisps, laying down another coating of spray. The wind kicked out by the plane’s propeller dispersed the smoky dust in all directions. A moment later, Harvey’s plane swayed in the sky, wings tipping back and forth in a wild, erratic fashion. The nose lifted for a moment before the entire plane flipped upside down and plunged into the ground, throwing up an enormous ball of fire.

Jenny stood with a gasp. “Oh, no. Harvey!”

“What in the world?” Randy stood next to his sister with confusion etched across his face.

In the distance, the helicopters wavered, dipped, and turned inside the black clouds. One chopper lurched forward, banked sharply, and slammed into the ground with another explosion. The others followed suit, leaving the sky empty. The wispy clouds moved as one vast entity as the wind pushed them westward.

“We can’t let them spray our field.” Randy stood up, his gut loose and queasy. “Something’s up with the spray. It’s some kind of poison or something.”

The sound of a machine roaring to life reached them from across the field. Pipes shuddered with pressure, and Harvest Guard burst from the nozzles, spraying the fungicide high into the air where it fell like rain across their entire field. The field sizzled and snapped like bacon cooking on a griddle as inky wisps rose from the soil.

“Mom and Dad!” Jenny cried out, leaping off the bench and running toward the access road that ran through the center of their field.

“No, Jenny!” Randy jumped after his sister, though he knew he had no chance of catching her. She was tall and long-legged, and she’d been running track since eighth grade.

The wind drove the wispy tendrils across the access road, making them look like fingers prodding and hunting for prey, each individual strand a part of some larger beast. The darkness rose higher and higher, dimming the sunlight as a shadow fell across the field.

Randy sprinted harder, shouting, “Jenny, stop! Jenny!”

His sister was well ahead of him, dead set on sprinting through the poison cloud. The girl pulled up ten yards from the wisps as a figure stumbled toward them down the access road. Randy recognized his mother’s yellow button-up shirt and her light red hair. Her eyes bulged out, her neck strained as her head twisted back and forth.

She fought to breathe, gasping for a single ounce of air. It seemed impossible that the friendly, smiling woman who had made them breakfast earlier now looked like something out of a nightmare. Tendrils lay across her skin like burn marks, dispersing in a light puff that reformed once she’d passed.

His mother clutched at her throat with one hand and waved them away with the other.

Randy reached his sister, grabbed her by the arm and jerked her backwards. Jenny resisted, swinging an elbow back to connect with his gut. Randy shrugged off the blow and kept pulling her away. Jenny might be faster but Randy was the stronger of the two. Long days working in the

fields during harvest season and playing rough high school sports had broadened his shoulders and given him a toned edge many college athletes would envy.

“She needs our help, Randy!” Jenny wailed as she punched and kicked at him. “Let me go! We need to help her!”

“No, she’s waving us away!” Randy shouted back, watching as his mother nodded fiercely.

The woman stopped at the edge of the access road, holding her hand out to them. Her eyes were filled with pain, yet there was a hint of love and regret in them. She fell to her knees and pitched face forward on the ground.

The sound that grew from Jenny’s chest and erupted from her wide-open mouth was like nothing Randy had ever heard. It was part sob and part animal growl, a sound that rejected their mother’s death outright in the eyes of the world and God. It was a sound Randy knew he would never forget as long as he lived.

Nothing could save their mother. They had to get away or face the same fate. Randy wrapped his arms around his sister, squeezed tight, and dragged her away, kicking and screaming. The wind kicked up and drove the tendrils toward them like an ocean tide.

Jenny suddenly stopped fighting him. She seemed to realize the danger they were in. She turned in his arms and stumbled toward the house, pulling him along with her.

Randy’s stomach dropped when he saw the house covered in tendrils that had blown in from another field. They were settling on the roof and sides of the house, spreading quick.

They could still make it to the house and get inside, but they’d left the windows open. Their house was old, built before air conditioning, designed to allow a stiff breeze to blow through all the time. The tendrils would surely find them before they could shut all the windows and doors.

“Come on,” Randy said, grabbing his sister’s hand. “The truck.”

They sprinted toward the beat-up Ford with the tendrils chasing close behind. Randy threw open the passenger side door, and Jenny dove inside, crawling fast across the seat to knock her head against the driver’s side window. Randy jumped in behind her, slamming the door shut behind him.

The tendrils settled on the glass, pulsing and spreading out like he’d seen them do on the house. Growths like tiny veins stretched for several millimeters before sprouting soft, fuzzy nodules that glowed with a faint crimson luminescence.

Randy’s mouth fell open in horror as he realized that was what his mother had breathed in. That’s what had gotten into her lungs and suffocated her, and his own throat tightened in reflex as more tendrils settled on top of the truck.

“Can it get in?” Jenny’s voice was nearly a shriek as she raised to her knees and looked around in fear.

“I don’t know,” Randy replied, then he realized the truck vents were open. He reached out and slammed the ones in front of him closed. Jenny followed suit, swinging herself upright in the seat and closing the vents on her side of the truck.

Randy looked around in disbelief as the windows turned black and slowly cut off the sunlight.

“Whatever it is, it has weight,” he said. “I think it will settle as long as we don’t disturb it, and then maybe we can leave.” Though Randy believed that about as much as he believed dogs could fly. “Let’s wait it out,” he whispered to comfort himself as much as his sister. “Let’s wait it out.”

Chapter 6

Burke Birkenhoff, Chicago, Illinois

Burke groaned and rolled over in his king-sized bed. Tossing off the covers that twisted around his legs, he glanced at the clock on the nightstand to see it was late afternoon. He picked up a bra that dangled from an empty wine glass and tossed it after the covers.

Feeling around on top of the nightstand, he found the remote control for the blinds and pressed a button. The glass along the walls shifted, and sunlight poured into the room.

“Too much,” he groaned, hitting a second button to reverse the effect so that only faint slivers of light made it into the room. “Much better.”

Burke winced against the impending headache before he put on a pair of running pants and stumbled into the bathroom. As he brushed his teeth, he recalled all the contracts that had recently come in for sales of their latest chemical fungicide, Harvest Guard, and all its derivatives. There was Harvest Guard Plus, Harvest Guard Residential, and even a Harvest Guard Seasonal.

After finishing in the bathroom, he strode along a white tiled hallway singing the Harvest Guard ad slogan to chase away his hangover. “For home, field, or yard, you can trust Harvest Guard.”

Farmers desperate to keep their crops from being wiped out in the summer had purchased record numbers of Durant-Monroe’s “ultimate solution” over the past two weeks, and the company’s stock price had nearly doubled. Billions of gallons of product had shipped two days ago, and every farmer in over a hundred countries would spray today.

Entering the studio-sized living room on the fifty-second floor of the Durant-Monroe building, Burke paused to peer out his enormous bay window. The view of Chicago was extraordinary. The patio door was open, and an exhilarating breeze blew through the apartment. Burke took a deep breath before moving over to the breakfast bar where Pauline sat on a high-backed stool dressed in one of his T-shirts. She sipped coffee as she stared into the living room at the big screen television hanging above the mantle.

“Good morning, Pauline,” Burke said in the light, professional tone he reserved for his assistant, despite the intimacy of their relationship. He came around the counter and kissed her on the forehead. Her blonde hair was still messy from the wild night. “How do you feel this morning?”

“I have mixed feelings,” Pauline replied, never taking her eyes off the television screen. “Get back to me in a few minutes.”

Burke chuckled as he circled back around the bar, grabbing the fixings for a Bloody Mary. There was already a bottle of vodka on the counter next to the stove, so he walked to the refrigerator and dug around for the Bloody Mary mix and some celery. “That’s what I like about you, Pauline. Your dry, snappy sense of humor.”

“Are you watching this?” Pauline asked, and the tone of her voice held a note that made Burke’s spine tingle with danger.

“I’m not,” he admitted. “I’m in too good a mood to care about world events.” He shut the refrigerator door and placed the mix and celery on the counter.

“I’m serious, Burke. You need to get over here.”

Burke let out an annoyed sigh and joined Pauline at the breakfast bar. Arms folded over his

bare chest, he watched the news unfold with a growing sense of dread.

A woman news reporter stood in the center of a small-town street while a “Breaking News from Durham, North Carolina” ticker flashed across the bottom of the screen. The reporter smiled into the camera and launched into the story. “Reports out of Durham, North Carolina indicate a possible toxic outbreak after farmers in the area sprayed fungicide on their crops today. Witnesses say there may be a connection between the toxic outbreak and a new chemical fungicide called Harvest Guard. Durant-Monroe Chemicals released Harvest Guard just this week. Farmers and agricultural companies paid up to a month in advance for what Durant-Monroe calls the ultimate solution to fungal diseases affecting crops and crop harvests. Farmers across the United States who wanted to get the jump on fungus infestations this year lined up in droves yesterday to pick up millions of gallons of Harvest Guard with plans of spraying today. Witnesses say the spray produced a black cloud that, when breathed in, caused asphyxiation in its victims. The toxin has already killed dozens of people.”

The screen switched to the reporter holding out her microphone to what Burke assumed was a local farmer with the rough-hewn features of someone who’d worked in the fields his entire life.

“I was late getting started on my spraying,” the farmer said, adjusting his Farmall hat. “But I saw my neighbor, Wiley, start early like he always does. I was working on some of my equipment in the yard when I noticed a black cloud rising above his field. Damn thing looked alive the way it moved.”

“Alive?” the reporter asked in an incredulous tone.

“Yeah, a little,” the farmer acknowledged. “I went to check on Wiley, but he never came out of his field. Then that cloud started moving toward me. Looked like the wind had caught it.”

“Can you tell us which way the cloud went?”

“I think southwest,” the farmer said, but the look in his eyes was uncertain.

The view switched to stock footage of a Durant-Monroe Chemical truck driving down a gravel road while the reporter continued. “Some say the quick push to market by Durant-Monroe is to blame for the toxic outbreak, but that’s speculation at the moment.” The view switched back to the reporter who gave the camera a sharp nod. “This is Deborah Wright reporting from Durham, North Carolina for CNA News.”

They switched to the anchor desk where an anchorman with a slick haircut fixed the camera with a serious expression. “We’ve not been able to reach Durant-Monroe Chemicals for comment, but we expect to hear something very soon.”

“What’s MSNA saying?” Burke’s tone held a note of dread.

Pauline held up the television remote and switched channels.

The story from MSNA was the same except they were reporting from a small town in Indiana where similar outbreaks were happening. There were over a dozen dead there. As Pauline navigated through the channels, it became clear that the toxic outbreaks were happening all across the United States, and things were getting worse by the minute.

A seed of fear settled into Burke’s stomach. His company was on the verge of greatness, and he couldn’t allow it to slip away. Burke narrowed his eyes at the screen. Part of him wasn’t surprised. It was true they had rushed Harvest Guard to market in all its forms, paying off the necessary governmental agencies to punch it through the system. Burke hadn’t been too worried, since the new formula was just a small tweak to the one they’d produced last year.

“This can’t be good, right?” Pauline asked, biting her lip. “Tell me this wasn’t us.”

“This kind of thing happens more than you think,” Burke replied, trying to convince himself

more than Pauline. “Everything is fine.” He started looking around for his phone until he saw Pauline fish it out of the front pocket of the T-shirt she wore.

“You started getting direct messages ten minute ago,” she said, waving the phone as Burke came over to take it. “It’s now over a hundred. I thought I’d let you brush your teeth before you dug into them. What do you want me to do?”

Burke stared at his phone like it was a deadly snake dangling between her fingers. Almost angrily, he snatched it out of her hand and set his jaw. “Get Josh over here right away and have him bring all the department heads. We’ll start damage control.”

“You got it. Anything else?”

Burke started to say no, then he glanced up at the television. While he was confident they would get this under control, there was a small chance they wouldn’t.

“Tell Charlie to prep the bus,” Burke said with an ominous tone.

“All right,” Pauline nodded, uncurling her long legs and sitting up in her chair. She turned around, faced a slim laptop resting on the breakfast bar, and opened the screen. “I’m on it, boss,” Pauline said, and she began tapping on the keyboard.

Chapter 7

Moe Tsosie, Bakersfield, California

Moe Tsosie guided his semi-trailer truck onto the entry ramp and joined I-5 heading south. He'd picked up his trailer full of almonds and avocados outside of Bakersfield, California and planned on delivering it to Las Vegas by the end of the day.

It would be a brief trip, just four hours, before he'd head home to Chinle, Arizona for four days of rest. Moe seldom caught so many days off in a row, and he used the time to get caught up on his chores around the house and do some horseback riding in the canyons around the reservation.

Traffic was light, so he increased his speed to seventy miles per hour and kicked back with a sigh. Fruit and almond farms stretched to both sides, nothing but green as far as he could see. Industrial sprayers spread out between the rows of crops, and Moe watched the liquid chemicals squirt up from nozzles to arc out over the plants in a fine, misty rain.

In the distance, massive electric towers stood with their arms held wide like Godzilla-sized monsters stalking across the land. The Tejon Mountains painted the horizon behind them, menacing and dark.

Moe glanced left toward Bakersfield and saw the distant speck of a news helicopter flying over the city. He'd cut across to jump on I-15 soon, so it would be nice to find a traffic report. He reached out and flipped on his radio, and the jingle of a car dealership commercial filled the truck cab. Moe sat back and listened until the next news report started a few minutes later.

"This is Rick Davidson reporting from the KGET news chopper in Bakersfield," the reporter said, the volume of his voice raised over the background noise of whirring rotors. "We're looking at light traffic throughout the city today, with only a bit of congestion on Highway 99 at 7th Standard Road. Otherwise, it's a beautiful day out there with winds coming out of the northeast at 11 miles per hour."

"Awesome," Moe said, referring to the traffic, and he ran his hand through his long dark hair so it fell back over his shoulders. Moe calculated he could reach Las Vegas by early afternoon and be drinking coffee in Chinle by evening. Luckily, the Denny's stayed open late, even in his hometown.

Moe flipped on his CD player and Patsy Cline crooned "Always" from his cab speakers. The singer had lived and died before Moe was born, though something about the earnest tone of her voice pierced Moe's heart. She made him think of the women he'd loved before and the future loves he might live to regret.

"You get me every time, Patsy," Moe said with a wistful grin, and he cranked up the sound so the cabin rocked with her sweet melodies.

Cruising along, Moe pinned his eyes ahead, glancing periodically into his side mirrors to check for cars around him. He allowed his gaze to linger far ahead as Patsy's voice soothed his soul.

Something drifted onto the road several miles ahead. Moe sat up and squinted ahead of him. It appeared to be a black fog oozing up on the road from the fields, squeezing tight as he approached. A glance into his side mirror showed the fog closing in behind as well, with finger-like tendrils drifting across the road.

"What in the world is going on?"

Still looking in his mirror, Moe's eyes flew wide open when a car shot out of the cloud and banked hard to the left, toppling end-over-end along the highway. More vehicles burst from the cloud and crashed into the tumbling wreckage or shot off the road to slam their noses in the dirt.

Moe took his foot off the gas and held it over the brake. His first instinct was to stop and help the people in the wrecks, but something about the fog made the hairs on his arms stand up. The fog looked toxic and deadly, closing in on all sides. Was it some new insecticide they'd dumped on the fields?

He switched his foot back to the gas and pressed down, and the diesel engine responded with a roar. Moe rolled his windows up and slammed his vents closed as the smoky tendrils engulfed him.

Turning in his seat, Moe reached for the respirator mask he'd thrown onto his bed. He wore it whenever he ventured into a warehouse full of produce to watch them load it onto his truck. After hearing what kinds of pesticides and antifungals they sprayed to protect product for cross country travel, Moe purchased the mask and wore it even though the warehouse workers laughed at him.

He slipped the mask over his head, losing sight of the road for two seconds. Moe looked up and winced as his fender bumped the car in front of him. He pumped his brakes as the vehicle bounced ahead with a honk.

"Sorry," Moe mumbled, happy he hadn't knocked the car off the road.

By then, the mysterious tendrils were all around him, making it hard to see the road.

Moe glanced at his speedometer, and the stop arm hovered at fifty-five miles per hour. It wasn't a high rate of speed, though probably too fast for such low visibility. As if on cue, the car he'd bumped suddenly stopped, its tail end flying into the air as it smashed into the vehicle in front of it.

Jerking his wheel to the left, Moe whipped his truck in a sharp but smooth maneuver around the wreck. He felt the weight of his trailer assume control, bending his tractor dangerously back and forth before he righted it.

The haze broke, and Moe shifted gears and slammed the gas pedal to outrun the growing chaos. He flew past two SUVs swerving in the slow lane. One crossed the yellow line as Moe flew past, and he clipped the truck, sending it into a harmless spin off the road.

Moe cursed and wove through more wreckage. One pickup truck had slid sideways and got T-boned by another car, and the pickup's driver waved his arms as he tried to escape from the burning wreckage. Moe slammed his palm on his steering wheel and shook his head, slowing his truck as he pulled it to the shoulder and stopped.

He popped open his door and hopped down. Distant crashes greeted his ears as he stepped away from the truck and looked far ahead. The wind drove the tendrils in gusts, and shadows of wrecks lay scattered everywhere.

Moe turned and sprinted back along the road to where the car burned a hundred yards away. A van drove by, trailing black dust as it plowed along, weaving as the driver gripped the wheel and focused on the road. Moe noted her rolled up windows, confirming his assumption that the cloud must be poisonous. He'd been smart to put on his mask, though he questioned his decision to save the person in the burning wreckage.

"This is stupid, Moe," he said to himself as he hustled. "Someone will hit you, and it won't be pretty."

Still, Moe couldn't allow someone to burn alive—not if he could help it. He only hoped he made it to them in time.

As he approached the burning car, a sports car zipped out of the cloud, heading fast toward him. The windows hung wide open, and the driver gripped his neck in respiratory distress. Moe watched the car angle toward his side of the road, and he dropped into a cautionary stance, ready to dive in any direction.

The car swung to the far side of the road and broke back in Moe's direction with a deafening squeal of tires. Moe's insides turned to liquid as the headlamps bore down on him, and he tensed himself to spring. At the last second, the sports car veered into the burning car in a fiery explosion, showering Moe in light and heat and pieces of glass.

He threw his arms over his head to protect himself and waited for the air to clear. Once safe, Moe took two steps toward the burning wreckage with his arm up to shield his eyes. The heat burned the hair off his arms. He couldn't get within ten feet of the wreckage much less save the people inside.

With a sad shake of his head, Moe turned and sprinted back to his truck, saying a silent prayer for those who burned alive. He gasped as he ran, the inside of his mask fogging up as his panting shot hot breath against his visor.

The sound of helicopter rotors reached his ears, and Moe looked up to spot the KGET helicopter dip down into a clear spot in the fog. They must have caught the chaotic scene and come to investigate. Moe waved a warning to the chopper as he ran.

"Get out of here," he shouted. "Go get help. Call the—"

The aircraft wobbled, drifting to one side in an almost haphazard manner.

"Oh no," Moe whispered as he reached his truck, watching the chopper show more signs of distress.

The craft bent backwards and drifted away from Moe, then the nose tipped forward and kept on tipping. The aircraft lost altitude and flew drunkenly toward the ground. Toward his truck!

"No, no, no!" Moe cried. He backpedaled away, his hands held out in despair.

The helicopter crashed through his trailer with a thunderous crunch and came out the other side in a ball of flames. Rotors smacked the ground and zipped in all directions, and Moe dropped to the ground and covered his head.

Once the debris settled, Moe rose to his knees. The helicopter wreckage lay strewn across the roadway along with almonds glowing and sizzling like embers. His truck remained intact, though the trailer burned. Moe jumped up and ran over and held his hands out to test the heat. It wasn't blistering like the two cars. Most of the helicopter fuel lay spilled on the roadway.

Moe rushed to the tractor hitch and disconnected the air and power lines. He ducked beneath the front of the trailer to grab the kingpin release. With a quick jerk, he pulled the clamps open with a *clank*.

Moe backed out from beneath the trailer and grabbed the lever to lower the trailer's support legs. He cranked it as fast as he could while the flames crept closer. Once the support legs touched the concrete, Moe sprinted back to his cab.

He climbed in and hit the switch to release the air suspension. The CD player moved to the next track, and *I Fall to Pieces* blared from the speakers as his truck disconnected from the trailer. He grabbed his seat belt and started to buckle it, but let it snap back. If the flames reached the gas tanks, he'd have to bail quick.

A quick check in his side mirror showed the flames getting closer, and Moe couldn't wait any longer. He put the truck in gear and tore off, lurching as the fifth wheel hit the connecting pin and bent it outward.

Moe drove hard, passing a dozen or more wrecks before he broke free of the cloud. Despite

the sun shining down, the horizon on either side boiled with more ominous clouds.

Moe stomped on the gas. The truck picked up speed and barreled ahead. The expressway remained clear for the moment, but what lay around the next bend remained to be seen.

Moe clutched the steering wheel as Patsy Cline finished her mournful tune to the rhythm of Moe's pounding heart.

I fall to pieces.

Each time someone speaks your name.

I fall to pieces.

Time only adds to the flame.

Chapter 8

Moe Tsosie, Barstow, California

Four hours later, Moe approached Barstow, California on I-15. He noticed patches of black and crimson growing on the backs of his hands and across his dashboard and seat. The growth hadn't caught his attention at first because of his focus on the road and the radio reports filtering in from across the United States.

Toxic clouds had killed hundreds of thousands of people in many major US cities, bringing the country to a standstill. News agencies scrambled to provide accurate information, though every report they rolled out became obsolete fifteen minutes later. Some experts pointed to a major escalation in bioterrorism, while others called it a result of chemical sprays released into the air on farms across the nation.

If Moe hadn't experienced the toxic clouds personally, he wouldn't have believed the reports. He'd put his money on the chemical spray theories, because he knew the lengths farmers and resellers went to keep their crops protected.

Moe would theorize later, because he wanted to get the disgusting growths off his skin. He swore the spots had only been soft dust before, though they clung to his skin even when he tried to brush them off.

Traffic had grown heavy over the last hours, people fleeing eastward with vehicles packed full of personal possessions, children and dogs tossed into the backseat along with piles of clothes and food.

Taking the next exit, Moe turned left and headed for the A&B Truck Wash and Mini-Mart on Main Street. He often washed his truck there between runs, and it had a powerful sprayer and a full range of interior cleaning supplies, even anti-bacterial wipes.

Moe guided his truck into the lot and pulled into the last stall on the end. Once parked, Moe exited his vehicle and took several steps back. Streaks of black and crimson growth stretched back from the grill to the wind deflector, covering the white metal like crimson fire. He approached the truck and looked closer, noticing fuzzy nodules on the ends of the short stalks.

"This looks like a fungus, man," Moe said to himself. Then he reached out to run his finger across the surface.

"You need any help, mister?"

Moe jerked his hand away and spun around to find an attendant approaching. The man was a skinny twenty-something, wearing coveralls and a Farmall hat.

"Hey, stay back!" Moe threw his hands up in warning. "Don't come any closer!"

The man stopped. "Are you okay, mister?"

"I'm fine, but I might be contaminated."

The man pointed past Moe with a dumbfounded expression. "What's that stuff on your truck?"

Moe half turned to look at the growth on his truck, then he peered down at his arms. "I think it's some kind of mold."

"Like what they're saying on the news?" The man looked scared.

"It could be." Moe shrugged and gestured to his truck. "I just want to wash it off my rig, and I'll use some disinfectant wipes on myself if that's okay. I'm not doing anything wrong."

"Can I catch it? The attendant backed away, keeping a wary eye on Moe and his splotchy skin.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Moe rubbed his skin vigorously and watched the fungus fall away. “Look, I can wipe it off. I think it’s okay as long as you don’t breathe it in.”

“Okay, man. Do what you need to do.” When the attendant had reached a certain distance, he turned and jogged back to the Mini-Mart, throwing doubtful glances over his shoulder.

Seeing the attendant’s reaction, Moe’s simmering panic spiked. He threw open his cab door, grabbed a tube of Clorox wipes from his sleeping area, and yanked two out. He worked on his left arm first, running the wipe over his skin and expecting the splotches to fall away easily. They didn’t. Moe scrubbed harder, and the mold peeled back, leaving red marks on his skin.

Encouraged, Moe worked on his right arm and neck. When he got to his hair, he found the stuff caked in it and his clothing. The image of moldy bread popped into his head and sent another wave of panic through him like a shock wave.

Moe removed his wallet and keys from his pocket, tossed them aside, and pulled off his mask and T-shirt. He placed his mask aside, considering it one of his most prized possessions. Removing his boots and pants, Moe checked his skin and made sure none of the mold had filtered in through his clothes.

Standing nude in the center of the A&B Truck Wash and Mini-Mart, Moe kicked his clothes aside and scrubbed every inch of his body. He burned through two full tubes of Clorox wipes before dumping the remaining slosh of antibacterial cleaner over his head. He ran a brush through his hair to get most of the mold out and stood there dripping.

“You need more?”

Moe looked up to see the skinny attendant standing there with a tube of generic disinfectant wipes in his hand and a crew of A&B workers lingering behind him. Two young female attendants gaped at him while an older gentleman with a beard grown to his chest watched Moe with a fascinated expression.

Feeling like part of a zoo attraction, Moe glanced down at himself. At forty-seven years of age, Moe wasn’t an Adonis, but he wasn’t in terrible shape either. He had a squat form with powerful arms and legs, though his belly hung down from too many days sitting behind the wheel of a truck.

Beyond shame, Moe held out his hands. “Yeah, I’ll take them.”

The attendant tossed the tube of wipes to him, and Moe yanked two free. “Hey, you have any clothes I could buy? I take an extra large shirt, and my waist size is thirty-eight.”

One young woman raised her finger in correction. “Make that a forty-inch waist.”

Moe nodded as he wiped under his arm pits. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“Be right back,” the skinny attendant said, and he turned and jogged back into the Mini-Mart, followed by the rest of the crew. They walked with stiff postures, whispering between themselves as they gestured. Moe figured they were deciding between staying at work or rushing home to safety.

Moe took a five-dollar bill out of his wallet and put it in the slot to start the car wash pump. The sprayer hose jerked with tension where it rested in its cradle. Moe peered at a selection knob to allow him to choose the type of spray. He set it to a water mist, pulled the wand from its holder with one hand, and sprayed himself down. He wiped his free hand over his skin, reveling in the cool mist. Leaning over, Moe sprayed the back of his head and rinsed out the disinfectant until it felt clean.

By the time he’d finished, the attendant stood there with a pile of clothes in his arms.

“I threw in some socks and underwear, too. Oh, and a towel.”

“Thank you so much,” Moe bent to get his wallet. “Let me pay you for them.”

“Don’t worry about it.” The attendant spoke in a soft, careful tone. “It’s on the house.”

The man placed the clothes on a dry spot and tossed Moe a towel. Moe dried off and got dressed, finding the forty-inch jeans more accommodating to his size than he cared to admit. He pulled on the fresh socks and hiker’s shoes the attendant provided before drawing a black T-shirt over his head.

Moe’s panic melted away as the soft cotton fabric settled on his shoulders.

“Thanks,” Moe nodded at the skinny man and turned to face his mold-covered truck with his hands on his hips.

“It’s thick on there.” The attendant stated the obvious, taking a step closer to Moe.

“And spreading,” Moe said, though the black and crimson color had faded to a dry gray. It must be the arid landscape and the sun beating down on the hood of his truck. Everyone knew dry air and sunlight was the best way to kill mold. “I’ll spray it off.”

Moe closed his truck door and put his air filtration mask on. Then he put five more dollars into the spray pump machine, and retrieved the sprayer. He turned the knob to a medium hard spray and prepared to do battle. He squeezed the handle, and the nozzle shot a V-shaped cone at the door of his truck. Moe worked it back and forth, trying to peel the mold off the white paint.

To his surprise, the mold resisted. Its crimson streaks glinted a deeper shade where it soaked up the moisture.

“I’m only helping this thing grow.” Moe shook his head and watched as a handful of weak tendrils drifted up from the surface of his truck. Moe didn’t know a lot about fungi except they produced spores as part of their reproductive cycle. Perhaps he’d caught it during a downside of its cycle. Or maybe plain water didn’t cause the same reaction as the farm antifungals.

“Maybe some soap will loosen it up,” the attendant suggested, and he stood next to the control knob with a questioning look back at Moe. Moe nodded, and the man turned it to the soap setting. “Try it now.”

Moe circled his truck, spraying a gentle arc of soapy water across the surface. Once he’d completed two full circles, he nodded to the attendant. “Turn it on the hardest setting.”

“Careful,” the man chuckled as he turned the knob to a setting highlighted in red. “This one will peel the paint off if you get too close.”

“That sounds perfect,” Moe stated. He stepped back, squeezed the handle, and the V-shaped cone burst from the nozzle with a definite kick. Moe angled the spray at the door of his truck and scraped at the mold. With a little skillful angling, it worked!

The loosened mold fell away or clung to his truck in long strings before Moe gave it a second blast. He moved around the rig for an hour, spending thirty dollars as he peeled the disgusting infection away.

Moe shuddered, thinking the mold had rested on his skin for several hours. If he’d waited any longer, it might have clung to him the same way it did his truck. What would it have done if it entered his bloodstream?

“Now for the inside.”

The attendant handed Moe more of the disinfectant wipes, and Moe laboriously cleaned every inch of his truck’s interior. He opened all the doors and pulled out his mattress, bedding, and spare clothes, tossing them into a pile next to the truck.

The spread wasn’t nearly so bad inside, though he had to dig down into every crevice, and he still couldn’t be sure he got it all. An hour and two more tubes of Clorox wipes later, Moe stood back and admired his work. Disinfectant scent lingered in the air, and his truck appeared spotless inside and out.

“Leave that stuff out in the sun,” Moe said, nodding to the pile of spongy runoff laying all around the rig. “Or burn it.”

Moe retrieved his air filtration mask and cleaned it before he tossed it onto his seat and shut all the rig doors.

“Hey, man.” The attendant gestured around at the pile of Moe’s possessions. “What do you want us to do about your clothes and bed?”

Moe shrugged. “Burn that stuff, too. Burn all of it.”

Moe climbed up behind the wheel, buckled himself in, and started the rig. With a wave to the attendant, Moe pulled out of A&B Truck Wash and Mini-Mart and jumped on I-15, determined to get home.

Chapter 9

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Center Township, Indiana

Randy used his knife to cut through the cloth truck seats, working by the light of his cell phone. He tore the cloth into strips and cut out several small squares of foam from deeper in the seats. Sweat dripped down his face and off his chin as he worked; the truck cab had become incredibly warm over the ten hours they'd been trapped inside.

He couldn't see outside except for a faint red glow penetrating the layer of black dust that had settled on the vehicle. They'd tried calling emergency services for hours but received no response, and only one of Jenny's friends, a girl named Ally, had picked up, although she remained inside her house, afraid to go out.

"Are you sure this will work?" Jenny asked.

"No, but we can't stay here much longer."

He opened his wallet and cut two strips of plastic from the sleeve that held his driver's license. He picked up one of the plastic grocery bags he'd used to haul their drinks from the corner store and cut one small hole for the mouth and a slit for the eyes. He used duct tape to secure a piece of foam over the mouth hole on the inside of the bag and did the same thing with a piece of plastic to cover the eye slit.

Using a thin strip of cloth from the seat, he wrapped it around his face so it covered his mouth, tying it behind his head.

"This will never work," Jenny said. "Whatever is in the air must be microscopic. A strip of cloth and piece of foam won't stop it."

"Yeah, but like I said, I think it has settled down," Randy replied. "If we can control our breathing and move slowly, we won't kick any into the air."

Jenny shook her head. "I don't know."

"I don't either," Randy said, starting to get annoyed at his sister. "But we can't stay in here."

He held up a twelve-ounce water bottle they'd been sipping on and shook it. Only a couple mouthfuls remained, and that wouldn't last them very long, not the way they were sweating. They had two more Cokes, but those weren't good for hydration. In fact, they would have the opposite effect.

Randy pulled the plastic grocery bag over his head and secured it around his neck with duct tape. He used one hand to move the eye slit up so he could see out of it, then he began experimenting with breathing. The plastic bag puffed out and deflated every time he breathed.

"You're going to kill yourself," Jenny shook her head. "Then I'll be alone."

"Not going to happen," Randy said, growing more confident as he pressed his hand against the foam piece, pushing it against his lips. "Just breathe slowly through the foam. If you breathe too long inside the bag, it will fill with carbon dioxide and you'll pass out."

"Great news." Jenny picked up the other plastic bag and punched holes in it like she'd seen Randy do. "We're going to survive a plague using Dollar Store gas masks."

"Dollar Store?" Randy raised his eyebrow in question, although Jenny couldn't see his expression. "These are Fifty-Cent Store gas masks."

Jenny smiled despite the tears streaking down her cheeks.

"Hey, it'll be okay," Randy assured her. "We need to get out to the storage shed. Dad's got some old air filtration masks in a trunk. We used them last year. If we can get to those, we'll be

golden.”

“I don’t care about that.” Jenny’s tone dripped frustration, and her face twisted up into a grimace. “It’s just...Mom and Dad.”

Randy’s heart sank. He’d tried to think about everything else but their parents for the past several hours, but the dread and anguish kept returning in a vicious cycle. “I know. But we don’t know if Dad is dead. He could still be out there in the truck and trapped like us.”

Jenny fixed him with a doubtful look and continued fashioning her mask.

“Look, Jen. Mom and Dad would want us to get out of this. So, you need to give this everything you’ve got. We owe it to them.”

Jenny stared at her brother for a moment, gave a long sniff, and nodded. When she finished making her mask, Randy helped her put it on. She practiced breathing for a few times to get the hang of it.

Randy put his hand on the door handle and looked back at her. “Are you ready?”

The plastic bag nodded in reply, and Jenny scooted closer to him on the seat. Randy pulled the door handle and popped the door. He eased it wide with one hand while turning on his cell phone flashlight application with the other. The bag shifted on his face, momentarily blinding him, so Randy paused to move the plastic slit around so he could see again.

One leg out of the truck, Randy held up the cell phone and directed the light all around. He didn’t see any black tendrils floating in the air, but it covered the ground. The crimson fuzz had changed to an eerie red glow, leaving black borders around the edges.

“Careful,” Todd said over his shoulder. “BD on the ground everywhere.”

“BD?”

“Big Death.” He shrugged. “Sorry, I couldn’t think of a better name.”

Without waiting for a reply, Randy stepped out of the truck, careful not to place his feet on spots that glowed red. He moved about ten yards from the truck, shining his light all around. A few minutes with the plastic bag on, and his head was already sweating.

He breathed in through the foam piece, waiting for his throat to clench up. It didn’t. He exhaled through the foam, happy when the bag around his head didn’t expand. Turning back to the truck where Jenny waited in the seat, he nodded. “It’s okay. Take it slow.”

Jenny climbed out of the truck, placing her feet in the same spots as Randy, tiptoeing over anything that glowed red.

In the meantime, Randy had bent lower, trying to get a better look at the stuff. The eerie shade of red glowed from pinhead-sized nodules resting on top of the fuzz. “I think it’s mold,” he said. “Like mold on top of a moldy piece of bread, you know?”

“Only a lot angrier.” Jenny came up beside him and rested her hand on his arm.

“Yeah. It’s super mad, for sure.”

“Where to?”

Randy looked to the right of their house to the equipment shed. Their father kept the simple tools there like hammers, shovels, rakes, and safety gear. There were gardener’s gloves and, if he remembered correctly, several used gas masks. There was about forty yards of BD between them and the shed, although Randy thought he saw a lot of clear spots where they could step.

Holding up his phone, Randy started forward. “The shed. Be careful.”

Their progress was painstaking as they stepped gingerly over the mold-covered ground. The bag slid around on Randy’s head, and he fought to keep the tiny slit of plastic over his eyes. Once or twice, he forgot to exhale into the foam, and his bag expanded until he could readjust.

After an eternity of time, step after careful step, ankles aching as he walked on his toes, they

made it to the shed door. Reddish mold covered the wooden slab from top to bottom, even the handle. Randy pulled a strip of seat cloth from his belt and held it up.

“I’m not sure what will happen when I open this,” Randy said over his shoulder. “So, stand back.”

He allowed Jenny to move away from the door. Then he placed the rag over the handle, turned it, and pulled the door open. The air hissed, and he stepped back, retracing his steps and joining Jenny some ten yards away.

Randy raised his cell phone. In the light, black tendrils spun upward from the ground, reaching a height of about five feet before they settled again.

“That’s one aggressive fungus,” Randy said, swallowing in disbelief.

“Yeah, real nasty stuff,” Jenny agreed. “Did the spray do that? The Harvest Guard?”

“I have no idea. But let’s see if it dies down.”

They stood there for fifteen minutes as the black spores dispersed, drifting down to the ground until the air seemed clear.

“Okay, we can’t stand here all day,” Randy said, his fear finally giving way to courage. “We’ve got to get those masks. Why don’t you stay out here?”

“No way,” Jenny said, and her bag rustled as she shook her head.

“Fine,” Randy replied. “Let’s go.”

He stepped carefully into the shed, exhaling as he stepped across the threshold. He didn’t bother to stop and test the air. If the mold got into his lungs, he’d know it.

A moment later, they were inside. Still standing. Still alive.

“So far so good,” he said, shining his cell phone around. The shed was a twenty-by-twenty structure, lined with shelves of various fertilizers, oil cans, and copper pipe fittings. A big riding lawn mower sat parked to the side. It didn’t appear that the mold had gotten inside the shed yet, there was no red glow, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t in the air. Randy crossed to the workbench at the far side of the shed, looking around for the plastic bin where he thought his father kept the air filtration masks.

When he couldn’t find the bin where he’d last seen it, his fear grew. What if his father had thrown them out? They couldn’t walk around with the bags on their heads. Then he noticed a square shape at the end of the bench with a toolbox resting on top. He moved down the bench, set the toolbox to the side, and put his hands on the lid.

“Wait!” Jenny shouted.

“What?” Randy turned the light back to his sister. He couldn’t see her face, though in his mind he saw her cautious expression.

“Don’t open the bin. We don’t want to contaminate what’s inside.”

“Oh, right.”

“We need a plan for swapping out our masks and staying clean,” she said. “You know, like in those movies about virus outbreaks. The characters always have to go through several levels of decontamination.”

Randy frowned inside his plastic bag. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Jenny came over and picked up the other end of the bin. “Let’s take this to the house. I have an idea.”

Chapter 10

Burke Birkenhoff, Chicago, Illinois

Burke, Pauline, and seven Durant-Monroe department heads watched news of the outbreak from a boardroom beneath Burke's apartment. They stared in awe at the television screen as what many were calling "spore clouds" overtook towns and cities from Vermont to Florida.

Images from helicopters and witnesses on the ground showed horrible scenes where people died choking on dark tendrils that moved and twisted like living entities. And as the night wore on, acres of bright red fields spread across the land where the spore clouds settled.

If Burke were a superstitious man, he might call these events evil, or at the very least, apocalyptic in a Biblical sense. Yet, he knew better. His company was at least partially responsible for what was happening, and the uneasy glances from his own people told him they were thinking the same thing, too.

"We caused this." Trish Cuthbert was the Head of Publicity, and she looked up and down the table accusingly. "We'd heard rumors that R&D needed to do more testing, but we promoted the product anyway."

"And we told the marketers to push the release date back," Travis Johnson, Head of the Science Division, added. "I, for one, am shocked that anyone was spraying our product this early. I didn't even realize we had shipped it. Who authorized this?"

The entire board erupted into shouting and accusations until Burke slammed his fist down on the table, rattling pens and coffee cups.

"I authorized it," Burke said in a forceful tone. "And several shipments across the world, from Africa to Northern England."

"Why?" Trish's eyes narrowed. "If you knew this could happen—"

"I didn't know this could happen," Burke said, glancing up at the television screen. "No one could have predicted this." Burke calmed his tone but kept his eyes hard. "We needed to beat Chem-Lab to market with Harvest Guard or they would have buried us."

Travis sputtered in amazement. "You authorized a dangerous product for world consumption just to beat Chem-Lab?"

"Keep lecturing me, Travis," Burke growled at the man, "and you can go find another job. That goes for all of you."

Travis's mouth clamped shut, and the rest of the table fell silent along with him.

Burke stood and glared up and down the table at each one of the department heads. He sneered as he addressed them. "You all complained about your bonuses last year. You didn't have enough money to bribe the Ivy League schools to get your witless children in. You couldn't afford your second mansions. So, you are as much to blame for this as anyone else."

Everyone at the table shrank beneath Burke's withering glare.

"Now, we need to work on a plan," Burke continued. "Travis, get our best dozen scientists working on some counter measures. Make them work in shifts. And get someone out in the field to get samples of this new fungus."

"Already done," Travis said with an assured nod. "But let me get you an update." The man stood, pulled his phone from his pocket, and walked away from the table.

"Great news," Burke said, smiling all around. "See, some of us are working pro-actively. How about you, Trish? Have we sent out the official company response?"

Trish sat up in her chair, regaining her composure. “We, um, can’t seem to reach anyone.”
“What do you mean we can’t reach anyone?”

“The news outlets were trying to get hold of us all morning and afternoon,” Trish continued. “Of course, we didn’t want to reply until we agreed on an official position.” Her eyes moved around the room. “Now, we can’t reach anyone at all.”

“That’s impossible,” Burke scoffed. “The news agencies love stories like this. They live for any chance to sink Durant-Monroe Chemicals. They should be chomping at the bit to hear our response.”

“Maybe there aren’t any more reporters left?” Trish’s voice shook. “Maybe they’re running for their lives?”

Burke scoffed. “Are you serious?”

“Either that, or many people are taking a sick day from work.”

As if to verify Trish’s assumptions, the television switched to the CNA anchor desk where the normally slick-looking reporter appeared disheveled. Strands of his hair were out of place, and his eyes held an uncertain fear. The space behind him, often filled with CNA employees looking busy at their desks, was empty.

Only when the camera zoomed in and someone spoke in the background did he realize he was on the air. He lifted his eyes and looked into the camera. “This is Brian McKinney coming to you from the CNA news desk in downtown Chicago. As you can see, we have a skeleton crew after the National Weather Agency declared that a cloud is moving west toward Chicago. The Chicago Health Agency has triggered a critical warning urging people to seek shelter immediately. They estimate the cloud should reach downtown Chicago by early morning, so please stay inside your homes and locate an air filtration mask if you can. Experts do not know how long the threat will remain critical, but witnesses have reported a one-hundred percent casualty rate for those who breathe the toxic matter. I think it’s safe to say that your life depends on following these instructions to the letter. We will continue to feed you news and information as long as we can. This is Brian McKinney, reporting from the CNA news desk.”

The CNA logo appeared on the screen, and a news ticker ran across the bottom of the screen.

The board room was deathly silent. Burke swallowed, his mouth dry.

“Do you still want me to find some press contacts?” Trish asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Clearly, no,” Burke said with a slight quiver in his tone. He turned to his assistant, Pauline, who had remained silent throughout the entire meeting. “How is Charlie doing on the bus?”

“They’re down in Sub Lot D,” Pauline said. “Waiting.”

“All right,” Burke said, standing up. “Let’s go.”

The entire board erupted in noise as Burke shut his laptop, picked it up, and left the room with Pauline in tow. Everyone else hesitated a moment before they leapt up from their chairs and followed him in a chorus of angry voices. Burke turned left down a long hallway until he reached an elevator reserved for himself and his department heads only. He pressed the button and stepped back to wait.

“Where are we going?” Trish asked, out of breath after running to keep up with the quick-striding Burke.

Burke replied over his shoulder. “We’re getting on a state-of-the-art bus that will take us anywhere we want to go while protecting us from the clouds. We’ll have everything we need. Food, water, and high-grade air filtration. We’ll be safe.”

His department heads murmured with relief, although they had questions.

“I haven’t been able to reach my mother and father in Maine,” Trish said, close to his elbow.

“Does the bus have a communication link?”

“Oh, it most assuredly does, Trish,” Burke replied with a smug smile. “We have a high-speed satellite dish and plenty of bandwidth for everyone.”

Trish sighed with relief. “Oh, thank you, Mr. Birkenhoff.”

Burke entered the elevator with Pauline at his side. “No problem, Trish.”

The department heads piled into the elevator, and Pauline hit the button to take them to Sub Lot D. The ride down was a hushed affair, only whispers of nervousness between some of the richest corporate executives in the United States, hoping to save their own hides. Burke wrinkled his nose at the stink of their fear.

He looked down at Pauline, and they shared a brief but knowing smile. She placed her hand on his arm and gave it a slight squeeze. The doors slid open to reveal the concrete parking structure lit by stark white halogen lights.

A long, shiny black bus with tinted windows stretched out in front of them. It looked like something a rock star might travel in. To Burke, it was much more than that. The bus was his first line of defense against the world’s growing volatility.

His original prediction was that unstable markets would one day bring the world to its knees, making rich people like Burke prime targets for angry mobs.

Imagine his surprise when he woke up to find his own company had at least been partially responsible for the world’s mess.

Burke prided himself in being prepared. As a corporate leader, he’d built up a healthy paranoia to fuel his prepping efforts.

So, he’d invested a million dollars’ worth of materials and technology into the vehicle over the years, turning it into the ultimate survival cruiser. It could brush off small arms fire like gnats, travel coast-to-coast on minimal fuel, all while the guests rested inside and breathed cool, fresh air.

Still, the bus would be worthless without a destination. The second line of defense was Burke’s bunker in the California Mountains along with a select group of critical staff members.

Burke’s department heads gasped at the beautiful vehicle, at least until they spotted the three men standing guard outside. They wore military-style combat gear. Sunglasses covered their eyes, and they cradled rifles in their arms, barrels pointed at the ground.

Burke gestured to Pauline. She left the elevator, stepped between the soldiers, and boarded the bus with Burke right on their heels. The soldiers closed ranks behind Burke, blocking the rest of the department heads as they tried to enter.

“Hey!” Travis shouted after Burke. “Are you just going to leave us here?”

“That’s right,” Burke said, unable to keep the pleased smirk off his face as he put his foot on the second step and turned around. “I’m leaving you high and dry, as they say.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Trish cried out, her voice raising in panic and anger.

“To be honest,” Burke shrugged. “I don’t care what you do. You’re all impossibly incompetent and annoying.”

Trish fixed him with an accusing stare, pointing her finger at him above the shoulder of one of his soldiers. “You said you would take care of us. You said we’d be safe.”

“I was referring to myself, Pauline, and my three rifle-bearing friends.” Burke gestured at the lot of them. “Don’t follow me, or you’ll force my men to take action.”

Burke ascended the last two steps and entered the plush, spacious interior. His bodyguards backed up the stairs, and the bus door hissed shut to the angry chorus of his doomed former employees.

Chapter 11

Moe Tsosie, Flagstaff, Arizona

Moe's clock read nearly 4 a.m. when he approached Flagstaff, Arizona. The traffic increased with every mile, people speeding by doing ninety miles per hour or more. Glancing down as vehicles passed, Moe saw people's desperate expressions as they fled the black clouds of spores.

They clung to their steering wheels with piles of possessions tossed into the back seat. Clothes hampers, cans of food, cases of water, and sometimes pets and people. Two children stared up at Moe from the back of one vehicle as their mother drove distracted. She tapped frantically on her cell phone, weaving back and forth across the white line at ninety-five miles per hour.

In the back seat of another vehicle, Moe saw a person stretched out, unmoving and covered in mold. The sight of it shocked him straight, and he looked again to confirm his suspicions. The white-haired driver wore splotches on his skin, and the mold tangled in his hair like decorative Halloween webbing.

Cars and trucks carried the scourge with them, their grills and hoods covered in streaks of the luminous crimson fungus like nature had given them a fiery paint job. Moe imagined them spreading it to any with whom they came in contact with, and the wind carrying millions of spores up into the cool night sky.

With a shake of his head, Moe remained focused on the road and the surrounding vehicles. He couldn't afford to let someone else's bad driving cause him to crash. Once past Flagstaff, it would be a clear shot home to Chinle, Arizona and the safety of the Navajo reservation.

Moe reached a big pileup just ten miles outside of Flagstaff, coming upon it in the darkness at the edge of his headlights' reach. Three cars lay crunched side-by-side against the guardrail, and people stood near the wreckage. The lady who'd passed Moe driving while tapping on her cell phone was one of them, gesturing at the others and pointing down the expressway toward Flagstaff.

He slowed down to twenty-five miles per hour, wanting to help until he spotted one vehicle covered in a layer of fungus. Tiny clusters of luminous crimson spores drifted into the air, rattled loose in the wreck and carried off by the wind. Moe fought the urge to stop. He remembered the choking drivers back in Bakersfield, and he knew what the fungus could do if it reached a person's lungs.

The woman glanced up at Moe, her expression beyond desperate. He didn't blame her, because panic had been simmering in his own gut ever since he'd escaped Bakersfield. Moe wished they would take a minute to look around and notice the mad traffic and drifting spores. If it were him, he'd leave the contaminated vehicle behind, grab everything they could carry, and start walking.

Moe spotted the two kids' peering out from the back of the woman's vehicle as he passed. He sighed, knowing he couldn't leave the kids there in that situation.

A horn went off as a vehicle flew dangerously around him, and Moe glared at the driver and tugged on his own horn to warn them to be more careful. Moe cruised another thirty yards and pulled onto the shoulder. Leaving his truck running, he grabbed his air filtration mask and climbed down.

He shut the door behind him, slipped his air filtration mask on, and walked back toward the

arguing people. Two men and two women stood around, watching the main combatants as they gestured at the crash and screamed at one another.

“You shouldn’t have cut me off, lady,” the man shouted. “You didn’t even use your turn signal.”

“I had my turn signal on, and I changed lanes legally,” she fired back with venom. “*You rear-ended me!*” She pointed at the man. “So, you better have good insurance, buddy, because you’ll need it.”

When Moe got within ten yards, he stopped and waved. The man spotted Moe and stopped arguing, which caused the woman to turn around.

“Hi, there!” Moe shouted above the traffic noise and gestured at his truck. “Do you folks need a lift?”

The woman turned around and placed her hands on her hips. “Who are you?”

“My name is Moe!”

“Well, what do you want, Moe?”

Moe took a step closer. “It’s dangerous out here, ma’am. I think we need to get you folks off the road. I can put you all in the sleeper cabin of my truck.”

“Will all my stuff fit in there?” The woman glanced at her car where it lay against the guardrail, the left tire bent outward.

“I don’t know, but the most important thing is to get you and your children to safety. Flagstaff is less than ten miles away.”

“Well, I was on my way to Phoenix,” she argued.

“Maybe you can get a ride to Phoenix from Flagstaff,” Moe suggested.

Two of the people standing behind the arguing couple nodded and approached Moe. A married couple in their thirties. Normal, non-arguing folk.

“We’d appreciate that lift,” the man said with a nod.

“No problem,” Moe smiled at them, his eyes narrowing as he glanced over them for signs of infection. “Stand to the side so you don’t get hit. People are driving crazy.”

“You’re telling me,” the man replied before he and his wife stepped to the side.

Moe turned back to the woman. “So, lady. Do you want...” His voice trailed off as he spotted headlights in the slow lane edge into the fast lane to give the wrecked cars room. Another vehicle sped along the fast lane, doing a hundred miles per hour by Moe’s estimation. It slammed into the car changing lanes and shot it toward them.

“Watch out!” Moe shouted, leaping back as he grabbed the others.

Tires screeched and metal crunched as Moe hit the ground. Pieces of metal and flying glass showered him. A soft puff of sound followed by a wave of heat told Moe something had caught fire.

Moe looked up as a tire rolled by. He crawled to his knees, gazing at the wreckage strewn all around. Body parts lay scattered all across the shoulder. Someone’s arm twitched on the concrete ten feet away, and a twisted corpse rested near the yellow line.

Fire lit the scene, dousing everything in a strange orange glow. The invading car had split the other three, shoving the arguing woman’s car off the road and knocking the near car into the bystanders. Then it had caught fire, its driver lying dead over the steering wheel, covered in flames.

The two people looking for a ride lay on their backs off the shoulder, gaping at the scene.

Moe stood and staggered over to the twisted body. It was the arguing woman lying with one leg pinned behind her, stretched at an impossible angle. Her dead eyes stared up at the sky. Moe

turned his attention back to her vehicle and spotted a child's arms pushing at the door. He sprinted over and saw the little boy trying to shove the door open while his sister sat terrified on the other side of the seat.

Moe tugged on the door handle, though it wouldn't open because of the smashed side panel. The window frame still held pieces of glass, so Moe found a fist-sized rock and hefted it.

"Get back," Moe told the boy.

The boy kicked away from the door and fell into his sister's lap as Moe knocked the sharp edges out with the rock. Then he tossed the rock aside and held out his hands to them.

"Come on. Both of you."

The boy leapt out first, and Moe caught him and set him to the side. Then he waited on the little girl. She put her hands on the door frame and stared at Moe with a mix of uncertainty and fear. Her black hair lay sweaty across her face.

"Where's Mom?" she pleaded.

"She's..." Moe hesitated, making grabbing motions with his hands. "She's around here. Just come on out." When she still didn't come, Moe squashed a spike of impatience and offered her a friendly smile. "Hey, I won't hurt you, I swear. But it's not safe in there, and your mom asked me to get you out."

"Where is she?"

Moe nodded to the side. "She's over there. She's—"

The girl leapt through the window and into Moe's arms. He placed her beside her brother, took their hands, and led them back to the shoulder.

"Mom!" The girl's head swiveled back and forth. Her eyes passed right over her mother's corpse, not recognizing her in the fiery light.

Turning them away from the expressway, Moe guided them toward his truck.

"But, Mom." The little girl's face twisted in agony as she looked back at the fiery crash.

Moe forced them to keep walking, not wanting to tell another lie but eager to do the right thing. "Look, kids. I need to get you inside my truck. It's too dangerous standing out here. Your mother would want—."

He glanced up at his rig and stopped as a spike of anger shot up his spine. The couple he'd offered a ride to were up by his truck. The woman was climbing into the passenger seat, and the driver's door slammed shut with the man already inside.

"Oh, you assholes," Moe growled. He let go of the kids' hands and sprinted ahead.

He leapt onto the driver's side step just as the rig lurched forward and squealed to a stop. Moe grabbed the door handle, jerked the door open, and cocked his fist back.

"You forgot to release the parking brake," he said, punching the man in the face.

The man's head rocked to the side, and Moe struck him two more times before jerking him out of the seat and pitching him onto the expressway. The man stood on shaky legs as his senses returned.

"Better watch out," Moe said, gesturing to the onrushing cars. "You'll get hit."

The man glanced at the headlights bearing down on him and leapt around to the front of Moe's truck. His wife met him there, and Moe slammed his truck door shut and stalked after them with his hands balled into fists. They fled, holding each other while shooting dirty looks at Moe.

"It's only ten miles to Flagstaff," Moe growled. He went back for the kids with an occasional glance thrown over his shoulder to make sure the couple kept going.

He found the kids standing over the corpse of their mother as traffic whizzed by. Moe took

them by their shoulders and drew them away. The little girl resisted for a moment but then turned and swung her fists in windmill fashion, grunting and crying as she walloped on him.

“Bring her back!” the girl cried. “Bring Mom back!”

Moe’s belly absorbed the abuse, and tears streaked down his face as he waited for her to wear herself out.

“I wish I could, but I can’t.” Moe explained, his heart tearing in two. “I know I’m not your mom, but I’ll get you someplace safe. I swear.”

The girl finally succumbed to exhaustion and fell against Moe with her arm’s wrapped around him. The little boy put his hands on her shoulders and patted her.

“I think Mom’s dead, Cindy,” the boy said, glancing up at Moe. “Let’s just go with the man. He’s right, it’s dangerous here. Mom would want us to be safe.”

The girl backed up, nodding with a numb expression as she held out her hand for Moe to take. Moe took the girl’s small hand in his. With one last look at their mother, Moe noticed the woman still held her phone. He knelt forward and wrestled the device from her death grip. It should contain phone numbers of relatives he could reach.

Back at his truck, Moe helped the kids into the sleeper cab. “Just sit on the mattress base.” Moe climbed behind the wheel and strapped his seat belt on. “It should be soft enough. You can lie down if you want to.”

The kids huddled on the thin mat with their arms around each other and their doubtful eyes glued to Moe.

“So, your name is Cindy,” Moe glanced back at the girl. “What about you, little guy?”

“I’m Tommy,” the boy said.

“Good to meet you both,” he nodded. “I’m Moe.”

Moe put his rig into gear and edged forward along the shoulder, building speed to merge into traffic.

Chapter 12

Moe Tsosie, Flagstaff, Arizona

The line of traffic on I-40 built as Moe came within a quarter mile of the Flagstaff exit. Vehicles slowed to a full stop, and car horns blared into the desert sky. Moe raised in his seat, half expecting to see a fiery crash way up ahead. He caught sight of blue police lights churning in the distance. The authorities had blocked off the entire expressway, though he couldn't see a wreck.

"I wonder why they would do that?" Moe asked.

"Is the road blocked?" Tommy asked from the back.

"It looks like it," Moe replied. "The police are there, and we're not too far from them."

"Can I sit up front with you?"

"For the moment, sure." Moe replied with a grin. "But this might be where I drop you off."

The boy flashed Moe a worried look.

"With the police, I mean," Moe corrected himself. "They'll take you to a safe place."

"Oh," the boy smiled and climbed into the passenger seat. "I've never ridden in a big rig before."

Moe chuckled. "Cool, right?"

"Yeah."

"Is your dad's number in here?" Moe asked, picking up their mom's phone from the center console.

"Yeah," Tommy said, looking at the phone like it was a ghost.

"Is your dad home in Phoenix?"

"That's where we live." Cindy seemed emboldened by her brother. "Can you take us to our dad?"

"I can't, because I've got to get home, too." Moe spoke with a disappointed tone. "But I'll find someone who can."

Moe put his truck in park, engaged his emergency brake, and held the phone up. He swiped his thumb across the screen, not surprised to see it was locked.

"Hey, kids, what's your mom's phone passcode?"

"0276," Tommy said.

Moe unlocked the phone, navigated to the contacts list, and glanced at Tommy.

"What's your dad's name?"

"Steve," the boy replied.

Moe found "Stevie Bear" in the contacts list and hit "call."

The call rang straight to Stevie Bear's voice mail, and Moe left him a detailed message about the situation. He implied that his wife had been in an accident. Then he reassured the man his kids were safely in Flagstaff, holding out the phone so the kids could say hello. Moe explained he would leave Tommy and Cindy with local authorities before continuing on to Chinle.

Another semi-trailer truck sat in the standstill traffic ahead of him. It was a refrigerated unit, likely hauling produce to the other side of the desert. Curious, Moe picked up his CB mic from its holder on the dashboard and switched to channel nineteen for east-west traffic.

He put the microphone to his lips and pressed the talk button. "Hey, this is Wildcat sitting outside of Flagtown staring at a reefer about a quarter mile from some major roadblock. You got

your ears on, reefer?” Moe released the talk button and listened.

The radio speaker crackled a reply. “Hey, Wildcat, I’m in that reefer you’re talking about. This is Gator. Looks like we got wall to wall bears up there.”

“Is it the local yokels causing the holdup?”

“Negative. They’ve got two hummers and some military standing by, too.”

“Any clue what’s going on?”

“Keeping people out of Flagtown, I reckon.” Gator paused. “You hear that toxic news coming out of the west?”

“Affirmative,” Moe replied. “I ran right through that mess. Almost died getting out of Cali.”

“Glad you made it,” Gator said. “Where you headed, Wildcat?”

“I’m not stopping at Flagtown,” Moe said. “I’m heading home to Chinle.”

“Oh, yeah? You a rez kid?”

“That’s right,” Moe grinned. “What about you?”

“Trying to get through Flagtown to the Sticker Patch.”

“I appreciate the information on the bears, Gator. Good luck.”

“You, too, Wildcat.”

Moe hung the mic up and looked across at Tommy. “I’ll drop you off with the friendly police officers up there. Are you okay with that?”

Both kids nodded.

Moe turned off his rig, removed his keys, and buried them deep in his pocket. He toyed with his air filtration mask where it rested on his dashboard. It could earn him some strange looks or cause people to panic if he wore it. Someone might even try to take it away from him.

There weren’t too many fungi-covered cars in the bunch, and they were spaced out. A lot of folks had their windows down with no obvious ill effects to their health. Groups of people had left their vehicles and stood right next to infected spots.

That seemed dangerous to Moe. While the dusty spores might not saturate the air, it didn’t mean people could risk prolonged exposure. He scanned a path through the cars ahead of his truck, choosing a way where they wouldn’t pass near any fungus.

“Okay, come out this way,” Moe said. He popped his door and climbed down, reaching back up for the kids.

Once he got the kids down, Moe locked up the rig, took their hands, and guided them ahead. Moe kept a wary lookout for signs of trouble during the quarter-mile walk. Aside from some restless people and an occasional horn honk, everyone seemed pleasant enough. Though the weight of tension and gloom lay across the expressway parking lot like a blanket, Moe didn’t know how long folks would remain patient.

He looked back as he passed Gator’s truck. A bearded man sitting behind the wheel gave Moe a thumbs up sign, and Moe nodded back.

As they neared the front of the line, Moe saw what Gator said was true. The police had lined up a dozen police cars across the eastbound and westbound lanes, with an armored Humvee on each side. The police stood side-by-side with the armed forces, their rifles pointed toward the ground.

Moe glanced at the exit ramp to see they’d blocked off Flagstaff, and they weren’t letting anyone travel east or west. Traffic had spilled over to the emergency lanes ten or twenty cars deep.

A crowd had gathered along the front rows of cars. Some spoke calmly to officers while others cursed or demanded they be let through. Yet, the looming presence of the military folks

and the armored vehicles' mounted guns kept them in line.

Moe spotted a female officer who didn't appear to be engaged with anyone and led the children over. The woman turned and took a step back as Moe approached but then eased her stance when she noticed the children with him. She was a stocky woman wearing her hair in a tight ponytail, and beads of sweat ran down her temples. “

“Hello, ma'am,” Moe said. “Hot evening, right?”

She gave a faint nod. “What do you want?”

“My name is Moe Tsosie, and I'm heading to Chinle, Arizona.”

“We've got orders not to let anyone through,” she said. “Unless you have an emergency, I suggest you get back in your car and wait. We expect to start letting people through within the next two hours.”

“That's great, ma'am, but I have another problem.” Moe held the kids' hands up. “These aren't my kids.”

The officer looked at the children before her eyes flashed to Moe. “Where did you get them?”

“There was a big wreck about ten miles back,” Moe explained. “Their mother was involved in the accident.”

The officer studied Moe's eyes before she got what he meant, and her expression softened. “I'm sorry to hear that. We have people out handling calls now. I'm sure it's on the list.”

“That's fine,” Moe said, adding a pleading note to his voice. “I just need someone to take the kids. They're not mine, and I don't have any food or water to give them. Can you have someone please take them into town?”

“I'm not sure...” The officer looked around for guidance from another officer standing by. He only shrugged.

“Please, ma'am,” Moe pressed. “Their father is in Phoenix. I have their mother's phone.”

Moe dropped the children's hands and dug out the woman's phone from his pocket. “I think the father is Stevie Bear on the contacts list, and I left him a message.”

The officer hesitated, but another look at the cute kids and she caved. The woman shouldered her rifle and took the phone from Moe. After putting it in her pocket, she reached to take the children's hands. “Come on, little ones. We'll have someone take you into the city and get you something to eat.”

“Bless you,” Moe said. “Thank you so much.”

The officer smiled down at the kids before fixing Moe with a sobering look. “What if we need to talk to you?”

Moe turned and pointed at his rig a quarter mile away. “I'm in the big white tractor there. Can't miss me.”

“I may send an officer to get your statement about the wreck, but can I get your name and phone number, too?”

“Of course.” Moe recited his name and number while the officer jotted it in her notepad, then he got to one knee in front of the kids. “You guys stay safe, okay?”

Little Cindy remained expressionless as the officer took her away, though Tommy turned and flashed Moe a smile. “Good luck, Wildcat.”

“Thanks,” Moe chuckled.

He watched the officer beckon a replacement, then guide the kids across the two lanes of highway to the exit ramp. Then he returned to his rig through the quarter mile of traffic complete with horns blaring, shouting, and ominous looks. Moe climbed behind the wheel, locked the

doors, and settled in for a long wait.

Chapter 13

where are these coming from? Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim snapped out of a dream full of choking people and sirens. A red alert notification on her computer demanded her attention. With a groan, Kim rolled over on the hard mattress and stumbled over to shut off the alarm. She stood leaning against her desk. The clock above the observation window of her quarantine room read 2:37 a.m.

She sat down in her chair, and checked the notification on the screen.

It was a meeting alert from the CDC headquarters in Atlanta. Kim suspected it was another briefing. Glancing at the video screen that connected her to the control center, she saw that Tom wasn't there. He represented the Washington branch, though Kim would be next in line.

She clicked on the icon and connected to the video conference call. Five people in various states of dress and weariness sat at a long table. The head of the CDC, Nancy Wilkens, sat closest to the conference camera and leaned over it as if she couldn't wait to get the meeting started. Kim guessed that she was in her late fifties with thick, wavy gray hair cut to her shoulders.

Nancy glanced back, saying, "Okay, let's settle down, folks. I think Washington just dialed in. Is that you, Washington?"

"I'm here," Kim said with a nod and a brief wave. "Tom isn't on yet. I can try calling the rooms, but I'm still in quarantine, so I can't physically track him down."

"We can give him a minute," Nancy assured her. She had a rough but kind voice. "I know you transferred from Ft. Collins, but your accent doesn't fit."

"I'm originally from Kentucky, ma'am," Kim replied. "Just outside of Lexington, to be precise."

"How is quarantine treating you?"

"No signs of infection so far," Kim replied. "I'm in the Q-wing reserved for CDC scientists, so I've got plenty of computing power with visual feeds to all the lab equipment."

"Sounds like Tom set you up."

"Yes, ma'am."

There was motion on her private monitor feed to the control center, and Kim glanced over to see Tom Flannery walk into the room. He still wore his lab coat, though the collar was bent upward, the material ruffled. Tom glanced into the private monitor he shared with Kim, gave her a half smile, and joined the meeting.

"Tom is coming online now," Kim announced to the group as Tom's face appeared in the video conference.

"Hello, Tom," Nancy said.

"Morning, Nancy." Tom gave the camera an apologetic smile. "Sorry I'm late. I was working on one of the test beds and fell asleep at the desk."

"We're all a little tired," Nancy admitted. "Unfortunately, this is the first of many interminable nights."

Kim felt a familiar stab of dread in her gut. She remembered those tendrils floating through the air and how they'd taken down hundreds of people right before her eyes.

Nancy picked up a computer tablet laying in front of her and peered at it. “First thing’s first. Casualty reports. Bob? Do we know how far this thing has gone and how many are dead?”

One man behind Nancy leaned forward and coughed. He was a thin man with a tousele of blond hair and thin-framed glasses perched on his nose. “Logistically speaking, with the help of the military, we put together teams of science techs and military personnel. We’ve got boots on the ground in every major city on the east coast and most of the Midwest. And we had several dozen helicopters in the sky.”

Nancy lifted an eyebrow. “Had?”

“Thirteen of the air units haven’t reported back since around 11:00 p.m. eastern,” Bob replied with a nod, “but those were the birds that took off when the outbreak first occurred. The crews weren’t prepared and became overwhelmed by spore clouds.”

Nancy closed her eyes and nodded. “Go on.”

“Reports have been filtering in all night,” Bob continued, and it seemed to Kim he was trying to sound confident in a very shaky situation. “A spore cloud hit almost every city south of Indianapolis, and there are more. Atlanta, Washington, Knoxville, Charleston, all dropped off the radar. And prior to dusk, we spotted a gigantic cloud drifting toward Chicago, expected to hit by morning.”

“You’re avoiding the big question,” Nancy winced. “What are the casualty numbers?”

Bob shifted in his chair, looking uncomfortable. “First, let me say we don’t have any infected to speak of. That means the affliction seems to be one-hundred percent fatal. It’s almost impossible to tell the number of casualties this soon, but it’s in the thousands. Six figures, at least.”

Everyone groaned, and Kim’s bones turned to lead.

“That’s not the news I wanted to hear,” Nancy tapped her fingers on the desk. “Make sure you keep Kim in the loop on team rosters and their locations and include her in meetings with the logistics leads.”

“You got it, Nancy.” Bob’s eyes flicked to the screen before he turned back to his laptop and began typing.

“I want a full list of their gear, too.” Kim’s voice grew tense. “We need to make sure they are well-equipped. I’m talking at least Level B protection, full-body coveralls. They’ll need decontamination areas for everything.”

“Noted, Kim.” Nancy clapped her hands once. “Now I’ll defer to my scientists. What are we ___”

“I’m serious,” Kim continued, interjecting with an edge to her tone. “I was out in that mess yesterday. I saw enough death and chaos in seven city blocks to last a lifetime. My assistant is dead. A little boy died in my arms...” Kim’s words came out choked for a moment before she regained her composure. “It’s critical that FEMA, the military, and anyone in the way of a spore cloud, be prepared for what’s about to hit them. The emergency broadcasts *must* be clear.”

“We sent the first emergency broadcast out an hour after all this started,” Bob explained. “We made sure to—”

“It won’t be enough to stay indoors,” Kim interrupted him. “People need to seal around their doors and cover vents with HEPA filter material, if they have it. If not, then paper towels over the vent openings might cut down on drafts from outside. Also, they can make DIY air filters using a box fan and a home furnace filter to reduce airborne allergens. Anything to cut down on spores in the air will help.”

“Get that to the media,” Nancy added over her shoulder.

Bob nodded. "Equipment lists. Note to update the emergency broadcast and media outlets." Bob redoubled his typing, and Kim's inbox began to fill up with data. Then Bob looked into the camera. "Anything else?"

Kim's palms were stinging, and she realized she'd been clenching her fists on the desk. "Sorry for the quick temper," Kim said, her face still hot with anger. "The situation got to me."

"No, you're right," Nancy agreed, and she looked at Kim with a sympathetic yet tough expression. "You're telling it like it is, and we all appreciate that."

Dr. Flannery dove into his report next. "Regarding the affliction, our first assumptions were correct. It appears we are dealing with a super-fungus with a hyper-accelerated spore germination cycle and an aggressive mycelium growth rate. It can live on any surface and consume almost anything for food. I've never seen anything like it."

"Exactly what is the growth rate?" That came from a young woman sitting next to Bob. She had a splash of freckles across her face and brown hair clipped close to her head. Kim thought her name might be Alison.

"At room temperature, the mycelium growth is around one to two millimeters per hour, faster at raised temperatures," Tom said. "That might not seem like a lot, but if you can imagine your home turning into a mushroom field inside of a few weeks, give or take, it puts things in perspective."

"That's incredibly fast for mycelium," Alison agreed.

"Yes, it is. And when the fungus establishes itself in the human bloodstream," Tom continued, "it can have a devastating effect."

Nancy's brow wrinkled in confusion. "But how would you know that? Isn't the disease one-hundred percent fatal? We can't possibly have any infected subjects to study."

Kim sat up straighter in her seat, glancing at Tom in their shared monitor.

Tom pursed his lips, his expression pained. "Contrary to Bob's account, we do have one infected person still alive."

"Who?" the CDC head asked. "And how?"

"The spore cloud began to spread through the city right around lunch time," Tom explained. "We were short-staffed that day, with a lot of folks out doing field work with their teams. The other dozen employees went out for lunch and never came back, except for one of our lab technicians. She didn't take a mask to lunch and was in severe arrest when she came down in the elevator. I jumped into a suit and intubated her before she suffocated. Then I managed to get her into a sealed examination room and get her stabilized. She's resting now."

Kim's chest tightened imagining what it must have been like for the poor lab tech. The severe immune reaction would have locked her throat tight as Dr. Flannery forced the tube down it. And while Kim didn't want to call out the doctor in the meeting, it annoyed her that he hadn't told her about the patient.

"Is she conscious?" Nancy asked.

"Not at all." Tom's eyes seemed troubled. "And she hasn't responded to three of the normal antifungal treatments we have available, but I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

"Do what you have to do, Doctor." Nancy's words held an ominous tone. "We need a solution, and we need one fast."

"Yes, ma'am."

Nancy continued. "Once Dr. Flannery provides a solution, we must produce mass amounts of it."

"We don't have that capability, Nancy," Tom reminded her.

The CDC head gave the camera a dry smile. “I’ve got some good news. We’re sending you folks in Washington a little gift by the name of Burke Birkenhoff.”

“The Durant-Monroe CEO?” Tom asked.

“The very one,” Nancy replied. “We’d been trying to reach him for hours and caught up to him trying to slink away to California where he has some doomsday bunker.”

“The bastard knew something like this might happen,” Kim said under her breath.

“It’s not just Burke,” Nancy said, off-handedly. “Plenty of people are heading for cover especially those who can afford it. The government sold a thousand unused missile silos across Nebraska to every bunker nut in the country. Turns out, they weren’t so nuts after all. Anyway, Burke resisted at first until I had General Miller promise to blow his little tour bus to smithereens if he didn’t comply. Normally, I wouldn’t condone such a threat to a civilian, but we’re in a make-or-break situation.

“How is Burke Birkenhoff going to help?” Kim asked with honest curiosity. “If he was trying to get away, that means he doesn’t have a solution to any of this.”

“True,” Nancy agreed. “But he’s bringing the Harvest Guard formula with him, and he’ll give that up along with any information that might help us solve the problem. He has production facilities all over the country.”

Kim nodded, impressed at Nancy’s creative thinking.

“Any questions?” When no one responded, Nancy continued. “Now, let’s give this bastard a name. Tom, any ideas?”

Dr. Flannery raised his eyebrows for a moment before letting out a sigh. “I hadn’t thought about it, but I suppose we should. The fungus attacks the respiratory system, growing at a high rate and causing an aggressive auto-immune response so that the victim essentially—”

“Chokes.” Kim’s eyes watered.

“Right, and it has properties of several common molds, including *C. auris*. But, for now, I think a simple name would work until we can better define it. I was thinking, *C. asphyxia*.”

Nancy pursed her lips in thought. “Morbid, but fitting.” Her tone lifted as she looked around. “Let’s keep the name between us and the CDC field crews. The media would have a field day with it if we told them. I want Bob and Alison in constant contact with Tom and Kim. Work together as a team. And let me know when Mr. Birkenhoff shows up.”

“Will do, Nancy,” Tom said.

“Great. Let’s meet again in eight hours. Good luck, people.”

The video feed cut off, leaving Kim sitting in the air-conditioned silence. She’d not been able to bring her phone into quarantine with her, though she could use the facility’s communication system to reach the outside world.

She clicked on the phone application and dialed the number for home. She hoped her husband was still awake.

He picked up almost immediately. “Kim?”

“It’s me, babe.”

“It’s great to hear your voice,” Bishop replied, his words ending in a quiet sigh. “I missed your voice.”

Kim grinned. Bishop had always liked her Fayette County twang, more of a mountain accent than deep south.

“And I missed yours,” Kim said. Bishop had a deep, resonant voice, and she secretly loved to snuggle on the couch with him, ear pressed to his chest as he spoke.

“I was worried,” Bishop said, emotion choking his voice. “I mean, the news is scary.”

“I know.”

“Is it as bad as they say?”

“It seems pretty bad,” Kim conceded. “But we don’t have a lot of information right now.” She didn’t want her husband worrying too much, so she changed the subject. “How are the kids?”

“They’re great. In bed, sleeping. They haven’t heard the news, yet.”

“That’s good.”

“Do you think we’re at risk out here?” Bishop asked, sounding concerned. “They’re talking about spore clouds floating around. Could one of those reach us?”

“Normally, I wouldn’t think the spores could stay airborne in the arid west,” Kim said, though she twisted her mouth with doubt as she recalled the spore tendrils drifting over downtown Washington. “But these are different. They’re tougher than your average fungi.”

“Sounds like we need to get ready,” he said.

“Absolutely,” Kim nodded.

“So, do we wrap the house in plastic, or what?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Kim laughed. “Weird, but interesting.”

“I’m a writer, babe.” Bishop’s grin resonated in his voice. “It’s my job to think about weird and interesting things.”

“That’s why I love you.” Kim grinned fondly, though her lips dipped into a frown as she glimpsed her husband with bulging red eyes as he strained to breathe. She quickly pushed the thought away. “I have to be honest, though. I’m in quarantine right now.”

“Quarantine? Are you sick, honey?”

“No, I’m fine!” Kim half-scoffed, but his concern touched her. She hadn’t told him about her adventures in the streets of Washington. Small steps. “It’s just a precaution. We’re safe here. This place is state-of-the-art, you know that. We’ve got our own air filtration and—”

“Okay, I get it,” Bishop laughed. “Now, how do I prepare for this thing?”

“That question coming from the man who wrote an entire pandemic series?” Bishop was an incredible writer, and his novels kept Kim on the edge of her seat, though he liked to stretch reality like taffy sometimes.

“That was a science fiction series I wrote two years ago, hon,” Bishop reminded her. “This is reality. As much as you helped me with my research, I’ll still defer to you for any changes in protocol.”

Grateful for his appreciation, Kim went over some basic facts. “Fungal spores are big compared to viruses and smoke, and the ones we’re dealing with are larger than average. So, we just need to keep them out of the house by sealing it and filtering any air intake.”

“Just tell me what to do.”

“Got a pen and paper?”

“I’m sitting in front of my laptop.”

“You need to make a trip to the hardware store,” Kim said. She ran down the list of things she thought her family would need.

Chapter 14

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

“Thanks, Tom,” Kim said as he placed the food tray into the sterile chamber and shut the door on his side. A square control panel lit green, and Kim opened the door on her side and removed the tray. He brought her a pot of coffee, cream and sugar, and a bagel with cream cheese. “How long do you think I’ll need to stay in here?”

“It won’t be long,” Tom stepped back, crossed his arms, and watched her through the big pane of glass that ran the length of the quarantine room. He offered a comforting smile. “At least through tonight. We’ll do one more blood test on you. If that’s clear, I’ll come in and give you a complete physical. If you don’t show any signs of infection, I’ll set you free. Then you can sit in the control center with me and play god.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Kim scoffed, taking her tray over to her computer desk. “It’s cozy in here.”

Tom chuckled. “I’m glad you’re comfortable.”

Kim sat down at the computer desk in front of her three screens and poured herself a cup of coffee. She’d only slept three hours between the time she’d arrived at the facility yesterday afternoon and the meeting with the Atlanta team thirty minutes earlier. She would need a lot of high-octane caffeine to get through the morning.

“You didn’t tell me a little boy died in your arms,” Tom said with softness.

“You didn’t tell me you had an infected CDC employee.”

“I’d gotten her stabilized before you came in.” His tone shifted from caring to apologetic. “And it was more important that I get you looking at her blood work.”

“I was a little tired and out of sorts when I first started looking,” Kim admitted. “The *Asphyxia* is tearing through her blood like a bull in a china shop. Her white cell count is astronomically high, and her heightened auto-immune response will lead to sepsis, if it hasn’t already.”

“It hasn’t,” Tom assured her. “Can you look again today?”

“I will,” Kim nodded. “But I’d rather be out in the field, looking for survivors in the area. Give me some protective gear and a handful of soldiers and I’ll be happy.”

“Kim, you’re not even out of quarantine yet.”

“When I get out—”

“You’re all I’ve got,” Tom held his hands out helplessly.

“No, I get it,” Kim agreed. “I’ll have my hands full between you and Bob over in Atlanta.”

“Better to be busy than bored,” Tom assured her. “Now, tell me. What are your thoughts about the fungus we’re dealing with?”

Kim turned back to her three computer screens. She opened a half-dozen fungi-related files from the CDC database and moved them from the primary screen to the one on the left. Glancing over the first one, she spoke her thoughts out loud. “That this is a fungus presents some unique challenges. Fungi are incredibly adaptable.”

“People think they can only grow in moist environments,” Tom stated, “but that’s only partially true. They can spread to arid parts of the country quite easily, even if they prefer damp basements. Mycelium threads work their way into the hardest of surfaces, and their networks can spread across several acres right under our feet. We need to take all that into account.”

“Spores can colonize almost every ecological environment,” Kim added with a sense of awe. “They’ve survived ice ages and several animal extinctions.”

“They are tough customers,” Tom agreed. “Remarkable, I think. I suppose that’s why they are a separate and unique animal kingdom all on their own. Any theories about the outbreak?”

Kim twisted her mouth in thought, her eyes narrowing at the screen. “If I had to guess, I’d say the variety of agricultural fungi we’re used to seeing experienced a shared mutation.”

Tom’s brow furrowed. “How could different fungi strains share the same mutation?”

“What’s the common factor here?” Kim waited for a response, and when she didn’t get one, she continued. “The antifungals, right? We’ve got three major chemical companies spraying in every corner of the country multiple times per year. They’re competing with one another, standardizing, stealing each other’s formulas.”

“So, the chemical spraying forced the fungi to genetically mutate across strains in different parts of the country?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Tom rubbed his chin. “It’s a brilliant theory.”

“It would take years of field study to prove,” Kim replied, pleased at the compliment. “We may narrow down the root cause of the gene mutation once Mr. Birkenhoff gets here. I’ve got a lot of questions for him.”

“You and me both. Hey, I dropped some potential solution mappings in our shared folder. Can you look at those and help me work on completing them?”

“To test on your patient?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure that’s ethical, Dr. Flannery?” Kim didn’t bother to hide her discomfort with the idea. “We’d be using her as a guinea pig.”

“We don’t have a choice at this point.” Tom pointed out. “This could be an extinction level event, you know that.”

Kim nodded. “I’ll look right away.”

“All right,” Tom said with a grim nod. “I’m going back to the control room.”

“Hey, Tom,” Kim said, getting up from her desk and moving to the glass.

Tom paused and looked back. “Yes?”

“Do you have any family anywhere? I mean, are you worried about anyone right now?”

The doctor turned back to the glass and slid his hands into his lab coat pockets. “Yes, of course.” He tilted his head and gave a smile. “I have a son and daughter in Seattle, and I’ve already called and let them know to be careful. I think they’ll be all right if our offices out west take the proper precautions like we’ve outlined for them.

“What about your wife?”

Tom made a partial grimace. “Mrs. Flannery passed away three years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Kim placed her hand against the glass and gave the doctor a sympathetic look.

“It was a rare blood condition,” Tom said, shaking his head. “We did everything we could for her, but she couldn’t beat it.”

“I’m really, really, sorry, Tom.” Kim felt a lump form in her throat.

“I’d like to say it’s fine, but the truth is, I miss Marta.” The doctor shrugged. “At least she was there when I received my Distinguished Service Award from the National Medical Association. She was so proud of me and would have loved seeing me become the first black CDC Director.”

Kim shook her head but smiled. “I didn’t know you were the first. Congrats.”

“I don’t like to make a big deal out of things like that,” Tom said with a humble bow of his head. “I’d rather keep working and leave the awards and accolades to others. But Marta cared about things like that. She reminded me every day that I was breaking new ground for the young men and women coming after me.”

“She wasn’t wrong,” Kim raised her eyebrows with a hopeful expression.

Doctor Flannery paused for a moment before he lifted his eyes to Kim. “How about you? You have a husband and kids, too, if I remember correctly.”

“That’s right,” Kim said with a smile. “Bishop is my husband, and my kids are Riley and Trevor. They’re still back in Ft. Collins. They’d planned on being here by the end of the summer, but…” Kim let her voice trail off.

“Make sure you tell them to stay where they are,” Tom said, pointedly. “Ft. Collins should be prepared should the spore cloud make it out there.”

“I’ve let them know,” Kim acknowledged. “I’ll have a team of soldiers go check up on them, too.”

“Good idea,” Tom said, then he smiled. “Good talk, Kim.”

“Agreed.” Kim gave him a single positive nod. “Talk to you soon.”

Dr. Flannery disappeared down the long hallway, and Kim turned to her breakfast. She poured herself a cup of coffee, added a sizeable amount of cream, and a bit of sugar. The first sip was hot and strong, and Kim closed her eyes for the moment of simple reprieve before she got into her work.

She pulled up some blood samples of the CDC employee on her left-hand computer screen and looked at them while she spread cream cheese on her bagel. She took a bite, eyes narrowed at the screen while she chewed.

Kim picked out the flowery-looking *Asphyxia* fungal cells as they slowly destroyed and consumed red blood cells. She increased the video speed and watched the patient’s immune cells respond, attempting to clean up the mess left behind by *Asphyxia*. The white cells were only partially successful, cleaning up some ruined red cells but unable to penetrate *Asphyxia*’s strong cell wall.

“You are one tough critter,” Kim said, taking the last bite of her bagel.

She shifted her attention to the computer screen on her right where she kept her email visible. She found the latest email from Bob over at the Atlanta CDC, and she opened it. There was a listing of every CDC field unit, their location, equipment, and a link to their live satellite feed.

“Might as well get caught up with the teams in the field while I work,” Kim murmured. She clicked the first link for CDC Field Unit One, poured herself another cup of coffee, and watched.

Chapter 15

Corporal Benjamin, CDC Field Unit One, Cleveland, Ohio

“Do you see anything, Benjamin?”

Corporal Benjamin leaned forward and peered down at the Cleveland, Ohio suburbs from the back of the UH-6 Black Hawk. Trails of smoke rose across the city as several dozen homes and buildings burned beneath the gray clouds. Human-shaped lumps littered the streets, and there were more car crashes than he could count on ten hands. There was no traffic, and no signs of life that he could see.

He shifted in his heavy Tyvek coveralls, moving his eyes across the horizon. “Captain, the spore cloud seems to have moved on.” Benjamin spoke into his headset mic. “But there are bodies everywhere.”

“Can you give me a count?”

Benjamin shook his head. “I don’t think I can, captain.”

“Well, try!”

Benjamin knew the population of Cleveland was around four-hundred thousand people, give or take. However, to get an estimate on casualties, they had to find someone alive. If they couldn’t, he’d have to report a total loss. He tried to imagine the words “four-hundred thousand dead” rolling off his tongue, and he couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“One second, captain. We’ll do a flyby over downtown.”

“Roger that, Benjamin. Standing by.”

The soldier directed the pilot to take a northeasterly course before he turned back inside the crew area to check on the CDC field agent who sat strapped into her seat. While she was a little pale from the swaying chopper, she gave Benjamin the thumbs up. They were the forward scouts for CDC Field Unit One, and the rest of the forty-person team would make their way into the outskirts of the city soon.

Benjamin turned his attention back to the screaming wind, his gloved hands clutching handles on the sides of the door frame and roof as the pilot banked the chopper hard to the right and rose higher. They skirted Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and followed a railroad line toward the city.

Sprawling industrial complexes lay off to the left, but Benjamin focused on the subdivisions down on their right. They passed over I-480, and Benjamin moved to the left side of the crew cabin and peered down at the more densely packed subdivisions there.

A sea of blue-collar homes stretched out before them, fires rising high, streets filled with dead bodies. The beautiful blue of Lake Erie to the north should have lifted Benjamin’s spirits, but he was running out of hope. The soldier’s eyes scanned the ground, desperate to see someone alive. It wasn’t lost on him that he was not only witnessing the complete death of a city but the destruction of the country he loved. Benjamin took a deep breath and sighed in anxious frustration, stomach turning beneath a swell of emotions.

“Captain, I don’t know how to say this, but—” Something caught Benjamin’s attention before it disappeared behind the chopper’s nose. He moved to the right side of the crew cabin and looked again.

“What is it, Benjamin? Spit it out, soldier.”

“Pilot, check your three,” Benjamin said with a rising note. “On the apartment building roof.

The blinking light. Do you see it?"

"Affirmative," the pilot replied. "Heading that way now."

The chopper banked again, and they swooped in over a three-story apartment building. As they got closer, Benjamin's hopes rose through the roof. "Captain, it appears there are ten children between the ages of, um, eight and fifteen huddled together on the roof. One of them is flashing a shop light at us."

"Great news, Benjamin." The captain sounded thrilled. "Go pick them up."

"Roger that, captain."

Benjamin directed the pilot to set down on the far end of the roof. They landed, sending waves of wind over the frightened children. Benjamin and the CDC field worker climbed out of the helicopter and crouch-walked across the long roof to where the kids waited. The field worker began checking the children over while Benjamin surveyed the scene, imagining how it must have played out.

"The parents are up here with them," Benjamin said.

"Well, bring them in, too. Do you need another air unit?"

"Negative." Benjamin looked with sad eyes across the row of corpses leaning against one of the big HVAC units. Black mold spores peppered the skin around their lips and mouths. Their eyes were wide open, bulging and horrible. "The parents are dead. It appears they gave the filtration masks to the kids and went without."

There was a moment's pause while the captain digested the information. "Why didn't they stay inside?"

"No clue, sir. Maybe they knew what was coming and..." Benjamin didn't want to say any more. It was too depressing to speculate. And when the field agent called him over to help, he dropped the subject. It didn't matter why the parents had done what they'd done, only that the children were safe. "Sir, I'm going to aid the CDC field agent now."

"Roger that, Benjamin. Real quick, though, how about those casualty numbers?"

"I'd say ninety percent casualties." Benjamin took one little girl by the hand. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she looked between Benjamin and the intimidating helicopter. He couldn't imagine the nightmares she'd be having in the days to come. "That's assuming ten percent of the population holed up inside their homes. We won't know more until we put more boots on the ground."

"Got it. I'll let you get back to work. Stay safe, Benjamin."

"Will do, sir." Benjamin tried to smile at the little girl as he led her to the waiting chopper, though he must have seemed like a monster to her in his bulky Tyvek coveralls and hood. The entire *world* must have seemed like a monster to her.

Chapter 16

Corporal Jeffreys, CDC Field Unit Two, Gainesville, Florida

“Jeffreys, take point.” The captain’s voice sounded close in Jeffreys’s earpiece as the pack of soldiers walked down the middle of the street.

“Aye, captain.” Corporal Jeffreys flipped on her helmet camera and jogged to the front of the line with her rifle held against her chest, barrel pointed down.

Despite the heavy Tyvek coveralls they all wore, they made good time moving through the Gainesville, Florida suburbs. Their mission was to guide the CDC field workers toward the University of Florida campus and search for survivors. A secondary part of the mission was to lay claim to the football stadium where they planned on setting up a FEMA camp.

The heavy suit made it difficult to turn just her head, so Jeffreys turned her whole body side to side as she walked. She swallowed down a lump of fear, marveling at the dead bodies scattered everywhere. It reminded her of a lake that had dried up and left all the fish to flounder, die, and rot in the sun.

It was hot inside the coveralls, and Jeffreys wanted to strip them off and feel the refreshing Florida breeze like she’d done back in college many years ago on spring break. However, doing that now would mean death by *Asphyxia*—the name of the affliction had come down to them earlier. Still, the thought of living in her coveralls for more than a day sounded like a nightmare. Jeffreys quelled a spike of anxiety and focused on doing her job.

“How’s it look up there, corporal?” the captain asked.

“Nothing but corpses, captain,” Jeffreys replied.

“Any signs of a spore cloud?”

“Nothing, captain.” She kept her voice steady and low-key. “It must have moved on.”

“Continue moving southwest and let me know when you see the stadium.”

Jeffreys replied in the affirmative and continued walking. They’d passed three burning orange tree fields already, and at least five homes were burning up ahead. Fire killed the fungus, but there wasn’t enough gasoline in the entire world to finish the job. The fungus grew everywhere, its angry red glow less noticeable in the afternoon light. But Jeffreys knew it was there. She’d seen it last night after taking off from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. Eerie red light as far as the eye could see.

The corporal had just about given up on seeing signs of life when she spotted movement up ahead. “Captain, I see people. Living ones. Looks like looters.”

“Good work, Jeffreys,” the captain replied. “Hold your position. Team, spread out and approach but do not engage the looters. I don’t care about them stealing a few groceries. Understood?”

The soldiers replied that they understood, and Jeffreys held her position as a half-dozen of her squad mates jogged out ahead of her. She felt a presence at her side, and she turned her body to see the captain standing next to her.

“With me, Jeffreys.”

Jeffreys nodded and moved ahead with the captain.

As they drew closer, the soldiers took casual stances, ensuring the business ends of their rifles pointed down, though Jeffreys sensed the tension rising. The dozen looters had formed a line that started inside the store and ended at the back of a pickup truck. They handed groceries

down the line to a man standing in the truck bed. He stacked cases of water and cans of soup at his feet.

“What’s covering their faces?” the captain asked.

“Looks like homemade gas masks,” Jeffreys replied. “I’m thinking two-liter bottles cut up, turned upside down, and duct-taped to their faces. Looks like they screwed filters onto the bottoms.”

“Ingenious,” the captain said, sounding impressed. “We should say hello.”

The captain strode forward with Jeffreys at his side. They left the protective ring of marines, approached the looters, and stopped thirty yards away. The looters were so focused on moving goods that they didn’t notice the marines right away. Waving his arms around for a good fifteen seconds, the captain finally got the attention of the man standing in the truck bed.

The man jumped, his gaze flashed over the weapons the soldiers carried, and he immediately tapped one of his buddies on the shoulder. That man turned and started at the sight of the soldiers, too. On down the line, the looters caught sight of the soldiers and panicked. Several of them ran off, and the man in the truck bed leapt to the concrete and dove into the driver’s seat. He slammed the door, started the truck, and tore off, squealing his tires as he careened around a bend and sped away. Where he drove over the mold, a cloud rose into the air, condensing into floating black tendrils.

“No, wait!” the captain called out, jogging after the looters until he realized it was futile.

Jeffreys ran after the captain, stopping beside him to share in his disappointment. “They must have thought we wanted to hurt them.”

“Can you blame them?” The captain turned his body back toward the other marines. “We look like aliens from another planet out here.”

“I can understand their reservations,” Jeffreys agreed.

“Oh, well,” the captain said after a moment. “Let’s get moving. Jeffreys, you’re back on point.”

“Yes, sir.” Jeffreys jogged out ahead of the marines, heartened that there were survivors and wondering if they knew of any beautiful, uninfected beaches.

Chapter 17

Jessie Talby, CDC Field Unit Three, New York, NY

CDC field worker, Jessie Talby, quelled her nervous tension by counting backwards from one hundred to one, focusing on the moment and not the possibility of something bad happening: a hole in her Tyvek coveralls; a problem with her air filtration system; a simple fall that might spell disaster and even death for her.

It was all part of the job, though Jessie never expected to have to help save the world.

Walking in the center of twenty-five marines should have made her feel safe, but to a farm girl like Jessie, Brooklyn, New York might as well have been the Amazon jungle. They had been walking its dark alleys and endless streets ever since being dropped in by helicopter an hour ago.

And despite the dismal prospects of finding survivors, they'd had a bit of luck in that department. They had saved three families who heeded the emergency broadcast warnings and sealed their apartments tight using every bit of tape and cloth they could find.

Three families saved. Fifteen people—a counterpoint to the thousands of corpses lying in the streets.

A majority had suffocated when the spore cloud rolled through, although some had been the casualties of accidents or acts of random violence. Still others had decided there was nowhere to hide from the approaching death and that a leap from the top story of a building was a better way to go.

The fungus grew over everything. It crawled up the sides of buildings, spread down dark alleys, and had even taken root in the bloody corpses of the people who'd committed suicide.

Her coveralls were stuffy, though Jessie was glad to have them on. They not only protected her from the dangerous spores but also the stench of corpse rot that was sure to grow thick over the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.

“One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight...” Jessie counted. She rolled her shoulders to loosen them and peered up at the buildings. She studied the bricks, the cracks in the bricks, and the windows that were over a hundred years old.

Her eyes passed over a window, moved on, and then flicked back. Had someone moved up there? She squinted harder. An air conditioning unit partially blocked her view, and the daylight glinted enough to make it difficult to tell. It could have been a person, or a cat. They'd rescued a dozen animals already.

“Or, it could have just been a trick of the light,” she murmured to herself. She was about to glance away when it happened again. The curtains had definitely moved, and she swore she saw someone looking down at them. Her heart leapt in her chest.

“I saw someone in that fourth-floor window,” she said, loudly. Then she realized she had her communications muted and pressed the button on her belt. There was a low beep, indicating she was off mute, and she blurted, “Hey, lieutenant. The building on the right. Fourth floor. I saw someone moving.”

The team's hulking field lieutenant, Lieutenant Richards, strode back from the front of the line. “Show me,” he said.

Jessie pointed up where she'd seen the movement, and the lieutenant leaned back so his hood would afford him a view. Together, the two backed up to the opposite side of the street, their eyes never leaving the window. Sure enough, the shape of someone's head was clearly visible.

Lieutenant Richards raised his hand, and Jessie followed suit, waving her own hand back and forth for good measure.

“Why don’t they wave back?” Jessie asked, curiously.

“It looks like a child.” The lieutenant’s tone grew more urgent. “They’re probably scared.” He called out for three soldiers to follow him inside and then nudged Jessie’s arm. “And you, too, Talby. You’re with us.”

“Yes, sir.” Jessie jumped in line behind the soldiers.

They pushed through the creaky front door and stepped into the foyer with their rifles pointed up the stairs. *Asphyxia* had not invaded too far into the foyer, yet. After looking around a moment, the lieutenant motioned the soldiers to go ahead, and the team hustled up the squeaking, groaning stairwell.

The four-story climb left Jessie dripping sweat and panting hard enough that the plastic faceplate of her hood fogged up. Jessie ignored it with the prospect of finding someone alive.

“I think this is the one,” said one soldier, nodding toward a door.

“I think you’re right,” Richards said, then he turned to Jessie. “Are you ready?”

Jessie pulled a plastic-wrapped air filtration mask out of her pack and held it up. “Ready.”

Richards turned back to the soldier. “Try it.”

The soldier reached down and turned the doorknob. It was locked tight, so she used the barrel of her rifle to give three gentle raps on the door. “Hello, in there!” she shouted. “This is the United States Armed Forces. We’re here looking for survivors of the toxic cloud. We have air filtration masks and can take you to safety. Please respond.”

Jessie mouthed the words along with the soldier. She knew the words by heart. Everyone did. The team had shouted them a hundred times that day.

When no one responded, the soldier turned back to the lieutenant for instructions.

“Force it,” Richards said. “Be careful.”

The soldier nodded and faced the door. “If anyone is on the other side, stand back! I’m going to break it down!”

They’d been told not to ram doors with their shoulder to avoid tearing their suits, so the soldier stepped back, lifted her big, heavy boot, and stomped it against the door. The old frame snapped like kindling, and the door flew open.

The soldiers rushed into the apartment and spread out, clearing each room with efficiency. Jessie heard the muted shout of a child, a soldier cursing, and the stomping of boots through the apartment. Jessie’s shoulders tensed up as she wondered what was going on.

There was a pause before the lieutenant spoke in a hushed tone. “Okay, Talby. You’re up. We cornered a live one in the living room.”

Jessie stepped carefully but excitedly across the threshold, careful not to tear her suit on any loose nails or splinters in the door frame. She moved down a long hallway, glancing into each room. Old food containers and clothes lay around the messy apartment. *Asphyxia* had claimed almost every room, growing thickest around the food containers. In the last room on the left was a single corpse, although Jessie didn’t stop to investigate the conditions surrounding the death. She’d seen hundreds upon hundreds of dead bodies that day, and her mind had grown numb to it.

The end of the hall opened into a large living room with clothes and blankets strewn everywhere. The television and air conditioning unit still hummed along.

One soldier stood by the window. “They didn’t even bother shutting the air conditioning vents.”

“They may not have gotten the news to do it,” said another soldier.

The first soldier pointed to the television. “The news would have been on there.”

“Well, maybe they didn’t understand—”

“Over here, Talby.” Lieutenant Richards stepped back and gestured.

The chatter faded in Jessie’s mind as she stared at the only one thing in the room that mattered. Amidst six corpses, all of them twisted in *Asphyxia* death, sat a little girl of about five. She crouched in front of the television, panting, staring at the Tyvek-covered soldiers with sheer terror in her eyes.

Asphyxia streaked the carpet all around the girl and stained her clothing, yet she showed no signs of being afflicted; she wasn’t coughing or struggling to breathe.

Jessie’s cold professionalism melted away. She knelt a few feet from the girl, hard enough to launch spores from the carpet into the air. The dark tendrils danced around the little girl’s head, and she breathed them in as she stared back at Jessie.

Shoulders tensed, Jessie waited for the girl’s eyes to roll up into her head and her chest to heave. She waited for the girl’s throat to close and for her to start choking as she gripped her neck in death.

The little girl only wrinkled her nose in irritation, like she might sneeze.

With a wide grin, Jessie turned her external speaker on to be heard outside her hood. “Well, aren’t you the most beautiful thing I’ve seen all day? My name is Jessie. What’s your name?” When the little girl didn’t answer, Jessie prodded her a bit more. “Don’t worry, we won’t hurt you. These guys...they’re just big teddy bears inside their weird suits.”

The soldiers shared an amused look at being called big teddy bears.

Richards spoke up. “Talby, we need to get a mask on that girl and exit.”

Jessie nodded inside her Tyvek hood and turned off her external speaker. “It might help if you guys wait in the hallway.”

Richards glanced around the room before agreeing. “Okay, Talby, but be careful.”

The soldiers left the living room, moving efficiently in their Tyvek coveralls, leaving Jessie alone with the little girl. After the soldiers exited, Jessie flashed her a knowing smile and turned her external speaker back on. “See, they’re harmless.”

“My mom says I’m not allowed to talk to strangers.” The girl’s eyes flashed to one corpse on Jessie’s left.

Jessie swallowed a lump in her throat. “Well, she must have been a smart—”

“They’re all dead.” The girl frowned.

“It’s terrible, I know.” Jessie made an apologetic face.

The little girl coughed twice, two small coughs, her eyes never leaving Jessie. Jessie’s heart skipped a beat, thinking she must have *Asphyxia*. Then the girl said, “That’s what happened to them.” She made the deliberate coughing sounds again, almost cute if not for the nightmare tapestry painted all around them. “They coughed a bunch and then died.”

Relieved, Jessie nodded. “It’s happening everywhere, to a lot of girls just like you. That’s why I think it might be best if you came with me. Those soldiers? They’re here to protect us, I swear.”

The girl looked around at the corpses in the room and then back to Jessie, and it seemed there was a little less fear in her eyes. “Fiona,” she said. “My name’s Fiona.”

Jessie held out her hand. “Well, Fiona, are you hungry? We’ve got food. I think someone has some peanut butter back in camp. Do you like peanut butter?”

Fiona nodded and reached up to place her tiny hand into Jessie’s Tyvek-covered paw.

“Okay, it’s settled then.” Jessie said, marveling at the girl’s lack of respiratory protection.

“There are so many people who can’t wait to talk to you.”

Jessie knew the CDC scientists would poke and prod the little girl as they studied her blood to determine what made Fiona different. It didn’t matter. Jessie would relish the pure moment of connection, and the discovery of the little girl who might be part of the answer.

It took some goading, but Fiona agreed to wear the child-sized air filtration mask Jessie offered. More because the lieutenant had ordered it than she needed it. Together, they exited the apartment, descended the creaky stairs, and entered the protection of the smiling, nodding soldiers.

Chapter 18

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Center Township, Indiana

“Do you think she suffered much?” Jenny asked with a sniff.

“I don’t think so.” Randy shook his head. “Only a minute or two.”

They stood by the access road that split their field, looking down at the corpse of their mother. Death discolored her, her body bloated in the normal way things do when they die. The only difference was the spots of BD at the edges of her mouth and beneath her nose. And the tendrils that had fallen on her since yesterday evening had stained her rotting flesh like tattoos.

“That’s good.” Jenny nodded. “Do you think we should dig a grave?”

Randy sighed into his air filtration mask, a significant improvement over the plastic bags and pieces of foam they’d been using the day before. “I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t want to touch that stuff, not even with our added protection.”

Not only had they improved on their respiratory protection, but they’d fashioned protective suits out of plastic garbage bags, plastic tarps, rubber kitchen gloves, and duct tape. It wasn’t the greatest protection in the world, but it was the best they could do given their circumstances. The plastic tarps had come from the basement where they’d stored them with their camping gear, and they made the perfect outer layer, resistant to ripping and stretching so the siblings could move around with more confidence.

“Want to check on Dad, then?”

Randy swallowed back tears. “I do, but I don’t.”

“I know what you mean,” Jenny agreed, and she nodded her plastic-covered head. “But I think we should, just to make sure. To have some closure, you know?”

“Okay, let’s go,” Randy said, and he moved around his mother’s corpse to walk down the fungus-covered service road. After a moment, Jenny followed, her footsteps hurried until she came even with him.

It had been over twenty-four hours since the outbreak, and BD was everywhere. The fungus covered the service road, the house, the truck, and the crops like a plague. It was still scary looking where it grew in thick patches, though the bright red color had faded to an angry crimson.

“I doubt anything will grow in the field ever again,” Randy said, glancing around at their ruined crops. “But maybe the scientists are working on something.”

Jenny scoffed. “What scientists? You saw the news this morning. There might not be any scientists left. We might be on our own.”

“Yeah, I know,” Randy said, not appreciating his sister’s grim pessimism but not wanting to argue. “Hey, here’s the truck.”

They had reached the end of the field where the Durant-Monroe Chemical truck was parked. Big strips of fuzzy, crimson fungus covered the vehicle. The name on the side of the big tank was unreadable. Where the hoses connected, water continued to drip, so Randy walked over to the main shutoff valve—one of the few things not covered in BD—and turned it off. Then he walked around the truck with Jenny moving in the opposite direction.

The driver lay slumped over the wheel, and Randy didn’t have to see the man’s face to know what had happened. The passenger side door hung open, and his father’s corpse lay half in and half out of the vehicle, face planted into the ground, boots up. BD lay in a thick patch around the

base of his twisted neck and had spread up the back of his overalls.

A series of images struck Randy. His father, Cordy Tucker, had been tall and thin, but the man could chop a cord of wood in record time. He never shied away from a problem or put off until tomorrow what he could do that day.

To Randy, his father had been fearless. And to see him lying in such a disgraceful position made Randy turn his head away in anger. A hand slipped inside his, and he turned to face Jenny. Her dark brown eyes cried behind the plastic visor.

“You know, maybe you’re right. We should bury them.” Randy wished he could wipe away his tears inside the mask. “Or at least put them side-by-side. They’d want to be together.”

“Yeah, they would,” Jenny agreed.

Together they took their father from the passenger side, careful not to pierce their protective suits. Tendrils of BD drifted up wherever they disturbed it, and Randy waved it away out of habit whenever he had a free hand.

It was tough going. Their father’s corpse was stiffening up, and heavy, too. It took them almost fifteen minutes to get him out of the truck, then another ten to drag him to the edge of the field.

“This seems like the best place to put him,” Randy said. “Overlooking his fields.”

Jenny nodded, and they turned to fetch their mother.

Anita Tucker’s corpse was much lighter than her husband’s, but still no less of a struggle. Randy took her arms, and Jenny her legs, and together they walked their mother out to the end of the service road where they rested her next to their father.

They stood in silence for a few moments. While their parents were Christian, they didn’t practice regularly. And since Randy and Jenny had spent even less time in church, no Bible verses came to mind. It made Randy wonder if they should have gone a little more.

“I can’t think of anything to say,” Jenny said, looking down.

“We’ve got to say something,” Randy replied, then he took a step closer and looked out across the blackened field before returning his gaze to his parents. “You two were the best mother and father we could have asked for. You cared for us always. Not just putting food on the table, but you always worried about our problems and tried to give us the best advice. And when Mom couldn’t solve it for us, she’d resort to a piece of—”

“Apple pie,” Jenny said, chuckling.

“That’s right,” Randy said before his voice tapered off into a whisper, and his heart ached in his chest. He left off with a few simple words. “We love you guys, and we’ll miss you.”

“That wasn’t bad, big brother,” Jenny smiled and sniffed. “Not bad at all.”

“Thanks.” Randy grinned sheepishly.

A low buzz vibrated, and the siblings looked around to locate the sound.

“Oh, it’s my phone.” Jenny lifted the device from a plastic pocket she’d fashioned in her suit and held it up. The phone was inside a plastic sandwich bag, protected from contamination. “It’s a text from Ally.”

“Still alive?” Randy asked.

Jenny nodded and shook the phone. “Duh.”

“Where is she?”

“At home,” Jenny said as she read the text. “She wants us to come and help her.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Randy asked.

“Are you kidding,” Jenny scoffed, then she started down the service road toward the house. “It’s the only idea we have.”

Randy took one last glance at his parents and then hustled to catch up with Jenny, his plastic crinkling as he moved.

“We need to look for survivors,” Jenny continued, “and look for help.”

“Should we take the truck?” Randy asked, glancing at the vehicle. “It’s covered in BD.”

“I don’t see why not,” Jenny said. “We’ll kick up plenty of BD, but it won’t matter because we’ll be well ahead of it. Plus, we’re protected now. I mean, unless you want to walk the ten miles to her house in these plastic suits.”

Randy acknowledged her point with a nod. He was already sweating bad in the warm, late spring air. “You’re right,” he said. “Maybe we could walk it at night, but not during the day.”

“It’s settled then,” Jenny gave him a single nod. “We take the truck.”

Chapter 19

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

Randy drove the pickup along I-41 north at a steady forty-five miles per hour with a constant tugging of uncertainty at the back of his mind. He gripped the wheel tight, eyes constantly glancing into his rearview mirror to gauge the effect their passing had on the BD.

The fungus wasn't covering the roads completely, though it crept up from the fields. Wherever their tires struck a patch of crimson and black, tendrils sprung up ten feet in the air to hang for several seconds before drifting to the concrete.

"I wonder what would happen if it rained?" Randy mumbled.

"What?" Jenny asked from the passenger side, glancing down at the ripped-up fabric they'd used to fashion their masks.

"I was just looking at the BD. It seems to shoot higher into the air when we run over it."

"That's probably because we're flying through it in the truck."

"Right. Friction, weight, and speed affect how much we aggravate it." Randy frowned. "So, I was wondering what would happen if it rained."

"You're talking like it's alive."

"It is alive," Randy argued. "It's a fungus, probably. Didn't you pay attention in science class?"

"Of course, I did," Jenny said. "But a fungus is not a person. It's not an evil force or something."

"You know what I mean."

They rode in silence for the next few minutes as the flat, Indiana fields flew by. There wasn't a single car on the road, and the fungus painted the fields black and crimson.

"I never thought I'd say this," Randy said, "but I'd give anything to see those miles of boring cornfields again."

"You and me both, brother," Jenny agreed.

They took country road 1700 west until they came to Ally's house at the corner of another intersection. Ally Walker's house was a quaint two-story home nestled beneath the shade of several tall, old trees, the leaves now drooped with fungus. Two big white barns lay off to the side along with several sizeable pieces of farm equipment. Green spots shined on the hood of a John Deere tractor amidst of the fungal spread.

Randy pulled his truck in behind the Tucker's vehicles, put it in park, and shut it off. "Okay, let's go see how Ally's doing."

They exited the truck, shutting their doors softly behind them. Jenny took the lead and walked up the front steps so she didn't disturb the BD. She knocked and then stood back. The sound of movement came from inside the house, and Randy saw the glass of the bay window shaking ever so slightly. Ally's face appeared on the other side of the glass. She had a long, pretty face and light hair, and her smile spread wide when she saw her friends.

Ally held up her index finger to indicate, "one second," and then moved toward the front door.

"Did you see her face?" Randy said just loud enough for Jenny to hear. "She's got speckles on it."

"I saw," Jenny acknowledged.

The front door came open, and Ally grinned at them through the storm door glass. “Hey, Jenny!” she practically squealed. When she tried to push the storm door open, and it didn’t budge, she looked down to see that Randy had put his boot against it to hold it shut.

“Hi, Ally,” Jenny said with a crooked smile.

“Why is Randy’s foot against the door?” Ally asked as her eyes switched to him.

“I don’t think we should come in, Ally,” Jenny replied for him. “We just stirred up a bunch of dust out here. We need to keep our distance.”

Ally threw up her hands and rolled her eyes. “Of course. Sorry, but I’m just so happy to see you guys.”

“Where are your parents?” Jenny asked, eyebrows furrowed with concern.

“They were at church in Kentland when the stuff came.” Ally coughed before her eyes lifted to the trees surrounding her home. She frowned at the mold-covered leaves.

Jenny gestured behind her toward the yard. “How did you know something was wrong out there?”

“You mean, the stuff?”

“Yeah.”

Ally pointed past Jenny and Randy out into the yard. The siblings turned. Out near the barn, a golden retriever lay on its side in a patch of green grass with a tennis ball in its mouth. Randy recognized it as the Walker’s family pet, Goldy.

“Poor Goldy,” Jenny said with a sad frown. She turned back to her friend, placing her gloved hand against the glass. “I’m so sorry, Ally.”

“It sucks,” Ally nodded, “but it probably saved my life. We were playing fetch. I tossed his tennis ball, and he ran to fetch it. But when he came back, he ran right through the dust cloud that had just drifted in out of nowhere. He choked, and then...” Ally sobbed and put her hand over her mouth to cover a mild coughing fit.

Randy exchanged a look with his sister.

“It’s okay,” Jenny comforted her friend through the glass, then her voice lifted. “Have you heard from anyone else?”

Ally’s eyes lifted from Goldy’s corpse to Jenny. “There have been some texts going around. Some kids are meeting at Benton High school. Others say the Kentland Library. But I’m afraid to leave the house.”

“That was the smartest thing you could have done,” Randy said.

“Where are you two holed up?” Ally asked, looking back and forth between them.

“At the house,” Jenny replied. “We’ve got a sort of decontamination setup going on. You know, like they have in the movies.”

“Great! You should let me come with you.”

Randy and Jenny exchanged another look. Jenny’s eyes were uncertain, and Randy suspected it wasn’t just because her friend was probably sick. It was because Jenny couldn’t bring herself to leave her friend behind. Randy hardened his heart, because he knew that’s what they would do.

Ally’s eyes darted back and forth between the two. “You *are* taking me with you, right?”

Jenny’s eyes grew pained as she faced her friend. “You seem sick, Ally. Not a lot, but enough to make us sick, and others, too. You probably shouldn’t be around anyone right now.”

“No way, guys.” Ally’s eyes grew wide with surprise before her expression dissolved into fear. “You can’t possibly be serious. There’s no way I can stay here alone.”

“Yes, you can,” Jenny assured her. “You just have to take care of yourself. And don’t go

outside.” Then, as if remembering something important, Jenny held up the plastic-wrapped air filtration mask they’d brought her. “And look. We brought you this mask. It should help if you’re desperate and need to leave the house.”

“For food or something,” Randy added.

“But you really need to stay inside, Ally.” Jenny reinforced the idea. “If you go to any of those places, like the school or church, you might infect someone.”

Ally stared at the mask with relief, though she still seemed pensive about them leaving her at the house. “But what am I supposed to do? Just sit here?”

“The electric is still on, for now,” Randy said with what he hoped was a cheeky grin. “So, think of it as a sick day from school. Chill and Netflix, or whatever you want to do. Get better.”

“We’ll go check on your parents at the church in Kentland,” Jenny offered, “and then we’ll try the library. If we have time, we’ll head down to Benton High School and see if anyone showed up.”

“Okay,” Ally said, frowning with uncertainty. “I’ll keep trying to text people. And thanks for the mask.”

Jenny held out the mask, and Randy stepped back. Ally pushed the door open enough to leave a narrow gap, and Jenny handed the mask inside to her.

After saying their goodbyes, Randy and Jenny climbed back into the pickup truck. Randy backed the truck around and then pulled out of the Walker’s driveway, heading north toward the small town of Kentland.

“We don’t have to check on all that, you know,” Randy suggested with a flat, doubtful tone. “The library, church, or the gym.”

“But we said we would.”

“You said we would.” Randy gripped the wheel harder. “Not me.”

“It’s the least we can do for her.” Jenny shot her brother an accusatory look. “She’s my friend.”

“I know that, Jenny.” A shadow passed over Randy’s eyes as he looked ahead. “She’s mine, too. But we still need to be careful. We don’t know how long we can make it in these suits without dehydrating, and our decontamination area is back at home. If we must take these suits off for any reason, we’re as good as dead.”

“We also have an obligation to search for survivors.” Jenny’s voice was firm behind the plastic mask. “There might be some like-minded people we can team up with.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he agreed, “but there could be people left alive who aren’t interested in teaming up. People who would do us harm.”

“What people are you worried about?” Jenny asked with an incredulous shake of her head.

“I’m worried about that.” Randy nodded ahead.

Jenny faced the front of the truck, eyes narrowing to see what Randy was talking about. Her jaw fell open, concern written on her face.

There was smoke rising out of Kentland.

Chapter 20

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

The twins approached Kentland on US 52, the road stretching north straight into the east side of town. A dozen fires sent trails of soot into the sky, and the uneasy feeling in Randy's chest gave a twist.

"Doesn't look like anyone's at the truck stop," Jenny said, peering out the passenger side window at the combination Shell Station and Kentland Truck Stop. "Wait, behind the gas pumps. I see a few people lying around the front door, and the driver of that semi looks dead behind the wheel."

Randy glanced over at the big semi-trailer truck pulled up to the side of the building and confirmed Jenny's observation. Then his eyes darted to the front of the store and glanced over the half-dozen people laying in front. "I wonder if they were trying to get in or out?"

"Good question. I don't see anyone inside."

"They'd be hiding," Randy murmured. "They'd have food for a little while, but it would be mostly snacks."

The Plate Lunch Diner went by with only two cars in the parking lot. The blinds were drawn tight, and the sign on the front door read CLOSED.

"They're definitely inside," Randy said with a shake of his head.

"Their food is terrible," Jenny added with a wry grin. "Probably kill them before the BD does."

A short way up, Randy turned left and crossed the wide double-lane highway to enter Kent Street. That swung them to the northwest for two hundred yards before they turned left onto Allen Street. The subdivision held widely dispersed homes with grass and trees covered in crimson and black fungus.

They passed two large homes on the left before Randy slowed the truck.

"There's the church," Jenny said, looking to their left.

Randy pulled to the right side of the road near the parking lot, stopped the truck, and put it in park. Then he shifted in his seat to get a better view of the church. The placard in front read *St. Joseph Catholic Church* with a line underneath that read, *Enter by the grace of God.*

Five bodies lay near the doors, apparently killed by BD while running back to the parking lot on the other side of the road.

"Two of them were kids," Randy bit his lip and shook his head.

"Were they trying to run from the church?" Jenny asked with a frown.

"Maybe they were late for mass," Randy replied, "and someone locked them out."

"Not funny, Randy."

"No, I'm serious," he said. "When the BD hit, the people inside the church probably locked the doors. A few stragglers showed up, couldn't get in, and tried to run back to their cars."

"That makes sense," Jenny agreed, reluctantly. "They didn't make it far." Her eyes shifted back to the church. "Do you think there's anyone left alive in there?"

Randy turned off the pickup and shot Jenny a look. "Only one way to find out."

They got out of the truck and shut their doors. Despite them being gentle, they still caused black tendrils to swirl upward into the air. As they approached the church doors, Randy glanced down at the corpses, their twisted faces and bulging eyes making his stomach turn.

Lifting his eyes to the twin church doors, Randy climbed the steps and put his plastic-covered ear to the wood. He couldn't hear anything inside, so he raised his fist to pound on one.

"Don't," his sister snapped, stopping Randy from striking the wood. He turned and saw her holding up a small stone in her hand wrapped with a rag from the truck. "We can't afford to rip the plastic on our suits."

"Good idea, Jen." Randy stepped aside to give her room.

Jenny moved up the stairs, lifted the rag-covered rock, and pounded it against the door three times. The rock made a dull thud against the wood.

"That should be plenty loud enough," Randy said, putting his ear to the door once again. He couldn't hear anything on the other side, so he nodded for Jenny to keep knocking.

She pounded on the door and then called out in a muffled voice. "Hello, hello! Anyone inside!"

They waited for someone to answer, but no one came. Randy put his hand on the ornate brass door handle and pulled gently. The door opened an inch as something shifted on the other side. Randy let go, yet the door didn't fall shut like he expected.

"It's not even locked," he said, glancing at his sister. "It feels like there's something on the other side."

"That's strange." Jenny pursed her lips to the side like she always did when she wasn't quite sure of something. "I don't want to open it, but I guess we should."

"Okay, you open one door, and I'll open the other." Randy grabbed the door handle on his side, and Jenny grabbed the one on hers. He nodded. "On three. One...two...three."

They pulled the doors open together in one smooth motion and held them apart. A waft of BD tendrils exploded from the church hall, and a pile of four mold-ridden bodies tumbled out.

Randy let go of the door handle and leapt over the side rail as Jenny screamed and danced down the stairs. Randy landed hard on the concrete with his hands coming down to break his fall. He raised his palms just before they scraped against the rough ground, balancing like a skier who'd just stuck a landing.

He spun to see Jenny standing in the middle of the road with her hands on her hips, shaking her head at the church. Randy joined her, limping on his stinging ankles.

"They were holding the door shut," Randy said. "But the BD still got inside."

The black tendrils were blowing in their direction, so Randy nudged his sister with his elbow. "Come on. Let's go." When she didn't immediately follow, Randy turned back to her. "What is it now?"

"Ally's parents. We have to make sure they're dead, or alive."

"Seriously, Jen?"

"We promised her we'd look."

Randy wanted to argue, though he knew it would be futile. Once Jenny had made a promise, an army couldn't stop her from seeing it through.

"We wait for that stuff to settle first," Randy said, taking her arm and pulling her away.

They backed up to the other side of the road while the BD floated down to streak across the gray concrete. Randy watched as one tendril landed near his shoe, the strange fungus spreading out and turning that red, agitated color.

After it settled, they moved to the front door, stepping around the bodies that had fallen out. Randy was hoping two of them were Ally's parents so they could move on from the place, then he corrected himself with a shake of his head. It would be much better if they weren't inside at all.

“Do you think you can even identify them?”

“I can,” Jenny said, stepping past the four bodies at the door and moving into the church.

It had been some time since Randy went to St. Joe’s, though he remembered it being modest in size with a large membership. As they stepped inside, Randy’s eyes adjusted to the dim illumination given off by overhead lights that hung from the ceiling. He gazed across the pews to the altar on the other side of the chamber rectory, and he swore he smelled the old wood of the place through his mask. The stained-glass windows blazed with the iconic images of saints and angels, and a sense of reverence settled on Randy’s shoulders.

Between the doors and the altar was the congregation. Randy estimated there were thirty or forty people spread out across the pews. Some lay in the aisle while others had collapsed over the backs of their seats, bodies contorted in BD. The fungus was streaked everywhere and had already begun spreading, floor to ceiling. Randy was amazed at how fast it grew, even in its less agitated state.

He turned his head to regain some of his composure even as Jenny stepped deeper inside the chamber. After a moment, he shook his head and followed her. His sister moved from corpse to corpse, leaning down to get a better view of their faces before moving on.

“Just don’t touch anyone,” Randy spoke loud enough for her to hear him through his mask.

Randy didn’t know Ally like Jenny did, and he knew the young woman’s parents even less. He followed Jenny down the center aisle, watching to make sure her suit didn’t get caught on anything.

She stopped at the third row from the front and studied a pair of bodies sitting up and leaning against each other in the pew. “Found them,” she said, stepping back.

Randy caught up with her and looked down at Ally’s parents. The pair were clutching one another, their heads hanging low, eyes closed tight. Randy noticed the black fungus around their mouths and noses.

“How are they so peaceful?” he said. “I mean, they were choking to death.”

“They knew what was happening,” his sister replied, “and they clung to each other in the end. They died with faith in their hearts.”

“I’m not sure faith had anything to do with—”

“It did, Randy.” Jenny’s eyes were red-rimmed as she glared at her brother. “They had faith in each other, and God. And that’s what I’ll tell Ally. That’s all that’s important.”

“All right, Jen.” Randy made a conciliatory gesture. “Don’t get mad at me.”

“I’m not.” She turned back to the dead couple. “I’m just...frustrated.”

“You and me both.”

Not wanting to upset his sister any further, Randy waited patiently while Jenny moved closer and inspected the two. She reached into Ally’s mother’s purse and hunted for something. When she found it, she put it into her plastic pocket and turned to Randy with a nod.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said.

Outside, they stood next to the pickup truck and leaned against the truck bed. It should have felt good to be out of the church, but Randy was still hot and sweating bad in his plastic suit. Salty moisture pooled up along the bottom of his mask, and his face itched like mad.

“We need to clean up a bit before we move on,” Randy said, staring at his arm where streaks of BD had settled on his plastic suit. “We’re absolutely covered in this stuff.”

“Okay, let’s bleach up,” Jenny agreed.

Randy grabbed a gallon of bleach, a bucket, and some sponges out of the back of the pickup. He poured some bleach into the bucket, dipped the sponge inside, and started wiping down

Jenny's plastic suit as she turned in a circle. They didn't know if the bleach killed the BD, though it seemed to do a good job of getting it off smooth surfaces. He inspected her suit for holes, making sure she wasn't compromised.

"You're good," Randy said.

"Your turn."

They switched positions and Jenny did the same for Randy. When they finished, Randy put the cleaning supplies back into the bed of the pickup, and they climbed inside with Randy behind the wheel.

He turned in his seat and gave his sister a firm stare. "Okay, do we keep looking around or head back to Ally's?"

"Let's check the library," Jenny said. "Then we'll go back to Ally's before heading home."

"All right."

Randy started the pickup truck and pulled away from St. Joseph's.

Chapter 21

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

Randy took a right on 4th Street, cruising up the block as his eyes scanned ahead for danger.

“It looks like the smoke is coming from the north part of town,” he said, watching five columns of smoke rising into the sky.

“Yeah. You think someone started setting people’s houses on fire?”

Randy shook his head. “No idea. Could be the gas lines, too. I mean, if almost everyone is dead, then who’s keeping the gas and power on? Who’s making sure it’s all running smooth?”

“I don’t imagine we’ll have gas and power for long.”

They drove past Ray’s Fireworks on their right. Like the Lunch Plate Diner, they’d pulled the window blinds shut tight and the sign on the front read CLOSED.

At the end of 4th Street, Randy turned left which put them on Seymour. It was the main strip that cut east to west through the center of town. It had gas stations, fast-food restaurants, a CVS drug store, and a bank.

As soon as they turned, Jenny rose in her seat and pointed ahead. “At least we’ll still have some kind of law and order around here.”

Randy almost didn’t believe his eyes. Two police officers stood at the corner entrance of the Newton County Jail. They wore dark blue coveralls with official markings and the name of the jail stenciled on the back. The officers wore air filtration masks and gloves for protection, and their thick police belts held holstered weapons, ammunition pouches, and batons.

Randy hit the gas and caused the engine to kick up, drawing the officers’ attention. One officer immediately raised his hand and stepped to the edge of the sidewalk. Randy pulled their truck up to the corner as Jenny rolled down her window.

The officer started to rest his hand on the upper door frame but pulled back when he saw the mold growth. He was a middle-aged man, clean shaved with strong, gray eyebrows. His blue eyes looked back and forth between the twins, sizing up their intentions.

“Hey, Sheriff Stans.” Jenny spoke loudly and clearly. “It’s Jenny and Randy Tucker.”

“I’d recognize that red hair anywhere,” Sheriff Stans said with the flash of a smile in his eyes. “How are you kids doing?”

“Surviving,” Randy said. “You have any idea what’s going on, sheriff?”

“You probably know as much as me,” Stans said. “The news says there are toxic clouds in the air. Emergency services contact can’t confirm if it’s a terrorist attack, but that’s what me and my officers think.”

“I think it came from the spraying,” Jenny said. “We were out in our yard when we saw Harvey’s plane go down.”

“All of his helicopters crashed, too, just after they started spraying.” Randy added to his sister’s story. “This huge black cloud came up. I call it BD. It stands for Big Death.”

The sheriff nodded as he digested the information. “How about your mom and dad? They doing okay?”

“They didn’t make it,” Jenny said, pausing to hold back tears. “They were out in the field when the spraying started. We barely got away ourselves.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Stans looked genuinely concerned, then he nodded to their plastic attire. “Pretty clever, you kids. Doesn’t surprise me you made it.”

“We have a decontamination room setup at the house,” Jenny said. “And it seems like bleach works great for getting it off our suits.” Her voice grew hopeful. “Sheriff, is there anyone else in town left alive? We just checked the church, but everyone’s dead. Our friend, Ally, heard people might be gathering at the library. So, we’re going there next.”

The sheriff’s expression grew grave. “To be honest, we haven’t had a chance to do much of anything since all this started. Only four of my officers reported in today, and just three of the jail staff. We’re doing everything we can to just hold down the fort here. We sealed off the old cell block, which has its own closed-air ventilation. The prisoners are all locked down, but this is an old cell block with old magnetic locks. Can’t tell you what will happen when the power goes out and the generators kick in. The lock safety mechanisms might work, or they might not.”

“That wouldn’t be good, sheriff,” Randy agreed.

“Well, we’ve got backup plans and ways of dealing with it, but it’s going to be hard being so understaffed.”

Randy nodded his understanding. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Actually, yes. I think you should check the library like you planned,” Stans said. “But as soon as you’re done there, I’d greatly appreciate it if you kids could round up some water and food supplies for us so I can keep all my officers on site. The inmates know something is up, and they’re getting riled.”

“Of course,” Randy said, looking at Jenny who was already nodding to the officer. “We’d be glad to help.”

The Sheriff let out an appreciative sigh. “That’s great, kids. I’d try the Food King and Dollar General. If you can’t find anything there, try the CVS Pharmacy. And if anyone gives you any trouble, tell them it’s by order of Sheriff Stans.

“You got it, sheriff,” Randy said with an enthusiastic nod, although he doubted there was anyone left alive to even give them any trouble.

The sheriff started to slap the top of the pickup, but drew his hand back with a shake of his head. Randy pulled the truck away from the curb and continued along Seymour.

“It’s a relief to know those guys made it,” Jenny said.

“I hadn’t even thought about the jail.” Randy replied, shaking his head. “The sheriff said the inmates were locked down, which means all of them must have survived the BD. Doesn’t seem fair they’re still alive when so many good folks have passed.”

“Just because they’re in the Newton County Jail doesn’t mean they deserve to die,” Jenny chided him.

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Sure you did,” Jenny said with some heat taken off her words. “But I get what you’re saying.”

They drove in silence as they reached 2nd Street and took a right. A block later, Randy pulled into the Kentland Library parking lot and pulled the truck to a stop.

“There’s some cars,” Jenny gestured at the lot. “Could be good.”

“Could be bad, too.” Randy gestured to a dead woman who had perished trying to get into her car, her body collapsed against the door.

They got out of the pickup and walked around the library, peering into the windows. The Kentland Library was a modern building, by Kentland Standards, and had newer windows and ventilation. The grounds were well-kept, with pristine landscaping and a flower garden marked with a short stone retaining wall. BD streaked the red brick walls and grass where the fungus had staked its claim.

“I don’t see anyone,” Jenny said as they worked their way to the front door.

Randy put his hand to the glass of the door and peered inside at the rows of bookshelves and the stairwell going up. Newer carpet covered the floor with a random, swirling design.

“I don’t see any dead bodies,” Randy said.

“We should go inside and check.” Jenny reached for the door handle.

“Don’t open that!” someone shouted as they crossed into Randy’s vision with their hand thrown up.

Jenny jerked away from the glass and put her hand to her chest. “Oh, it’s just Mrs. Brody,” Jenny said to Randy before turning back to the door. “Hey, Mrs. Brody!” Jenny waved. “It’s Randy and Jenny Tucker.”

Mary Brody was a thin, bookish woman in her late thirties. She wore jeans and a blouse with her name tag pinned to the breast. She’d pinned her blondish-gray hair to the top of her head.

“It’s so good to see you,” she called through the glass with obvious relief etched across her features. “You have no idea.”

“Is there anyone else inside with you?” Jenny asked.

“Yes, I have a handful of students from the reading club down in the basement.” The librarian looked outside at the fungus-covered grass. “We didn’t know what was happening outside, so we sealed up all the doors and locked them. How are you kids—”

Mrs. Brody’s eyes grew wide as she looked over Randy’s shoulder, and Randy caught a man’s reflection rushing at him in the glass.

He leapt aside just as a crowbar swung by and glanced the front door, causing spiderweb cracks in the glass from the point of impact. The man turned and brought up the crowbar again, but Randy put the flat of his boot into the man’s side and kicked him to the ground.

The short, stocky man looked sick and weak as he struggled to rise. He wore a Dickie’s work shirt with a dust mask covering his face. Randy didn’t recognize him, so he suspected it might be a truck driver passing through. Spots of fungus peppered the corners of his eyes and the front of his dust mask.

The man spoke but immediately broke into a fit of coughing. By the time he’d finished, bloody spittle stained the dust mask and dripped off his chin.

“Hey, man.” Randy held up his hands and backed away. “It looks like you need some help. Let us help you.”

“First, I need your mask,” the man said, stumbling forward as he gestured. “Your gas mask.”

“I don’t think that’s going to help you.” Randy backpedaled as he glanced over the man’s shoulder at Jenny. Her eyes were wide as she picked up one of the retaining wall bricks. “It might be better to get you to the hospital. Maybe someone—”

“Already...been.” The man struggled to talk, though his bloodshot eyes remained fixed on Randy’s mask. “Everyone’s dead. No masks.”

Randy didn’t doubt him. Iroquois Memorial was more of a glorified urgent care facility than a big city hospital, and they wouldn’t be prepared for something like BD.

“The girl can keep hers,” the man continued, waving the crowbar. “Just give me yours.”

“All right,” Randy said. He stopped walking backward so his sister could catch up. She was ten yards away, then five. She raised the stone high, eyes flashing to her brother as she closed in. “You can have my mask, dude. Just be cool—”

Jenny’s boots scuffed on the concrete sidewalk, and the man turned. His sister brought the stone down in a big, overhead swing that would have knocked out a bull. The man saw it coming and jerked away, swinging his crowbar low. The iron weapon struck Jenny in the ribs just as the

stone glanced hard across the man's temple and flew from Jenny's hands.

His sister stumbled back, clutching her stomach with a pained expression. Randy leapt forward with a cry, jerking the crowbar out of the man's hand and turning it on him. He struck wildly at the man, once, then again. The man backed up, raising his arms to protect himself beneath Randy's merciless barrage. His third blow struck the man's forearm, and Randy felt the hard bone crunch beneath the crowbar's weight.

His scream was cut off by a lung-wrenching cough. The man fell on his back, feet up and kicking as if that would protect him from Randy's wrath. Randy drew back the weapon to strike again.

"Randy! Stop! Randy, I'm okay!"

He halted, mid swing, and looked over his shoulder at Jenny. She rubbed the plastic over her stomach, but otherwise seemed fine.

"Did your suit get ripped?" he asked her, pointedly.

"Not at all." She shook her head. "Seriously, I've taken harder hits from us wrestling. Just don't kill the guy."

"I wasn't going to..." Randy's words drifted off as he realized he very well might have if his sister hadn't stopped him.

Randy looked down at the man writhing on the ground. He held his arm to his chest, eyes glaring up at Randy.

Randy pointed the crowbar at him. "You try something like that again, and I won't stop."

Then he left the man lying on the ground and strode back to the library doors.

Jenny walked beside her brother, sparing a glance back. "Should we try to help him?"

"Nope," Randy said. "We don't help people who try to kill us."

"Hey, Mrs. Brody," Randy said, coming up to the window. "Sorry about that."

The librarian still had her hand covering her mouth. Her eyes lingered on the man lying in the grass.

"Mrs. Brody!" Randy forced his words through the mask and glass, and the woman tore her eyes from the yard and focused on him.

"Sorry, Randy."

"It's okay," Randy said, taking some edge out of his tone. "I'm just thinking of a way to get you out of there, but you might be in the safest place in town."

"Every place is like this?" Mrs. Brody gestured outside at the fungus.

"Pretty much," Randy said, apologetically. "We should probably start with air filtration masks for you. I'm just not sure how to get them inside to you without letting in the fungus."

"Maybe we can use the book drop," Mrs. Brody said, moving to the side and gesturing at the big bin that swung out from the front of the building.

Randy could pull it open and drop the supplies inside without having to use the front door. If they set up some plastic on the other side, they could bleach any incoming goods before moving them in to the library proper. It would be tricky, though it would cut down on any of the fungus spores getting inside.

"Not a bad idea," Randy said, and he explained how they could make the book drop safe. "It would be great if you found some clear plastic bags or tarp like what we have." Randy held up his arm to show her the thicker plastic he was wearing. "If not, we can probably find you some."

"I'll check." The librarian's expression was grateful. "Thank you kids so much for doing this."

"No problem," Randy said.

“In the meantime, we’ll go collect some things from around town,” Jenny said. “For you and Sheriff Stans.”

“Be careful out there!” Mrs. Brody gave a tentative wave.

Randy exchanged a smile with his sister. Despite the tense exchange with the man in the Dickie’s shirt, and their hopeless situation, it felt good to be doing something productive.

“Looks like we’ve got our work cut out for us,” Randy said.

He still held the crowbar tight in his grip in case the Dickie’s man tried to give them any more trouble. Yet, when they turned around, he was gone.

Chapter 22

Moe Tsosie, Flagstaff, Arizona

Gunshots startled Moe from a troubled sleep full of ominous clouds and screaming people. Another burst of fire rattled off before he realized it wasn't part of a dream.

He sat up, swung his feet off the bed, and opened his eyes, immediately wincing away from a swath of sunlight that shined through his truck windows. Was it morning already? It seemed like he'd just given the children to the officer and returned to his rig to wait out the traffic. Two hours had turned into five until Moe gave up and laid down for a short nap.

No one had beat on his window to tell him to move his truck, and Gator hadn't called on the CB. That meant he still sat in the parking lot of traffic.

Moe raised up and leaned forward between the seats, putting his hand up like a visor. The lengthy lines of traffic remained, though the crowd up front by the officers had grown to two hundred people. Someone hollered something over a bullhorn, and another gunshot fired off.

"Are they shooting into the sky?" Moe wondered, peering ahead.

He sat back, put on his tennis shoes, and listened to his rumbling stomach. Moe leaned to the side and opened his mini-fridge, taking out the only bottled water that remained. He'd thrown the rest of his dry food storage out at the A&B Truck Wash back in Barstow. He popped the top and had a long drink.

"That'll have to do for now," he mumbled as he climbed forward into the driver's seat of his rig. He looked at the clock, and it read 2:54 p.m.

He'd slept the entire day away!

Moe checked his CB radio and realized he'd turned it almost all the way down. That explained why the chatter hadn't awoken him.

Turning the volume up, Moe picked the CB off the dashboard and put it to his lips. "Gator, this is Wildcat. You got your ears on?"

"Hey, Wildcat," Gator replied with a trucker's twang. "I've been calling you all morning. I wondered how the drop off went with those kids."

"They're fine." A half-grin worked its way onto Moe's lips. "I gave them over to a caring mama bear who took them to town. They should be okay."

"Great news, Wildcat. I'll bet you're wondering what's going on."

"That's right," Moe replied. "I slept the day away."

"I guess the fireworks woke you up."

Moe nodded. "I heard the shots."

"Well, the natives are getting restless," Gator said. "They want through, and I can't say I blame them. I'm getting antsy myself."

"Any reason you suspect the bears are keeping us here?"

"None that I can think of. Except they don't want us running into the mess out east."

"So, that wasn't just a news nightmare?"

"Nope. The entire east coast and most of the Midwest dropped off the radar. I'd assume Ft. Collins, Denver, and Albuquerque are next to go."

"Could be," Moe agreed. "But it's not like I'm heading that way."

"I hear what you're saying, Wildcat, but we don't have a say in the matter."

Moe glanced in his side mirror and caught a group of three dozen men approaching between

the vehicles. They each carried a rifle or handgun, jostling each other as they glared toward the front of the traffic line. Moe edged back in his seat as they passed. One man glanced up at Moe. His set jaw and intense eyes made Moe's stomach clench. He'd seen that look on many soldiers' faces just before an inevitable confrontation.

"Just for your information," Moe said. "There are approximately thirty armed men making their way up front. You should spot them in a few seconds."

"More fireworks?" Gator asked in a voice filled with tension.

"Affirmative."

"Reckon we should get out and try to mediate?" Gator asked.

"I can't see the sense in that," Moe replied as the last man passed him. "They seem serious, and I hadn't planned on becoming Swiss cheese today."

"Watch and wait mode, then." Gator paused as the armed men walked past his truck. Then he came back, "I see what you mean, Wildcat. Looks like the start of something bad."

The men reached the crowd of two-hundred people at the front of the line. Bystanders backed away at the sight of the men and their guns, giving them plenty of room as they dispersed into the throng.

Moments passed as the crowd grew agitated. The bullhorn noise increased.

Louder gunshots spat from the front of the line, and a chill spread from Moe's gut to the rest of his body. His hand shook where it rested on the wheel.

"Reckon that's from one of the military folks?" Gator asked.

"I'm former military," Moe said, staring at the crowd. "Those were just warning shots. The .50 caliber rounds will be next."

"Oh, no," Gator said.

"Oh, no is right," Moe replied as his chest tightened. "Stand by, Gator. Things are about to get ugly."

Moe didn't want to be right. He hoped beyond all hope he was wrong. He watched the events unfold as if he were sitting on his couch back home, viewing live news coverage of a war on television.

The crowd grew more agitated. Someone yelled through the bullhorn. Several police sirens chirped in warning. Moe gripped the wheel as a single shot rang out, and then another. Three rifle bursts sounded, and the crowd pressed forward toward the line of cruisers and the Humvee.

As if it had been waiting to bite, the .50 caliber gun ripped off a long line of rounds, and the crowd flew into motion. Some scattered to the sides of the road while mobs rushed the line. The second .50 caliber weapon blasted from the other side of the expressway, cross-firing into the mob of people. Rounds penetrated to the back of the crowd and chewed people to bits.

Moe closed his eyes with the images of spraying blood and flying body parts imprinted on the backs of his eyelids.

"You see what I'm seeing, Wildcat?"

"Yeah," Moe whispered with his mouth to the CB.

And then the .50 caliber weapon fire stopped. Moe lifted his head from the wheel and saw people had overrun the Humvees. The victors stood on top, jumping up and down and shaking their fists in the air. Several vehicles pushed forward through the scattering crowd, running them over in a sudden surge of rolling steel.

A van crashed between two police cruisers and pushed its way through. Two more vehicles followed, and soon, a steady stream of traffic flowed between them, heading east.

"I'm going through," Gator said, and Moe watched as Gator's truck ticked forward a few

feet. "Wish me luck."

"Wait, Gator. There are people up there."

"People or not. I'm not sticking around to see where this goes."

The .50 caliber gun fired again, and Moe peered at the armored Humvee on his side of the expressway. The person manning the weapon had turned it toward the ramp and was firing on police and military positioned there.

"That's not good," Moe said to himself as police on the ramp returned small arms fire. Their rounds wouldn't dent the Humvee, and the person could sit up there and fire with abandon until they ran out of ammunition.

The flow of traffic continued around the armored vehicle, though people passing through came in direct line of fire between the police and the .50 caliber weapon.

Vehicles plowed into the cruisers on the left, opening a second way through. Cars and trucks surged around the Humvee on that side, keen to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

"I'll knock that Hummer out of the way," Gator announced.

Moe watched as the big rig pulled forward, cars surging around it as Gator headed straight for the Humvee.

"Negative, Gator," Moe called into the CB. "Stay where you are."

Gator didn't reply, and his rig picked up speed.

The traffic in front of Moe inched forward. He situated his feet on his pedals, pushed the brake and clutch, and started his truck. The rig roared to life and settled into a quiet purr.

Having enormous trucks, Moe and Gator would be perfect targets. Still, Moe eased his rig forward. He didn't have to run the gauntlet, only be closer to the front when the combatants ran out of ammo.

"Hold back, Gator," Moe called into his CB. If anything, Gator's truck picked up speed.

"Negative, Wildcat," Gator said, his voice firm with determination. "The nuts have ousted their jailers and taken control of the asylum. We need to break through."

Gator aimed his rig toward the back end of the Humvee. The military vehicle was heavy, though the tractor truck should have no problem moving it aside. The person sitting in the turret spotted Gator coming, and they turned the weapon on him, pressing down on the trigger and firing into Gator's face. The big rig shuddered as the massive rounds tore through the cab, and the truck drifted to the left as it picked up speed.

Gator's truck nipped the back of the Humvee and jolted it aside before rolling down the expressway. Judging by how it angled out of control, Gator was hurt.

"Gator, you there? Gator?"

When the man didn't respond, Moe's jaw clenched, and he sped his truck to up thirty miles per hour. By then, traffic had thinned, and some drivers passed him. Moe gained speed, shooting for the gap on the left. His truck vibrated as bodies rolled beneath his wheels, and he tried not to imagine some of them still being alive.

The person behind the .50 caliber gun looked like a normal man wearing a button up shirt, though the deteriorating situation had turned him into a violent killer. He swung the machine gun in Moe's direction.

Moe threw up his hands to show he wouldn't ram the man, but the man only grinned and pressed the trigger. Moe closed his eyes and waited to die, but no rounds shattered his front window or chewed up the grill of his truck.

Raising his eyelids a fraction, Moe saw the man glare at his empty weapon before he reached below for more ammunition. The man had been so intent on firing, he hadn't realized he'd run

out.

Police fire rained down on the Humvee, and the man ducked as he drew a string of bullets out of an ammunition box and tried to load the weapon.

Moe aimed his truck toward the back end of the Humvee and shifted into fourth gear. He slammed his foot on the gas as the rig engine roared. The truck slammed into the Humvee hard and rattled the man in the turret. Moe glanced into his right-side mirror as police bullets ripped through the man's body and left him hanging lifeless on the Humvee's roof.

With a satisfied grunt, Moe pulled into the center of the road and joined the traffic flow. He glanced out his side mirror as he passed Gator's truck where it had gone off the road and crashed into the low brush. The truck driver lay back in his seat covered in blood, and Moe closed his eyes and whispered a Navajo prayer for the dead.

Chapter 23

Moe Tsosie, Jack Rabbit Road, Arizona

Five hours later, Moe took the exit ramp for Jack Rabbit Road and pulled to a stop in a squeal of brakes at the bottom of the hill. The area looked deserted, and that suited Moe just fine. It beat waiting at another police-enforced roadblock like he had at Holbrook, forcing Moe to turn around and head west on I-40 back to Exit 269. Expressway traffic remained manic in both directions as travelers searched for ways home or wallowed in the furious tides of a broken humanity.

He'd seen a dozen fights and more car wrecks than he could count. Hundreds of people squatted in makeshift shelters on the side of the expressway next to their broken-down vehicles. In the meantime, cell phone service had failed. No, fate would not deliver him home to Chinle that evening, so he might as well have a beer and relax at one of the oldest hangouts on the route.

He took a left and passed beneath I-40 to run smack into Old US-66. A tourist trading post lay far down the road on his left, but Moe sought a different establishment. He pulled his rig straight across US-66 and rattled onto a dirt road that guided him past a smattering of broken-down homes and overgrown brush.

The road ended in the cracked blacktop parking lot of a place called Coyote's. Old gas pumps rested in the middle of the lot, covered by a dilapidated awning and half-hung gas sign. The equipment hadn't worked in years, and the tanks had long ago run dry.

All Moe wanted was company and a quiet place to spend a few hours. He parked his rig next to the only other truck in the lot, an old blue Mack R Series. Moe turned off his rig and climbed out, his back and legs aching from hours of hard driving and an uncomfortable night of sleep on his mattress base.

Coyote's was a single-story tavern of the worst sort. Its dilapidated exterior begged for a fresh paint job and siding replacement, though it used to be a deep gray color.

The Coyote's sign glowed with dirty light, and Moe noticed a collection of dead bugs lying on the bottom. With a fond sigh, Moe pulled open the front door and entered.

The air inside was the same temperature as outside except for the additional aroma of Marlboros and stale beer. Its interior decor resembled something plucked out of a 1970s movie, complete with wood-paneled walls, old neon beer signs, and a deer head hanging above the pool room entrance.

The other trucker sat at the end of the bar, staring up at a fifteen-inch television surrounded by decades-old knick knacks. He looked like the friendly but quiet type, more interested in minding his own business than being bothered.

"Hey, Rocko," Moe waved to the giant bartender. "It's good to see you, brother."

"Moe Tsosie," Rocko called out, grinning from ear to ear. "Good to see you, my friend!"

One of the biggest men Moe had ever seen, Rocko stood six-feet five-inches tall and wore a thick mop of black hair flecked with gray. He boasted a rich Hopi heritage, though he did not practice the ways of his people. Still, Moe appreciated the man's peaceful spirit.

Rocko came out from behind the bar and embraced Moe with a hard pat on the back. "How are you, Moe? I didn't think I would ever see you again."

Moe chuckled with grim humor and shook his head. "It's nuts out there. I've had to outrun toxic clouds and crazy drivers, and someone tried to shoot a .50 caliber gun at me."

“That’s quite a day you’ve had,” Rocko said. “Sit down. I’ll get you a beer, and you can tell me all about it.”

“Sounds good.”

“This is my friend,” Rocko gestured at the other trucker as he resumed his position behind the bar. “I don’t know his name, but he pays his tab.”

Moe nodded to the rough-looking fellow, and the man nodded back. Moe chose a bar stool in the middle, threw a leg over it, and sat down. A bottle of beer landed in front of him, and Moe picked it up and drank deep, enjoying the cold numbness that blossomed in his throat.

“Oh, that’s good,” Moe smacked his lips and set the bottle down. “Much appreciated.”

“So, tell me about your day,” Rocko grinned as he swiped a dry rag across the bar.

Moe recounted his escape from Bakersfield, detailing the toxic cloud and every car crash he witnessed. Then he launched into how he’d picked up the two kids before landing in the expressway parking lot outside of Flagstaff. Moe related how he’d met Gator, turned the kids over to the police, and described the escalating violence as the mob rushed the police line. The last part ended with Gator dying as he tried to ram the Humvee to disable the wild gunman.

Rocko’s jaw dropped as Moe told his hellish tale. “You are one lucky man, Moe. It sounds like you could have died at least a half-dozen times.”

“At least,” Moe agreed with a sip of beer. “How have things been here?”

Rocko gestured. “As you see them, my friend. Dead quiet.

“We always said if the world ended, Coyote’s would be the last place to go.”

“You’ve got that right!” Rocko chuckled, already passing Moe another beer.

The three men watched TV in silence as news reports came in from all over the States. The east remained black and reports out of California were grim. Rocko flipped through the channels until he came across a Flagstaff station, where a camera panned around at the expressway carnage.

Remnants of vehicles lay crashed and dismantled. Bodies spread across the expressway in gruesome display, and the news channel did not try to hide them. It looked like a war zone from some other country, not the United States of America.

“Whoa!” Rocko said. “Is that what you drove through, brother?”

“That’s it,” Moe said. He glimpsed the armored Humvee in the eastbound lane and Gator’s truck lying in a ditch farther up the road.

Tears filled Moe’s eyes and flowed unbidden down his cheeks.

“It’s truly overwhelming, man,” Rocko reached across and patted Moe’s shoulder. “I would not have believed it if you weren’t here to confirm it.”

“Believe it, brother,” Moe sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “It’s real, and it will soon destroy us all.”

“Was it terrorists?” Rocko asked.

“No.” Moe took a deep breath. “One broadcast said this mess was man made, some side effect of crop spraying.”

“Do you agree with that?”

Moe remembered how he’d force-sprayed the resilient fungus off the side of his truck at the A&B Truck Wash. “I agree with it, yes. We did this to ourselves.”

Rocko swiped his bar rag across the woodgrain surface. “Well, I hope they find the people who did it and make them pay.”

“Me, too,” Moe said.

“So, what are you going to do?” Rocko asked.

“I’ll let the dust settle and then head home to Chinle,” Moe said. “I need to see if my people are okay. And if things stay this bad, we’ll need to deal with the problem when it reaches our towns. How about you?” Moe gestured around. “Will you go down with the ship?”

“Hell yes,” Rocko said with a ridiculous grin, then his expression sobered. “I’ve got family up in First Mesa, but I haven’t seen them in years. The Coyote has been my life for a long time. I can’t imagine ever leaving it.”

“Okay if I stay a day or two?”

“My house is yours, brother,” Rocko threw his arms wide and let them fall at his sides. He looked at the quiet truck driver at the end of the bar. “That goes for you too, friend.”

The man nodded and shook his empty beer bottle. Rocko snatched a fresh bottle from his cooler, popped the top, and slid it down, leaving a trail of perspiration behind.

Moe let his eyes linger on the cool droplets before lifting his eyes to the terrible devastation on the television screen, and he wondered if he had the will to live through it.

Chapter 24

Bishop Shields, Ft. Collins, Colorado

Bishop Shields pushed the big Home Depot cart through the store, ticking things off the list Kim had given him. He'd already been to the air filtration mask department and scored a half-dozen masks. Three for normal use, and three as backups. He didn't think it was being too greedy since he'd left another few dozen on the rack. His family came first, and it was his job to keep them protected when the spore clouds rolled in.

He moved to the pleated furnace air filters next. Kim had told him to grab as many of those as possible, especially the high-grade ones most suited for picking small particulates out of the air. He grabbed ten of those, leaving four, then grabbed a handful of dust masks before he moved on to the other items.

He picked up plastic tarps, dozens of tubes of caulking, rolls of tape, several gallons of disinfectant soap, bleach, rubber gloves, and scrubbers. On a whim, he navigated to the coverall section and was surprised to find several high-grade Tyvek coveralls in stock. Kim had mentioned regular stores rarely kept the good ones on-hand, though he might get lucky.

"Bingo," he grinned, sorting through the various sizes to see if they had one that would fit him. Bishop was a large man, standing six-feet four-inches tall and weighing two hundred and forty-five pounds. He kept in shape and had the shoulders of a defensive end. That was because he played the position at the University of Kentucky for two years until a back injury had caused him to miss his last two seasons.

They didn't have any in his size, but he picked up two for the kids and grabbed one as a backup.

All finished with his shopping, Bishop pushed his cart to the checkout line and rang up over a thousand dollars' worth of goods. He pushed the heavy cart out to his Lincoln SUV, drawing stares from people who wouldn't have been able to budge the cart much less push it up the slight incline to the car.

He felt much better after getting everything inside his vehicle. The family should have enough filter material to cover the vents, and plenty of plastic and cleaning supplies to set up a clean area.

If it hadn't been for Kim, he wouldn't have been reminded of what to do. Certainly, he'd written his pandemic series two years ago, though most of that knowledge had gone out the window.

Despite being a little more prepared, a twang of nervous tension grew in his chest. Taking the phone out of his pocket, he tried to call Kim. The line gave a disconnected signal that added to the tension.

Part of him wanted to pick up the kids and drive east to the capitol and put his wife safely in the car with them. But the sensible part of him knew that Kim was well within the "cloud zone," as the local news teams had mentioned, and it would be suicide driving into it.

The fungus was springing up all over the world. Flights were shutting down, and travel warnings ran as tickers on every television broadcast. There was even rumor of an outbreak in California that originated from a batch of contaminated produce.

The anxiety was spreading through the city like wildfire. People entering the Home Depot moved at a quickened pace. Their eyes darted everywhere as they hurried to beat the larger mobs

that were sure to come. It wasn't quite panic, but the brink of it.

Bishop got into the Lincoln, started it, and headed back home to drop off his newly purchased items. He wanted the kids to sort through it and organize the house to build their clean areas. While the kids did that, Bishop planned on fighting the crowds at the grocery stores to stock up on as much food as possible. He couldn't shake the feeling that everything he did, no matter how small, would play a direct role in their survival. And he'd do anything to ensure their safety.

Chapter 25

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim fried her brain working on the synthesis maps for Tom; she hadn't done such intense work in years. It had been over twenty-four hours since he'd given her the task, and she was just about finished with the final sequence. Once complete, she and Dr. Flannery would work on creating vials of solutions to try on their CDC patient.

The only sleep she'd gotten was five hours of fitful slumber on her hard mattress after she'd turned the maps over to Alison at the CDC in Atlanta to run her simulations. Alison had mock-tested Tom and Kim's solutions against the *Asphyxia* model they were building in the CDC database. So far, the results seemed promising.

As she worked, Kim watched a side monitor as dark and depressing stories came in from all around the world. *Asphyxia* had spread to over a hundred countries, and governmental agencies were fighting to produce a solution.

Airports had shut down in the United States right away, and China, India, and most of Europe quickly followed. Shipping ports were also shutting down around the world, with shiploads of produce and trade goods left sitting in docks to rot until the authorities got in and inspected them.

The world was crumbling through their fingers, and Kim felt too small to stop it. At the same time, she'd been watching yesterday when CDC Field Unit Three had found the little girl named Fiona sitting unaffected in a room full of corpses. The girl had showed no outward signs of infection, and her lungs seemed to have a high resistance to the *Asphyxia* toxin. While Kim's heart had gone out to Fiona, it gave her hope for the world. Perhaps the immunity Fiona demonstrated might help to find a cure.

"Hello, Kim," Tom said.

Kim glanced at the monitor she normally used to communicate with him, but he wasn't there. Tom chuckled. "I'm outside."

Kim's eyes lifted to see Tom standing on the other side of the glass with his hands clasped behind his back and a pleased, but tired, expression on his face. "What brings you all the way down here, Tom? Another blood test?"

"Not quite. All of your blood tests were negative. I'm here to see if you're ready to come out of quarantine."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Tom nodded. "If you were afflicted with *Asphyxia*, you'd know it by now."

"In that case," Kim gave a small fist pump. "I'm ready." She looked around at her electronic tablet and her computer setup, which she'd become intimate with over the last two days. "What about my computer things? I'm right in the middle of finishing the last synthesis map."

"The room I'm moving you to has the same setup. It's right off the commons area, so you'll have access to all the snacks and coffee you'd ever need without calling on me to get them for you.

"Sold." Kim gave him an enthusiastic nod.

"Leave your quarters and go down the hall to examination room C."

Kim exited her room, skipping down the hallway to the examination room where the doctor was waiting outside in light Tyvek coveralls.

"Have a seat on the table."

Kim kicked off her slippers and removed her shirt. The doors slid open and Tom stepped in. Tom held up a hand. "It's unnecessary to get completely undressed."

With a nod, Kim pulled her shirt back on and hopped up on the table.

Tom stopped in front of her, and his eyes moved along her face and down to her neck.

"Have you noticed any lesions or spore growth on your skin?"

Kim shook her head convincingly. "No, and I've been looking."

"Hold out your hands."

Kim held out her hands, and the doctor brought his gloved hands up beneath them. He inspected her fingernails and then flipped her hands over to stare at her palms. He did the same with her feet, looking between her toes and checking her heels.

It had been some time since Kim's first interview with Tom, and she forgot how big the man was. He wasn't muscular but had a thick body shape some men often get when they reach middle age.

He checked her breathing with a stethoscope and then finished with a quick examination of her back, ears, nose, and throat before he stepped back and removed his own mask.

"I'll trust you on the rest." He smiled and slapped his hands lightly against her shoulders. "You're free."

"Thanks, Tom," Kim said, hopping off the table and sliding back into her slippers. "I probably need some real clothes now."

Tom motioned for her to follow, and together they left the examination room and moved down a hallway toward the control center. "You can raid someone's locker. I noticed several gym bags lying around. As a general rule, we always have spare clothes on hand in the event our clothing is compromised and needs to be disposed of."

"It was the same back at Ft. Collins," Kim acknowledged.

"If we need to snip someone's lock, that's what we'll do. I doubt any of our fellow CDC employees will mind. I don't think they're coming back." Tom's smile barely tugged at the corners of his mouth. His eyes remained sad.

"We won't know until I get out there in the field and check, Tom." Kim tried to sound hopeful. "I'm sure someone is alive out there."

"I hope you're right," Dr. Flannery said. "Okay. Help me with the last of the mapping, then you can poke your head outside and have a look around. We just don't want you getting hurt before Fiona arrives."

"Fair enough, Tom," Kim agreed. "When is she due?"

"They were bringing her by chopper, so she should be close. But we have to take into consideration the circumstances. There could be delays."

"I lost contact with Talby after watching them bring her in," Kim said. "If they're not here in the next few hours, can I get your authorization to have a field unit search for them?"

"You don't need my permission, Kim," Tom said. "Do what's necessary to bring that girl in."

They approached a heavy steel door that divided the quarantine wing from the rest of the lab. Tom pressed his ID against the reader, watching as it turned green. He gestured for Kim to do the same. "Swipe in here or your ID won't work anywhere else in the facility. We frown on tailgaters."

"Understood." Kim took her ID out of her pocket and pressed it to the badge reader.

It flashed a brighter green to show her authorization. Tom hit another button for the door release, and the heavy steel slab slid away. Tom led Kim across the threshold and stopped at the

next intersection.

He indicated a hall leading away. “Your room is the first door on the left before the commons area. Fuel up if you have to, then join me in the control center ASAP.”

“I’d like to look at the patient, first.”

“She isn’t in the best condition.”

Kim put her hands on her hips and faced the man. “I’ve seen some rough stuff, Tom. I don’t think you can faze me at this point.”

Tom gestured for her to follow him in the other direction, down a hall labeled “CDC Control Center.”

They passed a dozen doors on either side of the hall before reaching the control center at the very end. They swiped in with their IDs and also placed their hands inside a hand reader as a second form of verification.

“Just an extra precaution,” Tom said as the door slid open with a quiet hiss of compressed air.

They entered a circular room with high-definition monitors and computer stations set around the outside. In the center was a row of high-tech gear. Kim counted five other doors in the room besides the entrance, though she couldn’t remember where any of them led.

The control center was the hub of the facility, and from what Kim remembered, everything branched off from there in a spoke-like pattern. If one were looking down on the layout like the face of a clock, Medical and Labs were on the north side of the control center from eleven o’clock to one o’clock, Quarantine was two o’clock to six o’clock, and the commons and staff quarters were seven o’clock to ten.

And they were just on Sub Level One. Kim had no idea what secrets the lower levels held.

“This way.” Tom angled for a set of double doors labeled MEDICAL | LAB on the far side of the chamber.

Kim had been through this section of the facility during her previous tour, and she wasn’t any less impressed with the place. The tiles were immaculate, the walls precisely labeled, and nozzles and cameras set into the ceiling for both human and microbial security. After thirty yards, they came to a fork that designated Medical to the left and Lab to the right. They took the left-hand fork for Medical.

Tom turned toward her as he walked. “We reserve this section for the rare instance we have a patient.”

“Most of the patients we treat would be at hospitals,” Kim acknowledged. “So we wouldn’t receive many here.”

“Not since the 2008 outbreak.”

“The 2008 outbreak?” Kim’s brow furrowed, thinking Dr. Flannery must be mistaken. “I don’t remember that one.”

“You can’t Google it. It’s still classified, although I’m not sure any of that matters now.”

Kim’s jaw dropped before she clamped it shut again. It shouldn’t surprise her that the government might have buried an outbreak, or several, given how the mainstream media outlets blew news out of proportion.

Tom took a quick left into an observation room and came to stand in front of a large window with his hands clasped behind his back. Kim followed, albeit more hesitantly. The observation section was a thin rectangle of space with only room to stand. The patient’s section was wide and brightly lit. An enormous examination table sat in the center of the room with the patient resting on top, arms at her sides. Vital monitors stood around the head of the table, and Kim saw that the

patient seemed stable but for an elevated pulse.

Kim's eyes lowered to the woman. She gasped and retreated a step. Then she returned to the glass and tried to see the patient with a scientific eye.

Tom had changed the woman into a patient's gown, had rested her head on a pillow, and combed her hair back from her head. A breathing tube protruded from her mouth. Several thin, crimson mycelium threads grew upward to twist around the apparatus. Dark fuzzy patches spotted her mouth and sprung from her nose, and there was even some reddish fuzz coming out of her ears and growing across her earlobes.

"Damn." Kim gulped. "It's...it's unbelievable."

"That's what I meant when I said you'd know if you had it."

"What's her name?"

"Samantha Rogers. She was one of our low-level lab techs. Good tech. Always on the spot when you needed her."

Kim swallowed hard as the unfairness of it all hit her in the gut. "We can save her."

"We're sure going to try," Tom said. "I need you to finish that last mapping, then we'll start administering the solutions."

"Consider it done." Kim set her jaw and placed her hands against the glass.

Ten minutes later, Kim was in her new office sitting in front of three monitors that buzzed to life. She had a mini carafe of coffee and some energy bars at her side. It would take her another four hours to finish the last mapping, and the faster she got started, the faster she would be done.

Kim pulled her long brown hair through a soft ponytail holder and got into her work. She paused, wanting to give her husband a call before she plunged down the rabbit hole.

She clicked the phone icon on her desktop and called Bishop. Her speakers made a faint buzzing noise and then bleated a disconnected tone. Kim's eyebrows furrowed. While she hoped it was just temporary, she knew full well it could be a permanent disconnection, and she might not talk to her husband and kids for an unknown length of time.

She tried her parents and brother next. The three lived close together in Fayette County, just outside of Lexington, Kentucky. None of them picked up.

"I should have called them sooner," Kim said with a disappointed note.

A tear ran down her cheek, and emotions threatened to overwhelm her. She was used to being away from her family for a week or two at a time. The job demanded it. But the world had become dangerously unstable, and the chances of things returning to normal were fading with every passing hour.

Fist clenched on her desk, Kim promised herself that she would see her family again. But she had a duty to fulfill, a responsibility to the remaining citizens of the United States, of the world, and those she loved.

Kim wiped the tear off her face and plunged into her work.

Chapter 26

Jessie Talby, somewhere in Pennsylvania

Jessie sat in the crew section of the UH-1N Iroquois as they flew over the rolling Pennsylvania landscape toward Washington. Jessie wore a communications headset, though she was less interested in the radio chatter and more focused on keeping Fiona comfortable.

The girl clung to Jessie's arm, wide-eyed but curious as she looked through the windows at the sky. Jessie and Fiona were the only two in the expansive crew area, and Jessie swallowed down a lump of nervousness in the seemingly haunted space.

In the rush to get Fiona to Washington, the UH-1N had set down after another mission long enough to get the two onboard before taking to the skies once more.

Once airborne, only the high whine of the engine filled her head, broken up by the occasional pilot to base chatter.

Jessie leaned over toward the girl and flashed her a hesitant smile. "Have you ever ridden in a helicopter before?"

The little girl shook her head.

"It's pretty cool, huh?"

Fiona continued shaking her head, exaggerating the movement.

"I'm so sorry, Fiona," Jessie tried to apologize. "I promise we're going someplace safe."

"Where?"

"Washington DC," Jessie said. "Ever heard of that?"

Fiona hadn't stopped shaking her head yet, and Jessie's latest question didn't stop her.

"Well, Washington is pretty cool. A lady named Kim Shields wants to see you. I don't know her...Well, I know *of* her. We work in the same department."

Fiona lifted her face to Jessie, eyes narrowed with trouble.

Jessie realized Fiona wasn't actually looking at her but a trail of smoke wafting through the cabin. Jessie raised her eyes and detected more sooty smoke blasting in from cracks in the roof.

At the same time, the regular whine of the engine took on a strained note. The helicopter lifted and then dropped again, causing Jessie's stomach to leap into her throat.

"What's wrong?" Fiona asked,

"I don't know." Jessie cast her eyes toward the front of the aircraft where the pilot appeared to struggle with the stick. She pressed her finger to her earpiece to enable the talk function.

"Pilot, is everything okay up there?"

"Keep the line clear, Talby." The pilot sounded professional, though the tension in his voice caused Jessie's stomach to twist again.

The pilot fought with the aircraft for another twenty seconds before his frantic call came over the radio waves. "Chopper One to base. Mayday. I repeat, Mayday...struggling...drive shaft malfunction..."

The helicopter stopped moving forward and hovered. After a pause, it spun to the right and then banked downward.

Fiona and Jessie shouted at the same time, and Jessie twisted and threw her arms around the girl. The chopper spun faster until Jessie had no doubt they were going down.

Teeth clenched against the incredible spinning G-forces, Jessie closed her eyes and squeezed the girl tighter. "Hold on, Fiona! I've got you!"

They hit with a jarring impact, causing Jessie to grunt as the wind was driven from her lungs. *Just hold on to the girl, she thought, hold on with everything you've got.*

Jessie and Fiona dragged the helicopter pilot away from the burning wreckage, still dazed with disbelief.

“Come on!” Jessie looked up to see Fiona grunting in her air filtration mask as she jerked at the pilot’s jump suit while Jessie held the man below his shoulders and pulled using her back and legs. “Just a few more yards.”

It probably wasn’t right to move him, especially if he had a neck injury, but they had to get him away from the wreckage in case the chopper blew up.

“Okay, this is good,” Jessie said after they’d dragged the pilot to a clear patch of long grass where no *Asphyxia* grew. She eyed the helicopter where the fire licked up higher from the engine. “I’ll get my pack out of there.”

“No, stay here,” Fiona whined, grabbing her hand.

Jessie knelt down next to the girl. “That’s got my water system and other things we’ll need. I’ll be right back.”

She sprinted toward the burning helicopter and climbed up into the crew area through the partially open side door. Her pack was laying between the seats along with some other gear. Jessie started to unbuckle the pack, though she struggled with one buckle where the prong was bent.

“Jessie, the fire is getting higher!” Fiona shouted. “Hurry!”

Jessie heard the flames kick up, and the smoke grow thicker. In her mind, she saw herself blowing up, her body flying into a thousand pieces as shrapnel tore through her. Her fingers bent the prong straight, and she unbuckled the gear and removed it.

Sprinting back to Fiona, Jessie turned just as the engine casing sputtered and blew outward, sending bits of debris into the air as Jessie pulled Fiona down. It wasn’t the huge explosion Jessie had imagined, though she could have been hurt or killed if she’d lingered another moment.

Once the debris settled, Jessie crawled over to the pilot and checked his injuries. He bled from a shoulder wound where a piece of shrapnel had become lodged, yet his pulse was still strong. His respirator remained on his face, though the faceplate had a crack.

Glancing up through her air filtration mask at the aircraft where it rested partially on its nose, Jessie couldn’t believe they’d survived.

The irony of their fate stung Jessie. It wouldn’t be *Asphyxia* that killed them, but some equipment malfunction. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise given the reduced crews and their stress levels over the past seventy-two hours.

The pilot must have done some amazing flying to save them, slowing the helicopter’s descent to bring them even with the ground before they pitched forward onto their nose.

All Jessie remembered was waking up and facing the ground, smoke drifting past her visor, and Fiona’s faint whimpering.

“What do we do now?” Fiona asked, her visor smudged with black soot.

“Good question,” Jessie said, and she had her first proper look around. It was late afternoon, and the sky was blue with patches of ominous clouds. They’d crashed at the edge of a long field with a farmhouse and barn several hundred yards away. She checked her pockets for her satellite phone but found it empty. She remembered it had been resting in her lap when the helicopter started going down. It either remained in the burning wreckage or had gotten lost in the crash. She’d come back and search for it later.

“I think we should get the pilot to that farmhouse,” Jessie said, nodding to the other side of

the field.

“That’s pretty far.”

“Maybe not. Come on.” Jessie shouldered her pack, took Fiona by the hand, and led her toward the farmhouse and barn. Jessie had traded in her heavy protective gear for something a little lighter—high-grade Tyvek coveralls and a full faceplate respirator.

Once they reached the farmhouse, Jessie climbed up the deck to the sliding glass door in the back. There were only faint streaks of *Asphyxia* on the wooden planking, and Jessie assumed the back of the house was sheltered from the wind.

She put her hand to the glass of the sliding door and peered inside. When she saw no one, she knocked and waited for someone to come. After a pause, Jessie pulled on the door handle and was grateful when it slid open.

“Hello, hello!” Jessie listened for footsteps, voices, or anything that might indicate someone occupied the home.

Not getting any response, Jessie led them toward the barn. Inside, she found just what she needed. A John Deere riding lawn mower with a small trailer sitting off to the side. The keys were still in the mower’s ignition, so Jessie hopped on, started it up, and tried to line it up with the trailer. It took a few attempts, but Jessie backed the mower up and connected the hitch.

“Wanna go for a ride?” Jessie asked.

“Sure!” Fiona cried out from behind her mask. While the girl had showed no signs of *Asphyxia* in her lungs, nose, mouth, or ears, Jessie wanted to keep the mask on her unless it was necessary to take it off. Some quick blood work back at the FEMA camp showed that while the *Asphyxia* fungus was present in her blood, it wasn’t affecting her like it was so many others. Jessie had to get Fiona to the CDC facility in Washington D.C.

She put Fiona and her pack into the trailer and looked around for a long board. She found a two-by-twelve and placed it into the trailer, telling Fiona to hold the board steady. Then she got behind the wheel and pulled out of the barn.

Jessie drove them across the bumpy terrain before stopping next to the injured pilot. Fiona hopped out and stood to the side while Jessie pushed her pack out of the way and slid the board off the trailer to make a ramp. She paused to check the man’s pulse before preparing to move him.

Getting her hands beneath the man’s shoulders and into his armpits, she lifted him and shoved off with her lead foot, dragging him up the ramp. Jessie wasn’t particularly athletic, although years of CDC field work had kept her in good shape, and she soon had him in the back of the trailer.

Jessie put Fiona in the back with the pilot and the board.

“You’re in charge,” she told the little girl. “Don’t let anything fall out.”

“I won’t.” Fiona placed one hand on the pilot’s chest and knelt on the board.

Jessie smiled and got back behind the wheel of the mower.

They drove even slower on the return trip, angling for the farmstead’s back deck which was only a few feet high.

She applied the same technique she’d used to get the man inside the trailer. Using the board to make a ramp up the stairs, Jessie dragged him up to the deck. She only realized they wouldn’t fit through the sliding glass door when she got to the top.

“Can you open the door a little wider?” she asked Fiona, not wanting to give up her grip, and the little girl squeezed past them and pulled the sliding door wider on its tracks.

Jessie got the man across the threshold and angled toward the living room. He was easy to

get across the smooth tiles but was more of a challenge on the carpet. And there was a thick, wooden coffee table in the way.

“Fiona, can you move that table?”

“Yep.” The little girl hustled over, grabbed the table edge, and pulled with all her might. After two tugs, Fiona dislodged the piece of furniture from where its legs had settled into the carpet and dragged it out of Jessie’s way.

Sweating and panting, Jessie dragged the pilot across the carpet and leaned him against a floral, cloth-covered couch.

Jessie straightened, rested with her hands on her hips, and looked around. They were in a modest, well-kept home that appeared to have an older woman’s touch. The lamps looked like antiques, and pictures in cute old frames lined the walls.

Before she did anything else, Jessie returned to the trailer and grabbed her backpack. Once back inside the house, Jessie shut the door behind her. No spores lingered in the air, though she was sure they’d dragged some in with them. Jessie set her backpack down and removed a mold detection kit, placing it on the coffee table. She checked the pilot’s pulse again, noting that it seemed weaker than before.

A closer inspection of his wound revealed five inches of metal sticking out of his shoulder on the left side. It didn’t appear close to his heart or lungs, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t hit an important artery. Jessie stood up on shaky legs and moved down a long hallway to the bathroom. She knelt in front of the sink, opened the cabinet doors, and discovered several rolls of gauze and bandages.

“Jackpot,” Jessie said. She was about to call Fiona when she turned to see the girl standing in the doorway. “Here, take these things and put them on the coffee table.”

Fiona did as she was told while Jessie found some alcohol and peroxide. Back in the living room, Jessie cut the pilot’s flight suit off using a pair of heavy scissors she’d found in the garage, leaving the metal exposed. She dismissed removing the piece, since it would only make him bleed more. Instead, she cleaned around the wound and bound it tightly.

“I’m thirsty, Jessie,” Fiona said, plopping down in a nearby recliner.

“Me, too,” Jessie said. “I just want to test the air in here first. For the pilot.”

Jessie didn’t think there was any realistic way to create a clean room to work on the pilot’s injuries, and there was a good chance *Asphyxia* had already gotten into his bloodstream. All Jessie could do was try to keep the man alive until they made it to the CDC in Washington.

“I can just take my mask off and get something to drink,” Fiona said, tugging at the plastic respirator strapped to her face.

“I know you can,” Jessie said, removing some collection tools from her mold kit. “But I’d rather you not unless we absolutely have to.” She peeled off the sticky backing from a collection slide and waved it in the air. She also took some samples from the walls around the sliding glass door.

Powering on her microscope, Jesse put the sample slides in one at a time and checked them. “Looks like we dragged in some bad stuff,” she confirmed with a frown. “It will settle out soon. In the meantime, let’s use our water tubes to get a drink.” Jesse pointed to the plastic tube that ran along the chin of her respirator. “Ever use one of these? It’s kind of spacey and cool.”

“Nope,” Fiona said, kicking her legs and looking more enthusiastic.

Jessie pulled out their water bottles from her pack. “Well come on over here. I’ll show you how it works.”

Chapter 27

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

“Kim, are you awake?”

Kim shifted on the mattress and rolled to a sitting position. Her eyes were bleary, and her brain was groggy, yet she stumbled to her feet and sat at her computer.

The clock above the monitor read Thursday, 8:37 p.m.

Kim groaned and lifted her eyes to her center computer monitor where the incoming call blinked. She clicked “Accept,” and Tom’s face popped up on the screen. “I’m here. Something wrong with the solution mappings I sent you?”

“No, not at all,” he replied. “The maps look great. After Alison runs her simulation, we’ll be able to produce enough solution to start full testing on Samantha as early as tomorrow morning.”

“What is it then?” Kim’s voice was rough, so she grabbed a half-empty bottle of lukewarm water and took a swallow.

“Birkenhoff’s assistant just called to let us know they are on the outskirts of the city, and I wanted to show you something before they arrived. Meet me in the control center.”

“Fine.”

Kim scowled and took another swallow of water and sat on her computer chair. When she’d first heard that the CEO of Durant-Monroe Chemicals was on his way, it hadn’t seemed very important. Since then, several questions sprung up in her mind. Questions she’d damn well ask the man.

Kim slipped out of her loose shorts and put on some blue jeans she’d found in one of the CDC employee lockers. They weren’t a perfect fit, but close enough. Leaving on her same gray T-shirt, she slid her feet inside a pair of light tennis shoes, snatched her ID off the desk and strode out of the room. She stalked down the hall and took a left to the control center where Dr. Flannery waited for her.

“Hi, Kim. Sorry to have woken you.” Tom motioned for her to join him next to a set of cameras that monitored the outside of the CDC facility.

Kim stepped over next to the doctor.

“They’re driving a large bus complete with a decontamination room and Class A protective suits, and they’ll park outside of the facility here.” Tom pointed to the camera that showed the street right outside the CDC entrance. “I want you to go meet Mr. Birkenhoff and his assistant and escort them down here. You need to give their suits a once over. Make sure there are no holes. Make sure they’re wearing them correctly. All that.”

Kim gave a terse nod. “Understood.”

“And one more thing.” Tom motioned for her to follow him to a thick metal door labeled STORAGE. “I’ve given you access to this room. Try your ID.”

Pressing her ID to the reader, Kim watched the light turn green and the door hiss open. She stepped inside a ten by fifteen-foot room with shelves along the walls.

Kim nodded at the wealth of items in the room. “Emergency Tyvek coveralls, respirators, and MREs. Good to know all this is here.”

“That’s not all,” Tom said, as he jerked his head to the far side of the room. “Go over there and place your ID against the reader.”

Kim made a soft grunt and moved to the far wall and stopped to touch the smooth, thick

metal. At first, she struggled to see the reader he was talking about, then she found it hidden behind a case of disinfectant soap. She glanced over her shoulder, and Tom gave her the go-ahead nod.

She touched her ID to the reader and stepped back in surprise as a small door popped open and slid to the side. Kim ducked inside and stood up in a five by five-foot room. Several rifles and handguns hung from pegs on the far wall, and there were boxes of ammunition on shelves beneath the guns.

Tom stepped into the room behind her and gestured around. "It's not enough for a small army, but great in a pinch."

"This is impressive, but scary," Kim frowned at the display. "I've only shot a gun a few times in my life, and that was ages ago. I'm sure I'm a bit rusty."

"I had some training, and I can show you the basics." Tom lifted a pistol and held it out to Kim. "This is a Smith & Wesson 9mm."

"Do you really think I'll need it?"

"Yesterday, General Miller promised to send some troops to guard the facility," Tom said with a shake of his head.

"But they never made it," Kim said flatly.

"Not yet, but that doesn't mean they won't show. Until then, we need to understand that we're vulnerable."

Kim frowned and nodded, taking the weapon from Tom. She held it up as memories of shooting out on her parents' farm returned.

Tom faced Kim and grasped her shoulders. "I've never loved guns, or even liked them. I cringe when I watch action movies. But this is one of a dozen places left on Earth that has a chance at solving the *Asphyxia* problem. We've got the CEO of Durant-Monroe Chemicals coming here to supposedly help us after he got caught trying to slink away like a cockroach. This is a man who may have just helped bring about the end of the world. A man who doesn't want anyone to think he's responsible, just in case we pull humanity back from the brink."

"The kind of man who might use violence to see that his secrets are kept safe," Kim whispered.

"Exactly."

"I've got a lot of questions for this guy."

"Me, too," Tom said. "But we need to be very careful. It's just Burke and his assistant, so I don't expect he'll be too hard to handle. But we don't want to provoke him, okay? We don't want to make him think we're after him."

"I understand, Tom," Kim said. She pointed at a switch on the left side. "So, this is the safety, right?"

An hour later, Kim stood in the decontamination chamber in front of the elevators wearing high-grade protective coveralls and a newly developed backpack respirator that pumped cool, fresh air into her suit. She turned toward the monitor and gave Tom a thumbs up before pressing the elevator's UP button. The elevator was already on this floor, so the doors came open right away, and she stepped inside.

Turning around, Kim pressed the button to go up to the ground floor. The doors slid shut, and Kim's stomach lurched as the elevator move upward.

"Can you hear me, Kim?" Tom asked, the sound of his voice coming through the suit's intercom.

"Loud and clear, Tom," Kim replied. "How about you?"

“Clear as a bell,” the doctor confirmed.

The bell inside the elevator dinged, and Kim stepped out into the hallway and looked around. The corpses she’d seen upon entering the facility two days ago were in an advanced state of decay. Kim walked by the bloated bodies, happy to have her hood on so she didn’t have to smell it.

With a glance down, Kim saw that the *Asphyxia* fungus grew around their noses and mouths and ears just like poor Samantha below. The mycelium threads snaked out of every orifice to wrap around the victim’s head in a suffocating embrace.

Kim shuddered and focused on the exit doors. She placed her ID against the reader, watched it turn green, and stepped out of the safety of the CDC facility. *Asphyxia* grew everywhere. It stretched in winding trails across the concrete and wound up the walls like scorch marks.

With a glance at the digital display across the bottom of her hood, Kim saw that her suit’s regulation was perfect. It beat the hot, sweaty, itchy mask she’d worn the other day. Looking up, she saw smoke trails drifting up into the sky.

“The city is on fire,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What?” Tom asked.

“There are smoke trails rising in the south.”

“Should we be worried?”

“I don’t think so,” Kim responded. “Not yet. I see Birkenhoff’s bus. I’ll go meet him.”

“Okay, Kim. Be careful.”

Kim walked past the benches with the dead lunch people and their spilled food containers. She kept her eyes on the long black bus sitting next to the curb. The vehicle had an ultra-advanced appearance with its shiny, black windows and chrome rims. Kim would have given anything to look inside.

She stopped fifteen feet from the side door and waved at whoever was inside. A moment later, the door slid open, and three figures stepped out dressed in black coveralls rivaling Kim’s own. She gasped when she realized they carried assault-style rifles wrapped in protective plastic.

The three men looked around before settling their cold eyes on Kim. She instinctively stepped back as fear flashed in her brain.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” Kim’s voice was rushed and breathy.

“I see it,” Tom said, viewing through the camera mounted on Kim’s hood. “And I don’t like it.”

Two others came down the steps and joined the three men with the guns. One was a short man Kim recognized as Birkenhoff, and the blonde woman standing next to him must be his assistant, Pauline.

“You were right,” Kim said with a slight shake of her head. “Maybe you should put in another call to General Miller to find his missing troops.”

“Already working on it,” Tom said. “In the meantime, try to keep those guns out of the facility. I’m going to loop in Burke’s communication line.”

“Okay.”

Kim heard a slight change of sound inside her hood, and Dr. Flannery’s voice came over the shared communication link.

“Hello, folks,” Tom said. “I’m Dr. Tom Flannery, speaking over the comm. There in front of you is Kim Shields. She’s one of our field scientists.”

The short man glanced around and then grinned when he saw that Kim was alone. He stepped forward, his hard, blue eyes confident with the armed muscle behind him.

“Good to meet you both.” The man nodded in Kim’s direction. “I’m Burke Birkenhoff and this is my assistant, Pauline.”

Pauline nodded curtly.

“And these other three?” Kim asked, nodding to Burke’s guards. “Do they have names?”

Burke shrugged. “They’re my protection.”

“We can’t allow them in the facility,” Kim’s voice was flat and unwavering. “Not with the guns.”

“Well, they go where I go.” Burke held his hands out helplessly. “And their guns are how they protect me.”

“You have nothing to worry about here,” Kim pressed. “We’re a science and research facility, not a military outpost. And no one can get in or out without our express permission.”

“You’re saying you don’t have armed soldiers inside?” Burke narrowed his eyes at Kim for a moment before his mouth fell open in sudden understanding. “You don’t have any protection, do you? If you had armed guards, they’d be out here with you.”

There was a pause on the channel before Tom spoke. “They’re on their way from General Miller’s base. It’s been a hectic few days, and they’re a little late.”

“Yes, of course,” Burke said as his eyelids fell half shut. “My men will help protect the building until General Miller’s soldiers arrive.”

“That’s unnecessary,” Tom said.

“I insist,” Burke replied. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Sorry, Burke,” Kim said before Tom spoke. “But I don’t feel safe with them inside the facility.”

A pleasant smile spread on Burke’s lips. “I can get right back on the bus and drive away.”

Kim’s face flashed with hot anger, and her next words burst out. “That would be a bold move, considering your company caused this mess.”

“You don’t know that,” Burke said as he took a step closer to Kim. “And here I am, trying to help.”

“Under orders from the United States Military,” Kim countered.

“Who are not here at the moment,” Burke pointed out, and the men behind him shifted positions with their eyes firmly focused on Kim. Then, as if to diffuse the situation, Burke held up a laptop case wrapped in plastic. “I have the Harvest Guard formula and, if we’re being honest, many of the anti-fungal formulas of my competitors right here on this computer. On top of that, I have years of research on agricultural fungi that surpasses anything the government has. I’m confident you’ll find some answers you need right here.”

Kim stared hard at the laptop case. Inside might be the key to the solution they were looking for. Just having the Durant-Monroe Chemical test data would allow Tom and Kim to build new chemical and biological solution mappings. If the solutions they already had didn’t work, Burke’s research might cut any further efforts in half.

Tom decided for her.

“Let’s discuss this inside,” Tom said with finality. “Kim, can you please inspect our visitors’ suits and escort them to the decontamination chamber?”

“Yes, sir,” Kim kept her words short so Burke didn’t hear the doubt in her voice. “If you could all spread out, I’ll just have a walk around you to check your suits.”

They did as she asked them, and Kim inspected their suits, looking for holes in the material that might allow contaminants inside. Burke stared straight ahead as Kim walked around him, a soft and patient smile resting on his lips. Pauline seemed less patient than her boss. Her eyes

ticked in every direction, and she shifted nervously from leg to leg as she waited.

Burke's guards troubled Kim the most. They remained still as Kim walked around them, their eyes finding her as she walked into their field of vision and tracking her until she moved out of sight.

Ten minutes later, satisfied there were no rips or tears in their material, Kim stepped to the front of the group and gave them an affirmative nod. "Your suits look fine. Follow me."

Kim turned and walked toward the entrance, not waiting to see if the others followed. A moment later, the sounds of their boots fell in behind her, and Kim was painfully aware of who she was letting into their precious facility.

When she came to the badge reader, Kim authorized herself, pushed the door open, and stepped inside. A small part of her almost allowed the door to shut and lock behind her, keeping the others out. She caught the door at the last second and reluctantly held it open for the others.

A moment later they were standing in the elevator, descending to sub level one.

Chapter 28

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Center Township, Indiana

Randy put the truck in park and leaned his head on the steering wheel. It had been over twenty-four hours since they'd left their house, and it seemed like an entire lifetime had passed. Randy's eyes closed, and he nearly fell asleep on the wheel.

"Come on," Jenny said, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Just a few feet to go and you can rest as long as you want."

Randy nodded, took the keys out of the ignition, and opened the door. Stepping into the dark, his boot landed in the middle of a fungal patch. Spore tendrils rose into the air, and Randy waved his hand at them before stepping through and shutting the door behind him.

"You forgot to spray," Jenny said.

Randy looked across to see his sister leaning into the truck and spraying their diluted bleach and disinfectant concoction all over the inside of the truck cab. Randy nodded, opened the door and picked his own bottle out of the seat. He sprayed the solution on the inside of his window, across the dashboard and on the seats. Then he wiped down the steering wheel. The solution didn't kill Big Death outright, though it sure seemed to slow down the spread.

Their philosophy was simple: avoid the fungus; keep it out of their lungs at all costs; spray and wipe everything behind them to slow it down.

When they'd finished, Randy backed out of the truck and shut the door behind him. It was around 9:30 p.m., and the BD glowed a faint crimson all across their field and yard. They each took an arm's worth of supplies out of the back of the truck and walked up to their front porch on tired, unsteady legs, doing their best to avoid fungal patches.

Randy noted that the fungus almost reached the second step but had come no further. Their front door frame showed slight traces of it where Randy had sprayed the day before, so he set his things down and re-sprayed all around before he wiped it down with a rag. They opened the front door and stepped into their first clean room.

It was a small space where they'd used duct tape, plastic tarps, and blue camping tarps to fashion a seven by seven clean area. There were buckets filled with a bleach and disinfectant concoction, sponges, and four spray bottles filled with the same formula. The hall light shined down through the plastic, and the twins did a quick inspection to ensure there was no fungal growth within the room.

"That's the good thing about BD," Jenny said. "You know it's there."

"At least on surfaces," Randy replied with tired words. "We still have to be careful of the air."

They took turns wiping down each other's plastic suits and masks with the disinfectant and then washed off the supplies they'd brought in, pushing them through a cut in the plastic into the next clean room. Inside, they decontaminated and used two pairs of scissors to cut off their plastic suits.

"Oh, gross," Jenny said as she pulled some of the sweaty plastic off her brother.

Randy only shook his head before he turned and helped Jenny cut off her suit. They placed the old plastic into a garbage bag and set it in the corner. They stepped through another cut in the plastic and entered a third space.

Two HEPA air filtration units ran constantly near the entrance in what Randy hoped was an optimal formation to capture any stray spores that found their way inside. They'd taped a plastic

tunnel between the basement door and the laundry room so they had easy access to the washer and dryer. They'd sealed off all the vents in the laundry room and filled the gaps around the garage door with caulking.

"Looks good." Randy moved with the energy of a young man who saw the light at the end of the tunnel. "We should be okay to continue."

"All right," Jenny replied in a muted tone.

As Randy stripped off the rest of his clothes, he winced at how wet and sweaty he had gotten under the plastic.

"I knew I was sweating," he said as he tossed his shirt into a pile with Jenny's, "but this is ridiculous."

His sister agreed. "Like I said, gross."

They stepped into the laundry room and rubbed hand sanitizer all over their skin and air filtration masks, disposed of the old filters, and washed up in the utility sink with disinfectant soap. Then they filled the tub with bleach water and dropped their clothes inside to soak.

The twins stood facing one another, eyes meeting through the plastic of their filtration masks. Randy was slightly uncomfortable standing in front of his sister in his birthday suit. As children, they'd seen each other naked a thousand times, though it was only in the last few years that they'd naturally become more modest about it. Circumstances as they were, Randy treated it as something they could not avoid. He figured Jenny felt about the same way.

"Ready?" Randy asked.

"Yep," Jenny replied.

They stripped off their masks in a splash of old sweat. Randy gasped as cool air washed over his cheeks and neck. He reached up, scratched at his neck, and rubbed his face as chills of pleasure ran down his spine. "Oh, man. That's good."

"We made it." Jenny grinned at him as she pawed and scratched at her own itchy skin.

"Just barely." Randy said with a sigh. "I'm pretty sure we're close to dehydration. And we smell like roadkill."

"Yeah, but we did some good today, brother." Jenny pulled the soft hair tie out of her hair and let her sweaty, red locks fall past her shoulders. "Sheriff Stans was grateful, and those officers will have a tough enough time keeping the jail locked down without having to fetch their own supplies."

"That's true," Randy agreed. "We definitely don't want criminals running around town."

They cleaned their masks with the disinfectant solution and met at the basement door. "And Mrs. Brody at the library. They didn't have any food or water until we got there."

It had taken them most of the day to gather supplies from the nearby stores, dispersing what they found between the Sheriff's group, seven people at the library, and another group of twenty at the Kentland Community Center. The twins had done everything possible to ensure everyone had the basic necessities.

"These coveralls will work great," Randy said, picking up two of the packages they'd brought in from the truck. "Aren't you glad we stopped by the hardware store?"

"We can bleach them and reuse them," Jenny agreed. She pulled open the basement door and descended the stairs with Randy following right behind her.

The basement was half finished, complete with a family room, a small kitchenette, a spare bedroom, a full bathroom, and a storage room. Another newer model HEPA unit ran on high in the center of the room.

They left the Tyvek coveralls in their plastic on the stairs and put the packages of canned

ravioli they'd scavenged on some shelves in the storage room. They went to the college-sized refrigerator in the small kitchenette and each took a bottled water out.

"Go ahead and shower," Randy said. "I'll make us some food."

Jenny took her water along with her pajamas and a towel and retreated to the bathroom.

Randy uncapped his bottle and tilted it up. The second the cool water hit the back of his throat, a ravishing thirst kicked up, and he drained the entire thing. He got another one out and drank that one slower. Thirst quenched, Randy put on a pair of old athletic shorts and heated himself a bowl of ravioli in the microwave.

He took the entire can down in five minutes and heated up another when Jenny came out of the bathroom rosy-cheeked and wrapped in a towel. Her red hair hung down in wet strands, and the water bottle in her hand was empty.

"Your food is heating," Randy said, heading for the bathroom. Jenny had left him plenty of hot water, and Randy luxuriated in the heat as almost two days' worth of sweat and grime washed down the drain.

Fifteen minutes later, he and Jenny sat on the couch with their bellies full and the news playing on a television hanging from the wall. The reports out of Indianapolis were dire.

A lady news anchor stared into the camera from behind a cluttered desk. Locks of black hair had fallen from her bun, and her face was devoid of makeup. "This is Nancy Collins from WIND News," she said, looking around. "It's just myself and a skeleton crew this evening. I don't know how long the power will remain on, but we'll keep reporting as long as there's someone out there listening. I have confirmation that my family..." Nancy paused and swallowed. "My family is dead, rest in peace Peter, Emily, and John." Tears ran down her cheeks. "And God bless my camera man, Eddie, for sticking around."

A large, dumpy-looking man with an Indianapolis Colts hat came around the camera and approached the desk. He placed a box of tissue on the desk in front of Nancy, and she plucked one out and dabbed at her eyes. "Thanks, Eddie."

She sat up straighter, sniffled, and focused her attention on the camera. "Here's the news. FEMA teams, along with the military, had set up a small camp on the south side of Indianapolis. They had begun housing survivors when the facility was compromised by infected persons who appeared to have been carriers of the infection. That runs counter to initial reports that the infection was instantly lethal."

"The guy that attacked you," Jenny said. "He was a carrier."

Randy nodded, remembering the crunch of the man's arm beneath the weight of his crowbar. "It makes sense since the BD seems to have slowed down some. I guess some people die fast, others die slow."

Nancy Collins continued. "Remaining FEMA teams and military personnel have moved the camp west to the Indianapolis International Airport. There aren't many survivors filtering in, so FEMA has asked us here at WIND news to direct everyone there. Of course, after securing sufficient respiratory protection. If you can't find an air filtration mask, the CDC has provided some instructions on how to improvise.

"We could do that," Jenny said as the reporter ran down the instructions.

"Yeah, we should start a YouTube channel," Randy said with a cynical chuckle. "How to survive the apocalypse on a budget."

Jenny laughed.

Nancy continued. "The CDC confirmed the infection stems from a fungal mutation brought about by the spraying of chemical antifungals on infected crops."

“I could have told them that, too.” Randy frowned.

“So, they’re not telling us anything we don’t already know,” Jenny said. She tried some different channels, yet all she found was static, station logos, and no content. She raised the remote and turned the television off, letting her hands fall into her lap.

“Looks like this is it, sis,” Randy said. “The end of the world.”

“Yeah, it sure looks that way,” she said in a quivering voice. And while his sister was resilient and even defiant in the face of any challenge, her emotions were being pushed to the limit.

He slid over to her, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and squeezed. “Hey sis. It’s going to be fine.”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” she sobbed. “The world means nothing. Mom and Dad are gone, and no one else in the family has answered their phones.”

“That’s true,” Randy said. His heart was heavy enough, and it was worse knowing Jenny was suffering. “But that doesn’t mean they’re dead.”

Jenny raised her eyes and fixed him with a bloodshot stare.

“Okay, they might be gone.” Randy winced inwardly. “But there’s still some people out there. FEMA has a camp down in Indy, so we can go there if we need to. And we’ve got each other. We’re not doing so bad, right?”

“Not too bad,” Jenny nodded in agreement.

“And, like you said, we’re helping many people.”

Randy rocked his sister back and forth. He’d always been protective of Jenny, but comforting her wasn’t a position he’d often found himself in. Jenny was her own woman, despite being his twin, and she hardly ever needed help from anyone.

“We need to stick together now that Mom and Dad are gone,” Randy said. “We’re all we’ve got.”

Jenny nodded and leaned her head on Randy’s shoulder just as the lights in the house flickered and died, dousing them in darkness.

Chapter 29

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

A day after Burke and his crew arrived, Kim sat going over the Harvest Guard data. She wasn't a chemist, so she stuck to the high-level documents outlining the company's strategy to create and deploy Harvest Guard around the world. She needed to know how their product attacked the fungus.

For all Burke's corporate smugness, or perhaps because of it, he hadn't left out a thing in his report. Kim read how the Durant-Monroe chemists had formulated a solution that protected plants on three levels: the contact, the translaminal, and the systemic. In fungicide terms, it meant that Harvest Guard would protect the plant on contact and then distribute itself to every surface of the plant over a few hours. It made for quite an impregnable defense against harmful fungi.

"No wonder so many farmers wanted to get their hands on this stuff," Kim murmured as she finished the last swallow of her coffee. "Especially since most fungicides only focus on one level of protection."

Yet, to create an ultimate solution, something had gone wrong. The makers of Harvest Guard hadn't counted on such a violent and coordinated fungal mutation.

Kim leaned away from her computer screen and closed her eyes. They were bleary and bloodshot from staring at her computer screen all night. The only good news was that she had some ideas about how they might one-up the Durant-Monroe chemists and create something *Asphyxia* couldn't fight. She typed a quick email and sent it over to Tom in the control center and Alison and Nancy in Atlanta.

That was one thing out of the way. The next was to check in on the field unit Kim had pulled out of New York to hunt down the little miracle girl. She pulled up the link to the field units and clicked the connection to Lieutenant Richards.

After a brief pause, the computer monitor filled with the inside of a helicopter's crew area, and the high whine of the aircraft's engine penetrated her earphones.

"This is Lieutenant Richards," the man said in a raised voice.

"Lieutenant Richards. This is Kim Shields from the CDC. Have you found Fiona yet?"

"Negative, ma'am. We've been in the air for several hours now trying to locate the chopper. The pilot either ran into a spore cloud and took an alternate route or they crashed."

The camera view moved to the open door, and Kim looked down over a rolling landscape of once green fields and forests. Entire swaths of woods were overcome with *Asphyxia*, and the tree branches and leaves bent beneath the weight of the fungus. What looked like an enormous city burned in the distance.

"Where are you now, lieutenant?" Kim asked, making sure she enunciated so the lieutenant heard her over the helicopter engine.

"We're just outside Philadelphia," Richards said.

"Is that Philadelphia burning?"

"Yes, it is, ma'am," Richards said, sending a chill of dread up Kim's spine.

She stared at the screen for several long moments before she shook her head. "I'll let you get back to it, lieutenant. Please alert me as soon as you find something out."

"Will do, ma'am."

Losing the little girl was not good. Who knew how long it would be until they found another person resistant to the fungus?

Her last problem was trying to reach her husband, Bishop. Standard cellular and intranet services were down, and there could be a thousand reasons, none of which the military had time to investigate. The CDC facility had access to satellite communications, but Bishop didn't have a Satellite phone.

Kim closed her laptop, grabbed it and her empty coffee cup, and strode out into the commons area. She heard Burke before she saw him, and her stomach sank at the thought of having to deal with him just before her meeting with Tom and the Atlanta CDC.

As she walked into the commons room, Kim spared a glance on her way to the coffee brewer. Burke sat at one of the plain, white tables with one of his guards and his assistant, Pauline. They wore black coveralls with the Durant-Monroe Company corporate logo emblazoned on their breast pockets.

She placed her coffee cup under the dispenser and started brewing herself a fresh cup. If she was lucky, Burke wouldn't try to engage her, although she doubted it since the man never seemed to shut up. He wasn't brilliant like all the magazines said he was, yet there was a craftiness about him that unsettled Kim's stomach.

"Hello, Mrs. Shields," Burke said with a high, pleasant note. "Has my data been helpful?"

"It has, Mr. Birkenhoff," Kim replied with a glance up. Then she reached to a bowl of fruit and picked out a banana for herself.

"That's wonderful," Burke said. "If anything, I hope it proves my company had nothing to do with the fungal outbreak."

Remembering what Tom had told her about provoking the man, Kim turned and allowed a pleasant smile to lift the corners of her mouth. "I haven't found anything definitive, yet. When I do, you'll be the first to know."

"I can tell by your strained smile that you're not interested in proving Durant-Monroe's innocence."

"Let's just say there's a lot more data to go through," Kim said. "I'm more concerned about helping the doctors find a solution for the outbreak. We'll worry about culpability later."

"Ah, that's a very smart approach," Burke nodded.

Kim's eyes moved to Pauline, who quietly watched the exchange between the two. Her fingers remained poised above a thin laptop keyboard and a coffee cup at her side. The woman was thin with blue eyes and light blonde hair. Her classic high cheek bones reminded Kim of an old-time actress.

The guard gave off the opposite impression. He wore a surly expression as he regarded Kim. He wasn't a man she'd care to meet in a dark alley. The only consolation was that she'd convinced Burke to make his guards leave their weapons in their assigned rooms. It would have been impossible for Kim to work otherwise.

"Have I introduced you to my team leader?" Burke said, gesturing to the man.

"No offense," Kim said, unable to hide her cynical expression. "I don't want to know him."

"Now, that's not very nice," Burke looked offended.

"Well, he doesn't *look* very nice," Kim shot back.

Burke's smile spread like oil on water. "I understand. He's in a dark mood more often than not, focused as he is on protecting me. In any case, this is Josh Richtman. Josh, this is Kim. Can you please show her a little more pleasantness? We've talked about this before."

Josh's frown lifted into a smile that looked painted on, shark-like, yet his eyes held their

wicked expression. The grin made Kim think of murder. She gave a disgruntled sigh, picked up her coffee and fruit, ready to leave the commons room, with her laptop tucked under her arm.

“Oh, one more thing,” Burke said. “I haven’t been able to contact General Miller. I’d been hoping to check in with him so he doesn’t...how did he put it...’drone strike my ass into oblivion?’”

“I’ll talk to Dr. Flannery about that,” Kim replied over her shoulder as she strode away.

Kim took a left at the next intersection, hurried down the long hallway, and swiped in to the control center. It wasn’t until she was inside and had shut the door behind her that Kim realized how scared she was.

“Are you okay, Kim?”

Kim looked up to see Tom sitting at a desk where he’d been peering into a microscope.

She waved him off. “It’s just Burke and his goons.”

“You can move inside the control center,” Tom said plainly. “It wouldn’t be too difficult to set you up in here. You can even sleep in the huddle room.”

“They’re just trying to intimidate me. It makes me want to carry one of those handguns around with me.”

“I’ll train you on them soon.” Tom gave her a definitive nod. “You won’t be able to practice shooting, but just getting familiar with the weapons might be useful.”

“I’d like that. In the meantime, I thought I’d join you for the meeting with Atlanta.”

“Already?” Tom looked at his watch with a shake of his head. “I was doing some last-minute checks on these solutions and lost track of time.”

“Will they be ready soon?”

Dr. Flannery nodded to a piece of equipment next to him that thrummed and shook gently. “We should have several vials of each within the next few hours, and Alison should finish up running the simulations against the *Asphyxia* model. We want to know the safest, best first approach.” Tom grabbed his laptop off the desk and directed Kim to a side room labeled HUDDLE ROOM.

“Ready?”

“Yes, let’s go,” Kim said.

A moment later, they were sitting at a small conference table with their laptops open and their reports ready to go. Tom hit a button and made the connection to the Atlanta CDC. Alison, Bob, and Nancy looked back at them through the remote camera.

“You two look terrible,” Nancy said in her gravel voice with the barest hint of amusement on her lips.

“Not half as bad as you people,” Tom quipped.

There were a few tired chuckles before they got down to business.

“Before we get started,” Nancy said. “I want you to know that the president is listening in and would like to be part of our discussions from now on.”

Kim sat up straighter in her chair and stared at Tom with wide eyes.

“Oh, hello Jill,” Tom said, somewhat uncomfortably. “It’s been awhile since we—”

“This is President Steven Christensen,” a man’s hard tone came over the line. “President Jill Fitch passed away early yesterday evening from *Asphyxia*. A spore cloud caught her while she was playing with her grandchildren on her estate outside the capital. I’ve assumed her role as president.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. President.” Tom said, and his eyes held the weight of genuine anguish as they fell to the table.

“I just want you folks to know that we appreciate all you’re doing,” President Christensen said. “And we understand you are working hard on a solution. If there’s anything else we can do for you, please let us know. We’ll do everything we can to help. It’s absolutely critical we get something on the table in the next couple of days if we’re going to beat this thing.”

“We need General Miller’s troops here,” Kim spoke up. “A small contingent should have been here already. Burke Birkenhoff and his guards brought their guns with them.”

“I wanted to bring that up,” Tom nodded at Kim.

“Do you think Burke might compromise the facility?” the president asked.

“I would hope not,” Tom said. “But they do have a menacing aspect to them. It would ease our minds if we had some of our own boys and girls looking out for us.”

“I understand,” the president said. “I’d like to put Burke and his entire company out in the middle of a spore field and let them fend for themselves. Unfortunately, we’ll need him to help us mass produce any solution you folks create. I’ll find out where those troops are and get them to swing in.”

“Thanks, Mr. President.”

“Now, I’ll get out of your way so you folks can get on with business,” he said.

Tom hesitated a moment, then he gestured at the screen. “Nancy, where are the rest of your crew?”

Nancy looked across the table at Alison and Bob before her eyes returned to Tom. “I’ve got three down with *Asphyxia*.”

Kim and Tom both nodded. Kim had noticed the other folks missing from the meeting but thought they might be busy with other work.

“How did that happen?” Tom asked.

“They must have only been partially exposed.” Nancy shook her head.

“They didn’t experience the violent auto-immune response we’d initially seen.” Kim nodded her head in understanding.

“Yes, a low abundance of spores in a single area promotes slower activity.” Nancy said.

Kim had seen similar results when looking at Samantha Rogers’s blood compared to some specimens taken off her own clothing. “It bides its time and allows its mycelium to bore deep. Eventually, it reaches a critical mass and germinates.”

“That seems to be what we’re dealing with here,” Nancy agreed, then she leaned back in her chair. “Before we talk about antibiotics and a cure, let’s talk logistics. Bob, Kim. How are things looking out there?”

“The news says it all,” Bob said. He looked like he was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. “The communications and power situation for the country is dire. Cellular and radio towers are down. Most power stations have been left abandoned and are failing. This will make it difficult for people to know where to go for help and impossible to keep uncontaminated foods fresh and dry.”

Kim added her part. “As perishable food sources rot, people will go through non-perishable items and soon face starvation.”

“On the flip side,” Bob said. “There just aren’t very many people left. Our field teams have estimated a staggering eighty-seven percent mortality rate. With the low demand for non-perishable food, survivors may scavenge long enough to create small, isolated farms.”

Kim nodded. “Those in colder, drier regions may have some protection from *Asphyxia*, but that’s just speculation. The spore clouds are still moving west.”

“It’s like this all over the world,” Bob continued. “We’ve lost connection with Germany and

France, although we still talk to England, China, and Russia. They've not been able to stem *Asphyxia* either."

The meeting fell silent for a moment before Nancy took a deep, resigned breath and pressed on. "Tom, tell me you folks are making some progress on the cure."

"Thanks, Nancy." Tom's tone was professional and steady. "First, let me give you some progress on our facility. We lost city power last night, so we're on generators right now."

"I didn't know that," Kim said with a glance over at her boss.

Tom turned to Kim. "We have a backup battery system that kicks in when the city power fails. The batteries will take the power load until the backup generators can come online. It's a seamless exchange. You wouldn't have even seen a flicker of lights."

"Okay, got it." Kim nodded, though a dreadful weight grew in her belly. The walls were closing in, and soon their location would be one of the few safe havens in the entire eastern United States. At least until the backup generators failed or ran out of fuel. What would they do then?

"Regarding a solution," Tom continued, "None of the standard fungicides worked on the test subject. Not even some of the tricks I had up my sleeve. But Alison and I are starting the next round of tests."

"The simulations all work for these tests," Alison added, her voice rough and raspy. Kim had the sudden and chilling impression that the entire Atlanta team was sick. "We'll be deploying solutions to attack *Asphyxia*'s cell wall as well as protein inhibitors to stem fungal growth and cause a complete breakdown of the fungal reproduction cycle."

"And if those don't work?" Nancy asked with her brow raised.

No one had an answer.

"I've been looking for the helicopter that had been carrying the girl, Fiona, to us." Kim said. "But Lieutenant Richards hasn't found the aircraft, the girl, or Agent Talby."

"I think we have to assume something happened." Nancy's voice held a sad note. "And that's a huge blow to our efforts."

"Yes, it is." Kim turned her head away from the monitor and web camera to hide the tears that filled her eyes. She couldn't find Fiona, couldn't reach her own family, and the world was crumbling down around them.

"Let's just hope our testing on Samantha Rogers works," Tom said. His tone didn't fill her with hope.

Chapter 30

Jessie Talby, somewhere in Pennsylvania

Jessie stood over the pilot and breathed through her mask. The gentle click of her respirator was maddening in the morning light. The sky was bright blue, and the sun shone through the bay window like any normal day.

The pilot wasn't moving, or breathing, and his mouth hung open inside his respirator with a single line of drool running off his chin. The wound in his shoulder had gotten worse through the evening, soaking several sets of bandages before Jessie had grown exhausted and fallen asleep.

"I think he's dead," Fiona said, and she poked the pilot's boot for good measure.

"Don't, Fiona."

"Sorry." She dropped her gaze to the floor and stepped away from the couch.

"We should have used the beat-up old truck out back and made a beeline for D.C." Jessie punched her palm. "We should have been there by now."

"I'm sorry," the little girl replied.

"And I'm stupid." A pang of disappointment rose in Jessie's heart. She'd not heard from her family since the *Asphyxia* outbreak started, and she didn't know if any of them were dead or alive. The promise she'd made as a CDC field agent had taken precedence over her own selfish wishes, otherwise she would have driven straight home and seen to her family. The truth of it was, they were likely dead along with ninety percent of the population. Jessie shook her head. "I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. The world is over. It's just...over."

"I feel the same way," Fiona said. Her voice held a note of childish aggravation that was adorable, and her tiny hand slipped into Jessie's. "Are we going to die, like Mom?"

Feeling petty and stupid, Jessie knelt beside the little girl and held both of her hands. "Absolutely not," she said as she fought back tears. "I think..." Jessie struggled to find the right words, then the disappointment she'd felt a moment ago flipped upside down and became a surge of hope. "I think you're here to save what's left of this world. I think you're here to save me."

"Really?" The little girl's eyes grew wide.

"Yeah, and I'll get you to Washington as soon as I can. No more delays."

Bending down, Jessie removed the pilot's gun from its holster and gave him one last glance. She took Fiona outside and put her in the passenger seat of an SUV she'd taken from the neighbor's house two miles down the road.

It was a newer model than the old Ford parked in the driveway, complete with air conditioning, a feature she needed after breathing into a hot respirator going on two days.

She placed a blanket in the girl's lap. "If you get cold, just wrap up in this blanket, okay?"

"Okay, Jessie." Fiona placed her hands on the blanket like a perfect princess.

Jessie shut the door and walked around to the front of the vehicle, glancing over at the barn where she'd found the farm's owners. They were an older couple, as she'd suspected, out watering a personal garden full of flowers and herbs.

The old man had collapsed right into the flower bed with a can of Harvest Guard lying next to him. The old woman must have gone to help her husband when she'd become stricken and fallen onto her back. Over the next several days, crimson and black fungus had choked the garden to death.

With a gulp, Jessie guessed at humanity's chances against *Asphyxia*. Even if they found a

cure, how would the survivors grow enough crops to stay alive? Jessie shook her head, because it didn't matter. She was one of the privileged few who still had a job to do. Probably the most important job in the world. And she had to do it before *Asphyxia* claimed her, too.

While inside the home, how many times had Jessie absently lifted her tight mask and scratched at her itchy skin? How many times had she removed her coveralls to relieve herself? And what about in the morning when she'd been so hungry that she'd eaten three packs of Hostess Cupcakes in the bathroom with her mask laying in the sink?

Sure, she'd been careful. Sure, there'd been no signs of spores in the air when she'd tested the bathroom air. It didn't mean she'd not already infected herself somehow. It didn't mean Jessie had all the time in the world.

She opened the SUV's hatchback and tossed her backpack inside. Then she went around to the driver's side and climbed in.

"I don't know where we are," Jessie said, putting the key she'd found into the ignition and starting the vehicle. "I lost my phone this morning, and this truck doesn't have GPS to follow, so we're flying blind. But, with a little luck, we'll be in the capitol in just a few hours."

"Awesome possum," Fiona said.

"Awesome possum, indeed."

Chapter 31

Bishop Shields, Ft. Collins, Colorado

“Riley, make sure you get around all the windows and in any cracks you see in the wall,” Bishop said. He tossed the twelve-year-old another tube of caulk, and she turned and caught it with one hand.

Ejecting the old tube, Riley cut the end off the new one, poked a hole in the stopper, and placed the tube in the caulk gun. Then she turned and angled the point into the corner of their living room where the drywall had separated. She squeezed the trigger to lay a bead of caulk and pressed it in with her finger.

“Good girl,” Bishop said, then he turned to the stairs and shouted up. “Trevor, do you need more caulk?”

“I’m good, dad,” Trevor shouted back. “I’ve got three new tubes up here.”

“Awesome,” Bishop mumbled to himself, looking around for something to do.

They’d been working all day to prepare the house for a potential spore cloud. Based on his wife’s advice, their best bet was to caulk every crack they found especially the gaps in the windows and in the doors leading outside. Bishop had already sealed the back door with some external caulk then he sealed over that with strips of duct tape.

Kim had also advised to do the first and second floors before sealing the basement. Something about the spore tendrils being larger and weighing more than standard spores gave them a better chance of survival on the higher floors. Bishop and Trevor had already moved a small refrigerator upstairs along with all of their camping gear, including a small gas stove to cook food.

The next concern was their water supply; they just didn’t have enough. Their stockpile of seven cases of bottled water would only last so long, so Bishop had scrubbed every container clean, including their garbage cans, and filled them up with city water. If the spore cloud arrived, he’d turn off the faucets for good and subsist on what they had.

Besides the backup air filtration masks he’d scored from the hardware store, he’d gone online to learn how to fashion them from scratch. He’d double checked their flashlights and even scooped several large candles into his cart while shopping for food. He’d just gotten out of the grocery store when people rushed in and began stripping the shelves clean.

The next time he saw his wife, he’d be sure to express his gratitude.

With the kids on top of everything, Bishop returned to his office and sat in front of his computer. As a writer, he didn’t need a fancy machine. His laptop was an older model but powerful enough to run architectural design programs.

His three monitors stretched across his desk, filled with research and notes on how to survive a gas attack. The idea was simple. Keep the clean air in. Keep the bad air out.

Toggling through the windows on his computer screen, Bishop settled on the news. He clicked on the live feed from the local station and turned the volume up.

A field reporter for WFTC was standing somewhere in the center of town as the wind whipped his short hair around. He gave a blunt nod toward the camera and fixed the viewers with an expression of serious concern. “This is Roger Nienaber reporting for WFTC news. I’m standing outside of Colorado State University where the United States Military is supporting FEMA in the construction of several massive shelters. This follows reports that storm winds

have blown dangerous toxic clouds from the Mid-South and Rust Belt westward. While the dangerous clouds aren't expected to reach Ft. Collins for at least another twenty-four hours, toxic particulates could still be in the air. Authorities are asking people to stay indoors, seal their vents, doors, and windows, and listen for future instructions."

The reporter stepped toward the camera, gesturing with an open hand and using a more conversational tone. "The toxicity is not poison gas like you would expect, but fungal in nature. We're talking about spores in the air, like the spring allergies you might normally see, only these are deadly. There have been reports of small incidents on the outskirts of Ft. Collins where farmers sprayed antifungals on crops, contributing to the outbreak. If you cannot seal your home using the list of items now showing on the screen, it's vital for you to come down to Colorado State University and take advantage of one of the many clean FEMA tents."

Bishop had been so intent on listening to the reporter that the three heavy knocks on his front door startled him. He stood and went to the door, first looking out the side window to see who it was.

Two soldiers in full military fatigues stood on his doorstep. They weren't carrying rifles, yet their presence sent a chill down Bishop's arms.

"Hi, fellas," Bishop said, easing out onto the porch. "What can I do for you?"

The soldiers' eyes widened at Bishop's size, and they moved back to give him some room.

One soldier took the lead, saying, "Bishop Shields?"

Bishop swallowed thickly. "Yes."

The soldier nodded. "Your wife called in an order with Ft. Collins to come check on you and your children."

Relief washed over him. "So, she's fine?"

"As far as we know, sir," the soldier said. "How are you and your kids?"

"We're doing fine, guys." Bishop released the breath he'd been holding. "Kim, um, Mrs. Shields, gave us some instructions on how to seal the house. We're in good shape."

"That's good to hear, sir. Colonel Ward is instructing all military families and families of government employees to make their way to Colorado State University. You're aware of the FEMA facility being set up there?"

"I heard on the news, but I think we'll be okay here."

The soldier nodded and stepped back. "Just letting you know the offer stands, sir. If you go down to the stadium, just let them know you're Mrs. Shields's family and they'll get you some cots right away."

"Will do, guys. Thanks." The soldiers began walking away, and Bishop held out his hand to stop them. "Hey guys, one more thing."

The soldiers stopped and turned, and the one who had been speaking with Bishop nodded.

Bishop fished his cell phone out of this front pocket and held it up. "I've been trying to reach Kim for over two days. I can't seem to get her. Is there any way you can call her? The news said the power is out in most places to the east, and cell phone connectivity is almost nonexistent. I was thinking you guys must have a satellite connection to Washington."

"As far as I know, sir, Mrs. Shields's call came across the military line. There's no way they'll let you call back on that line. Sorry, sir."

"No, I understand." Bishop pursed his lips and gave them a nod.

"Maybe when things settle down, they'll let you put a call in."

With that, the soldiers marched down the walkway, got into their jeep, and drove away. Bishop retreated into the house and shut the door behind him.

“What did the soldiers want?” Riley came in from the living room. She placed her fists on her hips with her caulk-covered index finger exposed so she wouldn’t get it everywhere. She’d rolled her jeans up and donned her “working” sneakers and a stained T-shirt from when she’d painted her room last fall.

“Your mom sent them. She wants us—”

Riley’s eyes grew excited. “Is Mom okay? Can we talk to her?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Bishop held out his hands to explain why, because he knew his daughter wouldn’t stop with the questions until she found her answers. But the thudding of running feet interrupted him as his son, Trevor, half-tumbled, half-slid down the stairs.

The boy stopped five steps from the top and leaned on the rail.

“Wow, you guys,” Trevor said. “Did you see the military jeep out there? I think that was a Growler.” Trevor was only ten, though his interest in all types of military equipment was like nothing Bishop had ever seen.

It had all started when Bishop was writing a military science fiction novel and showed Trevor his research. The boy had marveled at the light strike vehicles and heavier assault machines in the U.S. arsenal, and he’d kept up on current military weaponry ever since. There were many nights when Bishop came upstairs to make sure the boy was sleeping but caught him watching YouTube videos of jet flyovers and helicopter maneuvers.

“Like I was just telling your sister,” Bishop continued his explanation. “Your mother sent some guys over to let us know we can go to the FEMA facility if we want to.”

“Are we going to go?” Trevor asked. It was clear he was excited about the possibility of hanging around military personnel.

“I’m not sure yet,” Bishop said. “We’ll have to see. Just keep working for now.”

“Ariana and her family are going,” Riley said with a shift of her hips. “So is Tristen, Kyle, and Sharay. We should probably go, too.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Bishop said, avoiding the cliché: ‘if they jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?’ line. “Let me think about it a minute.”

The kids went back to work, and Bishop returned to his office. He stood in front of the wide window and looked out into the street. Their home was one of the larger ones in the Huntington Hills neighborhood, made affordable because of Kim’s increased salary and a surge in Bishop’s book sales over the past three years.

It was a nice, quiet suburban neighborhood with all the modern amenities. The only thing Kim hadn’t liked about it was the proximity of the neighbors. Having grown up in rural Kentucky, where the closest neighbors were a mile in any direction, Kim thought Huntington Hills was way too crowded.

Bishop mulled over the idea of going to the FEMA camp.

They were making substantial progress on sealing up the house, though he couldn’t help but feel like they were missing out on being down at the stadium. The military people might let them call Kim, and that alone would be worth packing up the kids and going down.

Would FEMA keep them safe? Was there even enough food and water and protective gear? He imagined thousands of people in the Fort Collins area rushing toward the college, causing jam ups and traffic problems.

Maybe they could park some distance from the stadium and hike the rest of the way.

Bishop cursed under his breath and rested his hands on either side of his keyboard. Writing had afforded him the ability to study and learn many things, and he’d become a smarter man because of it. Despite that, he would have loved to get his wife’s advice.

Chapter 32

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Center Township, Indiana

“We should leave the generator on,” Randy said. “Just to keep the air filtration going.”

“Good idea,” Jenny said as she walked out to their truck carrying a small grocery bag full of food. “And we should get an extra vehicle while we’re in town today.”

“Should we ask the Sheriff first?” Randy said, getting in on the driver’s side and starting up the vehicle. The truck rumbled to life, old reliable.

After the power had gone out the night before, Randy went outside and kicked on the generator. His father had always taken great care of the machine, and Randy was grateful for it. Going outside had required another hour of decontaminating himself, but it had been worth it.

They’d sealed the upstairs air returns, started up the air conditioning unit, and slept like rocks in the cool, clean basement air.

“I don’t think the Sheriff will mind,” Jenny said from the passenger side. “Just tell him you commandeered it for official use. Who will argue with you?”

“We might as well have a few different vehicles,” Randy agreed. “Especially if we’re going to run errands for everyone.”

Jenny gave him with a wry smile. She was in much better spirits, although her eyes still had a haunted look he wasn’t sure would ever go away. He probably had the same expression in his own eyes and didn’t even know it.

“I want to stop by Ally’s first,” Jenny said, “and drop off some food and supplies for her.”

“We can do that,” Randy said, pulling out of their driveway. “I hope she’s doing better.”

“Me, too.” Jenny glanced at her brother through her clean visor. “Do you think people might recover from BD? I mean, now that the worst of it is over.”

“That guy who attacked us yesterday didn’t look like he would recover,” Randy said with a pensive expression.

“Well, maybe if he took it easier, he’d recover.”

“I don’t disagree,” Randy said. “This isn’t the common flu, and I don’t think a couple days of rest will help. I hate to sound negative, but I think the worst is just beginning. And I’m ready for it.” Randy patted the bulge inside his Tyvek pocket. It was his father’s Ruger .357 revolver. It had a medium-length barrel and a seven-round capacity.

Jenny glanced down at the revolver. The sight of the weapon didn’t bother her. They were gun people, and the twins had learned how to fire weapons safely at an early age, though Randy had shown more of an interest than his sister. Still, Jenny frowned. “How much worse can it get? It’s already wiped out almost everyone.”

“It could wipe *us* out. Let’s just hope Ally is okay and go from there.”

Randy pulled their truck onto Ally’s road and drove the last quarter of a mile to her place. He dreaded telling Ally about her parents, though the truth was the truth, and they weren’t going to lie.

He pulled the truck into Ally’s driveway, noticing that the fungal advancement had slowed, and it didn’t burst so aggressively when disturbed. Maybe Jenny was right, and the worst was over. Maybe BD would just die out, and whoever was left could rebuild.

The future was uncertain, and the past was dead. There would be no high school, no high school dances, or Friday night football games. There would be no more Sundays binging

television shows and eating pizza. He'd never have his first legal beer at the bar with his father. There wouldn't be a Super Bowl or NCAA tournament. Randy could hardly wrap his brain around it. It was all gone. They would have to start from scratch.

"Earth to brother," Jenny said as she waved her gloved hand in front of his face. "Come in, little brother."

"Sorry," Randy said. He shut the truck off and popped his door open. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"You don't want to know."

"Sure, I do."

Randy only shook his head as they walked across the yard, stepped onto Ally's porch, and knocked on her door. At first, there was no response, so Jenny knocked again. Just when Randy thought the worst, the front door came open, and Ally looked out at them through the door crack.

The young woman was wearing her air filtration mask, though the face behind the visor seemed pale and sickly, and there were speckles of pinkish phlegm around the bottom of the mask. Her cheeks were sunken, and tiny black particulates swam in the whites of her eyes.

"Hey, Ally," Jenny said with exaggerated enthusiasm. Ally winced away from the light and noise, so Jenny toned it down. "How's it going in there? We brought you some food and medicine." Jenny held up the grocery bag. "We couldn't find any doctors at the clinic, and most of the medicine at the CVS was locked in some machine. So, we took some cold and flu stuff off the shelf."

"Thanks," Ally said. Her voice seemed tiny and rough as sandpaper. The young woman cleared her throat and tried again, opening the door a little wider to reveal a head of tangled hair. "Thanks. I was starting to think you guys weren't coming back."

"No way." Jenny waved off the suggestion. "We got busy helping Sheriff Stans yesterday."

"I did that list you texted me, Jen," Ally said in a tired voice. It was evident to Randy the girl wasn't in good shape. "I sealed up the vents and stayed inside. I tried to bleach the bathroom and turn it into a clean room, but I got tired and fell asleep." She reached up and tried to rub her eyes and then realized she had the air filtration mask on. "I kept this on most of the time, but I don't think it's working."

"Anything you can do to keep from breathing more spores is super helpful," Jenny said.

"Right, I appreciate that." Ally perked up. "You guys want to come in?"

Jenny exchanged a look with her brother. "Um, I don't think—"

"Sure, Ally," Randy said. "We can come in."

"Great." Ally held open the door for them, and the twins stepped inside.

Like the Tucker's home, Ally's was simple and functional, although her parents displayed more of their religious beliefs. There was a picture of Jesus over the living room table, and a shelf held a small statue of the Virgin Mary.

Ally led them into the unlit living room with the blinds shut tight against the afternoon sun. She walked over to a big, comfortable couch, picked up a pile of blankets and pillows, and tossed them into a chair. It was clear to Randy that the young woman had been sleeping there, and fungus grew on the couch arm, stretching down to the floor.

Ally gestured at the couch. "Have a seat. With those suits on, I don't guess you can get infected."

The twins sat down as Ally perched on the end of the recliner. Randy stared at the white noise on the television screen, surprised Ally still had power. The faint hum of static lingered on the edge of his hearing.

“Yeah, the cable TV went out last night,” Ally explained. “I’m about to re-watch Game of Thrones though. I’ve got all the seasons on DVD, but I usually stop after the seventh one. Hey, you guys want to stay and watch with me?”

While Randy didn’t keep up with his sister’s friends, he knew Ally the best. She was a vivacious young woman—outgoing and cheerful. To see her so sick tore at Randy’s heart.

“I don’t think we can stay,” Jenny replied. “Sheriff Stans has some things planned for us today. He’s been guarding the jail with a skeleton crew, so we’ve been helping to get them some supplies. He said the inmates are tough to handle.

“Oh, that’s okay.” Ally put her hand to her visor, coughing and adding to the mucus already smeared inside her mask. “I hope they can keep things under control, and I’m sure they appreciate you guys.”

The three sat in awkward silence for almost a full minute, and Ally’s eyes slid to the television where she stared at the white noise like a woman in a trance. Jenny and Randy exchanged an uncomfortable glance before Randy decided to get to the point.

“Actually, Ally.” Randy shifted in his seat. “We’ve got some news about your mom and dad.”

“Oh, really?” Ally said. One eyebrow raised, though she continued staring at the television screen. “Are they helping the Sheriff, too?”

Randy paused as his insides turned queasy. He’d never had to break such unpleasant news to someone before, though he understood from experience what it would mean for her.

“We found your mom and dad inside the church,” Jenny started, “with a lot of other people.”

“They were having a service.” Randy added. “They didn’t make it. No one in the church did.”

“But they looked like they were at peace,” Jenny quickly added.

Ally’s face transformed from calm passivity to agony. She reached up and pulled her mask off her face, dropping it onto the recliner. “I knew it.” Her words came out in a croak, her mouth twisting into a grimace. “I knew they didn’t make it, but I wouldn’t let myself believe it.”

Ally fell forward off the chair, and Jenny leapt off the couch and caught her. She wrapped her arms around Ally and squeezed her, and Ally clung to Jenny like a child.

“We know how you feel, Ally.” Jenny patted and embraced the young woman. “Really, we do. We found our mom and dad out in the field. I’m sorry. I’m so, so—”

Ally wailed loud, the sound resonating off the walls.

Randy winced as tears welled up in his eyes, and a savage rage surged through his blood. He wanted to punch something, kick something, or shoot something. Someone had caused the fungus, probably the people at Durant-Monroe Chemicals.

If Randy found out who was responsible, he’d give up his mask for five minutes alone in a room with them. Then he’d avenge everyone who had suffered and died at their hands. But like so many unfair outcomes, the responsible parties often hid in the shadows, remaining nameless and faceless.

As far as Randy knew, the people responsible for BD were dead already. So, he’d have to direct his hatred somewhere else.

Ten minutes later, the twins walked back to the truck. They turned and waved at Ally who waved back before shutting the door. They’d promised her they’d be back as soon as they finished helping Sheriff Stans at the jail.

“That was rough.” Randy shook his head.

“She’ll be fine.” Jenny looked over at Randy. “She just needed a shoulder to lean on and

someone to put her faith into.”

“And it looks like we’re it.” Randy pulled open the driver’s side door and climbed into the truck. “For Sheriff Stans, for Ally...for everyone.”

“I’d rather be out here helping people,” Jenny said, climbing into the truck. “You won’t catch me sitting inside the house all day, sulking.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad we helped her. I’m glad we can help anyone who needs it.”

“So, you do have a heart after all,” Jenny teased.

“I’m all about taking care of us,” Randy said with a grim smile. “But we can’t walk away from friends.”

Chapter 33

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

Randy drove the truck up to the jail, eyes always on the lookout for trouble. The fires in the north part of town still smoldered, sending trails of smoke up into the blue sky. Randy was just glad the fires hadn't spread.

There was no one outside the jail's garden entrance, though fungus covered almost every plant. Where the fungus didn't touch, the plants looked withered and drained. The Sheriff's car, a police van, and four other police cars were parked along the side of the building.

"Do things look okay to you?" Jenny asked.

Randy shrugged. "Yeah, but who knows? Let's check it out." He pulled the truck into the parking lot, cruising in a circle before he pulled to a stop and parked the vehicle with the nose facing the road.

"Okay, let's go."

The twins got out of the truck and met at the front bumper. Randy couldn't see anything through the front glass of the building, though the quietness caused the hairs on his arms to stand up.

"I don't see any of the Sheriff's guys," Randy said.

"Or the Sheriff."

With a sigh, Randy approached the door and peered into a short waiting room with a few chairs. Across the waiting room was a window with an intercom set into the glass.

"I've never been inside before," he said.

"That's a testament to your good upbringing," Jenny replied.

Randy scoffed. "And a little luck."

He reached out, grabbed the door handle, and tugged it open. Loud shouts and abrasive language echoed distantly, and an oppressive heat washed over them, muted by their breathable coveralls. Randy led his sister over to the service window and looked down upon Sheriff Stans with his head down on the desk. Raising his knuckles to the glass, Randy gave a gentle knock.

The Sheriff jerked awake, eyes darting back and forth behind the visor of his mask. The mask was skewed sideways on his face, and Randy suspected it wasn't firmly affixed for some time.

"Hey, Sheriff," Randy said with a respectful nod. "Sorry to wake you."

"Oh, not at all," the sheriff said. He readjusted his mask on his face. "I'm the one who's sorry for sleeping on duty."

"We're all tired," Randy said. "We just swung by to see if you needed any help."

"It should be about lunch time for the inmates," the sheriff said with a glance at the clock. "Let's go see if you can help Smith. Come around to the back." The sheriff indicated a door off to the side.

Randy and Jenny opened it and stepped through into the jail offices. Sheriff Stans greeted them with a nod and a friendly, but tired, grin. "Let's go back to the kitchen."

"You're still business as usual?" Randy asked.

"It's important to keep these guys on a regular schedule," the sheriff said. He stopped at a door and pressed his employee ID to a badge reader. The door clicked open, and Sheriff Stans stepped through and led them down a long hallway. "Any deviation from the norm could irritate the inmates and put my remaining officers at risk."

They took a right at the end of the hall and entered a vast kitchen with a buffet line that faced a larger dining room. They stopped next to the stove and a massive pot of boiling corn.

“Are you going to bring the inmates through here?” Jenny asked, glancing into the dining room with a nervous look. “I’m not sure I like the idea of standing on the other side of that buffet line from actual prisoners.”

“That would be too dangerous,” the sheriff replied, placing his gloved hands on his hips. “We’ve been taking their meals out to them. The prisoners haven’t been out of their cells since all of this started, and I don’t have the men to escort them or even let them out in groups.”

“What are you going to do with them?” Randy asked.

“We’ll keep them here until the governor gives us further directions. For now, orders are to stay the course. Status quo. I’ve been in contact with neighboring counties, and we’re all on the same page. I suspect they’ll have us relocate the prisoners to a military-protected FEMA camp.”

“Like the one in Indianapolis?” Jenny asked.

“Exactly,” Sheriff Stans agreed.

An officer came out of a walk-in cooler with an industrial-sized can of lima beans under each arm. He jumped when he saw the three of them, then he realized who it was.

“Sorry, Sheriff,” he said, voice muffled in his mask. He passed them and placed the lima beans down on a service table near the pot of boiling corn.

“Don’t worry about it, Smith. You know the Tucker twins, right?”

“Yeah, I do.” Officer Smith gave the twins a faint nod as he reached for the can opener. “You guys holding up okay?”

Randy knew Terry Smith from school. He’d been a senior when Randy was just a freshman. And while they’d not interacted much in those days, they’d still seen each other around town.

“We’re doing okay, all things considered,” Randy replied.

“Good.” Smith poured one can of lima beans in with the corn.

Sheriff Stans gestured. “These two are going to be your helpers today.”

Smith turned and gave them a thumbs up sign. “Oh, man. That’s great news. I’m running on fumes here.”

“Where do you want us to start?” Randy asked.

“I’m just winging it today,” Smith said with an awkward grin. “I’m not a cook.”

“No problem,” Jenny said.

“I’ve got some Salisbury steaks in the oven.” Smith poured the second can of lima beans in with the corn, grabbed a spoon, and held it out. “If one of you can monitor this, the other two can gather the trays and utensils.”

“I’ll stir,” Jenny said, snatching the spoon and diving in.

“I’m going to leave you to it,” the sheriff said, backing away. “Let me know when you’re ready, and we’ll escort you out onto the floor.”

“No problem, Sheriff,” Smith said. Then he turned and gestured for Randy to follow him to the back. “Let’s get the trays and utensils.”

The officer led Randy back into the dishwashing area, past a sink full of dirty plates and trays.

Randy glanced at the mess as they passed. “I can work on this pile of dirty dishes when we’re done.”

“That would be great,” Smith said, moving to a stack of clean trays. He indicated that Randy should grab a stack of plates nearby. “There’s only four of us officers left to handle things, along with the sheriff.”

“The sheriff said there were three jail staffers here. Where are they?”

“We had an accident out on Cell Block B. Two employees were hurt, and the third didn’t come to work this morning,” Smith shrugged. “Can’t really blame her.”

Randy only nodded, remembering what the sheriff had said about the accident earlier.

Smith showed Randy where to put the trays and plates, and together they spread the trays out, adding plates to each. They moved to the oven, opened it, and pulled out three trays of meat patties caked in simmering gravy.

“Not too bad,” Smith said, sniffing at the tray.

“Better than what we’ve been eating,” Randy agreed.

With Jenny’s help, they loaded up the plates with one meat patty, a serving of corn and lima beans, and a packaged Hostess cake.

“We need to take the cakes out of their packages,” Smith said. “Can’t let the inmates have anything they could use to harm themselves and others.”

“Plastic wrapping?” Jenny’s eyebrow raised as she started removing the packaging and placing the cakes back into a tray section.”

“You’d be surprised what they can make,” Smith said.

“Is that why we’re not giving them forks and knives?” Jenny asked.

Smith nodded. “Exactly. They’re going to eat this barbarian style, with their fingers. But it beats the alternative.”

After preparing the trays, they rolled up two tray carts and slid the trays inside.

“Okay, let’s push these into the control room,” Smith said.

Randy could sense him tense up as they wheeled the carts out of the kitchen and down a long hallway. Smith used his ID to swipe them through two lockdown sections with jail bars on both sides, and Randy winced each time the officer slammed the doors shut behind them.

“Are these inmates dangerous?” Randy asked, more concerned for his sister than anything, and Jenny flashed her brother a thankful glance.

“We’re not a maximum-security jail,” Smith said. “No murderers here. Some of these guys are even nice. But make no mistake, there are others in here who would just as soon piss on you and leave you for dead than help you.” Smith fixed them with a stare. “Don’t worry, you’ll stay in the control room, perfectly safe.”

“That’s good to know,” Randy sighed with relief. They wouldn’t be directly exposed to the prisoners, though it was still scary.

They came to a compact control room and pushed the carts between two long desks covered with electronic equipment. There were monitor screens, a dozen blinking green lights, countless buttons, and an intercom system built into the panels. Four empty chairs sat unfilled. On the other side of the door leading to the cell block, bright halogen lights blared down, and they heard the distant shouts and hollering of inmates.

Smith leaned over one intercom and pressed a button next to it. “Okay, sheriff. We’re ready to go down here.”

“Roger that. Give us a minute. We’ll be right down.”

Randy looked back the way they’d come. There were at least three doors between them and safety. He swallowed, feeling like a rabbit trapped in a den of wolves. He closed his eyes against all the yelling on the other side of the door.

A minute later, Sheriff Stans and another officer joined them in the control room.

The sheriff removed his gun from its holster and looked at them. “Now, kids. I’m going to have you help push the food carts onto the floor, then you’ll return to the control room. We’ll

shut the door behind you.”

“Got it, Sheriff.” Jenny nodded bravely, though Randy could tell his sister was scared.

Randy replied, “Understood.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

Chapter 34

Moe Tsosie, Jack Rabbit Road, Arizona

The cue ball cracked the tight cluster of solids and stripes, and the balls exploded in all directions. Moe watched as the green-striped fourteen and the solid orange three fell into the corner and side pockets, respectively.

“You’ve got your choice, Lane,” Moe told the other trucker as the man picked up a piece of chalk and rubbed it on the end of his pool stick.

In their two days holed up at Coyote’s, Moe had learned a handful of things about the man. Two of them were his name and rank in the United States Army. Sergeant First Class Lane Tithing was two years younger than Moe and had served in Afghanistan, though he’d not seen the same action as Moe. Still, Moe recognized the haunted look in Lane’s eyes that hid his share of demons.

On Thursday, the power had gone out, and Rocko had taken the last of his steaks from his walk-in cooler and thrown them on the grill. The three had sat on a picnic bench in back of Coyote’s, gazing out over the endless scrubland while eating steaks, corn on the cob, and baked beans off paper plates. Rather than drink himself into oblivion, Moe had enjoyed each cold beer with the knowledge it might be his last one.

Friday started as one game of pool and then turned into many as midday turned into early evening. With darkness approaching, Moe felt his time to leave Coyote’s draw near. But he kept telling himself, “One more game. One more beer.”

“What game are we on?” Lane knocked a striped ball into a side pocket.

“Who knows?” Moe replied. “Probably the hundredth.”

“You’re close, Marine,” Lane gave Moe a sober nod and swiped a gray-blond lock of hair from his eyes.

“I’d say you’ve taken at least seventy percent of them.” Moe shook his head, disappointed in himself.

“I’ve won eighty-two games,” Lane allowed himself a slight grin, “and you’ve won thirteen.”

Moe chuckled. “You’re a real shark, man.”

“I just like to win,” Lane replied with a gray-eyed sparkle.

“Hey, guys,” Rocko called out from the lounge. “Check this out.”

Moe peered through a window in the partitioned wall to where the bartender stood by the front door.

“What is it?” Moe asked. He rested his pool stick against the wall and stepped into the lounge area with his beer in hand.

Rocko pointed at the door. “Looks like some action down the road.”

Moe joined the man, and together they stepped outside. Moe stared down the road at the orange flames rising from rooftops, and the waft of burning wood stung his nose.

“Someone lit the trading posts on fire,” Rocko said with a disgruntled smirk. “Think they’ll come for my place?”

“I think you can count on it,” Moe replied.

Rocko developed a worrisome expression. “Hey, Moe. I understand if you want to leave. Things are getting dangerous around here, and I don’t want anyone getting hurt on my account.”

Moe turned to Rocko with a sad look. He lifted his beer and jabbed it into the big man’s

chest. “That really hurts, Rocko. You think I would abandon you just when things were getting good?”

Rocko grinned. “Thanks, brother.”

“What’s going on?” Lane asked as he pushed through the doors.

“We’ve got company.” Moe nodded toward the fires as a pair of pickup trucks filled with people drove between two burning buildings. The people in back hooted and hollered and held up items they’d looted from the stores.

“I’ve got just the thing.”

Lane fished his keys from his pocket and walked to his truck. He opened the sleeper section of his rig and leaned inside. He pulled out one AR-15, then another, followed by a large ammunition can. The man leaned back inside and withdrew two handguns, slipping them into his waistband. Lane stepped down from his truck and called to Moe. “Little help over here!”

Moe hustled over and lifted the ammunition can to his chest. “You came prepared.”

Lane picked up the rifles and shrugged. “If the last nationwide quarantine told me anything, it was to keep my rig stocked, especially with weapons. People get crazy in crazy situations.”

“I wish I’d thought of that,” Moe said in agreement. “Things have been awful crazy the past few days.”

Lane smiled.

The three retreated inside Coyote’s, and Rocko locked the front door, pulling a chain from the wall and wrapping it around the rectangular door handles.

“You want one of these handguns?” Lane asked the tall bartender.

“I’ve got everything I need back here.” Rocko moved behind the bar and reached beneath the counter to pull out a sawed-off shotgun.

Lane nodded at the weapon with appreciation before turning to Moe. “What do you think we can do to bolster our defenses in fifteen minutes?”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” Moe looked around as he placed the ammunition can on a table.

Minutes later, shapes appeared outside the front doors, illuminated by headlights. Two people pushed against the glass. Moe and Lane peered from behind a semi-circle of tables positioned around the bar with a slight gap on either side. It was their version of circling the wagons.

Rocko stayed behind the bar to guard against anyone breaking in through the back.

When the doors wouldn’t open, the shapes shoved harder. The glass doors gave three inches but didn’t split apart. One person pointed down at the chains wrapped around the handles on the inside, and the other nodded.

They stepped back, and one of them lifted a baseball bat high and swung it hard. Glass shattered across the lounge floor as the person worked the bat around the edges to clear the sharp shards.

As soon as the shapes stepped across the threshold, Moe and Lane opened fire. Their .223 rounds smacked their targets backward, sending spritzes of blood flying into those standing in the lot behind them.

Moe hadn’t shot at another human being in over a decade, and sick anxiety rose in his gut as he watched his first kill hit the ground. Moe tamped down his emotions, breathing steady as he changed targets and spat lead at someone who dove out of view.

Incoming fire peppered the tables, sending wood chips into Moe’s face. Moe ducked down and waited for a lull before popping over the top again and letting loose with a few more rounds until the entrance was clear, and three people lay dead.

“They’re messing with your trucks!” Rocko shouted from behind the bar.

Moe leveled his gaze at Lane. “Ready? On three.” Moe counted down, and when he hit zero, the two men fired two rounds each through the entrance before advancing to the windows.

Moe took the window on the far right where their trucks sat parked. A handful of people stood on the truck steps and pried at the doors with crowbars. Moe calmly raised his rifle and fired at a man digging at his passenger side door. The bullet punched through the man’s arm to send him spinning to the ground.

A woman standing by Lane’s rig raised a handgun at Moe, but Lane fired three rounds from the other window. The bullets buttoned the woman up her side from waist to shoulder, spattering Lane’s truck with blood.

“Someone’s breaking in through the back!” Rocko shouted.

“Need help, Rocko?” Moe yelled over his shoulder.

“I can handle it,” Rocko called back.

Moe glanced to see the bartender stoop as he left the safety of the bar and shoved through the swinging kitchen door.

Two pickup trucks circled into the lot and came to a hard stop at the far edge. A dozen armed people leapt from the back and spread out across the blacktop, firing at Coyote’s. Their shots flew wild, hitting the side of the building or zipping harmlessly by.

“This is target practice,” Moe edged around the window frame, picked a target, and fired.

Moe missed the first two times but kneecapped the man on the third shot. With Lane’s added fire, the parking lot turned into a killing field of anguished wails and prone, dying forms. Some crawled away, hand-over-hand, and Moe left them alone until everyone was down. Then he took care of the wounded ones.

A shotgun blasted from the kitchen, followed by another.

Moe exchanged a look with Lane across the room, and the man jerked his head for Moe to go check on Rocko. Moe nodded and drew away from the window. He squeezed through the gap in the tables and side-stepped around the bar. He reached the swinging door when it flew open and Rocko busted through.

The big man stumbled forward, moaning and clutching his stomach. Moe shifted his rifle to his right hand and tried to catch the man with his left. Too heavy to hold, Rocko bore Moe backward where they tumbled into the legs of one of the overturned tables.

Moe eased his friend to the floor, eyes watching the blood on Rocko’s hands. The kitchen door crashed open again, and Moe jerked his attention up as a man with a butcher knife charged through. Moe swung his rifle around and fired two quick shots into the man’s belly.

The man had raised the blade to swipe at Moe. He looked down and grabbed his stomach as blood gushed between his fingers.

Moe lunged forward and kicked him in the chest, sending him tumbling back into the next man coming through. Bringing his weapon to bear, Moe stalked forward and pulled the trigger repeatedly. His rounds chewed into the pair, driving them back into the kitchen where they fell to the floor dead.

Moe hit the magazine release, and the empty piece hit the floor with a clatter as Moe loaded another. He swept the barrel of his weapon through the long kitchen. A dishwasher and stove rested against the near wall, and the far wall held shelves of canned food products and other supplies.

Footsteps approached from outside, and a woman stepped into the kitchen with a pistol in her hand. Moe jerked his rifle to his shoulder and fired. His aim was off, and his round smacked a

big jug in an explosion of ketchup. The woman gasped and leapt back as the red sauce splattered her face. Moe covered the back door for two seconds before he heard boots running away.

He stepped over the people he'd killed and rushed to the door, firing at several shadows running in the darkness. When no more marauders challenged him, Moe lowered his rifle and reached out to grab the edge of the buckshot door, slamming it shut behind him.

"It's Moe coming through," he shouted to Lane before he stepped into the lounge.

Rocko still lay on the floor, leaning against the underside of the table with one arm thrown over the column for support. His face was drawn into a grimace of pain, and blood filled his lap and dripped in a large puddle on the floor.

"Coast is clear," Lane shouted from his window, though he continued to scan the parking lot for more targets.

With a nod, Moe placed his gun on the bar and fell to his knees by Rocko's side. He removed his T-shirt and placed it beneath Rocko's hand, applying pressure until he groaned.

"I think they got me good," Rocko said. "I can feel it."

Moe agreed. The amount of lost blood pointed to a vital internal injury. The nearest hospital was back in Winslow.

"Hang in there, buddy." Moe's voice felt distant, like another version of him was speaking. "Let's see if we can get this bleeding stopped."

Moe looked up and saw Lane standing next to the bar. He placed his rifle down, stripped off his shirt, and tossed it to Moe, and Moe placed it over his already blood-soaked garment.

Rocko's eyes opened wide with panic before his expression softened into a dreamy state, like no pain touched him. His breathing settled, and his hand relaxed over his wounds. The bartender looked slowly around the bar, eyes drifting over the shelf of knick-knacks, bottles of liquor, and old photos of friends and patrons from years gone by.

The bartender's eyes fell back to Moe. "It was a good run."

"Don't say that, man." Moe's breath hitched, though he tried to keep himself calm for his friend. He looked around. "Hey, Lane, toss me some bar rags—"

"Moe," Rocko hissed, ripping Moe's attention back.

"Yeah, man," Moe leaned closer and put his hand on the big man's shoulder.

"It was a good run," Rocko repeated with a pointed look. "And I'm glad you were my friend. I'm glad..." His face twisted in pain but fell soft again as it passed. "I'm glad you were here at the end."

Moe started to protest more but he knew Rocko's time was up. Moe nodded and gripped his friend's bloody hand tighter.

"I didn't go down with the ship," Rocko gasped and smiled. "You have to sink it for me. Got it?"

"Okay, brother. I'll see it done."

Moe held his friend's eyes, sending comfort and energy to Rocko's passing spirit. He whispered a Navajo prayer as Rocko's body stiffened with his last breath and then relaxed forever.

Chapter 35

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby, wearing her full protective gear. She strode to the front doors, stepping over rotting corpses as she went. She pushed through both sets of doors and entered the facility's courtyard where the dim emergency lights fought the evening's darkness for dominance.

Everything was quiet, and nothing moved. The corpses were just bumps of shadows covered in fungal growth, its faint crimson luminance unholy in the darkness.

Burke's shiny, black bus sat parked against the curb.

"I'm here, Tom," Kim said.

"I'm going to connect you with General Miller's soldiers now," Tom replied. There was a shift in sound in Kim's hood before Tom continued. "Hello, Lieutenant Colonel Bryant. This is Dr. Tom Flannery, director of the CDC facility. How close are you?"

"Coming around the block now," a gruff voice spoke into Kim's ear. "Thirty seconds, tops."

Kim envisioned Dr. Flannery nodding in the control center. "CDC Field Agent Kim Shields will be waiting for you."

"Roger that," Bryant said.

Kim soon heard the roar of an engine, and a military Humvee pulled up behind Burke's bus. Three soldiers got out, met at the driver's side, and looked around. Two of the soldiers wore simple white coveralls and respirators while a third soldier wore a camouflaged suit equivalent to Kim's. All three of the men carried assault-style rifles in plastic bags, similar to Burke's goons, and each had a backpack slung over their shoulders.

They spotted her and made their way over.

Kim waved. "Good to see you, Lieutenant Colonel Bryant."

"Ma'am. Sorry we're late, but we got sidetracked helping some civilians evacuate a building. We found twenty of them. Our biggest haul yet."

"Do you think there are many more?" Kim asked, her voice edged with hope. "I mean, have you seen more who need rescuing?"

"Hard to tell, ma'am," Bryant said. "A lot of folks are burrowing deep inside of buildings to put walls between them and the fungus. They'll come out once they run out of food. The smart ones are leaving lights in their windows to let us know they need help. I split the main part of my unit off with orders to escort the twenty we found back to the FEMA base. We three came to lock down your facility."

"You've no idea how much we appreciate that," Kim said. She couldn't wait to see the expression on Burke's face when she introduced him to Bryant. Kim did a visual inspection of the soldiers' suits, walking around them and looking for tears. "You're fine to come inside the general quarters," Kim said, "but your men will need to sit in quarantine for a day or so before we can allow them to roam since they're not wearing Class A protection. It's just a precaution."

"That won't be a problem," Bryant said. "They've been on duty since this all started, and I'm sure they'd appreciate the downtime."

"Great. Let's get you inside."

Thirty minutes of decontamination protocols later, Kim and Bryant met in the commons area. The soldier had showered and dressed in his original military fatigues after Kim had given them

a quick wash in the community washing machine. His well-muscled shoulders bulged in his white T-shirt.

“Cream or sugar?” Kim asked him from where she stood in front of the coffee maker.

“Black,” the soldier replied, running his hand through his damp hair.

Kim brought the cup of coffee over and placed it on the table in front of him before she got one for herself.

“Thanks,” Bryant said, lifting the cup to his lips.

“No problem,” Kim replied. She replaced the used coffee pod and put a fresh one in for herself, hitting the start button to begin the brewing cycle. “Nothing like fresh coffee to clear your head.”

“You’ve got that right,” Bryant agreed. “This is the good stuff, too. Not the instant packets we’re used to.”

Kim poured cream and sugar into her cup and sat across from Bryant.

“How long have you and Dr. Flannery been down here?” he asked.

“Almost since the moment it all started,” Kim said, then she twisted her lips. “I had to run the obstacle course from hell to get here.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay,” Kim said. “I made it. That’s all that counts. What’s it like at the FEMA camp? Do you need me there?”

“To be honest, ma’am,” Bryant looked at her, “It doesn’t look good for us. We’ve got about two-thousand people and growing. Most of them are infected. The CDC folks have been great, but we didn’t realize there were carriers mingling inside the clean tents. By the time we realized people were passing it from person to person, it was too late.”

“The fungus retracts to a less aggressive state after about twenty-four hours,” Kim acknowledged. “We’re hoping it goes completely dormant. The only good news is that no one has died in this second phase that I’m aware of. Although I haven’t been able to keep up with all the field teams.

“No, you’re right. People at the FEMA camp are sick, and getting sicker, but no one has died. Do you think that’s a good sign?”

“It means folks can resist the less aggressive form of the fungus,” Kim said. “We need to bring some of those folks here for testing.”

Bryant’s expression was grim. “If you need more test subjects, we’ve got them.”

“I’ve been interested in a little girl from New York who seems to be immune to *Asphyxia*.” Kim leveled her gaze at the man. “At least until we lost contact with her.”

“Damn.” Bryant shook his head.

“On the positive side, we’ve got another round of solutions to test one subject.”

“What if those don’t work?”

“We have to keep trying. I’ll talk to Dr. Flannery and General Miller about transferring some of the infected from the FEMA camp to here.”

Footsteps approached, and Kim looked up to see Burke, Pauline, and two of Burke’s goons step into the commons room.

“You’ll bring more infected people into the facility?” Burke asked. The CEO was dressed in workout clothes, and a towel hung around his neck. “Are you sure that’s safe?”

“That information is classified,” Kim said.

“Yet, here you are discussing it with some grunt.” Burke turned to Bryant. “This is?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Scott Bryant,” the soldier said. “I take it you’re Birkenhoff?”

“The one and only,” Burke said with a grin. “This is my assistant, Pauline, and my top man, Josh Richtman.”

Goon and soldier stared one another up and down. Kim could feel the tension in the room grow.

Burke stared openly at Bryant’s pistol holstered on his hip. “I thought you said no weapons allowed in the facility?”

“We make exceptions for United States military,” Kim replied, unable to keep the hint of smartness from her tone. “This is a government facility.”

“For as long as there is a government,” Burke murmured.

Bryant stiffened in his chair.

Burke’s goon, Richtman, took a deep, steady breath, and a smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

“Sorry,” Burke said, spreading his hands. “We’ve all been a little out of sorts, as you can imagine. Some of us are less than thrilled with the government’s response to the crisis.”

Kim’s face flashed with heat, and her jaw dropped. “The government’s response? For a mess you created?”

Burke pulled up a chair from another table. “Do you mind if I sit?” Without waiting for a response, he slid into the chair and placed his hands on the table in front of him. “My company was competing with several other companies to bring our product to market. With the government’s consent, we rolled out the Harvest Guard product legally. I’m happy to say, our global supply chain is the best in the world, and it brought the antifungal to market expediently.”

“No one alerted the CDC, Burke.” Dr. Flannery’s words about not provoking the CEO echoed in Kim’s head, yet she couldn’t contain her contempt. “You didn’t properly test Harvest Guard in the field. You resubmitted results of your previous tests. I don’t know who you paid off to get this pushed down the pipeline and into production, but if they’re still alive, you’re both going down for it.”

“Sounds criminal to me.” Bryant shrugged. “Then again, I’m not an expert.”

The heat of Kim’s words and Bryant’s veiled threat didn’t seem to affect the CEO.

“Is that why General Miller wanted me here?” Burke asked with a snide expression. “To keep tabs on me?”

“You’d have to ask him,” Kim said.

Burke gave Kim a contemptuous look. “You think one jarhead is enough to keep us here?”

Kim stiffened. “His men will be out of quarantine in twenty-four hours.”

“Don’t forget the two thousand troops stationed around the FEMA camp just outside of the city,” Bryant said, matter-of-factly. “Humvee’s with mounted weaponry that would shred that bus of yours. You aren’t going anywhere.”

Burke nodded with a contemplative expression. “I’m going to visit that wonderful little gym you folks have on site.” Burke pulled at the towel wrapped around his neck. “Exercise is so important. Pauline?”

“I want to grab a piece of fruit, first,” the tall assistant said, moving to the cabinets.

“Grab it while you can,” Burke said in a sing song way. “And then catch up.”

With that, the CEO stood and left the room with his goons following close behind him.

Kim watched Pauline grab a banana from the pile, its bright yellow skin already starting to turn brown with ripeness.

“Hey, Pauline,” Kim said, finding it irritating how confident she was with an armed soldier backing her up. “I’d like to interview you to help us understand where Durant-Monroe fits into

this disaster.”

Pauline hesitated at the threshold of the room, turning back to glare at Kim. “I don’t think that would be a good idea. Not without Mr. Birkenhoff’s lawyers present.”

“I think we can all agree that’s not going to happen,” Kim said. “I just need to ask a couple of questions. And, since it looks like we’re going to be roommates for a while, we might as well get to know each other.”

Pauline’s smile froze. “Later today then.”

“Great.”

Kim watched as the woman stepped into the hall and followed Burke.

“You don’t trust Mr. Birkenhoff, do you?”

“Not as far as I can throw him,” Kim said. “He wouldn’t have a leg to stand on in a court of law. Why he’s so damn smug about everything, I have no idea.”

“Sounds like you’ve got him dead to rights.”

“But, if we can’t find a cure for *Asphyxia*, if we can’t save what’s left of humanity, Burke may never pay for what he’s done.”

Chapter 36

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

The sheriff led the twins, Officer Smith, and another officer across the threshold and into a second control room. It held three thick, metal doors leading into cell blocks A, B, and C. The sheriff hit the switches to release Cell Block B's door.

While Randy was already hot in his Tyvek coveralls, the room felt stuffy, and the shouts of the inmates grew louder.

Jenny let go of her cart and nudged Randy. "Looks like there's no one in the other cell blocks."

Randy looked to his left and right and saw that the tiny, rectangular windows set into the doors were black. The lights were off. "You're right." Randy glanced at the sheriff to make sure he wasn't watching. Then he grabbed Smith and pulled him closer. "Hey, man, what happened to those other cell blocks? Why are the windows dark?"

Smith shot his own glance at the sheriff before he placed his mask close to Randy's ear. "Those blocks were on a newer ventilation system. All linked up. Somehow the stuff got in there, and we couldn't save them."

Randy looked back and forth between the cell block doors. "Were some of the men in A and C sick?"

Smith nodded again.

Jenny butted her head between the two of them. "And the sheriff brought the infected ones into an uninfected block?"

A loud, clanking noise interrupted them, and the sheriff pushed Cell Block B's door open and stepped through. Another officer in protective coveralls and a respirator met him. They exchanged a few words and stepped aside as the sheriff waved them in.

Smith pushed his cart in first, followed by Jenny, Randy, and the second officer. The guard at the door looked at Randy with nervous, exhausted eyes as he gripped his rifle tight. Randy nodded to him as they pushed their way through. The cell block was a large rectangle of cells facing inward toward a central courtyard. Within the courtyard were tables, chairs, and a few carts full of linens and other cell supplies.

The inmates erupted at once, hollering and hooting at the newcomers as they entered. They shouted insults and curses that made Randy blush. He couldn't see Jenny's face, though he imagined what she must be thinking.

"Stay close to Smith," the sheriff said, puffing his chest out as he looked around. "We'll park the carts out in the middle, then you kids go back to the control room and shut the doors behind you. You can watch from the monitors."

Once they were out in the middle of the courtyard, the sheriff turned back to them. "Okay, this is good," Sheriff Stans said with a jerk of his head. "You kids go back."

Randy and Jenny left the carts and walked back to the intersection. While it was only twenty-five yards, it seemed like a million miles with the inmates jeering at them.

When Randy looked past the glares, scowls, and pounding fists, he noticed the coughing and hacking sounds; they were painful sounds that reminded him of people with advanced pneumonia. Sick men lingered in the backs of their cells or lay exhausted on their thin cots. One man shouted that there was stuff growing in his toilet.

Randy glanced up to see one man in particular standing in the cell closest to the intersection door. From playing high school football, Randy had learned how to gauge a man's height and weight at a glance. The man in the cell was a hulk, standing six feet, four inches tall and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds.

The man's face was long with an untrimmed beard covering his jaw. Dark, tousled hair sprouted from his head as if it hadn't seen a comb in weeks. His jail shirt stretched over a pair of wide shoulders, and his big hands rested on the edge of the tray slit like a spider waiting for a fat, juicy bug to come by.

He was the only prisoner in the cell.

"Hey, boys, looks like they brought us two pretty red-heads!" the hulk shouted, and the other prisoners hooted and hollered in response.

"That girl looks as sweet as cotton candy," one shouted.

Another hooted, "I'll fight you for her..."

Randy raised his middle finger to the hulking man just before they entered the safety of the chamber, and the inmates went even more ballistic with laughter. Smith followed the twins and shut the chamber door behind them, cutting off the sounds. He threw the lock and gestured to the control room.

"Come on," he said. "Let's watch from the monitors."

Smith sat in front of the monitor screens, and Randy and Jenny pulled up chairs on either side of him. They watched as the on-duty officer and the sheriff went to the first cell where a pair of old men sat.

"That's Jones and Bickens," Smith said, pointing at the screen. "Nice guys."

"What are they in for?" Randy asked.

"Drunk and disorderly," Smith said. He glanced at Randy and shrugged. "Wrong place at the wrong time."

"Yeah, no kidding."

The two old men inside the cell seemed like solemn monks compared to the other inmates. One of the men brought an old stack of trays over to a tray slit in the cell bars and slipped them through to the on-duty officer. Once the officer had taken the old trays and moved away from the door, Sheriff Stans brought two trays of fresh food over and slipped them into the tray slit one at a time.

One of the old men took his tray and joined his cellmate on a bunk. Then he dipped his fingers into the lima beans and corn, holding the dripping vegetables up with a nod before he dropped them into his mouth.

"Next up," Smith said.

The prisoners hurled barely perceptible insults and catcalls at the officers by the dozen and in more creative ways than Randy had ever heard.

"Tough crowd," Randy said.

Officer Smith nodded. "You have no idea."

Randy began to understand Sheriff Stans' weariness and just how difficult it was for the officers to keep the jail under control. It must be a nightmare to deal with all those hard-knock men when most of them didn't appreciate it. Randy wasn't sure he shared the sheriff's same sense of duty.

As they neared the end of the hour, the sheriff and his officer came to the hulking man's cell.

Randy narrowed his eyes. "Who's that?"

"The guy you flipped off? That's Krumer."

“What’s he in for?”

“You don’t want to know,” Smith said with a glance at Randy. “Seriously, you don’t want to know. He’s going up state as soon as things get back to normal.” Smith’s expression sobered. “You probably shouldn’t have flipped him off.”

An hour later, Sheriff Stans and the on-duty officer pushed the carts over near the junction door, and Smith led the twins to retrieve them.

Randy, Jenny, and Smith each got behind their carts and pushed them out of the control room. Randy let out an enormous sigh of relief when the control room door slammed shut behind them.

They pushed the carts back to the kitchen and then left the building. While Randy was relieved to be out of the jail, he would have loved to take off his air filtration mask and wipe the sweat off his face. His blood still pumped full of adrenaline from the confrontation with Krumer, and he turned and gave his sister a grin.

Jenny wasn’t smiling.

“What’s wrong?”

“Smith was right.” She stood there with her hands on her hips, fuming. “You shouldn’t have flipped that Krumer guy off. That guy was huge.”

“I’m not going to take crap from anyone,” Randy said with a sour note. “And it’s not like I’m a shrimp or something. Our entire offensive line was bigger than him last year, and I handled them just fine in practice.

“This isn’t football practice.”

Seeing his sister’s serious concern, Randy nodded. “It’s not a game, I know. I’ll try not to poke any more bears. I’d like to never go inside there again.”

The front door of the jail flew open, and the bedraggled sheriff jogged out, half waving. “Hey, I was hoping I’d catch you before you left. Sorry for the inmates’ language. They’re not pleasant people, but we appreciate the help.”

“No worries, Sheriff,” Randy said. “It’s a tough situation in there.”

“Yes, it is. And that’s why I need your help again.”

Randy glanced at his still-rattled sister. “What’s the job, sheriff?”

“We need you to collect more fuel for the generators.” His brow arched and he lifted his eyes to gaze across the town. “We’ve got about three days of fuel left, but I’d like to stockpile it now. I figure you can check the gas stations and see if any of them will pump. If not, we can figure out how to get them working later. So, what you’ll need to do is—”

“What’s that going to get you, sheriff?” Randy threw up his hands in frustration.

“What’s that, son?”

“I mean, you’ve got some dangerous guys in there.” Randy gestured toward the building. “I’ll bet every one of those jerks is thinking of a way to get out of there. And Officer Smith and the other guys are exhausted.”

The sheriff was a good inch taller than Randy. He stood stiffly and looked down his nose at the young man. “You don’t think I know all that? You don’t think I know we’re walking on a razor’s edge?”

“No, I know you do.” Randy shook his head. “I’m just saying, it’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“What would you have me do, Randy?” The sheriff’s stern eyes bore down. “Want me to let them out?”

“No way.” Randy shook his head. “Especially not Krumer.”

“Want me to just abandon the place and leave them to die?” The sheriff hardened his tone. “Some of them did nothing more than smoke some weed. Others just had a few too many drinks and got a little rowdy.”

Randy thought about the two older men who were in for drunk and disorderly. “Not all of them. Just the bad ones.”

The sheriff shifted his weight to his other leg. “So, you want me to get out their case files? We can round up some coffee and donuts and make a day of going through them. You can help me decide which ones get to die. Sound good?”

“I’m not a judge.” Randy shook his head again and looked away from the sheriff. He was seeing the deeper layer to all this, and his admiration grew for the men sticking to their posts.

“Well, neither am I.” Stans’ voice sank lower as his weariness returned. “So, how about you just go get us the gas?”

Sheriff Stans turned and walked back inside the jail.

Chapter 37

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

After a long day of gathering gasoline and scavenging for the library people, Randy and Jenny climbed out of the old Ford and stumbled to the front door of their home. The generator was still running, and one faint light shone through the interior of the house, giving it a warm and inviting glow.

As they approached the front door, Randy saw that the fungus had encroached around the doorframe once more. It looked like some evil portal from a haunted house.

Randy opened the front door, grabbed a bucket of bleach from just inside, and scrubbed the fungus from around the frame. Once done, he and Jenny decontaminated. They left their soiled coveralls to soak in the utility sink and stripped their air filtration masks off to breathe in cool, fresh air for the first time all day.

“Taking off my mask after a long day will never get old,” Randy said. He used disinfectant soap to wash his face and then stood at the top of the basement stairs, waiting on Jenny.

“We didn’t even get a new vehicle,” Jenny said as she took off her own mask and finished disinfecting her skin.

“We’ll get one tomorrow,” Randy said as he led his sister down the stairs into their safe place. “It’s not like we’re going anywhere soon. We’re probably stuck feeding those inmates forever.”

“A lot of them were sick,” Jenny said, leaving the significance of her words to linger in the air.

Randy remembered what one of the inmates had said about “stuff” coming up from their toilets, so he inspected the drains in their kitchenette and bathroom and sprayed bleach into them to ensure there was nothing coming up from the septic tanks.

They each took a shower, dressed in shorts and T-shirts, and microwaved some soup. They pulled out two TV dinner trays and ate in front of the white noise of the television.

“The folks at the library were in friendly spirits today,” Jenny said as she ate.

“They’re still alive,” Randy nodded. “And they’ve got us to bring them supplies, for now. I’m just not sure how long we can keep this up with the sheriff’s demands. If we’re stuck helping around town, we won’t have time to search for other survivors. I mean, who knows who else is out there doing what we’re doing just to survive.”

“What if one of us drove down to Indianapolis to check on the FEMA camp there?” Jenny asked, hopefully. “Maybe they can help us, or at least give us a place to bring people to.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking,” Randy slurped some beef barley soup off his spoon. “I was thinking about it as soon as we heard that last news report, but then we got busy. I’ll talk to the sheriff about it tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jenny finished her soup and pushed the tray away from her. Randy finished a moment later. He could normally eat two or three bowls of soup, and a sandwich on top of that, but they had to ration their supplies.

Randy sat back on the couch with a sigh and then winced as Jenny’s feet landed in his lap. Looking over he saw that she’d turned sideways on the couch and stretched her long legs all the way across.

“You should rub my feet.”

“I’m not rubbing these nasty things.” Randy grabbed her big toe and jerked it playfully. Jenny yowled and wiggled. “Hey, you used to rub them when we were little!”

“Your feet were a lot smaller then,” Randy grinned mischievously. “These things are boats now.”

“Hey, you know I hate my enormous feet.” Jenny flashed him a mock frown and pulled her legs back.

Randy grabbed her feet and held them in his lap with a chuckle. “Just kidding, sis.” Then he stroked the top of her foot like he had when they were little kids.

“Ah, that’s much better,” Jenny said, settling into the couch and resting her head back.

Soon, he heard light snores coming from her end of the couch and saw she’d fallen fast asleep. Randy stared ahead, stroking his sister’s skin and thinking back on better days before their lives had been snapped in two.

Jenny had always been there for Randy after a big football loss, listening to him rant about the mistakes he’d made and what the team needed to do to get better. She’d always brought him ice for his shoulder and helped him stretch his bruised body the following day. And he’d always helped Jenny train for her track meets, offering advice and spending hours at the track to help her improve her race times.

He would never forget the time she’d won her first meet and they’d celebrated with their parents at the Pizza King. They were sophomores at the time, and Jenny was over the moon at having blown the competition away in the first 5000m race of the season. She’d never looked back after that, getting faster and faster over the next three years.

They had always taken care of each other. Even when Randy had a girlfriend or Jenny had a boyfriend, they always ended up being the most important things in each other’s lives besides their mother and father.

Randy suspected that being twins gave them a special bond, something that went beyond a regular sibling relationship. He was certainly thankful that he had Jenny now, and he wouldn’t know what to do without her.

That’s why he had to protect her above all else. No matter how much responsibility the sheriff placed on Randy’s head with the inmates, Jenny was the most important thing. More important than every man in that jail or every person left alive in town, as far as Randy was concerned.

Chapter 38

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

“Good to see you’re up early.”

Kim looked up to see Bryant enter the commons area. He still wore his fatigues and boots with his pistol strapped to his hip. He hadn’t shaved, and the dark growth around his jaw made his ice-blue eyes stand out even more.

“I’ve hardly gotten any sleep at all.” Kim stifled a yawn over her coffee cup.

“You and me both.” Bryant went to the coffee maker, replaced the old pod with a fresh one, and brewed a fresh cup. “I walked the halls a dozen times overnight. Burke and his merry band are locked away in their room.”

“Up to no good, I’m sure,” Kim said. In her exhaustion, she’d forgotten about her resentment toward the CEO and the danger he presented being here. “I’m almost tempted to kick him and his buddies out. We got what we needed from him.”

“You could do that,” Bryant said. He pulled over a chair and sat opposite Kim. “But I think General Miller will want to keep him around in case things get back to normal. You know, to dole out some justice.”

“I’d love to see that,” Kim said with a faint smile, then she shook her head. “But I don’t think things will be back to normal any time soon. I mean, have you realized how many millions have died already? Can you imagine what it’s going to take to repopulate the world? I mean, there could be entire countries wiped out.”

“It’s hard to wrap my head around,” Bryant said. “I’m just trying to fly straight and perform one task after another.”

“I think everyone left alive will need to think like that to get through this.”

“Did you hear from the little girl?” Bryant asked. “What was her name? Fiona?”

Kim shook her head. “We haven’t heard a thing. I have one of the CDC field teams out looking for her now, but my guess is that their chopper crashed. I hope she’s still alive.”

Bryant looked grim and sipped his coffee.

Kim sighed and rubbed her hands down her face.

“You okay?”

“I just miss my husband and kids,” Kim smiled. “They’re in Ft. Collins. I haven’t been able to reach them directly, but I spoke to some folks at my old office, and they promised to check in on them. They’ve got their hands full, too. Some of the spore clouds drifted through the drier part of the country. They’ve reported contaminated air reaching Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and even California.”

“That’s not good.” Bryant shook his head. “And it explains why I’ve heard nothing from Missy.”

“It that your wife?”

Bryant nodded. “She’s stationed at Edwards Air Force Base in California.”

“She a pilot?”

“She is,” Bryant smiled fondly. “I already asked her to fly out here and pick me up, but she denied my request. She has other orders.”

Kim chuckled, and it felt good to laugh after several days of death, sleeplessness, and hard work. “So, you got to talk to her?”

“Two days ago,” Bryant said. “They were planning on airlifting supplies and troops to the FEMA camps in the spore zone, but if what you say is true—”

“Kim, can you come to the control center? I have something you might want to see,” Dr. Flannery called through the intercom.

“Duty calls,” Kim said to Bryant.

“Is Lieutenant Colonel Bryant with you, by any chance?”

“Right here, Doc,” Bryant said, raising his voice.

“This may interest you, too.”

“Be right there.”

Kim exchanged a look with Bryant, and the two got up and exited the commons. Tom’s voice sounded encouraging, so Kim moved at a hurried pace, and the long strides of the soldier kept up with her. They came to the control center door, and Kim swiped her ID against the reader. She waited for the door to slide open and they stepped inside.

Tom stood over by the high-tech equipment, peering into one of the high-powered microscopes. As they approached, the doctor looked up from the instrument, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Don’t smile at me that way unless you have something amazing to say,” Kim said, looking hopeful.

Tom barely hid his excitement. “Have you looked at Samantha Roger’s blood after we tried solution B-18?”

“Not for a few hours,” Kim said.

“I added a protein inhibitor to the treatment plan, and the combination broke down *Asphyxia*’s cell wall. The protein inhibitor keeps the cells from repairing themselves and enables the patient’s own immune system to attack the cells.”

“That’s amazing, Tom.” Tears of relief welled in her eyes. “Provided the fungus doesn’t mutate again.”

“Well, Samantha is a long way from full remission.” Tom’s tone grew more subdued as he stepped away from the microscope and gestured to Kim. “But the initial findings look great.”

Kim bent over the microscope and studied the breakdown of the cells. She noticed several flowery fungal cells already split open and the super-charged white blood cells cleaning them up. It was beautiful.

She stepped back from the microscope and put her hand to her chest. “This is a huge first step.” Then she opened her arms and caught the doctor off guard with an embrace.

Tom chuckled and hugged her back, lifting Kim off the ground. They turned to Bryant. The soldier held up his hand, and Kim and Tom each gave him a high five.

“We need to tell Atlanta as soon as possible,” Tom said. He grabbed his laptop where it rested next to the microscope and sidestepped over to the conference room door.

Kim followed the doctor but then turned to see Bryant lingering in the center of the room. “Bryant can come, too?”

“Please, join us, Bryant,” the doctor waved the soldier over. “I want to bring General Miller in on this, and the president.”

“Yes, sir.” Bryant quick-stepped over to them.

They got situated in the room with Kim and Bryant on one side of the conference table and Tom on the other. The doctor sat down, pulled the conference control pad in front of him, and began sending out calls for the Atlanta CDC to join.

“I’m calling the Atlanta CDC, the president’s line, and General Miller,” the doctor said. “We

might not get them all on video, but I'm hoping they can at least dial in on audio." Tom sat back, opened his laptop, and waited.

Kim turned her body to the monitor and built-in camera at the end of the conference table. She saw her reflection in the black monitor screen. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail, though several loose strands hung around her face, and her eyes looked tired.

Despite her exhaustion, the new test results had her blood pumping with excitement, and she couldn't wait to give Atlanta the news. The only problem was that Atlanta never came online. The screen remained blank, even after several minutes.

"What's going on?" Tom said, sounding worried.

"Bob and Alison looked sick on the last conference call." Kim said. "I haven't received anything from them for sixteen hours."

"Nancy must be down, too," Tom said, sounding defeated.

Finally, the monitor flickered to life and Nancy Wilkens's face flashed on the screen. Relief washed over Kim. She had gotten used to Nancy's gruff voice, and it was good to know she was still alive.

"Thank God, Nancy," Tom lifted his head, eyes wide. "We didn't think you were going to answer."

The woman spoke but immediately started coughing. She covered her mouth with a napkin to hide the telltale signs of *Asphyxia*; flecks of black and pink mucous.

When she was able to speak, Nancy lowered the napkin and wiped the corner across her bottom lip. "Sorry, Tom, but it looks like the fungus got me too." The woman's voice sounded like sandpaper, and she looked delirious. "I've got everyone else resting. I'll tell you though, none of us are doing well." Nancy covered her mouth and coughed again.

"We've made some progress," Tom said, and he rattled off the details about solution B-18 and the protein inhibitor that seemed to wreak havoc on *Asphyxia*'s cell walls. "I'll send you the compound details now." Tom's voice was full of grim determination. "You should be able to synthesize enough to give your team a fighting chance."

Nancy's head bobbed tiredly. "Thanks, Tom. Great work."

Kim leaned forward. "Do you need one of us to come to you, Nancy? We could synthesize something here and get it down to you in sixteen hours or so."

"Nonsense," Nancy straightened in her chair, eyes lighting up as her voice took a forceful tone. "I can do it here and get it administered in half the time."

"It's not been widely tested," Tom reminded them. "B-18 is an extremely preliminary formula. The side effects—"

"Damn the side effects," Nancy grimaced. "We can't perfect the formula if we're dead. Once we confirm B-18 really works, we'll need to make as much of it as we can for distribution to the FEMA camps."

Nancy's eyes turned to Kim. "You need to meet with Birkenhoff and see where he can lend a hand. There's a Durant-Monroe Chemical plant in Cincinnati, but I don't know what their capabilities are and who they have left to help us."

Kim nodded just as the conference line beeped.

"This is General Miller," a gruff voice said. "I've only got a minute. What's happening?"

"Thanks for your time, General," Tom said. "Will the president be joining us?"

"No, but he hopes you have some good news for us."

"We do," Tom said, and he broke down what had transpired with B-18 and their plans to continue testing it, mostly on themselves in order to stay alive.

“If it works, do you think Birkenhoff can help us mass produce it?” the general asked.

“If any of his labs and facilities are still functional,” Nancy said, “they should be able to help. We’ve contracted them to produce other vaccines and medicines in the past. I’m just not sure they have the people to pull it off.”

“What’s his mood like?” Miller asked.

“He resents being here,” Kim said, “but he hasn’t been unhelpful, yet.”

The general was quiet for a moment before he spoke again. “I think we need to hold the man and assume control of all Durant-Monroe properties, both physical and intellectual. Separate him from his people and lock him in a room. Then I want you to interview him and find out what assets he has remaining. Assuming he’s still in contact with them.”

Kim nodded.

“As soon as you folks confirm that B-18 is the real deal, we’ll redirect all remaining personnel to converge on your position and escort you to the nearest Durant-Monroe production facility. Maybe we can even fly some folks in from the west coast to help make up for any labor shortages.”

“I’ll start working on that now,” Kim said with a nod. “I’m still in contact with the remaining twenty-five field teams, and I can redirect them here.”

The general looked grim. “Any theories on why the field teams are being so heavily affected?”

“By the time *Asphyxia* transitioned into its second phase,” Kim said, “it had already infected many of the field teams. Their symptoms wouldn’t have been noticed right away, so any decontamination protocols were too late. The teams were sleeping in infected tents and didn’t even know it.”

“They were walking around infected, thinking they were clear.”

“It just hit us too hard, too fast, sir,” Kim agreed as the heavy weight of reality bore down. “We just didn’t have the resources and the proper facilities to keep our people one hundred percent clean.” It was a truth Kim had not even admitted to herself until that moment. But the steady decline of teams reporting in over the last forty-eight hours, and signs of coughing symptoms in those teams who did report in, had shown her the truth.

“Same thing that happened to our first FEMA camp,” Miller said. There was a pause and then the general resumed his hard, determined tone. “Well, people, you have your tasks. Let’s confirm B-18 and then gather all our strength for one final push. And make sure you lock down Birkenhoff. He is not to leave the facility.”

Tom turned and gave Kim a hard look. “Kim, I want you to carry your sidearm from here on out. You got that?”

“Got it,” Kim said, secretly hoping she didn’t have to use it.

Chapter 39

Burke Birkenhoff, Washington, D.C.

Burke leaned forward in his chair and squeezed his fists tight where they rested on either side of his laptop as rage swept through him. Tom Flannery had given Burke access to the CDC communication application, and Burke had used a personal USB stick with hacking software to overhear their conversations.

At first, Burke wasn't interested in listening to a bunch of scientists fail miserably at trying to stop the inevitable last gasp of mankind. His intention had been to wait it out and then sneak away to live out the rest of his years at his California bunker with Pauline.

But with General Miller's order to lock Burke up against his will and take control of Durant-Monroe assets, it was clear he wouldn't get to do that by simply playing along.

He'd have to take action.

Durant-Monroe didn't have many assets left. The company had been losing money for years as they fought off hostile takeovers and increasing costs. Burke had lost contact with his facility leaders two days ago, and he assumed his scientists and workers had either died or abandoned the company all together.

He couldn't tell General Miller about his company's lack of assets if he wanted to remain valuable to them until he could escape. As soon as they found out he had nothing to offer, they'd toss him in a dungeon and throw away the key.

"They think they can hold me here," Burke sneered. "It's not going to happen."

"Sounds like we're about to bust out of here, boss." Pauline sat cross legged on the bed, her long legs drawn up beneath her and her hands resting on her knees in a meditative pose. She wore a skintight pair of jeans and a plain black T-shirt with the bottom portion tied up at her waist.

"You run interference down by the quarantine area," Burke said. "Don't let that pesky scientist release those soldiers. I'll grab Richtman, the boys, and our guns. We'll take over the facility."

"Aren't the guns locked away?" Pauline asked.

"I have the code to the storage closet," Burke said with a snide grin.

Pauline stood up and slipped her feet into a pair of sneakers. Then she crossed over to their bags and got out the pistol she'd hidden in one of the side compartments. "What if Shields becomes difficult?"

Burke glanced pointedly at the pistol in Pauline's hand.

After a moment, Burke saw that Pauline was struggling with the idea. Her nose and cheeks held a wincing expression, as if she'd just stubbed her toe on a piece of furniture. Pushing back his chair, Burke crossed the room and used his index finger to lift her chin.

"We're not in the old world anymore," he said. "It's dog eat dog out there now, and no one's going to look out for us but ourselves."

Pauline didn't seem convinced. "I've done a lot of things for you, Burke. A lot of really bad, dirty things. But this is by far the dirtiest. I'm not sure I can do it."

"Don't do it for me, dear." A slight snarl worked its way onto Burke's face. "Remember this. It won't be just me and Richter they'll keep locked up down here. It'll be you, too. Oh, sure, it will be comfortable for a while. We'll have plenty of food and water. They might even treat us

well.” He added a sinister note to his voice. “But, mark my words, there will come a day when the food and water will run out, and only scraps will remain. Do you think they’ll spare a bite for us?”

Burke lifted Pauline’s chin higher. Fear and uncertainty filled her eyes, though she hung on Burke’s every word, and that’s exactly where he wanted her.

He pressed her. “Or, they’ll all get sick first and die sooner than that. How are you going to break out of your quarantine cell after they leave you there to rot? They’ll be too sick and tired to get out of bed.”

“They say they have a cure,” Pauline said.

Burke shook his head. “Maybe they do have a cure, but that won’t stop the death of society and the pain of restarting.” Burke pulled his finger away and took a step back. “I’ll leave it up to you, Pauline. But I can promise you one thing. If we do what we need to do, get out of here, and get back on that bus, I promise you’ll be sipping margaritas on the back patio of our bunker inside a week. We’ll be far too high for any fungus to reach. You’ll gaze out over the Pacific Ocean and forget all about this gloomy part of our lives. Many of our friends are already there, waiting for us.”

Pauline gripped the gun tighter. “I guess we have to make some hard decisions.”

Burke stepped back and gestured at the door. “Nothing good in life is ever gained without a big decision. You know what decisions I’ve had to make. Can I count on you to do the same?”

Pauline took a deep breath and tucked the pistol behind her hip inside the waistband of her jeans and strode from the room.

Chapter 40

Moe Tsosie, Jack Rabbit Road, Arizona

Moe and Lane stood outside of Coyote's in the late morning sun. He tossed the last empty gas can down and gripped the lighter in his hand.

"You didn't have to help me," Moe said with a glance over at the bodies of the marauders they'd dragged to the side of the parking lot. A group of vultures had already descended to feast on the bullet-ridden corpses, and Moe expected coyotes and other creatures to follow.

"I know I didn't," Lane said. "But I liked Rocko, too. I didn't know him as long as you, but he made people feel at home."

"That he did," Moe conceded. "And now the world's worse off with him gone."

Moe recalled the first time he'd ever stepped into Coyote's almost a decade ago. Rocko greeted him the first time much like the last, with peaceful intent and a welcoming heart.

"I called him my brother," Moe said, choking the words out through a tight throat. It hurt Moe to say. Still, it was the truth, a proud truth.

He flicked the striker on the lighter and tossed it onto the line of gasoline he'd drawn to where they stood. The flames caught, racing along the flammable trail until it hit Coyote's and went up with an audible whoosh and blast of heat.

Moe and Lane took two steps back and watched as fire licked across the front and crawled up the dry-rotted siding. The flames reached the top and danced along the roof. Soon, fire engulfed the entire structure, and sweat formed on Moe's forehead and dripped down his temples.

"I'll head out now," Lane said with a pat on Moe's shoulder.

Moe turned and held out his hand. "It was good meeting you Sergeant First Class Lane Tithing."

"You too, Staff Sergeant Tsosie." Lane took Moe's hand in a firm grip and shook it.

"Maybe we'll meet again."

"Maybe," Lane grinned, and his steel-gray eyes sparked with mirth. "But probably not."

"Where are you headed? Just in case I make it out that way."

"El Paso." Lane said, and his expression turned wistful. "After that, who knows?"

"Got it," Moe grinned. "Good luck, sir."

"You too." Lane released Moe's hand and turned back to his truck. He paused. "Oh, that reminds me." The man picked up one of the AR-15s and a pack of what Moe assumed was ammunition and placed it next to Moe's truck.

"I can't take that," Moe said, though his eyes lingered on the weapon. He knew the weapon was worth its weight in gold.

"You can, and you will," Lane insisted. "You're an excellent shot, and I can't think of anyone else who would put it to better use than you."

"Thanks."

Lane walked to his blue Mack R Series and climbed in. The rig rumbled to life, and the man pulled away with a brief salute to Moe. Moe returned the gesture and watched the rig pull across to the main road on its way to the entry ramp. The truck took I-40 east toward Holbrook, and the diesel engine faded until Moe stood alone next to the crackling building. Moe said a silent prayer for Lane and waved one last time.

He turned back to Coyote's and watched as the flames devoured the place. Within forty-five

minutes, the roof caved in, and the walls followed. At that point, Moe figured Rocko's corpse was burning, too.

The fire burned for another thirty minutes before he stowed the AR-15, several magazines of ammunition, and a backpack of nonperishable foods in his truck. Once loaded, Moe climbed up into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut behind him. He started the rig and sat for a moment while it idled.

With several quick tugs of his horn, Moe pulled away and headed for home.

Chapter 41

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

Randy walked out of the house and into the warm, cloudy day. As he moved to the truck, he avoided patches of fungus, a habit that was becoming instinctual.

He waited for his sister there, staring out across their ruined crops and the patches of green grass and trees trying to stay alive against the BD. He found himself silently rooting for those patches of green, desperate to break through the crimson and black fungus.

A glance at the sky showed storm clouds drifting toward them, but there were no traces of spores in the air.

“Happy Saturday morning,” Jenny called as she came up and put her arm around her brother.

“Hey, sis,” Randy responded.

“What are you looking at?”

Randy twisted his lips in disgust. “Just staring at the fungus and wanting to burn it all away.”

“That would probably work.”

“There’s not enough gasoline in the world to do it,” he said. “But someone in Indianapolis will have a better solution.”

“You still want to drive there today after we get our chorin’ done for the sheriff?” Jenny said “chorin” with a slight drawl.

“Yes, I do.” Randy gave a firm nod. “So, let’s try to keep it short with the sheriff today. We’ll see if they need help to feed the inmates again, but then we’re cutting out early and heading to Indianapolis.

“What about the folks at the library?”

“They’ll be fine,” Randy replied. “They’ve got enough food for two days, and they’re down in the basement where they’ve got clean air for now.” He saw the doubtful expression on Jenny’s face. “Okay, we’ll swing by and tell Mrs. Brody what we’re going to do. It’s less than two hours into the city, so we’ll be back before anyone even knows we’re gone.”

“Should we see if Officer Smith wants to go with us?”

“I don’t think so,” Randy said. “They’ve got enough to worry about. We’ll tell the sheriff what we heard on the news and then we’re leaving. I’m sure he won’t object when I tell him we’ll bring back some help.”

They stood in silence, and Randy’s eyes scanned the edge of the field where their parents lay buried beneath fungal growth.

“You know, right about now I’d be calling the guys to go shooting or do some fishing,” Randy said. “This was my favorite time of year when the crops were in the ground and school was out.”

“Nothing to do but have fun,” Jenny agreed, following his gaze. “I’d be sleeping late and then heading out for a run.”

“The good old days,” Randy said.

“Think we’ll ever get them back?”

Randy wrapped his arm around his sister’s shoulder and gave her a brief squeeze. “I hope so, sis. I hope so. Come on, let’s go check on Ally.”

The twins got into the truck, shutting the doors gently as they’d trained themselves to do. Randy started up the old Ford and pulled onto US-41 north toward Ally’s place.

They rode in silence, Randy glancing in his rearview mirror as their tires stirred up tendrils of BD. The spread on the road was thin and stretched out. The BD probably couldn't get much nourishment from dry rock.

"We're on our way, Ally," Jenny sang.

"Sorry we didn't make it there yesterday," Randy said. "But part of me was happy. Those inmates pissed me off, and I needed a break."

"It won't be so bad next time." Jenny shook her head. "Maybe we can even help some of those guys get out of there, because I think you're right. Someone needs to decide who should stay in the jail and who gets to leave. I thought about how to tell Sheriff Stans, too."

"That's cool," Randy nodded, happy to have her input.

Randy pulled the truck into Ally's driveway.

The old farmstead looked serene beneath the shade of the hundred-year-old oak trees, and the yard was lumpy with their bulging roots. Patches of fungus had fallen off the trees and into the yard, and Randy hoped that was a good sign.

Randy glanced at Goldy's corpse as they crossed to the front porch and stepped up. Jenny knocked, and they waited. She knocked again, and they waited some more.

When no one came, Jenny walked around the house and peered in through the windows, although there wasn't much to see. Ally had covered them all with plastic garbage bags like they'd told her.

"I don't like it," Jenny said, frowning at the house.

"Do you think she might have left?"

Jenny turned and looked out toward the Honda out by the barn. "Her car's still here."

An uneasy feeling stirred in Randy's belly.

Jenny returned to the front porch and knocked one more time, extra loud, before she opened the storm door and tried the doorknob. The door opened as soon as she touched it. Randy noticed part of the frame had snapped where someone had broken in.

Jenny looked back at him with a worried expression.

"Back up, sis," Randy said. He drew his pistol from his coverall pocket and stepped in front of her, glancing around the dimly lit living room as he entered.

Jenny opened the front door wider, and light spilled in to reveal the house in disarray. Sneaker prints and spots of fungus marked the hallway leading into the kitchen. On his left, Randy saw furniture had been knocked over.

"Someone fought here," Randy said.

Jenny stepped into the living room, yelling, "Ally! Ally, are you okay?"

"Sis, wait," Randy said, but Jenny was already stomping through the living room and into the back of the house.

Cursing under his breath, Randy followed her, keeping the barrel of his gun pointed downward. As he passed through the living room, he saw a TV dinner tray dumped on the floor along with a bowl of something dark, like soup, and a book. The covers and blankets Ally had been sleeping on were tossed to the side and scattered across the floor.

Randy hurried through the house and caught up with his sister at the end of the hallway. She stood stock still at the threshold of a room, staring at something that lay just inside.

"Who could have done this, Randy?" she sobbed, putting her hand to her chest and clutching at her overalls.

Randy edged past her and looked into the room. He wasn't familiar with the layout of Ally's house, though judging by the posters and teenage-style lace decorations all over the room, it

must be Ally's bedroom.

The young woman lay on her back, arms and legs splayed, mouth wide open, trails of fungus ran from the corners of her lips.

Her air filtration mask had been ripped from her face, and her head had been caved in by some blunt weapon. Blood and parts of her skull and brain spattered the carpet.

Randy felt the contents of his breakfast start to come up, and he had to turn away before he hurled all over Ally's corpse.

"Oh, Ally." Jenny's voice sounded frail behind her visor. Then her knees gave out, and she slid to the floor.

"Stay here." Randy wanted to help his sister; however, the killer might still be in the house. He stepped inside Ally's bedroom, avoiding any blood, and glanced around. Seeing no signs of the killer or his weapon, Randy stepped back into the hallway and checked all the rooms before returning to his sister where she knelt sobbing by Ally's side. Jenny held the young woman's hand, stroking her palm as her chest hitched.

Randy squatted down in the hallway, shoulders slumped. He stared at Ally's corpse, noting the bruises on her arms, though he couldn't bring himself to look at her head again.

Ally had probably been eating and reading on the couch when the murderer broke in. She'd thrown off her covers and stood, lifting her left arm to defend herself against the bat swinging for her head. She'd retreated to her bedroom and tried to slam the door shut, only to have the murderer strike a blow that knocked her onto her back. From there, he'd finished the brutal job.

Rage swelled inside Randy. The last minutes of Ally's life must have been terrifying. Randy had always thought Ally was a bit of an airhead, though she'd had a good heart. No one deserved to die the way she died.

But how had they known Ally was home? Had it been someone randomly raiding homes? It was possible.

After fifteen minutes, Jenny's crying died down to a sniffle, and Randy stood.

"Come on," Randy said, reaching out to his sister. She took his hand, and Randy pulled her to her feet. "I'll take you back to the house," he said. "You don't have to do anything today. I'll tell Sheriff Stans—"

"No way," Jenny said, pushing him away. Her eyes were red-rimmed and angry as she glared at him, and a trail of snot leaked from her nose. "I will not sit in the house while you're out risking yourself."

Randy didn't want to argue with her, so he kept his mouth shut until they were outside. It should have felt like stepping into fresh air, though all Randy smelled was the stale plastic of his mask.

"At least let me take you back to the house to get cleaned up," he said. "You've got snot running out of your nose."

Jenny tried to wipe it away with the back of her hand but her visor blocked it. Realizing she couldn't make it through the day with a snotty, dripping nose, she nodded.

The twins got back in the truck and left Ally's place behind.

Chapter 42

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

The twins got cleaned up at the house, doing a partial decontamination just long enough for them to wipe their faces with fresh water. An hour later, they pulled up to the jail in solemn silence, unable to shake the specter of Ally's death.

And, like with their parents, they'd faced a choice of what to do with her dead body. Randy suggested taking an entire day this week to put their parents and Ally to rest, and Jenny reluctantly agreed. There was a lot to consider. Digging holes in the ground would be back breaking work, and risky, even with their coveralls and air filtration masks on.

Secretly, Randy wanted to ask Officer Smith or someone else from the jail to help him with the task and spare Jenny that horror. She would be mad, but Randy would rather take her angry words than see his sister have to bury the people she loved.

Randy pulled into the jail parking lot, did his usual turn around, and parked with the nose of the truck pointed toward the street. He turned to his sister. "You okay?"

"Yeah, let's do this," Jenny said, and she got out of the truck and came around to Randy's side.

Randy got out and took a quick look around. He was used to the quiet city streets and cars gathering dust in parking lots. He frowned.

"Where'd all the police cars go?" Randy asked.

Jenny scanned the area and her face went pale. "Do you think they left?"

Randy shook his head and peered at the front door of the jail. "Maybe Sheriff Stans sent them out for more gas and food. We are two hours later than yesterday. Come on, let's check it out."

Randy strode to the front door, eased it open, and stepped inside. He meandered to the service window and peered into the offices. Sheriff Stans wasn't sleeping at the desk like they'd found him yesterday, and there were no signs of the other officers anywhere.

"They must be in back," Jenny said in the eerie silence.

The twins stepped through the office door and strode past several desks illuminated by the building's stark white halogen lights. Randy glanced down at the pen holders, computer monitors, and half-filled wastepaper baskets no one would ever use again.

They pushed through a door at the back of the office and stepped into a short hallway that required an ID to pass through. Randy couldn't remember if the sheriff had used his, so he led Jenny to it and pulled the handle, expecting the magnetic locks to stop him. They didn't, and the door flew open wide, the handle dented the drywall when it hit.

Stepping into an intersection, Randy remembered the kitchen and service area was straight ahead while the cells were halfway down the hall and to their right.

Randy paused, holding his hand up to Jenny. "You hear that?"

Jenny tilted her head forward, listening hard. She shook her head. "I don't hear anything."

"Right. No prisoners yelling or screaming," Randy said. "No one causing a ruckus."

"Jenny peered down the shorter hallway that led to the jail cells with a grim expression. "The cars and van are gone. Maybe they moved the prisoners to the FEMA site?"

Randy shook his head. "They wouldn't be able to fit all of them in that one van."

"Maybe they made multiple trips?" Jenny suggested, her voice sounding hopeful.

"Maybe," Randy replied, though he got his gun out, anyway.

Randy ignored the small part of himself that told him they needed to get out now. There was no sign of the sheriff or any of his men, but the gun in his hand gave him confidence.

They still hadn't seen a single prisoner running loose in the hallways.

"Are we going to check it out?" Jenny asked.

"I'd be more inclined to do it if you weren't in here with me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jenny said.

Randy adjusted his grip on the gun and looked back and forth between the passage leading to the kitchen and jail cells. "I'd be willing to check the kitchen to see if any of the officers are there, but I'm not going anywhere near those cells."

Randy strode down the hallway with Jenny close behind him. Several doors lay along the left side of the hallway marked as restrooms and janitorial storage, though Randy didn't stop and check any of those. He quickly led Jenny past the jail cells and continued to the end of the hall where they took a hard right and entered the kitchen area.

In most respects, the kitchen looked clean. The walk-in coolers hummed, and the faint smell of cooked food lingered in the air. However, the tray carts were pushed back against the wall and there were no signs that Smith had put together a big meal for the prisoners.

Peering through the prep area at the industrial-sized dishwasher, Randy saw most of the dirty dishes from yesterday were done.

"It doesn't look like they made the prisoners breakfast," Jenny said.

"What in the world is going on? Maybe you're right. Maybe they did just up and leave."

A clinking sound reached their ears from out in the dining area, and Jenny turned and walked over to the buffet bar. Randy followed her over and stared along with her at two men sitting in the middle of the dining room sharing what appeared to be an apple pie and a small decanter of coffee.

"That's Jones and Bickens," Randy said.

"Who?"

"The old guys from yesterday," Randy reminded her. "The ones in for drunk and disorderly."

"But what are they doing out?"

One of the old men looked up from his pie and grinned at Randy, holding up his fork in a salute. "Hey there, you two," he called out. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"What are you guys doing out of your cells?" Randy called back, enunciating every word so they heard him through his filtration mask.

"We're having a piece of pie." Bickens leaned back and sighed, his hand thrown over his paunched belly. They'd already eaten half the pie.

"Did the sheriff let you out?" Randy asked.

Jones shook his head. "No, Sheriff Stans..." The older man hesitated a moment before he turned to Bickens with a wide-eyed expression. He pointed at the twins with his fork. "Hey, you kids need to get out of here right away."

Jenny leaned forward across the food bar. "Why? What happened? Where is everyone?"

"You don't want to know," Jones spat, then he jabbed his fork at them harder. "Just get the hell out of here. Trust me. You don't want Krumer to see you walking around."

"You don't have to tell us twice." Randy grabbed Jenny by the hand.

"Wait!" Jenny yanked her hand free. She ran over to one counter, tore open a drawer, and snatched out a wicked looking butcher knife. Her face was back to pale and drawn. She looked terrified.

Randy led the way, gun raised, barrel pointed straight ahead. He turned the corner to the long

hallway leading back to the offices and started down it.

He took two more steps and froze. Jenny stumbled into him.

“Hey, what the—” she started but then saw why Randy had stopped.

Krumer stood in the hallway junction, blocking their escape. He looked like something out of a nightmare, a gleaming white smile spread across his blood-splattered face. A jail security ID hung from his clenched fist.

“Hey, kids,” he growled. “I hoped you’d swing by.”

“Where’s the sheriff and Officer Smith?”

“Officer Smith is only here with us in spirit. His body gave out. Sheriff Stans is a different story. Tough old guy. Used to coach me when I played high school football. He was a real bastard then, and he’s a real bastard now. We’re working out our differences, and I think we’re on the right track.”

“Shoot him, Randy,” Jenny hissed. “We’ll ask questions later.”

Randy nodded and fired. The shot sounded like a bomb in the enclosed space of the hallway. When the smoke cleared, Krumer was gone.

“You’re too slow,” Krumer shouted from around the corner. Menacing laughter echoed around them.

“Give us the sheriff,” Randy called, “and we’ll be on our way. You’re free to go anywhere you please once we’re gone.”

“I’ll tell you what you told me yesterday,” Krumer yelled with a short, harsh chuckle. His massive hand appeared from around the corner, middle finger raised.

“Let’s just go in there and get the sheriff out,” Jenny whispered to Randy. Her eyes stared ahead as she gripped the butcher knife. “We’re the ones with the gun.”

“If the officers and sheriff are all down, he’d have weapons in there with him, too. Not to mention more of his buddies.”

“He didn’t have a gun when he was standing out here.”

Randy shook his head. “Let’s just get out of here. We can’t take that guy on.”

Jenny glared at her brother. After a moment, she glanced down the hallway where Krumer had disappeared. She looked back to her brother and nodded. “You’re right, let’s go.”

They backed up the hallway to the door that led into the offices. The ID scanner beside it glowed red. Randy could see the dent in the drywall through the glass. He pushed against the door. It didn’t budge.

“What the...? It’s locked.” Randy’s gaze flashed down the hallway and back to the drywall dent. He shoved the door again. He threw his shoulder against it. Nothing.

“Looking for this?” Krumer chuckled.

Randy stiffened. He and Jenny turned to face back down the hallway.

Krumer leaned against the corner holding up the jail security ID. It swung from his bloody fist. The insane smile played across his face again. “Come and get it.”

Chapter 43

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Kentland, Indiana

Randy whirled around the corner, side-stepping as he brought his gun to bear in case Krumer waited. The big man was nowhere to be seen, and Randy noted the first control room door standing wide open. Randy indicated for Jenny to follow, then he strode carefully ahead.

When he reached the open door, Randy leaned left and right, peering into the room on either side of the door. Convinced the man wouldn't surprise him, Randy stepped forward into the room and rotated his torso to point the gun back and forth like he'd seen them do on television shows.

Randy had never taken part in advanced military maneuvers, though he was a dead shot at twenty-five yards. With nothing to see in the first control room, Randy looked ahead to the next. That door was open as well, so Randy stepped into the three-way intersection marked as cell blocks A, B, and C, moving his sights from side to side.

Blocks A and C's windows were still blacked out, and likely would be forever. The door to cell block B was wide open, and Randy saw the blood bath inside.

The white tile floor was slick with red, and one of the sheriff's men was dead on his back, eyes staring up at the ceiling. A shotgun lay nearby along with a scatter of used shells. Three inmates lay in pools of blood, blown to pieces by the shotgun.

A man coughed in the cell block, followed by another. It was the kind of lung-wracking cough only BD caused.

Randy approached the door and then looked back at his sister. "He could be anywhere in there."

Jenny's expression wavered as she stared at the blood on the other side of the door, then her eyes shifted to Randy. "I don't think we have a choice. He's got the ID. That's our way out of here."

"Come on in kids!" Krumer shouted, "the sheriff needs your help! We've got some sick people in here, too! You kids are so helpful!"

The man's voice echoed ominously in the concrete cell block. Randy couldn't pinpoint his location. He did the same leaning maneuver to check either side of the door, then he crossed the threshold, leading with his gun.

Randy turned left and right, eyes searching every corner of the cell block as his nerves tingled and his heart pounded. It was an open area, marked only by some tables and chairs and one food cart. He didn't see Krumer anywhere.

Boots squeaking on the bloody floor, Randy stepped over the dead guard and moved further into the chamber, convinced Krumer must be hiding in one of the cells. A quick scan showed Randy that there were at least a dozen men still laying in their bunks, all of them sick with the fungal infection.

A man was sitting on his bunk in the cell across from Randy. The man stared at Randy with sick, haunted eyes. Traces of fungus peppered his lips and nostrils, and a thin line of bloody drool ran down the man's chin and dripped onto his coveralls.

His eyes fixed on Randy for a moment before they slid upward as if he were looking at the ceiling of his cell. The sick man's eyes lowered again, and his expression sent a spike of panic shooting through Randy's limbs.

Randy turned just as a pair of sneakered feet swung down and cracked him in his visor. He flew backwards and landed hard, smacking the back of his head on the tile. Krumer hung from pipes that ran across the ceiling. The inmate let go and hit the floor with a heavy sound. Then he strode forward in two quick strides, grabbing for Randy's gun.

Randy took a fraction of a second too long to aim and fire, and Krumer ripped the gun from his grasp. He straddled Randy and slammed the butt of the gun down on Randy's visor.

Throwing up his arms, Randy blocked the strike. He kicked and twisted, punching at the big man as his own rage rose to the surface. Randy landed a shot to Krumer's stomach, drawing an angry grunt. Then he bucked his hips and almost tossed the man off. But Krumer rebalanced himself, raised the gun again, and slammed it down on Randy's visor.

The visor held strong, though the mask skewed even farther, partially blocking Randy's vision.

Krumer suddenly stiffened, dropping the gun as he yowled in pain. He half twisted, showing Jenny hanging on to the knife she'd slammed into the man's back. Krumer threw his elbow backward and caught her in the jaw. Her head rocked to the side, and she stumbled two steps and fell on the blood-slick tiles.

Using Jenny's distraction, Randy bucked his hips again, this time tossing Krumer off and allowing himself to scramble out from under him. Mask twisted on his face, Randy got to his feet and spun in a circle, trying to find his gun while moving out of Krumer's range.

"Randy!" Jenny called.

Randy spun just as Krumer's meaty fist swung in his direction. As a tight end on his high school football team, Randy had spent hours drilling on whether to dodge a blocker or run them over. He leapt back from the punch just before it would have knocked his head off.

Jenny ran up behind Krumer and tried to grab the knife that was still sticking out of his back. Krumer turned and swiped at her again. If Randy was quick, his sister was even quicker. Her long legs and thin frame allowed her to keep her distance as she drew Krumer away from Randy to buy him some time.

Randy's eyes darted all around, but he couldn't locate the gun anywhere.

The huge inmate chased Jenny off before he reeled back in Randy's direction, arms wide. Randy backed up until something touched his hip, and he glanced down to see the sheriff laying on the table. The man's hands were handcuffed above his head, his face horribly bruised.

He tried to speak, but all that came out were bloody bubbles in the corners of his mouth.

"The sheriff lost his gas mask," Krumer said with an apologetic tone, then he lurched forward to grab Randy.

Randy danced backward and slid to the side, putting the sheriff's table between him and the insane inmate.

Krumer grinned over the moaning sheriff at Randy. "You know, I'm not sure what happened out there, but I'm glad it did. I haven't felt this free in a long time."

"It's a fungal disease," Randy spat. "And you're going to die from it."

"I've got news for you, buddy," Krumer sneered. "We're all going to die, someday."

The big inmate put both hands around Sheriff Stans's neck and squeezed. The sheriff fought back feebly, his handcuffed fists swinging down with the strength of a child while Krumer laughed and wrung his neck.

Randy cocked his fist back and struck Krumer in the side of the face. The man leaned away with the blow, laughing it off as he kept squeezing. Randy struck him again and then again, though the inmate didn't budge. Throwing his shoulder and hands forward, Randy shoved

Krumer off the sheriff in a tackle move. As if expecting it, Krumer released Stans and snatched Randy's left arm with his big paw.

"Got you," Krumer sneered, pulling Randy forward while he brought his elbow around to connect with Randy's temple.

Randy's head snapped back, stars streaking through his brain, and his body fell limp. He tumbled to the bloody floor like a rag doll. He was aware of Krumer coming around the table after him, so he tried to crawl backwards even as his limbs rebelled from the shock of the near knockout blow.

The meaty paws reached for him, but Randy kicked out with one leg as he retreated across the bloody floor. A stillness settled over him. An angry, enraged stillness that threw all caution to the wind.

"Come on," he growled, kicking his boot into Krumer's knee.

Krumer winced and backed up, giving Randy time to get to his feet. Randy's legs shook, and the left side of his head ached with pain, yet he was still standing. Still fighting.

With a glance past Krumer, Randy saw Jenny sneaking up behind the man. Her hands were balled into fists, and her eyes had a reckless look. Randy feigned a kick, and Krumer responded by trying to snatch Randy's ankle.

Jenny took two more steps and leaped onto Krumer's back. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and her hand grasped the knife handle already in his back and worked it up and down, growling as she dug it deeper. Krumer screamed and howled, spinning in a circle, reaching back to grab Jenny like a bear trying to dislodge a monkey.

She avoided being caught for a few precious moments, but then Krumer jerked his head back and connected with Jenny's chin. She fell backwards, bringing the knife with her as she crashed to the tiles.

Randy saw the knife clatter away, so he ran to it, and snatched it off the floor.

Krumer stood over Jenny with his foot on her chest. The big man adjusted his stance so that his jail-issued sneaker slid to her throat and pressed down. Fueled with rage, Randy screamed and rushed forward.

The inmate saw Randy coming and threw out his fist to stop him. Randy took the blow at the same time he plunged the knife into the man's throat with a sickening, wet smack.

Gasping and stumbling, blood gushing down his chest, Krumer jerked the blade out of his throat and glared at Randy with insane hatred. Blowing bloody bubbles around his neck wound, Krumer flipped the knife around and lunged at Randy.

A shotgun blast hit Krumer in the side of the head. Bloody bits of him exploded in all directions, and Randy turned his visor away as some of it flew his way.

The enormous body hit the floor with a thud, and Randy turned to see who had fired. The old man, Jones, stood there with the guard's shotgun in his hand, barrel still smoking from the shot. Bickens stood over by the cell block door, looking at the bloody scene with a terrified expression.

Seeing Randy's shock, old Jones looked rueful. "We came as soon as we heard the ruckus."

"Took you all that time to get down the hall?" Randy said.

"These old legs aren't what they used to be," Jones did a brief shuffle. "I won't be breaking any land speed records anytime soon."

Randy nodded. "Thanks. We owe you one."

Randy turned to his sister and held out his hand. "You okay, sis?"

"I think so." Jenny took Randy's hand and let him pull her to her feet. Then she rubbed her

jaw. “Feels like someone took a hammer to my face.” She nodded to his mask. “You think you breathed in any BD?”

Randy shrugged and adjusted his air filtration mask. “I’m not sure. I guess we’ll find out soon enough.” His gaze lingered on Krumer’s corpse, then he walked over on shaky legs, rolled the man over with a grunt, and snatched the sheriff’s ID from his belt.

“Randy... Sheriff Stans...” Jenny’s voice was urgent and sad.

Stans was no longer moving. Head hanging low, Randy strode over to the table and looked down. The sheriff’s glassy gray eyes stared up at the ceiling, his face pale with blood loss. He wasn’t breathing.

“I really liked the sheriff,” Jones said, approaching with the shotgun.

“He was a good man,” Randy said in a shaky voice. “He just bit off way more than he could chew. We all did.”

They stood in silence for a moment before Jones looked around. “Now, can you kids tell us what in the world is going on out there and if we’re going to survive it?”

Chapter 44

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim jogged from the control room to the quarantine area on the east side of the CDC facility, trying not to appear too rushed in case she ran into Burke or one of his men. It was likely they'd be somewhere on the west side of the facility, either in their own rooms or in the commons area.

If Bryant's men weren't infected with *Asphyxia*, Kim could release them and even the odds against Burke and his goons.

Entering the examination prep room, Kim stepped around a table covered with latex gloves, dust masks, and medical supplies. Cabinets and drawers lined the walls, and there was a supply closet on the east and west sides of the room.

Kim moved across the room where a control panel waited next to some sliding doors. The examination room was behind them. She punched a button on the control panel and spoke to Bryant's soldiers in their quarantine rooms.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said.

Kim stepped over to the supply table and snatched a pair of latex gloves while she waited for the soldiers to reply.

The first soldier spoke up through the intercom. "I'm here, ma'am. Private Sims."

"Private Gonzalez here," said the second soldier.

"Okay, good," Kim said as she slapped the gloves on her hands. "Boys, we have a situation here. General Miller wants Burke Birkenhoff and his men locked down. Lieutenant Colonel Bryant is aware, and he's gone to his room to retrieve his weapons. I'm letting you fellows out to help Bryant, after I give you a cursory inspection."

"Sounds good," Sims acknowledged. "I've been checking myself out. No signs of the fungus on me."

"Same here," Gonzalez piped up.

"I'll let you out of your cells now." Kim spoke in a professional tone even though her nerves were on fire. "I want you to walk to the end of the quarantine hall and wait for me to open the examination room doors."

Kim started to unlock the soldier's cells when Pauline's voice stopped her.

"Hands off the console, Kim."

Kim turned as Pauline entered the room with a pistol in her hand and an icy stare. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Take your hand off the console," the assistant repeated.

Kim kept her voice calm and her hand on the console even though the sight of the gun terrified her. "I just need to examine the soldiers."

"You're not going to examine anyone." Pauline waved the weapon. "And you're not going to lock us up."

"How...?" Kim's voice trailed off.

"Burke's got a little hacking tool that works with just about any communication software," Pauline shrugged. "The CDC is behind a strong firewall, but there's not a lot of internal security. It wasn't hard. You'd be surprised how resourceful Burke is."

"I'll admit," Kim slid her fingers toward the cell control buttons. "We're interested in Burke paying for what he's done, but you're not to blame. We know you're just Burke's assistant, and

you didn't create or distribute Harvest Guard."

The distant rattling of gunfire reached Kim's ears, and her eyes widened as she realized Burke must have declared a full-out war on them. She glared at Pauline. "He's bringing it all down, isn't he? Everything we've worked for. Everything we've accomplished here."

Pauline raised the gun and pointed it at Kim's head. The woman was fifteen yards away, standing just on the other side of the supply tables. "You don't understand, do you?" she said imploringly. "There's no coming back from this. Burke doesn't have anyone to help you make more of whatever you're trying to make. His scientists are missing, his facilities shut down. It's every person for themselves."

Kim kept her fingers on the pad, swallowing down the fear. While Pauline didn't seem like a killer, her eyes bulged with firm resolution. She looked like a woman who'd convinced herself she was doing the right thing, and Kim knew she'd pull the trigger. But if Kim didn't do something, Burke would kill them anyway, and the world would waste away with no chance of a cure.

With a gasp, Kim pressed the buttons to release the soldiers' cell doors and dove to her right just as a bullet slammed into the wall a foot above the console. Kim crouch-walked around the edge of the room, staying low and close to the cabinets as Pauline took pot shots at her.

Bullets tore into the wood cabinets and sprayed Kim's neck and shoulders with chips. Kim stopped behind a short, rolling cabinet and remained squatting as two bullets slammed into it.

She reached to her hip with her Smith & Wesson and flipped off the safety. Kim gripped the gun in both hands and rose, pointed it at Pauline, and fired.

It had been years since Kim had shot a gun, though she had a good idea of what to expect. Still, the kick jolted her shoulder, and the sharp report caused her to wince.

Pauline's chest jerked, and she stumbled backwards with a look of surprise and pain on her face. The assistant fired another shot as she fell, and something stung Kim in her left side just below her breast. She gasped in shock and pain, yet her legs remained steady.

With the barrel of her weapon trained on Pauline, Kim circled the supply table toward her. The woman writhed on the ground with her gun lying next to her. Her chest was red with blood, and her painful moan caused a shiver to run up Kim's spine.

Kim squatted, and picked up Pauline's gun, tucking it into the waistband of her jeans. Then she backed away, staring in disbelief at what she'd done. The wound looked terrible, probably lethal, and the only person who could help her was Dr. Flannery.

Feet came running down the hallway, and Kim heard Burke's voice and Richtman's reply. Her eyes darted to the left and right, looking for a place to hide. If Burke found her, he'd have no qualms about putting a bullet in her head. Kim turned and rushed over to the storage closet. She opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind her just as the two entered the prep room.

Breathing steadily, blood seeping down her left side, Kim listened as the feet stopped running. She imagined Burke and Richtman staring at Pauline and her massive chest wound.

Kim heard one soldier through the intercom.

"Ma'am, this is Gonzales and Sims. Are you okay? We heard gunshots."

She heard Burke's angry whispers and Richtman's reply before they shuffled further into the room. Kim gently eased open the storage room door and peered through the crack. She watched as the two men stood near the supply table, whispering between themselves. They held lethal looking assault-style rifles cradled in their arms.

"If Shields is hiding in the quarantine area somewhere," Burke snarled, "you leave her for

me. I want to see that bitch squirm before she dies.”

“You got it boss,” Richtman replied. “Don’t worry about the soldiers. They won’t be armed.”

Kim’s insides sank as the two men moved to the control panel. Burke pressed the button to open the examination room doors. Both men stepped back with their rifle barrels lowered as the doors slid open. Seeing no one in the room, the men moved across the threshold.

Half-sobbing, chest stinging with pain and dread, Kim opened the supply closet door and stepped out. Raising her pistol, Kim edged toward the open examination room doors and the intercom.

Burke and Richtman were on the other side of the room, closing in on the second set of doors that marked the quarantine area. Sims and Gonzalez would be just on the other side.

Kim raised her weapon and shouted, “Sims and Gonzalez, watch out! They’re armed!” Then she fired multiple times at Richtman’s back, watching as the man first ducked and then howled in pain when one of her bullets struck home.

Burke dropped into a crouch, spun, and fired a three-round blind burst in Kim’s direction. Kim danced to her right to avoid the zipping bullets and slammed her hand on the button to shut and lock the doors.

Then she turned and ran. Part of her ached for the soldiers she’d trapped inside with those madmen, though at least she’d given them warning. She might have even given them more of a chance by wounding Richtman, too.

Her first priority had to be helping Tom in the control center. They had to preserve the B-18 formula and Samantha Roger’s treatment plan. And Kim had to make sure Tom was still alive.

Kim approached the intersection between the staff quarters and the CDC control center. She looked to her right down the straight hallway that led to the control center. Then she glanced ahead down the curving hallway that led to the staff quarters. If Bryant had survived Burke’s goons, he might need her help. Together, they could hole up in the control center and mount a defense.

She took two steps forward and jerked to a halt as gunfire erupted ahead of her. Men screamed, and more bursts of gunfire ripped off, loud in the confined space. She couldn’t see who it was because of the curvature of the hall, and she didn’t stick around to find out.

“No more messing around, Kim,” she hissed to herself as she backed up and then sprinted down the hallway to the control center. She had to lock things down there, with or without Bryant and his soldiers.

Kim’s heart skipped a beat when she realized the big steel door to the control center had already slid away, leaving the place wide open. Kim slowed down, moving more cautiously, leading with her weapon as her ears strained to hear.

She smelled the smoke of burning electronic components and gunpowder when she was twenty yards from the door. Unable to control the sheer dread of what she might find, Kim rushed into the room, pointing her gun around in case one of Burke’s buddies was waiting for her.

No one was there, not even Dr. Flannery.

The room was still as Kim’s eyes scanned from left to right. The place was shot to pieces. High-speed computers sparked, snapped, and sizzled. Monitors blinked through spiderweb cracks. The delicate analytical equipment in the center of the room looked chewed to pieces. Ceiling tiles and wires hung down.

Kim reached out and leaned on the back of a nearby chair for support. It was all gone: all their work and breakthroughs.

Jaw clenched tight, Kim looked over her shoulder at the door. If Burke thought he would get away with destroying a government facility to cover up his misdeeds, he'd better think again. Kim would make sure he paid for it, and she wouldn't wait for General Miller. She'd do it herself.

The door to the supply closet swung open, and Kim dropped into a crouch as she brought her weapon up.

Tom Flannery stumbled into the room, his chest riddled with holes, shirt saturated with blood. His eyes flared with pain as he coughed bloody spittle onto his chin. The doctor dropped the gun he was holding, stumbled against a desk, and fell to his knees.

Kim started to go to him, but the doctor waved her off. "Shut and lock the door," he said in a pained voice. "The override key is 3-1-2-7-8. When Burke realizes you're alive, he'll come back and try to finish what he started.

"He can try," Kim growled through clenched teeth as she marched to the door, plugged in the override key, and slammed her palm on the close door button.

The big, steel door hissed shut, locking them inside.

Chapter 45

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim's heart sunk and tears streamed down her cheeks as she tried to stop Tom's bleeding. It was bad. The doctor was in big trouble. He'd taken one or two rounds to the stomach, his right fibula was fractured, and the flesh wound in his arm wouldn't stop bleeding despite the tightly tied tourniquet she'd applied.

After laying him on the floor with a soft chair cushion under his head, Kim had run to the storage closet and retrieved two first aid kits. Then she'd used all the gauze and bandages to stop the bleeding. She'd even removed her T-shirt and tried to stuff it into his belly wounds, but the white garment became saturated within seconds.

"They made these damn first aid kits for minor burns and cuts, not extensive bleeding." Kim tossed an empty roll of medical tape to the side in frustration.

"It's okay, Kim." Tom said, patting her hand. His eyes started to glaze over.

"Don't you dare," Kim growled, clutching his hand.

"I'm not ready to go just yet," he said, swallowing dry. "I was just thinking back to when I met Marta for the first time. It was back in college. She was an Education major, and I was just starting my first year of Med School. I was in the library trying to study when I heard two young women laughing quietly in the back. I got up and went to shush them and found Marta and her friend, Bethany, laughing at something in a magazine.

"Both of them were fine looking young women, but Marta...That woman..." Tom let out a quiet sigh. "She was a beauty to behold. I never believed in love at first sight until that moment. I asked her out right away, without even knowing her name."

Kim squeezed her eyes tight, grinding her jaw as tears burned her cheeks. "Did she say yes?"

"She did." Tom patted Kim's hand "Don't be sad. I feel like I'm on the verge of..." Tom swallowed and then winced as a shudder ran through his body. After a moment, his expression relaxed and he was able to continue. "On the verge of something big. No more worries, and I get to see my Marta again."

"Yes, you do," Kim nodded as her body sunk.

The doctor seemed on the verge of taking his last breath when he stiffened and raised his head. "Kim..."

"I'm here, Tom." Kim leaned closer.

"You have your ID?"

"Yes," Kim said, clutching the plastic where it hung around her neck.

"Good. I've given you access to everything. All the sub floors. Do you understand?"

Kim nodded.

"Go down the emergency stairs..." Tom swallowed and gasped again. "To Sub Level Three. There's a gift."

"A gift?"

"And in my quarters, you'll find a tablet computer. On it is information on Paul Henderson."

Kim's face twisted in confusion. "Paul Henderson. The mycologist?"

"Yes, yes. He's the man. He has a wonderful place, a lab, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. If he's still there, he can tweak the B-18 solution. Paul can make it better."

"Isn't his work controversial?"

“He’s a very unique guy,” Tom said weakly. “An eccentric. He...he doesn’t work for any government or company.”

“Then how do you know he can help?”

“We spoke when all this started,” Tom admitted. “Before communication broke down. He gave me some ideas for the B-18 solution.” Tom coughed. “You can find him...”

Kim was nodding as she saw what Tom wanted her to do.

Tom clutched Kim’s arm and pulled her closer. “Find some escorts. Bryant, or—”

“I don’t think Bryant made it,” Kim said with a frown. “I think he’s dead.”

“Then call General Miller or one of your CDC field teams. The world needs you to find a cure. Tell them President Christensen authorized the use of government assets for the mission. I want you to beat this, do you understand?”

“I’ll try, Tom.” Kim shook her head weakly.

Nodding, Tom rested his head back on the seat cushion. “I want the best for you, Kim. For your family. For the world.” He smiled. “Where I’ll be, it won’t matter anymore.”

There was a faint pounding on the heavy steel door, and Kim turned to glare at it. Tom was breathing steadily with his eyes closed, so Kim stood, took her gun out, and moved to the door.

The intercom monitor flickered to life to reveal Burke leaning forward in the wide-angled frame. Richtman was behind him with his rifle slung over his shoulder and his palm pressed against his lower back.

“Hello, Kim,” the CEO said, narrowing his eyes as he stepped away from the camera.

“Burke.” Kim nodded. “I was hoping you’d died.”

Burke spread his hands wide. “I have this uncanny way of staying alive.” His eyes fell to Kim’s chest and her bloody bra. “Ouch, looks like Pauline winged you.”

Kim glanced down at her wound. The bleeding had stopped after she’d slapped a bandage over the hanging skin the bullet had shaved away. She might have a cracked rib, too, but she wouldn’t let Burke see her pain.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Kim said, shifting her weight to her other leg and lifting her chin.

“I was hoping to have a brief chat with you,” Burke said.

Kim glared at the screen.

“I understand you’re a little angry at me,” Burke said, biting his lip innocently. “But you can see why I had to do it. For self-preservation. Your people would have hanged me.”

“And you’ve proven you deserve it.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Kim.” Burke shook his head as he reached out and pressed some buttons on the console.

“I used an override key to lock the door,” Kim said. “You can’t get in, not even with your little hacking tool.”

“That’s too bad.” Burke stepped back from the monitor and gripped his rifle with both hands. “It would have been good to talk to you face to face. Well, then. I’ll leave now, with Richtman and Pauline.”

“Pauline’s alive?”

“Barely.” Burke gave a sad shake of his head. “My bus driver, Charlie, is a decent medic. He might save her, but I’d say the chances are slim.”

Kim glanced over at Tom where his breathing had become shallow. He didn’t have much longer.

“It’s hard to believe you care about anything,” Kim turned her attention back to the monitor. “You just threw away the only hope the world had to beat *Asphyxia*. You might have found some

redemption in that, don't you think?"

The CEO clicked his tongue and narrowed his eyes in thought. "There's no redemption for me, Kim. At least not in your eyes or the eyes of the world. But I have always been prepared to live with my decisions, and that's what separates me from so many others. I'll live a long, productive, guilt-free life, and you'll spend the rest of your meager days down here, wondering if you could have done better for a world that never cared about you to begin with."

"You're sick."

"No, I'm a survivor."

"Get out of here," Kim said. "You make me want to throw up."

"Come with us," Burke shrugged. "We can always use people like you in our new utopia."

Kim shook her head in disbelief. "You never stop, do you?"

"I'm a businessman, Kim. I'm willing to put our differences aside for our mutual benefit. You could be a scientific adviser to me. We'll even swing by and pick up your family. I overheard you say they're in Ft. Collins, right? Just say the word, and you'll be sipping cocktails on the beach within a week."

It took every bit of control Kim had not to hit the override button and open the door, blasting Burke and Richtman with her remaining bullets. But who was she kidding? She wouldn't get a single shot off before they mowed her down.

"I'll find you, Burke," Kim said, resting her hand on the console. "I'll find you and your little utopia and bring it all down."

She hit the button to kill the feed and turned away from the door.

By the time she got back to Tom, he was dead.

A few minutes later, Kim stood just outside of Samantha Roger's room wearing spare coveralls and an air filtration mask on her face. As Kim figured, the glass partition was shot out. Bullets riddled the woman's body and her blood dripped from the table.

Kim hit a button on the console inside the door and stepped back. She watched as a heavy decontamination spray soaked the room, and the door slid shut in front of her face.

Returning to the control room, Kim turned on the facility camera feed. She checked on the quarantine area monitor feed and found the two soldiers, Sims and Gonzalez, dead just inside the door.

With a quiet sigh, she tracked Burke and Richtman as they donned their heavy protective suits and fit Pauline into hers. Placing the assistant on a gurney, they pushed her through quarantine, into the elevator, and out to the waiting bus.

Meanwhile, Richtman grabbed two huge gasoline containers off the back of Bryant's Humvee and came back to the elevator. Realizing what he was doing, Kim opened the control center door and bolted outside, running to the end of the hallway and turning right toward the staff quarters. She had to retrieve the computer tablet out of Tom's room before Richtman burned everything down.

As she passed the commons area, she saw the pristine white tiles ahead streaked with blood. Just outside Bryant's room, she stumbled upon Burke's other two goons. They were both shot up and laying in a wide pool of blood that stretched across the hallway.

Bryant was nowhere to be seen.

She stepped to his bullet-riddled door and reached up to swipe her ID across the reader. Before she could, the door slid aside with a rattling hiss and Bryant fell out. Kim caught the man as his rifle clattered to the floor, his weight bending her to the ground.

"Bryant, hey!" Kim cried with relief as she lowered the man to the floor and leaned him back

against the wall. Her eyes searched him for injuries and saw his right side and lap soaked in blood “Hip, leg, or stomach?”

Bryant clutched her coveralls with a strong grip. “Hip and side, I think.”

Kim glanced back down the hallway toward quarantine. Richtman could come around the corner at any moment and blow them both to pieces, but she needed to get Bryant’s bleeding stopped. Her shirt was back in the control center.

“Stay here,” she said, pulling Bryant’s rifle into his lap. “Watch out for Richtman. He’s trying to set fire to the place. I’ll find something to stop the bleeding.”

The facility fire alarms activated, their blaring sound cutting through Kim’s head like a scythe. Bryant’s eyes widened, and he gripped his gun tighter, pointing the barrel down the hall with a nod.

“Be right back.”

Kim sprinted another hundred yards down the long, curving hallway to Tom’s room and used her ID to get in. His room was neat with a full bookshelf full of old, classic titles and one shelf dedicated to pulpy science fiction paperbacks. Kim spotted the tablet laying on his bed, and she rushed over and snatched it up. Then she went to his sock drawer and pulled out six pairs of thick cotton socks before exiting the room.

Back at Bryant’s room, she knelt down and spread apart his torn T-shirt, trying to find the wound. There was too much blood for her to tell. She pressed three socks against the area and placed Bryant’s right hand over it.

“Keep the pressure on it.”

“It looks worse than it feels.” Bryant gave a sudden wince. “Scratch that. It feels terrible. But I can make it.”

She helped the soldier stand and shoulder his weapon, then she got under his right arm to bear some of his weight. She had to be careful if they stumbled upon Richtman. With the tablet computer tucked under her right arm, and her gun pointed down, she’d have to drop the tablet to get a shot off.

They passed the commons area and hobbled Bryant down the control center hall as fast as possible. Once inside the control center, Kim sat Bryant in a chair and returned to the control center door.

She started to shut and lock it but saw Richtman watching her from the far end of the hall. He was dragging a gas can in one hand and held a pistol in the other. She couldn’t read his expression inside his protective hood, though she hoped he was in pain.

Kim would never hit him at that distance, but she raised her pistol to fire anyway. Richtman wrenched the gas can and dragged it hurriedly out of sight.

“I hope you bleed out in that suit,” Kim said, then she hit a button and the big slab of metal slid shut.

Chapter 46

Randy and Jenny Tucker, Center Township, Indiana

It was early evening by the time Randy drove the truck into their driveway. The faint light they'd left on shined through the bay window like a beacon of hope and comfort. And after the day they'd had, they needed it.

After fighting Krumer at the jail, Randy and Jenny had run all over town to help Jones and Bickens find some air filtration masks. They'd turned the police station upside down and then driven to the fire station where they found two no one had claimed.

After situating the former prisoners with the promise to return the next day, Randy had driven Jenny to the library where they'd talked to Mrs. Brody through the front door.

The library folks had ingeniously fashioned their own air filtration masks out of 2-liter bottles, duct tape, and pieces of home air filters they'd been using to protect their vents.

Randy suggested that the next day, he and Jenny would find a van, sanitize it as best they could, and pull it close to the library entrance.

The folks inside would be ready with air filtration masks on. They would exit the library and file into the back of the van. They'd swing by the jail, grab Jones and Bickens, and head for the Indianapolis FEMA camp. Mrs. Brody had agreed, and they'd left it at that.

Finally home, Randy put the truck in park and shut off the engine with a sigh.

"So glad to be here," Jenny said.

"You and me both."

"At least we have a home to come back to."

"I'm going to have a ham sandwich with my soup tonight," Randy said. When Jenny gave him a questioning look, he shrugged, saying, "It will go bad, eventually. Might as well eat it while we can."

Jenny mulled it over and nodded. "You know, a ham sandwich sounds amazing right now."

"I'll even make it for you," Randy offered.

"No, tonight is my treat!" Jenny grinned, then she popped her door and stepped out of the truck.

Randy got out of the driver's side, turned toward the house, and froze.

The front door was hanging half open.

Heart racing, Randy removed his revolver from his coverall pocket and approached the house in a crouch. He still had six bullets left in the gun, and he wouldn't hesitate to use them.

"Randy, what—?"

Randy jerked his hand up and then pointed to the house. Jenny saw the open door and fell silent. She slid behind Randy, and they approached the door together. Randy picked up the faint sounds of stumbling, something heavy falling over, and tape ripping.

"They're tearing our tarps down," he hissed over his shoulder.

Anger rose in Randy's gut like acid, and he gripped the gun even tighter. He was about to call the person out, but the stumbling and bumping got louder as the person came to the front door.

With a sudden heave, the door flew open the rest of the way, and a short, stocky man staggered out wearing an air filtration mask strapped to his head. The reason for his staggering became evident. He had duct tape stuck to his legs and was dragging half the plastic tarps out

with him.

The man turned and hopped and kicked, trying to remove the clinging tape with one swollen hand while holding up a baseball bat in the other. Red stained the end of the bat, sending a chill up Randy's spine.

"Hey!" Randy shouted, causing the man to jerk around and face the twins.

His Dickie's work shirt looked familiar, so did his air filtration mask.

"It's the guy who attacked us at the library," Jenny said as she stepped out from behind Randy. "And look at his mask. That's Ally's." Jenny's fists clenched at her sides as her eyes ticked back and forth between the mask and the stained end of the baseball bat.

The man stared at them with a glazed expression, and Randy noticed the inside of his mask was slick with blood and mucus.

"You killed our friend!" Randy shouted as he adjusted his grip on his gun.

The man's fungus-covered eyes flew wide, and he held out his hands in confusion. The man's left arm was still bruised and swollen where Randy had struck him with the crowbar, and it looked like the skin might pop at any moment.

"I got a mask." The man slurred his words. "I finally got one."

"You killed our friend and tore up our house, man!" Randy raised his pistol and pointed it at the man's head. The frustration of the past four days rose to the surface on a wave of anger. "I should kill you."

"Don't...don't kill me." The man coughed violently, half bending over with the effort. Then he straightened and took two more steps, tapping the baseball bat against his visor. "You could have just given me a mask, and I wouldn't have had to kill her. I wouldn't have—"

Randy pulled the trigger from five yards away, cutting off the words like he'd snuffed out a candle. The bullet penetrated the visor and exploded from the back of the man's head in a spray of blood and bone.

His body hit the fungus-covered ground, kicking up a faint waft of tendrils that hung in the air for a long moment before drifting to the ground.

Chapter 47

Bishop Shields, Ft. Collins, Colorado

“Keep in mind, kids,” Bishop said as he pulled into the strip mall parking lot and parked in front of the Starbucks. “We’re here because this is the best chance to reach your mother. This isn’t social hour.”

He’d chosen the neighborhood of Old Prospect since it was right on State Route 287 yet still within walking distance to the college. With a look around, Bishop saw dozens of people walking down the main strip and crossing at the next block up, moving west toward the college.

It reminded him of people going to a concert or attending a Colorado State football game, except that everyone wore backpacks and carried personal items with them. He looked into the backseat and saw the kids looking around excitedly.

“Are you guys ready to go?”

They answered in the affirmative, each of them squirming to get out of the car. To their credit, they were sticking to their promise to do exactly as he said. Good thing, because it was clear they thought this was more like an adventure and not a life or death situation.

To Bishop, it felt like a trap. There were already too many people for his liking, and it would get worse the closer they got to the stadium. Still, he kept reminding himself that they might find a way to call Kim, once they located some military folks.

And maybe the FEMA people knew what they were doing. Maybe they had state-of-the-art facilities and knew what to do when the toxic cloud hit.

Bishop closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s go.”

He got out of their Lincoln SUV, walked around to the back, and popped the back hatch. The kids met him there, each of them grabbing their respective backpacks and settling them on their shoulders. Bishop shut the back hatch and pressed the button on his key fob to lock the vehicle.

They walked north for several blocks on South College Avenue and stopped at the corner of South College and West Prospect Streets. Excitement buzzed in the air as more and more people filtered in from every part of town. Car traffic was sparse, and people had a hard time turning the corners as pedestrians crossed against the crosswalk signs in large groups.

“I’ve been texting Ariana,” Riley said, shaking her head at her phone. “But my texts aren’t going through.”

“It’s probably just too many people fighting for bandwidth,” Bishop said in his deep tone. “Pretty soon there will be a hundred thousand people down here. Everyone will be texting and calling each other. I wouldn’t expect the signal to get any better if I were you.”

Riley frowned and shoved her phone into her back pocket.

Bishop waited for the crosswalk light to turn green before gestured at the kids. “You guys go ahead of me.”

His son and daughter did as they were told, and together they crossed to the other side. Bishop’s big body and wide shoulders kept people from brushing up against the kids from behind, making it easy to keep an eye on them.

Once safely across, Bishop looked over his right shoulder, lifting his eyes eastward toward the towns of Ault and Severence. The wind had kicked up, and dark clouds loomed in the distance. It could have been a trick of the light, but the darkness looked more like a curtain than high-ranging storm clouds.

The crowds thickened as they approached Center Avenue where a FEMA worker stood on a plastic bin on the corner with a bullhorn in her hand. "The stadium is full, so please move past it and gather on the intramural fields!" She shouted the same thing once in every direction. "Pick a line to register, and someone will direct you to your tent assignments."

Bishop didn't like being herded. The press of bodies was making him sweat in hot flashes, and he constantly looked around to gauge the crowd. The growing throng was calm and amicable, displaying perfect order in the face of a potential catastrophe.

As they turned north on Center Avenue toward the football fields, Bishop gazed to the east once more. The dark curtain had encroached on the eastern edge of Fort Collins at an increasing and alarming rate. It looked like a swarm of hornets with strange movements of undulating air, rippling in the warm breeze.

It reminded him of the quiet minutes before a thunderstorm when the world became surreal and the smell of moisture drifted in the air. Bishop reached out and grabbed the kids' backpacks. Their feet caught in mid stride as he pulled them to a stop at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Dad!" Riley yelped.

"Jeesh, Dad," Trevor added, looking back with a disgruntled expression.

Bishop ignored their complaints, his eyes pinned on the encroaching curtain. No one else had noticed it yet, though Bishop swore there were distant screams where the darkness had already touched down.

"Kids, I think you should put on your masks," Bishop said, already unfastening the straps on Riley and Trevor's backpacks. Thankful he'd been smart enough to instruct the children to pack the air filtration masks on top, Bishop pulled the masks out and held them up for the kids to take. When they didn't turn around fast enough, Bishop shook the masks. "Come on, kids. Take the damn masks!"

"Okay, Dad!" Trevor raised his voice. The boy grabbed his mask and fumbled to get it on his head.

Riley, taking her sweet time, looked over her left shoulder and spotted the darkness coming for them. Her eyes widened in terror, and her hands flew into motion to get her mask's straps situated to slide it on.

Bishop removed his own backpack and set it on the ground, eyes narrowed at what looked like tendrils of smoky dust driven by the wind. The tendrils shot upward and drifted down only to be lifted once again. A pair of them intertwined like snakes and spiraled downward toward the ground, a devilish interplay making it seem evil and alive. If it hadn't been for Kim explaining the toxic clouds were an aberration of nature, he might have believed that were true.

Others were starting to notice, too.

A young man and woman holding hands looked up at the descending cloud and stopped in their tracks. They immediately backed up, running into the family behind them. The father cursed the young couple before his eyes lifted to spy the dark tendrils. He grabbed his wife's arm with one hand and threw his other arm out to stop one of their children who'd been walking next to them.

They all looked up, gaped, and backed away. It became infectious, with more people looking up and retreating. They tripped, stumbled, and fell. Others took off in a dead sprint down the street, heading due west.

Moving deliberately, Bishop found his mask and pulled it from his backpack. As he straightened out the straps, people screamed all around him. He lifted the mask over his head, glancing down to ensure the kids already had theirs on, and slid his mask down.

“Adjust the fit,” Bishop snapped over the screams, keeping his eyes on his spooked kids. “We’re heading back to the car, okay? Do you understand that?”

Riley’s eyes shifted left and right as she nodded, chest heaving in fear as people jostled and pushed her. Trevor was moving too fast and got his strap flipped around on the back of his head. Bishop pulled the straps of his own mask wide and settled it over his head, allowing the straps to slap tightly into place.

“We trained for this,” Bishop boomed as he turned Trevor around and fixed his strap. “Take a deep breath, keep your head clear, and hold on to me.”

The visor of his mask muffled Bishop’s words, but he could project his voice at a tremendous volume like a foghorn in the night. It was a skill he’d learned while calling out defensive plays to his football team in noisy stadiums with sixty thousand people screaming at the top of their lungs to drown him out.

Riley and Trevor were both scared stiff, and they nodded vigorously, eyes glued to their father.

“Good. Let’s go. Back to the car.” Bishop turned and held out his hands. Riley took his right hand, and Trevor took his left.

He pulled them through the crowd as order disintegrated. People pushed and shoved as they reversed direction against the flow marching blindly north. Those behind were slower to pick up on the danger, and people slammed together on the sidewalk and in the street.

Bishop charged ahead, using his bulk to make room. He avoided running anyone over, though many ran into him and bounced to the pavement. The tendrils fell all around them, bursting into clouds as people ran through them and breathed them in.

A man running away stopped ten yards in front of Bishop and grasped at his throat. Then he wrenched his body around, gasping and tearing at his skin as he choked. Bishop took one look at the man’s bulging, panic-filled eyes and knew his life and the lives of his children hung on the thinnest of threads.

Riley’s hand jerked out of his. Bishop cried out, reeling in search of his daughter. He saw Riley windmilling her fists at a woman trying to wrench the girl’s mask off. The woman’s hands were tangled in Riley’s thick hair, tugging at the straps even as she choked on the toxic cloud.

A man stumbled into Bishop, and Bishop swept him aside with his meaty arm. Then he grabbed the woman assaulting Riley by her hair, wrenched her head back, and shoved her to the pavement where a crowd of people trampled her.

Bishop snatched his daughter by her backpack just as Trevor was wrenched away in the other direction. He half turned to see two older teenagers fighting to get his son’s mask off. Trevor kicked and punched at the older boys, his screams of panic muffled behind his visor.

Letting go of Riley for the moment, Bishop spun and rushed toward the melee. He cocked his right fist and punched one teen, dropping him on the spot. The other boy kept fighting, his face red and bulging, neck straining.

Bishop wrapped his left arm around Trevor’s head to hold his mask on and used his right forearm to shove the choking teen to the ground. Then he turned and searched for his daughter again.

Riley was a dozen yards away, spinning and bouncing around as people slammed into her. The air was full of dark dust, and hundreds of people were choking on it.

Growling into his visor, Bishop grabbed Trevor’s upper arm in a vice grip, not caring if he hurt the boy. Then he took three big strides and snatched up his daughter the same way. Turning into the chaos, Bishop charged ahead, half dragging, half shoving his children ahead of him.

Bishop had spent most of his young life fighting through offensive lines to get to the quarterback. He'd wrestled, fought, and clawed at men who stood six-feet, five-inches tall, and weighed in excess of three hundred pounds. He'd learned every technique for getting leverage on an opponent and busting through a line.

In the crowded, panic-filled streets of Ft. Collins, Bishop was like a bull in a china shop. He kicked and kneed people aside, sometimes using his shoulders to bowl them over as he dragged the kids behind him.

A tall young man, probably a college student judging by the Colorado State hoodie he wore, tried for Bishop's mask. Bishop slammed his visor into the man's face, and then brought up his knee as the man went down, feeling the satisfactory crunch of cartilage and bone.

"Come on! Let's go!" Bishop screamed into his visor, plowing ahead. "Let's go! Let's go! Bring it on! Come on!"

His grip on his children was unbreakable, his rage, unquenchable. Chills ran through his shoulders as he released the warrior that had not shown its face in over a decade.

The tendrils dropped people like flies, though the smarter ones ran inside of the nearest buildings to escape the danger. By the time they turned on South College Avenue, they'd broken free of the crowds. Bishop shoved the kids ahead of him, shouting, "Run!"

They sprinted all the way back to their SUV with tendrils falling all around them in soft waves. Where the tendrils struck the ground, they clung and spread in an eerie red fuzz. Bishop had them on his neck and arms, and they streaked his visor like burns.

By the time they reached the SUV, the streets had grown eerily quiet. Bishop popped the back hatch, and they tossed their packs inside. Then they scrambled into the car and sat there, panting in disbelief.

"Do not take those masks off," Bishop yelled back at the kids. "You hear me? Do not dare take them off."

The kids nodded, their eyes wet and teary behind their visors. Riley's hair stuck up on a tangle of curls, and Bishop imagined he'd have to cut some off to get the mask off her head.

"What is that stuff, Dad?" Riley's chest heaved as she sobbed.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure," Bishop replied. "But we can't breathe it in. *Ever*. Do you understand me?"

The kids nodded, and Bishop straightened in his seat with both hands resting on the wheel. He got his breathing under control and then started the Lincoln.

He pulled out of the Starbucks parking lot and drove slowly south along South College Avenue, weaving around the dozens of bodies lying motionless in the street. It was clear the authorities hadn't been prepared. Not even close.

They were on their own in an empty and deadly world.

Chapter 48

Moe Tsosie, Chinle, Arizona

Moe drove his rig up State Route 191 from Burnside to his hometown of Chinle, Arizona in the early evening. Red dirt stretched flat in every direction, broken only by fields of rough grass or an occasional mobile home or ramshackle structure. Broken fences caught clusters of garbage or dead scrubs, and random poles pierced the dirt.

Low mountains lay distant to the east and west, hugging the land in a loose embrace. Then Moe reached a place where the land gave way to deep canyons and valleys that stretched away on his right. He couldn't see them from his position on the road, though he'd explored them on horseback when he was a child.

Moe followed the endless stretch of power lines as State Route 191 banked east, cut off by a lengthy rise. He crossed Cottonmouth Wash and approached the outskirts of Chinle. It was a small Navajo town of around forty-five hundred people, with over seventy percent speaking their native language at home.

He'd been away three weeks, and old feelings of home washed over him mixed with the anticipation of what he might find. As he drove past Jumbo's Automotive Service and the local high school on his right, Moe got a sense everything was fine. Traffic was light and non-rushed, and folks carried on like a toxic fungus wasn't consuming the world.

Moe took a right on Route 7 and trundled past the Best Western and a Subway, slowing only when he approached the Denny's on his left. He pulled into the lot, noticing several of his old friends' cars parked there.

Moe found a spot at the far end, locked up his rig, and entered the diner. He walked with tenderness, his legs and back still stiff from last evening's fight. His head throbbed with raw emotion, though a quietness settled on his spirit. Perhaps it was the act of coming home and finding it still there.

Moe waved to some friends in greeting and took a seat at the counter. He turned his head, seeing Casey Harvey waiting on a couple down at the end. She was a young lady of eighteen and had been a girl when Moe started driving a rig almost ten years ago. Casey had grown into a long-limbed young woman with dark, silken hair falling past her shoulders. She was far too young for Moe, though she'd make someone else very happy one day.

She finished taking the couple's order and turned to the register to ring it in. A smile lit her face from ear to ear when she caught sight of Moe, and she grabbed a coffee pot off the burner and brought it over to him.

"Hey, Moe!" Her voice was chipper, although her eyes held a deep, underlying tension. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine." He nodded and presented a wan smile. "How about you? How's business?"

"Best it's been all year." She flipped a clean coffee cup onto the counter in front of him and filled it up with the steaming, sloshing brew. "Hungry, Moe?"

"Not too much. Coffee's fine."

"You need to get in on some of this apple pie." She winked at him. "It's great. We've got a case of it, but I don't think it will last too long. Especially since...you know." She cocked her head to the side. "You're aware of what's been happening, right?"

Moe scoffed. "Oh, yeah. I almost died a few times escaping California."

“I’m glad you made it.” Casey reached out and touched his forearm. “I was worried about you. Everyone’s been glued to the television for the past three days.” Her expression took on a stricken look. “They say millions of people are dead and thousands of others are sick. Everyone’s worried it will hit us soon.”

Moe’s eyes lifted to the television screen where the news played. A reporter out of Albuquerque stood on the outskirts of the city, wind whipping her hair around as she gestured behind her toward the east. While Moe couldn’t hear the woman, he read the news ticker along the bottom of the screen. It said a lot about FEMA camps, military support, and the government’s efforts to protect citizens from the contagion.

“I will have that piece of apple pie, Casey,” Moe said, stirring cream into his coffee. He gave the waitress a faint smile. “Could be my last one, right?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Casey tried to sound reassuring. “The tribal elders are preparing for food and water shortages, and there will be clean places to sleep. They say the Wildcat Den will be ready in another day or two.”

The Wildcat Den was the home of the local high school basketball team, the Chinle Wildcats. They were the pride of the town, and their sports complex was a beautiful, sprawling building that would hold the entire population of Chinle with room to spare. Moe had adopted the mascot as his CB handle: Wildcat.

Moe nodded and lowered his gaze to the young woman. “I’m sure everyone will be safe there.” His tone remained confident, though he wasn’t so sure on the inside. His time as a truck driver had taken him all across the United States, and he knew the vastness of the country. If they couldn’t stop the contagion in Indiana, Missouri, or Kansas, they would have no chance of stopping it here.

“Okay, let me grab you that pie.” Casey left to go around the counter to the pie case.

“Thanks, Casey,” Moe whispered as the news report held his attention.

The broadcast switched to a Denver station. This time it was the view from a helicopter looking toward what Moe presumed was the east. The digital frame on the bottom of the screen showed the location as Aurora, Colorado, though the volume was too low to hear the report, and the captions were off.

“Can you turn it up?” someone gave a quick shout.

“Yeah, yeah, hang on!” Casey shouted back. She delivered Moe’s pie with a smile and looked around for the remote control. She found it over by the cash register and pointed it up at the TV, turning the volume up to seventy.

“This is the CBS4 live chopper reporting out of Aurora, Colorado. We have been told by CDC sources and weather authorities that a massive cloud of what they say are spores—that’s right, mold spores—are being blown westward by high winds and rain. And as you can see from the chopper view, there appears to be a hazy curtain in the distance which is the actual cloud itself. Initially, Denver authorities dismissed the reports and continued sending resources eastward until early yesterday when power and communication died out for most of the eastern and central United States.”

Moe dug into his pie, picking off the corner and placing it in his mouth. He followed with a sip of coffee, reveling in the mix of bittersweet taste.

“Are you saying they lost contact with their eastbound teams?” That was a clear female voice Moe assumed was the anchor woman back in the main newsroom.

“That’s what we think,” the reporter replied. “Authorities are being tight lipped, although that could be because of the amount of preparation being done in the surrounding area. In Fort

Collins, they've encouraged residents to gather at the Colorado State University football stadium where FEMA has safe camps set up and US military protection on hand to keep everyone safe."

"That's good to know," the female anchor replied. "Can the authorities predict when the cloud will hit?"

"The spore clouds were supposed to hit tomorrow evening, but high winds have pushed that date up to as early as a few hours from now."

"And these aren't spores you might find in routine spring allergies, are they, Rick?"

"No, Jan. These spores are deadly. We still don't know the exact fatality rate out of the Eastern United States, although the last reports showed the death toll to be in the millions. Power and most communications are down"

Moe took another bite of his pie and tuned the TV out. It didn't take a genius to realize they only pretended to tell the news—a farewell broadcast just as Moe ate his farewell piece of pie.

Turning his plate sideways, Moe worked his fork into the pie crust. It was his favorite part, that bit of crust mixed with some juicy apple pie filling. He washed that down with a sip of coffee before finishing his last bite. Then he pushed the plate away, sat back, and watched the spore cloud consume Denver and Fort Collins.

By the time it was over, the people in the Denny's were crying and hugging one another. Many of them said their goodbyes, whispering ominously about the end of the world. Others tried to be more positive. They encouraged everyone to gather at the Wildcat Den to look after one another and make sure everyone stayed safe.

Hours later, Moe finished his fourth cup of coffee as the restaurant closed down. He watched as Casey and the Denny's crew swept and mopped as if it was just another closing shift. With a smile, Moe remembered how Casey's mother and father took care of Moe and his family when times got tough. He and Casey went back a long way, and Moe thought of her as his little sister, just as much as his actual sister, Waki.

When she'd finished, Casey joined Moe at the counter with her own cup of coffee. "You want to help me take this last pot down?"

Moe offered the young woman a faint smile and a brotherly nod.

"Good, because I don't want to go home yet, and I could use the company."

"Anything I can help with?"

"Just baby-daddy issues." Casey shook her head. "Funny that it won't matter in a few hours when that spore cloud hits us. We're probably all going to die. I mean, the East Coast is dead, man."

"Hard to tell," Moe shrugged. "Maybe the spirits of the desert will protect us like they have for so many centuries."

Casey made a scoffing sound as she stirred cream and sugar into her coffee. "I've never been the religious type."

"I didn't think I was either," Moe replied, looking around. "Until I came back home. It feels different today."

They sat in silence, the kind of silence only long-time friends can share.

"It's good to have you back, Moe."

"It's good to be back."

"And here's to living through tomorrow." Casey sighed and lifted her coffee cup high.

"Yes, ma'am." Moe clinked his cup against hers. "Here's to living through tomorrow."

Chapter 49

Kim Shields, Washington, D.C.

Kim stepped off the elevator on Sub Level Three and looked around. She stood in a large, dim parking garage lit only by the overhead emergency lights and the blinking fire alarms. The ceiling was higher than she would have normally expected in such a subterranean space. It was big enough to drive a semi-trailer truck through.

Touching the wound on her ribs, Kim took a deep, wincing breath and released it in a lengthy sigh. She looked around, taking in the CDC vehicles that stretched out in all directions.

There were sedans, vans, and trucks of all shapes and sizes. Some of them had muted CDC emblems on the front door panels of the department-issued vehicles while the larger vans and trucks boasted large CDC emblems for specific uses, such as the CDC Diabetes Center bus.

Computer tablet in hand, Kim walked straight to where the larger vehicles were parked. She moved past each one, looking for the “gift” Tom had left her. He hadn’t told her which one it was, so she would have to guess.

Kim’s eyes scanned ahead, moving past a large, shiny, royal blue bus parked in the middle of the row. Her eyes returned to it and narrowed. Longer than all the rest, the bus was sleek and new, almost like it had never touched the road. The vehicle mirrored Burke’s shiny black one except for the color, and it was unmarked by any specific CDC logo.

Could this be the “gift” Tom had been referring to? Kim hadn’t known what to expect when she came to Sub Level Three, although a vehicle had crossed her mind. Tom knew Kim needed a set of wheels to get to Paul Henderson, unless she wanted to drive the soldiers’ Humvee.

She approached the big blue bus like an explorer who’d just found a marvelous relic. It was a beautiful sight. The bus door was near the rear, and she stood next to it, noticing the badge reader just to the side. She swiped her ID across the surface and watched the pad’s outer light turn green.

“Please engage retinal scan,” a female voice echoed in the hollow parking lot in a clipped tone.

Kim fell into a ready crouch but realized the voice was coming from the bus itself. Turning back to the door, she noticed a red dot just above the badge reader. She leaned forward and peered into the light with her right eye. A horizontal beam moved from the top of her eye to the center, briefly blinding her in a flash of red before it continued to the bottom.

The door clicked, popped out, and slid to the side, and Kim stepped back, peering up into the darkness.

Butterflies fluttering in her stomach, she placed her right foot on the first of three steps. Bright light flowed down and illuminated a compact room at the top.

Kim climbed the steps and found herself in a space that resembled a decontamination chamber. There was a monitor and intercom console set into the wall, and spray nozzles peppered the smooth walls.

A door lay straight ahead, almost within arm’s reach, and there was another one on her right. Kim assumed the latter one led to the front of the bus.

“Welcome, Kim Shields.” The female voice said in a smart, robotic tone. “My name is AMI, your Automated Management Interface. Welcome to the CDC mobile lab. My database holds a full range of tutorials. If you need help at any time, simply ask.”

“Thanks, AMI.” Kim grinned as she looked around, eager to see the rest of the lab. First, she needed to get Lieutenant Colonel Bryant out of the CDC facility before it burned to the ground. “Hang tight, AMI,” Kim said, stepping out of the bus. “I’ll be right back.”

Chapter 50

Jessie Talby, Washington, D.C.

Four hours later, Jessie parked the SUV in front of the military Humvee and got out. She stared up at the CDC building and watched flames lick out from the windows and up the side. Past the security doors, she saw flames in the lobby, burning up through the elevator shaft to scorch the ceiling.

She sighed as the fire spread, roaring as thick clouds of smoke rolled upward into the sky. The *Asphyxia* fungus sizzled as the flames devoured it, and soon glass shattered from the heat with pieces of concrete falling away.

Jessie heard Fiona's door open and shut, and the little girl came around the vehicle and took Jessie's hand. Together, they stared up at the flames, Jessie's heart sinking as she wondered what to do.

She'd had minimal contact with Kim Shields up until their helicopter had gone down. Was Kim trapped inside the burning building? If she'd gotten out, where would she have gone?

"Are we going to be okay, Jessie?" Fiona asked, looking up with innocent eyes that reflected the firelight.

"We'll be fine," Jessie nodded, though inside she wasn't sure.

"Where are all the people? Didn't you say we would see some doctors? Didn't you say they might poke at me but not to be afraid?"

"I did say that, Fiona." Jessie gestured at the flames. "But something happened here, and I don't think there are any doctors left."

"Where did they all go?"

Jessie shrugged, looking around at how the fungus clung to the walls of the surrounding buildings and crawled up it, glowing in the fire like something out of a madman's painting.

The CDC field agent took a deep breath and focused on Fiona's face—her beautiful, healthy face. She knelt in front of the girl and tried to smile.

"Okay, let's see," Jessie said. "We know the nearest FEMA camp is over at Ronald Reagan Airport. That's where General Miller will be." Her eyes slid to the military vehicle parked behind them. "I can try calling him from that Humvee and see if anyone's there. Then, maybe, we can find out where Kim Shields went."

"Is Kim the doctor who wants to see me?"

"That's her," Jessie confirmed.

"Is she nice?"

A smile crept across Jessie's face at the simple, innocent question. With everything Fiona had been through—her family dying, a helicopter crash, and the world burning down around them—she was only concerned that Kim Shields was a nice lady.

"I've never met her before," Jessie chuckled, "but she seemed nice to me when we spoke."

"Good." Fiona nodded.

"Okay, then. Let's..." Jessie felt a tickle in her chest followed by the uncontrollable urge to cough. The itch dug deeper until she placed her hand against the visor of her air filtration mask, drew in a deep breath, and coughed in a sandpaper-sharp exhale.

When she pulled her hand away, she noticed a tiny speckle of black and pink mucus on the inside of her mask. Her body turned to lead, heart sinking like a ship's anchor. Jessie closed her eyes as tears ran down her cheeks, and she couldn't hide them from Fiona.

A tiny hand touched Jessie's visor and then rested on her shoulder. "It's okay, Jessie. You're not going to die."

"You don't think so?" Jessie sniffed and nestled her head against the little girl's hand.

"It's just a cold," Fiona said. "Not like what Mom and Sissy had."

Jessie shook her head as more tears stung her cheeks. A hot flash of unbidden anger made her grind her teeth in hatred for the disease that was wiping them all out. She didn't even know if her family was okay, and she was out in the middle of nowhere, dying in front of this little girl.

Jessie wanted to throw her mask off and rage at the world. She wanted to scream and cough until she ripped the fungus from her own lungs.

Yet, there was hope. It was standing right in front of her, the little girl who remained untouched by the *Asphyxia* fungus. And while it might be too late for Jessie, there was still hope for others.

She had to deliver Fiona to Kim Shields, even if it killed her.

Jessie glanced once at the burning CDC building, hoping Kim was still alive. Then she led Fiona to the Humvee, intent on making a call.

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