

The physical toll of reentry seemed paltry compared to the pulsing acceleration of liftoff. Mia's stomach lurched when gravity took hold, but other than that, she remained fully conscious and aware. The view out the window shifted from dark space, to deep purple and then to clear blue sky. Not a cloud in sight. The view through the command center window was much more expansive than the small portal had been, but she still could not see the ground.

And that's what she really wanted to see.

She expected the world to be scorched and decimated. Ruins of the human civilization. Over time, what was left would be reduced to dust, and future generations, born from the children of the few survivors, would build a new world. Villages at first. Then small cities. Migrations would come next. Trade routes. Countries. Wars. Human civilization would be remade and probably, someday in the future, undone again.

She wondered for a moment if this could have happened before. *Maybe the flood was some kind of man-made cataclysm?* she thought. Six thousand years in the future, our descendants might debate the mythology surrounding the time when God burned the Earth, sparing those who fled into space, in EEPs that contained all the knowledge and life of the previous earth. The knowledge, all digital, wouldn't survive long. Batteries would die and the technology to recreate them wouldn't exist for a long time to come. But in the years to come, using the technology on the EEPs, they would recreate Earth's animal life.

She knew it was all ludicrous, but that didn't keep her from hoping.

*What else is there to hope for?* she wondered.

The parachutes deployed and jolted the EEP hard, slowing the descent to a swaying flutter.

She unlocked the bar restraint and pushed it back over her head.

"What are you doing?" Austin asked.

"I want to see." The cushioning system disengaged with the removal of the bar and she could move again. She undid the Velcro snaps and pushed out of her chair. But she didn't make it far. While gravity was now tugging her toward the Earth's core, her brain had yet to readjust. Some part of her mind expected to float free of the chair, but she merely bounced in the seat.

Austin chuckled. "Heavier than you remember?"

"Hey," she said, before standing and leaning toward the window.

"When we touch down, you'll want to be back in the chair and strapped in," he said, undoing his own restraints. "It could be rough."

The EEP had swayed back so she could see only sky. "Won't the shock absorbers take most of it?"

"Unless we land on a ledge and flip over."

She looked back at him. “That could happen?”

“If it’s a short fall we could end up upside down or on our side. If it’s a long fall, the EEP would right itself—it’s bottom heavy—but the parachutes might not slow us down again.”

Mia frowned, but felt the EEP sway in the other direction. She leaned over the command console and looked out the window. As the world below came into view, Austin joined her.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Well, that’s not what I expected.”

A residential neighborhood, seemingly untouched by the war, stood one thousand feet below. Things looked different in the distance—darker—but this small part of the world looked livable.

“Do you think there are survivors?”

“I don’t see how it’s possible. Then again, I don’t see how this is possible either. I was expecting ruins everywhere.” As the EEP spun around, Austin saw a gleaming white circle below them. “There’s EEP Beta.”

Mia strained to see. The massive spacecraft had come to rest atop of a house, now flattened beneath it.

“EEP Alpha, do you read?”

Austin toggled the com system. “We hear you Reggie. What’s the score?”

“The system was right. I’m on the ground. The air is breathable. The Geiger counter is pinging at normal levels. No fallout anywhere. It’s like the missiles never dropped.”

“Have you seen any survivors?”

“Not a one.” Reggie was quiet for a moment. “No animals either. No birds. No bugs. Somehow this neighborhood survived.”

A stiff breeze caught EEP Alpha and began pulling them away from EEP Beta.

“Looks like we’re going to touch down a few blocks away,” Austin said. “Stay where you are. We’ll come to you.”

“Copy that, Austin.”

Austin motioned to the chairs and sat down. “Better strap in, we’ll be on the ground in thirty seconds.”

Mia nodded, took her seat and began to lift the bar restraint over her body. But before she did, Reggie’s voice came over the speakers again. “Oh my God, I see survivors!”

Mia and Austin launched from their chairs and looked out the window. EEP Beta was further away, but still visible. They could see Reggie in front, waving his arms, and his group of survivors exiting the EEP behind him. Further down the street, a crowd of people approached.

“Looks like the whole neighborhood,” Reggie said. “Sounds like they’re shouting something.”

“What are they saying?” Austin asked, while keeping one eye on their distance from the ground. Maybe fifteen seconds left.

“Can’t tell. They’re all shouting. Making it hard to hear.” Reggie’s voice grew louder as he spoke to the people, who were now just a few feet away. “One at a time! I can’t hear you!”

A new voice, feminine, came over Reggie’s mic. “Please run! I don’t want to hurt—” “Reggie...” Austin said. Something about the woman’s voice bothered him. But he didn’t get any further.

“What?” Reggie said, “I don’t—” The scream that followed was horrible, like something from a B-movie actress, but worse because it came from the voice of a man.

“Fuck,” Austin said. They were far from the action now, but the jerky violent movements of the mob as they descended on the survivors, coupled with Reggie’s scream told him everything he needed to know. They were being slaughtered. The last thing he saw was a group of the mob peel off and head in their direction. Then a tall power line passed by the window.

He shoved Mia into her seat and dove into his. “Hold on!”

The impact came a moment later. The EEP shook and screeched as they plowed through a house, scraped across the open street and slammed into a second home. The EEP tipped for a moment as the full parachutes tugged, but the heavy base settled to the ground with a thud.

They were still for only a moment when Austin leapt from his seat and yanked her up. There was no time to ask about injuries. No time to ponder what had happened. They needed to move.

“There an armory on board?” she asked.

Austin nodded. They were on the same page.

Though the neighborhood looked as American as they come, he didn’t know where they had landed. What he did know was that the locals were hostile and would reach them inside five minutes.

They had to run.

They had to fight.

The war, it seemed, wasn’t over.

## **TORMENT**

## America

“Everyone up!” Mia shouted as she rejoined the others. She felt happy to see Garbarino and Paul Byers jump up at the ready.

When Austin added, “Move! We have hostiles incoming!” Vanderwarf and White stood. Austin pointed to them, “You two, weapons cache. I want a firearm in the hands of everyone over seven years old in under a minute.” He turned to Garbarino and Byers. “Joe, break out the survival packs. One for everyone.”

Garbarino waved for Paul to follow him, then looked back. “What about the kid? She won’t be able to carry it.”

“I’ll double up,” Austin said.

“So will you,” Mia said to Garbarino as she pulled Liz free of her restraints and picked her up. “I’m carrying Liz.”

He frowned for a moment, but then nodded. It made sense.

“Explain the situation to them while I check things out.” Austin said as he moved around Mia and headed for the exterior hatch.

Mia watched him unlock the hatch and step outside, no pause or consideration given to the survivability of the atmosphere. When she turned back, Mark, Collins and Chang were staring at her wide-eyed.

“What’s happening?” Collins asked. “Is it the Russians? Did they survive somehow?”

“We’re in a residential neighborhood,” Mia said, and then thought about her next words. She didn’t want to scare Liz further. She could feel the little girl’s limbs shaking as she silently held on tight. “EEP Beta landed a few blocks over. They...encountered a large hostile group.”

Chang sucked in a breath. “They’re dead?”

Mia shot her a look as Liz tightened her grip.

Chang looked at the floor. “Sorry.”

Mia tried to think of a way to say things without Liz understanding. She decided on military speak, which she knew thanks to Matt. “They’re KIA,” Mia said. “Yes. Some of the group is coming this way.”

“Hence the backpacks and weapons,” Mark said. “We’re on the run.”

Vanderwarf and White reentered the room, each carrying a small arsenal—several handguns, spare clips, two shotguns and three MP5 submachine guns. They laid them out on a reclining chair. Mia had spent a lot of time at the shooting range with various men in her former life and was a pretty good shot. She felt thankful for that as she took a Sig Sauer handgun and four spare clips, and shoved them all into a pocket with one hand while holding Liz with the other.

Collins took a handgun as well. He didn't look comfortable holding it.

"You've shot before?" Paul asked him.

"I've only fired a gun a few times. My father took me hunting. Never liked it." He moved the weapon up and down, feeling its weight in his hand. "Not sure I could shoot someone."

Mia let out scoffing laugh. "Says the man who pushed the button."

Collins stiffened. "Hey—"

"No time for talking, you two," White said. "Focus on surviving or you're likely not to." He held a handgun out to Mark. "Not going to be a stereotype, are you?"

"Hardly," Mark said, taking an MP5 and a Sig Sauer.

Vanderwarf squinted at him, motioning to the MP5. "You know how to use that?"

"The handgun, yes." He held up the MP5. "This thing, no—"

Garbarino and Paul returned, a slew of backpacks on their backs and in their arms.

Mark pointed to Paul, "—but he does." After taking two spare clips for the MP5, Mark handed the weapon to his brother, who had just deposited the bags at their feet.

Paul inspected the MP5, checked the clip and chambered the first round. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Mark said as he slipped on his backpack.

The exterior hatch swung open. Austin entered and found several weapons aimed in his direction. He paused for a moment, realizing he'd almost been shot, then stepped in and claimed a second handgun for himself. "Those who have never fired a weapon, please don't aim or fire at something until those of us with experience say so. The switch on the left side is the safety. Switch it to the off position—" He demonstrated this for them. "—point it at your target and pull the trigger."

"Right," Chang said. She placed her handgun in her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. She still wore her work clothes. She wasn't wearing high heels, but her shoes weren't exactly made for running. "How far do we have to go?"

While most of the people looked at her the way they might a mental patient, Austin said what they were all thinking. "As far as we have to, now—"

A distant scream cut through the air.

"What's that?" Chang asked.

Austin moved to the hatch, leading with his gun. "They're coming." He turned back to the group. "Get those packs on and grab as many weapons as you can carry."

Garbarino picked up two handguns, one of them being the weapon taken from him previously, and a shotgun. Vanderwarf and White had the MP5s and one handgun each. Collins took the second shotgun.

A gunshot echoed loudly inside the EEP sending hands to ears.

"Fuck!" Garbarino shouted.

"They're here!" Austin squeezed off two rounds. "Garbarino, take them south. I'll slow them down!"

Mia followed Garbarino out of the EEP and on to the street of the McMansion lined neighborhood. The blacktop street smelled of new pavement and was bisected by two

bright yellow lines, perhaps days old. The maple trees lining the street were bare, and the grass brown, but being the middle of February in what looked like the American Northeast to her, that was expected. What wasn't expected was the temperature, which Mia pegged around eighty degrees. Other than that aberration, the neighborhood looked like so many others hastily built over the previous ten years. There was no rushing mob, but she did see two bodies lying face down one hundred feet away. As the others exited and followed Garbarino around the backside of the EEP, Mia stopped by Austin. "You shouldn't stay by yourself."

"I'll be fine."

"You could die."

"I know I'm not paid to do this anymore, but it's still my job." Austin motioned toward Liz. "And it's not like you can help."

"What about Garbarino? Why did you put him in charge?"

"He'll toe the line as long as he feels respected," Austin said. "If I don't make it back, he's in charge in a fight, you're in charge of everything else. He'll go for that."

"If he doesn't?"

Austin looked over her shoulder. "Then you'll have help."

Paul had waited for her. He stood there, brandishing his submachine gun like a true war hero. And he'd heard everything.

"But that's not going to happen," Austin said. "I just want to give you a head start. I can catch up."

A terrified voice called out from the distance.

"Is that one of ours?" Paul asked.

"Wrong direction," Austin said, taking aim past the two bodies he'd already shot. "Now go!"

Paul took Mia by the arm and led her around the EEP. She was surprised to see Garbarino waiting there for them and wondered if he had heard any of their conversation. But he just waved them on, shouting, "Move your asses!"

Two shots rang out from Austin's position.

Mia saw the rest of their crew jogging down the street, away from the EEP and the oncoming crowd. She looked back the way they'd come. It didn't feel right, leaving Austin. But then Liz leaned back, looked her in the eyes and said, "What the hell are you waiting for, Auntie Mia, move your ass!"

She started forward. Then two more shots set them all to running, like horses out of the gate. They didn't slow until they caught up to Collins, who was already out of breath.

Mia thought about it and realized she'd never seen photos of or heard news about this president going out for jogs. In fact, she seemed to recall he had heart problems. Great.

Two blocks from the EEP, more gunshots rang out. Then a scream. A man's scream.

Then silence. They all stared back at the EEP, waiting for Austin to come running, but he didn't.

After a moment, Mia turned to Garbarino, placed her hand on his arm, and very intentionally said, "Lead the way," all the while feeling like she'd just handed them all over to the devil.



Within twenty minutes, Mia, Collins, Chang and the Byers brothers lagged behind their three Secret Service escorts. Mia was in shape, but lacked endurance, especially when carrying a fifty pound seven year old. Liz seemed to sense this and tapped her shoulder. "I can run now," the girl said. "I'm not afraid anymore."

Mia looked the girl in the eyes. "You sure?"

She nodded.

"Stay right next to me."

The nod continued. Mia put her down, then put her hands on her knees while she caught her breath. The brothers and Chang stopped with her, while Collins walked on ahead, his body soaked in sweat.

Garbarino heard the number of moving feet behind him change and turned around. "Hey! Keep moving."

"We need to rest," Mia said.

"Those people might still be chasing us," he said, stomping toward her.

"There hasn't been a sound or a gunshot for a while," she countered.

Garbarino stood above her. "That's probably because Austin is dead and those sons-a-bitches are sneaking up on us. Now..." He took her arm and yanked her up. "Move!"

"Hey!" Liz shouted and went to hit Garbarino, but Mia caught her little fist.

She stood face-to-face with the man, and when she did she realized she stood a good two inches taller. "Right now, if those people charged us, I wouldn't have the energy to run. We've been through a lot and the non-stop adrenaline rush of being launched into space by a series of nuclear blasts, watching the world be destroyed, floating in zero gravity, dropping back down to Earth and then being attacked by crazed survivors, is starting to wear off."

Garbarino's face slowly fell as he listened to her. The words seemed to suck the energy out of him. He looked around the neighborhood. "Houses up there look big. Might be a good place to hole up."

Mia looked up the road and saw several new and very large houses. They were the kind contractors built in a month, the kind she mocked when she drove by, but right now they looked incredibly normal and inviting. She smiled. "Thank you."

"Let's move," Chang said. "Maybe the plumbing still works."

Mark followed after her. "I could go for a shower."

"I'll take a bath," Paul said, loping ahead of the other two, looking ridiculous with his submachine gun.

Mia took Liz's hand and nodded at Garbarino. "You did the right thing."

“Yeah, well, let’s hope it doesn’t get us killed.” He motioned for her to get moving and followed behind her. She looked back and was happy to find him walking backwards, keeping watch behind them.

They reached the line of massive homes five minutes later and selected a three-story giant. The choice had nothing to do with how opulent the house was, with its perfectly shaped, leafless hedges, a waterless fountain and a new BMW in the driveway. The third story fire escape appealed to all of them. If trouble came through the front, back or garage doors, they had an alternate escape route. The third floor would also offer them an excellent view of the neighborhood and anyone that might be looking for them.

While the others let themselves in through the unlocked front door, Mia stopped in front of the house. She pulled her handgun from her pocket and ejected a single round. It landed on the sidewalk. She bent down and positioned the round so that it pointed toward the house.

“What are you doing?” Liz asked.

“Leaving a message.”

“For Mr. Austin?”

“Yup. For Mr. Austin.”

She stood and scooped up Liz. “Can he be my new daddy? I’ve never had a daddy.”

Mia laughed. “You like him that much?”

She bobbed her head up and down. “And you can be my new mommy.”

“Liz...” Mia didn’t know what to say. She had avoided the subject for as long as possible, but now it seemed Liz needed to process the loss.

“I know she’s dead,” the girl said. “*Everyone* is dead. Except for us.” Tears formed in her eyes, causing Mia to tear up as well.

*This is a new world*, Mia thought. As awful as it felt, if Liz was going to survive, she would have to get tough. They all would. And she swore to herself that this was the last time she would cry. Blurry crying eyes couldn’t aim a gun very well. And they didn’t evoke confidence in the people she now led.

A knock on the door turned her around. The priest stood there with the shotgun. “Shake a leg, ladies.”

Mia wiped her eyes and put Liz down. “I’m your mommy now. I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

“And Mr. Austin?”

Mia smiled. “I’ll let you ask him.”

“You don’t want to marry him?”

The smile faded.

“You still love Uncle Matt?” Liz answered the question in her own mind and shook her head. “You’re right, I don’t think he would like that.”

Liz ran to Mark, who was waving her on. She left Mia standing alone on the sidewalk, frozen with guilt. For a moment she wished one of the savage survivors would leap out from behind a tree and tear her to pieces. She deserved nothing less. She had betrayed

the man she loved. Over what? A little boredom. Some lonely nights? Her fucking libido?

“Mia!” Mark was whispering now, but more insistent. His voice snapped her from her reverie. She turned toward him and found Liz waving her in, too. If it weren’t for Liz she might put the gun in her mouth and escape this horrible world once and for all.

After scanning the area, she entered the house and closed the solid red door behind her.

And open concept interior and a group of relieved faces greeted her.

Mark had just taken a seat behind a baby grand piano.

The three Secret Service agents and Collins were searching through kitchen cabinets and sharing a box of Funny Bones.

Paul exited a bathroom and announced, “Water’s running.”

Garbarino entered from the garage. “Power’s out, but they have a generator and a really big propane tank.”

Chang sat in a reclining chair, scanning a DVD collection. “They have Khan!”

Mark poised his hands over the piano keys.

“Everyone shut up!” Mia said in such an angry voice that it came out as half growl. “Are you all insane?”

When no one answered, she continued.

“There are people outside who want to kill us. With their bare hands. They already killed at least thirty-one other survivors and maybe Austin.” She looked at the agents and Collins. “You going to offer them cookies and spoiled milk when they come knocking?” Mark came next. “Are you going to provide the soundtrack while they tear us apart?” She turned to Chang. “You may never see Star Trek again.” Paul. “You may never take a hot shower.” Garbarino. “And if you plan on keeping us alive by ringing the fucking dinner bell, then go right ahead and start the generator.” Did you notice how quiet it is out there? No cars. No electricity. Not even a fucking cricket! They’d hear the generator for miles away.”

Everyone stood in silence, staring at her.

She pointed to the three people in the kitchen. “Blockade the back door.” Garbarino and Paul. “Garage.” Mark and Chang. “Front door.”

She moved to the stairs, pulling Liz with her. Garbarino stood in front of her, blocking her way. “And what will you be doing, fearless leader?”

Mia took her handgun out and chambered a round. Garbarino stepped back and tensed. She saw the gun in his hand slowly rising. “If you’ll get out of my way, I’m going to go make sure there isn’t an army of people upstairs waiting to kill us once we’ve barricaded ourselves in.”

The idea that someone could already be in the house hit Garbarino hard. He stepped aside and motioned for Paul to follow him.

As Mia stormed up the stairs with Liz in tow, she heard furniture moving behind her. She stopped at the second floor and looked down at Liz. The girl wore a large smile. “What?”

“You cursed,” she said. “A lot.”

Mia let out a small laugh. “Yeah, I did.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Mia said. “I was angry.”

“Mommy said that swear words aren’t really bad. It’s society that says they’re bad. But they’re still just words. And most of the time they make people smile.”

Mia laughed again. It sounded like something Margo would say.

“But now,” Liz said, “Everyone is dead. So we can decide what’s okay to say, right?”

Mia felt wrong smiling, but couldn’t help it. “I suppose. But what if the others disagree?”

Liz stood quiet for a moment, pondering the question. Then she shrugged. “Fuck ‘em.”

Covering her mouth, Mia laughed hard, but stopped just as abruptly. She held the gun up. Liz went silent and fell in behind her. She’d heard it too. Footsteps. Above them. Someone was home.

“Stay here,” Mia whispered to Liz. She’d quickly checked the second floor bedrooms and deposited Liz in a closet. The girl shuffled back into the closet, hidden behind a rack of hanging suits that must have come from a Big n’ Tall store.

The stairs to the third floor were at the center of the hall and ended at a closed door. A thick, beige carpet covered the steps and concealed her approach. She paused at the top of the stairs, trying to remember how police officers breached a room, but then realized every image she had of the maneuver was from a TV show.

With her left hand on the door knob and the gun in her right, she slowly turned the handle and nudged the door open. Other than the bottom of the door brushing against the carpet, she managed complete silence.

The third floor was one large room. Four skylights above and a large, front looking window filled the room with the tangerine glow of the setting sun. She searched the long room for any sign of the person she’d heard and found nothing. There were two arcade games; the screens blank. A mini-bar filled the back corner accompanied by a card table and dart board on the wall. The front half of the room held two plush couches and a TV screen that looked big enough to service a stadium theater. But the centerpiece of the room was a pool table. Ornatly carved from red oak, the table sat at the center of the space. A large stained glass fixture hung above it.

The most interesting thing about the pool table was what lay on the side.

A bullet.

Her bullet.

She walked toward the round, staring at it. “Austin?”

“Didn’t want you to shoot me.” Austin’s voice came from behind her. A small bathroom was hidden behind the stairs. He stepped out, wiping off his face with a hand towel.

She wanted to leap at the man and hug him. Having written him off as dead, she felt glad to see him. She lowered her gun.

He walked to the pool table and picked up the round. “Thanks for the message. I came in through the fire escape after checking out the backyard.”

“How did you get here so fast?” she asked.

He took out a pool ball and rolled it across the table, bouncing it off the cushion. “I wasn’t that far behind. Wanted to make sure you weren’t being followed.”

“You were watching us?”

He nodded. “I was in the woods behind the house.”

“Could’a told me.”

“Worried?” he asked with a grin.

“Asshole.”

Austin laughed and looked beyond her. Liz was standing there. He stopped smiling.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Austin. We decided that curse words weren’t offensive anymore,” Liz said as she entered the room and sat on a couch.

“I told you to wait,” Mia said, a touch of anger in her voice.

Liz shrugged. “I thought it was safe to come out with them.” She thumbed over her shoulder as Mark arrived, carrying a novel. Paul and Chang followed him, also carrying novels.

“There a book club I don’t know about?” Austin asked.

“Only form of entertainment that’s not going to get us killed,” Mark said.

“Running for your life isn’t entertaining enough?” Mia asked.

“Food’s here,” Collins announced as he entered carrying two brown bags full of non-perishable food.

White and Vanderwarf followed, hands empty. Garbarino was last. He closed and locked the door at the bottom of the stairs then joined them at the top. He looked honestly pleased to see Austin. “You made it.”

Austin stopped the rolling pool ball. “One almost got me. Snuck up behind me while I was distracted.”

“Were they armed?” Garbarino asked.

Austin shook his head. “They were...insane. No weapons. Came at me with hands and teeth. Like animals. A few of them weren’t any trouble. But if I wasn’t armed...or if the rest of them showed up.” He shook his head again, this time looking at the floor.

“Wouldn’t have turned out the same.”

After a moment of silence, he moved to the end of the pool table and reached under it. He motioned to Garbarino. “Help me on this end. Vanderwarf. White. Get the other side.”

Together, the four of them moved the heavy table in front of the fire escape door on the side of the house. With the downstairs sealed, the second floor door locked and the pool table blocking the only other exit, they were sealed in tight.

As night settled, the group ate boxes of Hostess comfort food, spoke little, and one by one dropped off to sleep. Vanderwarf and White lay down behind the bar. No one could see them, everyone knew the two were dealing with the destruction of the world in their own, primal way.

“Going to have to start repopulating the planet sooner or later,” Paul had whispered to Mark, but the priest wasn’t laughing. Despite his normally humorous personality, he had fallen more serious as the sun descended and the sunset turned blood red. But if darkness filled his thoughts, he kept it to himself and eventually nodded off. Paul slept on one of the couches, snoring lightly. Chang had found a bean bag chair and fell asleep halfway on, lying on her back with her head cocked back and her mouth wide open. Collins fell asleep as he often did in the Oval Office, head down on the table. He’d started playing solitaire, but wasn’t having any luck.

Liz fell asleep on Mia's lap while she sat in a comfortable chair to the side of the front window. Had it not been pitch black outside, it would have offered her a view of half the neighborhood for nearly a mile. Austin sat on a stool across from her, arms folded across his chest keeping watch in the other direction.

"Strange, isn't it?" he said quietly.

"What is?" she replied.

"That sound."

She listened, but could only hear the breathing of several sleeping people and Paul's snoring. "I can't hear anything."

Austin picked up a pillow from the arm of the couch and tossed it at Paul. The man snorted, rolled over and fell quiet. "Outside," Austin said.

She reached forward slowly and opened the small window. She held her breath and listened. At first she heard nothing. But after a few moments she heard...something. High pitched. Reverberating. Very distant. "What is it?" she asked.

"Screaming," he said.

Goose bumps sprung up on her arms. He was right. Once he identified the sound, she could hear it for what it was—screaming, from hundreds, if not thousands of people. "What's going on out there?" she asked.

As though in reply, a light outside clicked on.

Austin sprang up.

Mia gasped.

"Motion sensitive light in the driveway," he said. "Must have a battery backup."

She heard nothing but "motion sensitive." Someone lurked outside. She shifted for a view of the driveway and saw a man. He moved quickly, but not in a single direction. Like a squirrel in the road, unsure of which way to run from an approaching car, he leaped one way and then the other. She could hear his panicked breathing, squeaking with fear.

"Should we help him?" she asked.

Austin shook his head, no. Instead, he whispered, "Close your window."

She did so, quickly and quietly, careful not to jostle Liz and wake her up.

"I don't think he could have heard us."

"It's not him I'm worried about." He motioned to the others. "It's them. I don't want them to wake up. I don't want them to see."

"See what?"

"You didn't hear the voices?"

She shook her head, wondering if her hearing sucked or if Austin just had really good ears.

"The people who attacked me. Who attacked Reggie. They all shouted warnings first. Apologies. Like they didn't want to be doing what they were about to do. Like it horrified them. I could hear them coming." He motioned out the window. "And so can he."

The man was still running in circles. Then, through the closed windows, Mia did hear another voice. A woman's. Then a man's. She couldn't make out the words, but she could see them. Running shadows. Three of them.

The panicked man finally saw them coming. Or maybe heard them. And turned to run in the opposite direction. But he was so out of his head with fright that he turned and sprinted into a tree. The three descended on top of him before he could stand. The woman went for his neck with her teeth, cutting off his scream. The two men tore at his stomach. Blood pooled around him as they slaughtered the man.

From beginning to end, the attack lasted only fifteen seconds. The two men and the woman stood above the body, wailing. Crying like children. They disappeared into the night again, leaving the dead man behind, his entrails looping over the driveway, his blood glowing bright red under the halogen glow of the motion sensitive light.

Mia and Austin stared down at the body in silence.

When the light blinked out again, Austin whispered, "We'll go out the back in the morning. Get some sleep."

She thought sleep would be impossible, but she sat back, closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the view of stars outside had been replaced by blue sky. For a moment, lost in the comfortable place between sleep and reality, she forgot everything that had happened.

That's when Liz started screaming.



Mia launched from her chair, wrapped her hand around Liz's open mouth and turned her away from the large window. She thought the girl had seen the mauled body in the driveway. *Why didn't we cover the window last night?*

As Liz filled her lungs to scream again, Austin knelt in front of her, ready to talk her down from her panic. But he quickly realized what was happening. "She's still asleep."

"Someone shut her up!" Garbarino hissed. He jumped to his feet, holding his weapon. The screaming got his hackles up.

Mia shook her arm. "Elizabeth! Wake up! Liz!"

The girl screamed again.

"They're going to hear her!" Garbarino said.

Mia knew he was right. Her high pitched squeal could probably be heard for blocks, even with the windows shut. And who's to say the killers she and Austin saw the night before weren't waiting outside already?

White and Vanderwarf emerged from behind the bar, weapons at the ready. "What's happening?" Vanderwarf asked.

"Kid's having a nightmare," Collins answered as he stood up and approached Mia. He knelt down in front of Liz, next to Austin and before anyone grasped his intentions, he reached out and slapped the girl across the face.

"Hey!" Austin shouted, shoving his former boss away. Collins fell back, unhurt.

The scream didn't come again. A gentle crying took its place. "My face hurts," Liz said.

Mia glared at Collins for a moment before picking up her niece.

He held his hands up. "It worked, didn't it? And it sure as hell beats him—" He motioned to Garbarino, "—putting a bullet in her."

Austin saw Garbarino's weapon lower. Had he been bringing it up to fire? There was no way to be sure, so he let it go. He didn't chastise Collins any further, either. The slap wasn't hard enough to break the girl's jaw and she *did* stop screaming. But was it too late already?

Austin moved to the window and looked out over the neighborhood. The houses, all various shades of beige, glowed yellow in the morning sun. When his gaze turned to the driveway, his heart hammered in his chest.

Mia rubbed Liz's cheek. "You're okay, baby. You're okay."

"I had a bad dream."

"I know."

"You were dead," Liz said before looking at the others. "They were all dead. And I was alone."

"You're not alone," Mia said, wrapping the girl in her arms. A gentle touch on her shoulder took her attention away from Liz. It was Austin. He motioned toward the window with his eyes. There was something outside he wanted her to see. His silence meant he didn't want the others to know.

She looked around the room. With Liz quiet, they all went about their morning rituals. Collins mixed instant coffee into a mug of cold water. Paul was in the bathroom. Mark sat on one of the couches, reading from his small Bible. Vanderwarf, White and Garbarino sat around the card table, opening a fresh box of Hostess cakes. Chang was just waking now. From the tired look in her eyes, she'd slept through the morning theatrics.

Mia stood slowly, holding Liz in her arms, and turned to the window. She kept Liz looking in the opposite direction as she looked, first at the empty neighborhood, and then down to the driveway. She gasped at what she saw.

A dried bloodstain covered a large swath of pavement, but the body, and every scrap of eviscerated organ was missing.

"He's gone... scavengers?" she asked, quietly.

"I don't think so," Austin said. "There'd be something left behind. Bones."

"Maybe they moved it?"

He shook his head. "We haven't seen a living animal or insect since we landed."

"Maybe they came back for him?" Mia asked.

"Came back for who?" It was Chang. She'd snuck up behind them while they looked out the window. She followed their eyes toward the driveway. "Oh my God. Is that blood?"

Mia put Liz down and gave her a little shove toward Mark. "Go talk to Uncle Mark."

Liz obeyed, sitting down next to Mark. He saw what was going on and put his arm around the girl. He opened the Bible and said, "Let me tell you a story."

With Liz preoccupied, Mia turned to Chang. "Stay quiet."

Chang looked back into the room. The others were getting on with their morning, some were even smiling. She nodded. "Whose blood is that?"

"A man was killed there last night," Austin said, his voice devoid of emotion.

"Last night? You saw it?"

Austin looked Chang in the eyes. "Not a word." He waited for her to nod again, then turned to the others. "We're heading out in thirty minutes. Eat, drink, pack what you can carry."

“What’s the plan?” White asked.

“We don’t even know where we are,” Vanderwarf added.

“We’re in Rhode Island,” Austin said, holding up a map he’d found while searching the end tables on either side of the couch. “We’ll head north, through Massachusetts and New Hampshire.”

“Won’t it be colder up there?” Paul asked as he exited the bathroom.

“It should be colder here,” Austin said. “It should be freezing. But it’s not. I think it’s safe to assume the weather patterns and seasons have changed.”

“Then why head north?” Paul asked.

“Fewer targets,” Collins said and then turned to Austin. “Northern New England—Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine—don’t have a lot in the way of strategic targets. It’s mostly trees and very few people. With each nuke costing a good chunk of change to maintain and launch, it’s less likely the Russians directly targeted that area of the country.”

“You think there might be survivors?” Garbarino asked, sounding hopeful.

“I’m hoping so.”

“The kind that doesn’t want to kill us?” Chang added as she headed for the bathroom.

“Yeah,” Austin said. “That kind.”

Mia glanced out the window and saw movement. She held her breath as she leaned over for a better look. She did an admirable job of hiding the quick intake of air, but Austin noticed. He glanced back at her, despite all eyes being on him. Her eyes were wide with urgency. He took a step back and followed her gaze.

He had a harder time hiding his surprise, “Fuck.”

But no one seemed to notice, as Chang distracted them by saying, “Dude, haven’t you heard, if it’s yellow, let it mellow—”

Austin’s mind raced. Was he seeing things? He didn’t think so. Then how was this possible? The man standing beneath the window, only five feet from the front porch, was the same man they’d seen slaughtered the night before. He was still fidgeting. Still panicking. And the wild eyed man seemed perfectly healthy despite being nearly naked and covered in caked-on blood.

And if he’s here, the killers that tracked him down might not be far behind.

Chang’s voice cut through his thoughts. “If it’s brown, flush it down.”

Austin snapped around, and hissed an angry, “No!”

But his voice was lost among the chuckles of the others.

“Chang!” He said, louder. “Stop!”

She turned to him. “What?” But his warning came too slow. She’d already flushed the toilet. Despite there being no running water, the toilet tank still held enough for one flush. The third floor toilet roared as water shot into the toilet bowl and flowed through the plumbing toward the basement.

Chang understood her mistake as soon as she saw his eyes. She cringed. “Sorry.”

“Tom,” Mia said, her voice a barely controlled whisper.

He moved back to the window and looked down. The panicked man had stopped in his tracks and was looking up at them. He met Austin's eyes. The man's stare rooted Austin in place and filled him with some kind of primal fear. But the stranger seemed just as afraid.

The fear-filled stare-down was broken when the man whipped his head to the left. He looked up again and mouthed a single word. "Run." Then, he ran.

Tom turned to the others. "Pack up. We're leaving now."

Garbarino stood. "Why? What's—"

The sound of breaking glass silenced him.

"That was downstairs," Paul said.

Austin threw on his backpack and drew his weapon. "They're coming through the windows."

"Fuck," Vanderwarf said. She stood, backpack on and weapon at the ready a moment later. The rest of the group quickly followed.

Garbarino, Austin, Mia and White ran for the pool table blocking the fire exit door. They had it moved out of the way in seconds. Garbarino reached for the deadbolt. Just as he was turning it, Austin's hand slapped over his, stopping him.

"Wait," Austin urged.

Garbarino's eyes were wide. "Fuck that!" He tried turning the lock again, but Austin held it tight.

"Wait," Austin repeated.

Garbarino glared at him for a moment. "For what?"

"If there's more than one, we want to give them all time to get inside, so we can get out. And as soon as we open that door, the ten of us need to run down two flights of stairs. They won't have to go as far. The only chance we have at a head start is if they're—"

The door at the bottom of the third floor staircase shook as several fists pounded against it. Austin removed his hand from Garbarino's. "Go!"

The locks flew open and Garbarino launched himself out onto the small landing. The morning sun warmed him, and he saw no danger. He took the stairs two at a time, leading the line of survivors down the side of the house. Dead grass crunched beneath his feet when he reached the bottom and knelt in a firing stance. He checked both directions. "All clear," he whispered as the others joined him.

Austin was the last one down. When he reached the bottom, he noticed the banging inside the house had stopped.

The killers were coming.

Austin waved them toward the backyard where a line of trees marked the beginning of a large patch of wilderness. "Into the woods!"

The backyard was a wide open patch of dead grass. Other than a swing set and a candy cane-shaped septic system vent, there was nothing to hide behind. They were totally exposed. But there was no choice. They had to run.

The group moved as one, like flocking birds, crouch-running across the grass. But a child's toy tripped Vanderwarf and sent her to the ground only five feet from the back of the house. White turned around and stopped. He reached down to pick her up. With his head down, he heard the dull thuds of someone running inside the house. Thinking he had at least ten seconds before the person reached the barricaded back door and perhaps another minute after that, he didn't bother raising his weapon.

When the window exploded from the inside out, he was totally unprepared for it. A woman flew through the air, shards of glass covering her face, arms and naked upper torso. White and the woman hit the ground a second later and before anyone, including White, who had the wind knocked out of him, could respond, the woman shouted, "I'm sorry! I don't want to—" She drove her rigid fingers into his throat with unnatural strength. Her fingers disappeared into his neck up to the third knuckle.

White twitched beneath her.

Vanderwarf screamed and kicked away from the woman and her now dead lover.

The woman wailed, as though wounded.

A single gunshot silenced her.

Austin.

The bullet struck the woman's forehead and sent her flailing backwards.

"Vanderwarf!" Austin shouted. "Move!"

Though horrified, Vanderwarf's instincts and training kicked in. She climbed to her feet and ran toward the others. Glass exploded again as a second body emerged from the house. It was a man. Nearly naked. His body charged like a killing machine on speed. But his face was twisted with agony. The expression locked solid as Austin fired a second shot, piercing the man's brain and sending him to the ground.

The silence that followed lasted only a moment.

Voices—a sea of them—rose up in the distance.

"The woods," Austin growled. "Now!"

There was no pause. No looking back.

They ran like prey.

Like the man killed in the driveway the night before.

The same man who followed them now.

Unlike the others, he looked back, eyeing the bodies on the grass—watching their eyes—and then followed the group into the darkness of the dead woods.