

Awakening

Children of the After, #1

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Chapter 1

The grey steel of the wall was cold against his skin, causing goose pimples to crawl down his arm as the hair upon it stood up. A chill shot up his spine, his shoulders jerking slightly as he rummaged through the open canisters upon the shelf before him. Wrappers, wrappers, and more wrappers. Nothing but empty plastic and paper. Throwing his hands up in both frustration and defeat, Jack looked across the length of the room at the long row of shelves. It was gone. All of it, except perhaps enough for one more meal. Two, if they ate even more sparingly.

Wiping his hands down his once white, sleeveless shirt, freeing them from the stale crumbs and dust, he raised them once more to brush back the thick brown hair from his eyes. He needed a haircut. He'd needed one months ago when they entered the shelter, but now he was sure he was beginning to look like a boy band wannabe. If such a thing still existed.

Passing the small digital screen on the wall, he winced. It had been installed to monitor news stations and broadcasts, though it never had more than static on the screen. Even the first day. They had listened to the static for weeks on end, until they weren't able to sleep without it. It was odd how such a nothing could become something, here in the steel confines of their home. Shaking his head, he reached down and picked up a sweatshirt before pulling it over his head. He had no idea what to expect when they went outside. He no longer knew if there was an outside. But there was only one way to find out.

His eyes scanning the empty shelves once more, he looked past them to the only people he was certain were alive. There, on a small, twin-sized pair of bunks, were the sleeping forms of both Samantha and Will. He knew they had to leave the survival shelter. He had prolonged their stay as long as he was able, but it couldn't sustain them any longer. The food was all but gone. The waste recycler and water purifier were on the fritz when there was power, but most of the time even that wasn't working.

Crossing the smooth steel floor as quietly as he was able, he grinned down upon his sleeping siblings. They had fought and argued as much as any other brothers and sisters before the event, but as time passed, isolated with none but each other, they began to rely upon one another. They were the only comfort each of them had, and he was responsible for them. Shaking his head, Jack recalled how much each of them was sure their father would open the door just minutes or hours after the magnetic lock that secured it had closed. Hours turned into days, and then weeks. Their dad never returned, but then they hoped that their mom would come. Surely she was spared from whatever had happened outside? She had been in Europe on business when Dad locked them in the vault, but she never came. They had cried a lot those first months. Scared and alone, they found strength in one another, and eventually the tears stopped.

It was their dad's final words that last day that were etched in Jack's memory more than any other thing he could recall from all of his sixteen years. The day it happened, their dad made Jack promise he would look out for Sam and Will. He remembered his dad's eyes, they had been red and swollen, and he was obviously scared. They were all scared. Everyone had been scared, though Jack still didn't know exactly what had happened in the hours prior to entering the vault that had everyone panicking. It didn't matter now. He was responsible for taking care of both Samantha and Will, and they couldn't stay in the security vault any longer. It wasn't a decision he was making lightly, and if there were any other choice he would have made it. No, today he would take them out of the vault, if for no other reason than to gather supplies from their home, outside, and return.

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Opening her sapphire eyes, Sam slowly stretched her arms over her head, restoring the dormant circulation. Sighing somewhat loudly, she then stretched out her legs while arching her back like some sort of feline, cracking her toes, before relaxing once more. Rolling to her side, she used the back of her sleeve to wipe the sleep from her eyes before blinking several times as her vision adjusted to her barely lit surroundings. Just as every day before, she was met with the disappointing reality that her situation was not just a dream, as the vacant steel walls beamed back at her from every direction. What she wouldn't give to log onto her laptop and tweet to all of her friends. But the reality of the situation was she couldn't, and she hated it.

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bunk, she sat up before quietly dropping down to the cold metal floor, trying not to wake Will in the bunk below. He was grumpy if he didn't get enough sleep, and no one in their right mind wanted to be trapped in a tin can with a cranky seven year old with nothing to do.

Slipping on her once favorite Nikes, she turned to look upon his small body as his chest rose and fell slowly with rhythmic breaths. *Whew*. He was still asleep. Brushing her raven hair out of her face with her fingers, she tried to pull them through the knots but gave up the useless task before fully committing. Whatever. There was no one to impress.

Grinning, she spun to see her own look mirrored in the eyes of her brother who sat in the relative darkness, further back into the shelter. He shrugged and motioned her over with concerned eyes that looked too much like their dad's had, the hours before the door closed. Tiptoeing across the stark metal of their prison, Sam cautiously sat upon the same bench as her older brother and looked up into his face expectantly.

"Good morning," he whispered with a wry grin.

"Just as good as yesterday's, I'd bet," she replied.

"We can't stay in here any longer," Jack stated simply.

It was usually his way these days, at least with her. Simple, and straight to the point. At least with Will he was more playful. She missed that in him. Not that they had gotten along often before the event. Even so, she knew that none of them were the same now.

"What are we going to do?" Sam whispered, knowing he awaited a response.

"The only thing we can. I'll open the door, and we'll go outside."

“What if it isn’t safe?”

“We’re out of food, Sam. The water tastes funny, when we even have water, and the toilet has been backed up for days. It’s not working anymore. We can’t stay in here. We have to go out.”

“But we don’t know what’s out there. It could be dangerous. What if the air is poison or something?” she asked, jumping straight to the worst case scenario.

“What choice do we have? We can stay in here and starve over the next week or two, or we can go outside.”

“But Dad said stay in as long as we can, Jack. He said *stay in*.”

“We did, Sam. This *is* as long as we can, and as much as I hate it, Dad’s not here.”

“I’m not arguing. I’m just scared.”

“Me too, but we have to. How can we tell Will that there is no more food left? I can’t do it. I’m not going to. Not after everything else. We need to go find more food. Water too, if we can.”

“But we can’t just take Will out there.”

“Why?”

“What if Dad *is* out there? You know...” she trailed off, not trusting her voice further.

“Then you stay in here and keep him calm. I’ll go out after breakfast, and if it’s safe I’ll get you guys.”

Nodding, still distrustful of her vocal cords, she turned her face away from him, not wanting Jack to see the tear that threatened to slip from her eye at the thought of their father being dead outside. She waited a moment, her chin trembling slightly as she fought to calm her overwhelming feelings. It was good they were going out. They needed to. This place was making them crazy. Not knowing was eating at them. But what if outside was worse? What then?

Shaking the thoughts from her head, she tried hard not to focus on the negatives, or the ‘what ifs’. Instead, halfheartedly trying to comb out the tangles in her hair with her fingers, she turned back to Jack and began to whisper.

“So... what’s left for breakfast?”

“Your absolute favorite,” Jack replied with a smile. “Vacuum packed saltines with a spoon full of protein powder and a packet of peanut butter.”

“So guaranteed constipation, then?”

“You got it, punk. Good thing too, we don’t need you blowing up the bathroom right now with it all backed up again.”

Without hesitation she cocked her arm back and slugged him in the shoulder as hard as she was able. Though she likely hurt her own hand more than him for the supposed offence, she secretly liked it when he called her ‘punk’. It was those small moments of playfulness that still made them feel like family. Like kids. Those moments were the speck of light in an otherwise vacant world of darkness and uncertainty. She could only hope that after today, there would be more reason for such moments. Anything had to be better than the security vault.

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Rubbing his fists into his eyes, he blinked over and over before sitting up and bounding to the floor barefoot, his feet smacking the metal below. Slipping on his

puppy slippers, Will scuffed his feet across the floor in the direction of Jack and Sam's voices. They were whispering again. They whispered a lot when they didn't think he was listening, but he knew more than they thought. He had heard when they talked about what was happening outside. Right after their dad put them in the vault. Sam thought it was aliens, but Jack said it was probably a war. Will guessed it was probably a war with aliens. Or monsters. Monsters were a good reason to hide in the vault. He had also heard when Sam and Jack talked about their dad. They thought Dad was dead, but no way. Dad was super strong and he wasn't afraid of nobody. Will was certain he had went to get Mom, and they would be back as soon as they could. It was probably just hard to get back with a war against alien monsters going on outside.

Plopping himself upon the bench between Jack and Sam, he grinned as their conversation ended abruptly, and both turned their attention to him. Before the vault they hardly played with him, each of them busy with their own friends, phones, and computers, but now he got all their attention.

"Hey, buddy," Jack greeted him.

"Hi, pumpkin," said Sam.

"Hi," he replied with a big, big smile.

"Are you hungry?" Sam asked.

"Do birds poop on cars?" Will replied, grinning again at his clever reply.

"I suppose they do," Sam beamed. "Here ya go, kiddo."

Will reached out his small hands and accepted the already open packs of both crackers and peanut butter. Sam had been nice and already mixed in the chocolate flavored protein powder with his peanut butter, making it almost taste like Nutella or a peanut butter cup. Almost, but not quite.

Holding the creamy mix in one hand he smashed the plastic container with his other hand, watching the dark brown concoction squeeze out between his hands to plop down upon the uppermost cracker. The crackers were huge, each made of four squares, and easily the size of a slice of bread. Taking the second cracker, he discarded the peanut butter container and squished the two crackers together, making an impromptu sandwich. Yummy. Will attacked his breakfast voraciously as both his big brother and sister watched on with odd looks upon their faces. They were up to something.

"What were you guys talking about?" Will asked through a mouth full of sticky food, watching their exchanged look of concern.

"I'm going to go outside this morning," Jack replied, running a hand through his thick brown hair and looking more serious than ever.

"Are you going to look for Mom and Dad?" Will asked excitedly, bits of food escaping his mouth.

"No, buddy. We need to go find some food and stuff. Have a look around."

"I can help get some food. I have candy in the pantry," Will said, even more excited now.

"No, pal. You gotta stay here with Sam, and protect her while I go see what's outside."

"The house is outside, duh. We already know that," Will replied.

"You're right, pumpkin, but we don't know what *else* is out there," Sam chimed in.

Thinking it over, it was a moment before Will replied. "You mean like alien monsters?"

"I don't think there will be alien monsters, but we really don't know what happened outside. It might be dangerous or scary, so I'm going to look first, and if it is safe, then maybe you and Sam can come out too. OK?"

"OK," Will agreed and turned his attention back to his food. Soon enough he would know if there were alien monsters, and with any luck he could eat some candy.

Chapter 2

The time was upon him, and Jack's nervousness quickly turned into fear and self-doubt. He needed to go outside. He knew that with a certainty unlike any other, but the fear of what might lie beyond the door frightened him. Simply opening the door could kill them if Sam's guess about poisonous air was right. He was supposed to keep them safe, not get them killed. But he had to go. He just had to.

Looking around the survival vault, he could not believe that he would ever not want to leave this place. He had spent weeks staring at the door wanting nothing more than to exit it, and now he felt secure here. Safe. They were all safe here, and he knew it, but it was time.

All five bunks in the shelter were empty, and the rows of emptied food canisters upon the shelves were more familiar to him now than even his bedroom had been just months ago. The LED lighting of the space was dim, threatening a total loss of light in the days or weeks to come, but even so he walked past the bench he had been seated on earlier, and strode to the door without so much as catching a toe. Vaguely he listened to the shuffling of feet behind him, both Sam and Will following him towards the door. He turned to meet their eyes.

"Sam, you close the door behind me as soon as I'm clear. Don't lock it, just close it quickly. Whatever you do, just keep Will inside. OK?"

"OK," she replied, with tears threatening to fall. Jack had heard her voice catch even with the short reply, and he understood her fear. It had his stomach in knots too. None of them knew what had happened outside. None knew what to expect. Jack looked down to Will.

It was strange looking at him. Sure he was only seven years old, but his face and demeanor had changed greatly in the last months. His childhood had been robbed from him, twisted, and given back a darkened nightmare within a steel cage filled with darkness, yet empty. As Will looked up to him with large eyes, Jack could still see his little brother as he had been months before, annoying and blissfully loud, but that was gone now. He still wore the striped pajamas of red, white, and blue, and fuzzy puppy slippers that he had been fond of before the vault, but aside from his outfit, Jack feared that Will's former carefree self had vanished. The child that looked up at him, grasping their sister's hand, was not holding to her in fear. No, he clung to her as if to keep *her* from harm. As if he was

her protector. The world, or lack thereof, had changed him, and it frightened Jack. Will deserved to be a child.

“Look out for your sister, and don’t let her come outside unless I come and get you. OK?”

“Yes, sir!” Will said with slight grin as he saluted with his free hand.

Knowing this could be his last chance, Jack collected them both to him and wrapped his arms around them tightly. He reminded himself that if he didn’t go, they would starve. He prayed he wasn’t condemning them to an earlier fate by his actions.

Kissing Will’s forehead, just as their father had been known to, Jack released them both and turned quickly to hide his own emotions. Lifting the cover to the keypad beside the door, he pressed the green unlock button and keyed in the six digit code. His own birthdate.

With a shudder and a hum, the LED lights of the shelter went black as a loud metal on metal clang reverberated through the structure as dust broke loose from the walls and ceiling and rained down upon them. Jack reached out in the darkness and felt for the handle upon the vault door and, giving it a tug, a hissing sound filled the air as he pressed the door outward. Little did he expect what happened next.

With unimaginable force, the door flung wide, ripping free from his grasp as he was flung bodily out from the vault, crashing into some unseen object beyond as light exploded before his eyes. Howling wind roared through the darkness as the metal door groaned on its hinges and smashed back into the outer wall of the vault over and over, before breaking free altogether and falling to the floor, its hinges having failed.

Jack scrambled to his feet, dizzy from the blow to his head, and leaned into the wind whipping all about him, as the darkness was momentarily replaced by dazzling light. It was night, not day as they had presumed. With the familiar smell of rain in the air, an image of his surroundings was temporarily etched into his vision as the light vanished, only to be replaced by peals of thunder that shook everything around him. Gone. Their home was gone, and in its place a desolate nightmare remained.

Reaching up to his head he felt the cut and warm blood near his temple and staggered back towards the vault, small arms and hands reaching out of the darkness to grasp at him and drag him within once more. It was a ruin. A wasteland.

Collapsing within the open doorway of the vault, Jack looked up with defeat in his face, his shoulders sagging as another flash of light played across the horrified faces of both Sam and Will. They had the same glimpse of outside that he did. They knew it was gone. Though none of them knew the extent of the damage, they each had had hope destroyed and it showed plainly on their faces. Seeking more information would have to wait until morning, or at least until the storm abated. Jack leaned heavily against the wall next to the now open door.

“I’ll get some bandages,” Sam half yelled over the howling storm outside before vanishing into the darkness.

Will knelt closely and looked at him with an odd stern expression on his face, seeming to be working out some inner turmoil before he spoke.

“No alien monsters is good, but I don’t think I’m gonna get my candy,” he said matter of factly.

Jack couldn’t help but smile in the light of the situation. Their shelter was no longer secure. Their home outside appeared destroyed. They had no food. Yet Will was concerned about candy he had hidden in the pantry months ago. Perhaps there was still some kid in him yet.

It was only a couple of minutes before Sam returned with a small first aid kit in hand that Jack recognized from the wall of the meager bathroom within the security vault. Jack watched her carefully open the container as she selected a small pump-style spray bottle of disinfectant which she cautiously sprayed over his cut, before wiping away both blood and the spray with a piece of sterile gauze. Just like their mother had done when he skinned his knee as a child. Sam blew softly upon the wound to ease the burning from the antiseptic spray, before opening a package of adhesive butterfly strips which she used to pull the cut closed before covering the whole thing with gauze and medical tape.

Not wanting to disrupt her work or distract her, Jack sat still in silence as she finished up, watching Will, who was watching them both in return. When Sam finished she sat back, looking at him and their little brother, before her look of concentration faded to once again be replaced by worry. Jack knew her expression was much the same as his own but now, more than ever, they needed a plan.

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Sam felt his arms squeeze around her and Will tightly, and opened her eyes in time to see Jack press his lips to Will’s head. Just like Dad did. Her eyes began to water. He was telling them goodbye. She could not, no, would not believe that this would be the end, and as such she only watched, keeping her mouth shut firmly as he turned quickly to hide his own tears that threatened to escape him. She knew he was trying to be strong for them. He was trying to do what Dad would do, and she was proud of him for it.

Listening as Jack punched in the code that would unlock the door, she gasped slightly as the lights went dark, the last of the battery reserve finally failing in an effort to release the locking mechanism. With a loud clank, she felt more than saw Jack shove the door open as a wall of air blasted her in the face causing her to close her eyes. When they opened again, Jack was gone.

Clinging to Will’s hand she dragged him to the side of the doorway, as again and again the great metal door slammed into the wall of the shelter with no sign of Jack in the darkness beyond. Cold wind howled as a flash of blinding light illuminated the portal through the wall, and she saw Jack fighting to stand as blood trickled down from his head. Beyond him, nothing but an ominous sky filled with angry clouds and lancing rain, and then it was all gone.

Flinging herself into the doorway, releasing Will’s hand to grasp at both sides of the door frame, she screamed Jack’s name into the darkness, her voice becoming lost in a thunderous boom that made her knees quiver. But she didn’t give up.

Seeking with her eyes in the darkness she noted a variance in the blackness, like a shadow moving among the dark abyss, and reached out to grab its advancing form. Grasping at Jack’s track sweatshirt, she narrowly stumbled

backwards over Will, who also sought to drag their brother in out of harm's way. Vaguely she noticed that the LEDs had illuminated once more, though scarcely so.

Once inside, Jack crumpled to the floor, whether in pain or defeat, she couldn't be sure, but noting the ragged cut on the side of his head, Sam acted without hesitation. Stating her intentions, she spun and carefully picked her way back through the dark and now deafeningly loud vault into the adjoining chamber. Once through the narrow doorway, she traced her fingers along the steel wall until she found what she sought. Pulling the small metal box from its place upon the wall, Sam returned through the wind and relative darkness to both her brothers' sides, and began tending to Jack's wound. She remembered he was always a big baby when it came to the burn of antiseptic spray and blew on it, just as Mom used to, before bandaging him up. When her task was finished they shared a look, and she knew they needed to talk. Nothing was as expected.

"Can we get this closed somehow?" Sam shouted above the howling wind outside.

Without a word Jack nodded and made to rise. Not knowing what he intended, Sam simply watched as Jack crossed the narrow room and began removing the pins that secured one of the unused bunks to the wall. A bed meant for their mom or dad. A mom or dad that it was now quite obvious wouldn't be coming for them.

Noting his intentions she rushed to help him, and together they unfastened the frame and removed it and the mattress from the wall. Dragging the bunk across the steel floor, Sam watched as Will picked up the first aid kit and moved out of the way for them. Struggling against the wind surging through the door, they hefted their makeshift barricade into place. Within minutes the mattress was covering the open doorway, and the frame was wedged into place, temporarily securing the mattress. The storm outside was little more than a muffled growl.

Sighing loudly, Sam turned to face her older brother but her gaze fell upon Will instead, and her heart broke a little at the expression on his face. Freezing mid stride, her eyes locked with Will's and for a moment it felt like the world paused around them as everything slowed into infinity. Etched there on her younger brother's features was a mix of pain, disappointment, fear, and horror. None of them had known what to expect, and all of them had come to their own conclusions as to what would lie outside their door. Even so, neither Sam nor Jack had considered Will's reaction to the devastated home outside. Prior to the security vault, their home had been the center of Will's world.

Home was where he felt safe and by extension *why* he felt safe in the vault, but now that was gone. Home was not just walls, but was Mom and Dad too, and now all three were taken from him. His world, as he knew it, was broken, and Sam could see clearly through the expression on his face the realization of his childlike perception of a world in turmoil. He was in a familiar place, yet lost. He was with those who loved him, but alone. Poor Will had just seen beyond the meager horrors of his imagination to the real horrors of the world, and was destroyed because of it. Sam did the only thing she could think of.

Like their mother would have done if she were there, she rushed to his side and scooped his small body up off the floor and into her arms, coddling him close to her chest and held him tight. That act alone triggered something within him, and his stalwart painful expression broke like the sobs that exploded from him as tears

began to run unchecked from his eyes down Sam's neck and chest. She knew in that instant that nothing would ever be the same with him. With any of them, for that matter. Mom and Dad weren't coming back, and it was up to her to do what was right for Will and teach him right from wrong. It was up to her to comfort him, and the realizations brought tears to her own eyes as she herself was once again wrapped within protecting arms as Jack came to join them. They only had each other.

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Will watched as Jack opened the big door and was nearly toppled off his feet as wind gusted through the door. The only thing that kept him on his feet was the fact he was holding Sam's hand. Leaning into the wind he blinked his eyes, realizing that Jack was already out there somewhere. Lightning flashed and he caught a glimpse of his brother not far outside the door, but Sam blocked most of the view as her grip grew immediately more firm and stance more rigid.

Again the darkness came as thunder shook the vault. Sam ushered him to the edge of the doorway hurriedly and he realized that she had screamed during the thunder, though Will hardly heard it. Instead, he focused on the image ingrained in his head, scorched there momentarily by a single flash of lightning somewhere in the distance. He had expected the house to look the same outside the vault as it had when they came in. Perhaps dusty, but the same. Outside the door would be the bookcase that hid the entrance to the vault and beyond that would be the living room with the grey leather furniture Mom liked so much. Antique hardwood floors that were great for sliding in his slippers would turn to tile at the kitchen, and spanning the length of both rooms would be a wall of giant windows where Will could look out over the city. Up here he felt like a super hero. At least he used to.

Instead of the luxury custom apartment their dad had designed, there was a great black void into nothingness. Just beyond where Jack sprawled against what appeared to be the overturned book case, was a great hole where once had been the living room. Had Jack ventured just a few steps further, he would have fallen into its depths. The wall of windows appeared to be missing and everything was dark and dirty. Then it was gone. The image fading from his vision.

Empty blackness returned and with it Jack came into the vault again, but he was bleeding. Something had got him out there in the dark. Looking to the door, Will watched for Jack's attacker and was forced to witness the destruction to their home again and again as lightning flashed somewhere in the beyond. Nothing was as he remembered it. No longer were their pictures on the wall. No longer was there a home at all. It was gone. All of it.

Will didn't know whether to be hurt or angry as the doorway was sealed closed once more with a mattress and metal bed frame, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. If it were aliens, monsters, or anything else wasn't important now. Will knew they weren't safe. Mom and Dad weren't here to take care of them. The police weren't coming like they said they would in an emergency at school when Officer David visited his class. No one was left. Nothing was left. He couldn't breathe.

Chapter 3

It had taken quite some time to get Will calmed down, and hours further until the storm quieted outside. Even then Jack hesitated more than an hour before working up the courage to open the doorway again. But the case remained the same. They couldn't stay in the vault. Especially now that Will didn't feel secure and the door was torn off. There was no helping it. They needed to find supplies and possibly a better suited place to stay. He hadn't expected the impact on Will of seeing their home destroyed. In all honesty he hadn't even considered that their home *would* be destroyed.

With a dull ringing in one ear and a mild headache, Jack rose from his bunk to see a small sliver of light shining through the doorway beneath the mattress. It was finally morning outside. Rising, he noted Sam's approach and turned to face her. Will had exhausted himself from crying earlier and had fallen asleep more than an hour before. As such, Jack barely whispered to his sister as she came nearer.

"You should really think about brushing your hair once in a while. I mean really? What will all the boys think at school?" he teased, trying to relieve the tension.

"Ha ha, dork," she said, striking a pose with her best duck face. "I still got it."

Smiling at one another, they each spent a moment in self-reflection thinking of the days when school had seemed a nuisance. Jack wished now that he could go and hang out with his friends, or even take an algebra exam. Instead, however, he focused again on his little sister and began whispering anew.

"I think I should look around before Will wakes back up, just in case."

"Ok, I'll stay near the door, but I'm not going far. I don't want Will to wake up and both of us be gone. If he panics and has an attack, there isn't anything we can do for him. We got lucky earlier."

"I know, Sam. You did really good with him. He needs you."

"He needs you too, so be careful out there. OK?"

"I will," Jack replied, before turning back towards the makeshift door.

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Stepping through the hole in the wall, where once stood the only door to their steel home, Jack found himself in a world that was both new and vaguely familiar. Angles and corners were recognizable, but to every surface mold and mildew clung, entwined with rust stains and other filth. Broken glass covered nearly every inch of the floor, and girder beams and piping jutted down from the ceiling and out of the walls where great holes and cracks devastated the structure. Where before had been their kitchen, a great hole had collapsed, taking not only the kitchen, but also half of the living room with it when it fell away. That whole corner of their apartment was obliterated, and missing altogether, Jack was able to look out through the gaping hole in the building. What he saw beyond was even more appalling.

From the thirtieth story of their building, they used to have a nice view of the Chicago skyline, but such was not the case any longer. Out from the great hole in the wall, Jack looked upon a twisted shadow of the city he remembered. Where once stood great buildings of gleaming steel and glass, now remained little more than twisted and gnarled steel skeletons, some leaning into their neighbors for support. Below them, where once communities and neighborhoods had sprawled endlessly like an ocean of rooftops, was a blackened wasteland of burnt ash and charred husks. From his vantage the entire city had been obliterated, and nothing remained but the tortured carcass of a once living and breathing metropolis. The whole scene spoke of death and desolation. There was literally nothing left. At least, not that he could see.

Looking out, he located the ruins of the school he had attended, the school where most of his classmates would have been when he was locked in the vault with his siblings. Now nothing remained of the building but blackened piles of bricks.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, he turned and traced along the side of the wall shared with the vault, wanting to see something different. Anything. Rounding the corner at the end he was surprised to find the hall to their bedrooms more or less intact. There was a wide crack up through the drywall on each side of the hall, and a girder supporting the floor above had collapsed near the end of the hall where their parents' bedroom was, but otherwise it was fairly clear of debris. Cautiously, he entered the hall.

Carefully testing each step, he worked down the passageway to the first room. Opening the door he found the bathroom almost untouched from the damage. There were two cracked tiles in the shower and the mirror above the sink was cracked as well, but otherwise only a layer of dust showed proof of months of neglect. Smiling to himself he pulled a drawer open upon the vanity and plucked from it a hairbrush for Sam. Though he wanted nothing more in that moment than to brush his teeth, even without water, he did not want to worry Sam by keeping her waiting.

Stepping cautiously back out into the hall he approached Sam's door next. Here the crack in the wall was its widest, and trying the door he found it jammed. Taking a risk, he pressed his back against the wall opposite the door and gave it one solid kick. The door exploded inwards, coming dislodged in its frame to swing wide and collide with the wall within. Again, Jack was surprised. Inside, not only was Sam's room almost flawless, but her posters still clung to the walls everywhere, and her most prized possession, her laptop, still sat open in the center of her bed as if she had just left the room. The whole thing was surreal.

Inspecting the room from the hall, he watched as the curtains blew, proving that the glass there was broken as well, before he moved on to the next room. Trying his own bedroom door he found it easy to open and swung the door wide. Here the surprising lack of damage ended, as a large section of his bedroom wall was missing where the window had once been. From the hall he could see the mangled fire escape outside, and an idea occurred to him. Crossing the room cautiously, he paused each time the broken glass crunched beneath his shoes, afraid the sound might be the floor giving way beneath him. Reaching the damaged wall, he leaned out to inspect the damage. Where before had been a row of six solar panels that

powered the vault, now only three and a half remained. Even those remaining, however, were badly cracked and damaged. Pieces of glass and a foil-like substance hung here and there from their shattered surfaces, and several wires hung out into the day air, severed from whatever connections no longer existed. Jack could not believe the vault's power had lasted this long with such extensive damage, but was thankful it had. It looked like the panels were one stiff wind away from crumbling altogether.

Leaving the ruined wall behind he turned back the way he had come, and within seconds he was moving along to the next room. Pushing this door open, he admired the large superhero cutouts that adorned the walls and the brightly colored paint. Smiling in remembrance, Jack recalled the day he painted the room with Mom before Will had been born. She had been so excited, and he had been a proud expecting brother to help. How his role had changed from that time when he was nine until now was amazing. To think that it had been more than seven years already was almost unbelievable.

Like his own room, much of the exterior wall here was missing, revealing a stout steel beam. Broken glass and other debris littered the floor, but even so, Jack carefully picked out a path through the room and collected one of Will's toys from the floor. It was dusty and dirty, but otherwise no worse for wear, and brushing it off he revealed its shine. It was what his dad called a throwback toy, some sort of transforming robot that had been popular when Dad was a kid that had resurfaced and become popular again decades later. All that mattered was the fact that Will had loved the toy, and Jack could bring it to him to have when he woke up. Turning, Jack left Will's room with an expectant grin.

At the end of the hall was one more bedroom. Standing between them was the collapsed steel girder from above, but it appeared easy enough to circumvent. The only thing in Jack's way was himself. The last time they had seen their father was just outside the vault and that thought combined with the fact that he had yet to stumble upon him, led Jack to fear that what remained of him might be in the bedroom beyond the door ahead. The thought was irrational. He knew it was more than unlikely just his imagination and fear, but he couldn't shake the feeling. But after several moments he decided that there could be something worse than finding his father's remains, and that would be Will finding them. Or no one ever knowing that their father was there. That too, Jack supposed, was a terrible thing. Closure would be better.

Edging his way around the huge steel beam, Jack approached the door to his parents' room and reached out for the knob. Giving it a quick turn he shoved the door inward but it barely budged, moving only an inch or two before stopping. As he shoved harder it gave way a couple more inches. Finally putting his shoulder to the door, Jack shoved hard with all his weight as the door and whatever lay behind it slid open with a grinding sound.

Peering beyond, it was obvious that there was no reason to go any further. Past the door was a pile of rubble several feet thick that encompassed the whole of the room. Piled in heaps of broken construction materials-- wire, drywall and lumber from the floors above had completely collapsed down upon his parents' room, obscuring everything beneath. If their father was there, they would never know it. Jack doubted there was any chance his parents were alive, especially after the

view of the city beyond, but Will could still have hope. He deserved it. And Jack wasn't about to be the one to take it away from him. Sam either, for that matter. She had said that she believed them dead, but Jack wasn't certain she really meant it.

Clutching the toy robot tighter, Jack turned and strode back the way he had come, cautiously picking his steps until he rounded the corner into what remained of the living room once again. From there he skirted what furniture remained before looking to the open doorway of the vault. Therein stood his younger sister with a beaming smile on her lips. She had been worried, he could tell, but her fears were now eased. He was glad for her and sad at the same time. Even though she felt better at his return, she would not feel better when he told her they needed to leave.

* * * * *

Samantha watched as Jack walked out of the vault, and witnessed as his expression and demeanor changed within seconds of looking out of the hole where the kitchen had once been. She needed to know what he had seen, so she waited until he left the room before sparing a glance back to assure herself that Will was still asleep, and stepped out into the apartment herself. What she saw there made her physically sick to her stomach. Had it not been more than half a day since she had eaten, she likely would have retched, but instead a knot formed in her stomach as tears fell freely from her eyes for what seemed like the millionth time that day.

Out ahead where once the city's skyline had been magnificent, especially at sunset, now remained only disfigured and crippled fixtures of wilted and twisted steel that reached to the heavens like the fingers of arthritic hands in prayer. Beneath them, the piles of ash and tinder that were once homes blended with the asphalt roads and parking lots. Like the night before, the day down below was nothing but empty blackness. In the months that they hid away in the vault, the world around them had burned. The scene reminded her of the book report she had done on Hiroshima at the beginning of the school year. She wondered if they were being poisoned by radiation this very moment.

Hearing a sound from somewhere behind her, Sam returned to the vault after wiping away her tears. Finding Will still asleep, she returned to the doorway and waited patiently, listening for any sound that could mean that Jack was returning. She didn't wait long.

Maybe fifteen minutes after she returned to their shelter, Jack appeared once more, a gaudily colored robot toy in his clutches, and she couldn't help but smile at his thoughtfulness. Before the event she had doubted that he cared about her or Will at all, he was so busy with track and his friends, but now she had no doubts. Beaming at him, she was again surprised as he pulled out a much needed and all too familiar item from his back pocket that caused the corners of her mouth to rise to the point they actually hurt.

"You know you're awesome right now, right?"

"Right now?" Jack replied. "I'm always awesome, just you're too dorky to see it."

"Whatever, you're still the hero of my vanity, like for reals," Sam said, taking on the best valley girl voice she could manage.

“If you say so, dork. But you’re welcome.”

“And I’m pretty. Tell me I’m pretty, Jack. Like you used to when I was little,” she mocked.

“Pretty weird.”

It felt good to joke as Sam began to pull the brush through the insane tangles in her hair. A good wash and conditioning would go a really long ways, but for now this would have to do.

* * * * *

Blinking the sleep from his eyes, Will rolled to his side to find himself in Sam’s bunk, with the open door of the vault straight across from him. As usual, Sam and Jack were whispering just outside the door. Rolling further towards the edge of the bunk, he stopped abruptly when something hard dug into his side. Reaching down he dislodged the hard angular object and pulled it free from his sheet and blanket. His heart leapt into his throat.

Down to every detailed sticker he inspected the robot, his eyes and mouth wide in disbelief. Sam walked in, and then Jack too, but Will barely noticed as he turned the toy over and over in his hands. Bending the robots joints and posing him as if he’d just won a wrestling match with both arms up in the air, Sam’s giggle caught his attention as he looked up from his toy.

Looking back at him, both Jack and Sam were smiling. Their eyes hinted at real happiness, something he hadn’t seen in a while, though they both faked it for him almost daily. No, today it was real. Will hoped there was more good news.

“Hi, guys,” Will greeted his older siblings.

“Hey, little man,” Jack responded. “I thought you might like that,” he added, gesturing to the toy.

“Hey, Sam. You got your hair fixed!” Will almost shouted, having almost forgotten what she looked like with her long black hair when it was silky and smooth.

“I sure did. You got your robot and I got a brush.”

“What did you get, Jack?”

It almost felt like Christmas, the change so drastic from the day before, he couldn’t help but feel giddy inside.

“I got to see you and Sam smile, buddy. That’s enough for me.”

“If you say so, Jack.”

The change then was palpable, as Jack and Sam both came closer and sat to either side of him on the bunk. Their smiles faded to the fake ones he had become familiar with, and they both looked at him expectantly as if he would turn into a puppy at any minute.

“Will, we have to leave the vault and the apartment,” Jack said

“Are we going to look for Mom and Dad?” he asked after a moment of contemplation.

“Not yet, buddy. We need to find a safer place to stay.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know, pal. I thought we might head out of the city. Maybe to Grandma’s.”

“Grandma’s would be good, wouldn’t it, Will?” Sam asked.

“OK. Can I take my robot?”

“You sure can. And we need to scavenge whatever else we can too. Do you know what scavenge means?” Jack asked.

“Like a scavenger hunt?”

“Exactly,” Sam said with a real smile.

“We’ll have to be careful. The house is a real mess, but we’ll get some clothes and whatever else we can find and look for a way outside.”

“OK, Jack.”

“But first we need to take what we can from here,” Jack concluded as he rose.

Will watched as Jack reached out his hand and pulled Sam to her feet, before she turned around as well and helped him out of bed. He knew just what he wanted to take with him.

Chapter 4

While he and Sam moved about the confined vault, collecting what items they thought necessary, Jack found his mind wandering back to the scene of the devastated city outside. Everything had been burned, but by what? Had they been attacked by another country? Bombed? Could it have been a meteor or solar flare? Had something biological happened to the people and the city simply burned in their absence? They literally knew nothing of what had happened over the last six months or more. Nothing. The whole world was an unknown now, and the ‘what ifs’ were astounding.

He didn’t know whether they would be able to find people, and if they did, if they could trust them. There was no way of knowing if this was an isolated incident or more widespread. Was the whole U.S. destroyed? The world? It was his job to keep Sam and Will safe, but he didn’t even know what safe meant anymore. They would have to be cautious. They couldn’t trust anything or anyone. Dad had always told him to make an effort to learn about something before making his own decisions, not to simply believe what he was told. Jack felt that more than ever, his dad’s words applied now.

So absent mindedly going about his task, he paused a moment to look down into the pillowcase in his hands. Thus far he had collected a can opener, a pair of screwdrivers, a hammer, and a set of camping silverware for each of them, along with the other camping cooking supplies they had to include a frying pan and camp stove with half a bottle of propane. It wasn’t much, but would allow them to cook a meal if they found something to eat. Hunting would have been an option if Chicago’s gun laws hadn’t gotten so strict over the past years that it basically stripped guns from law abiding citizens, leaving only the criminals and police armed. The crime rate had gotten terrible back then, and that was when his dad had the vault built. If only their dad had been able to keep one of his guns. Jack had shot his dad’s rifle before and wished he had it now, but no such luck. They would have to scavenge for food until he came up with something better.

Turning, he witnessed as Will stripped the pillowcase from his own pillow and stuffed his toy robot inside along with a deck of playing cards. It was amusing how different his own priorities were from his younger brother's.

"Hey, Sam, what did you find?" Jack asked across the security vault.

"I got the first aid kit and a couple books of matches from old MREs. Toilet paper too, cause I'm not making the mistake of using leaves again," she joked, referencing a camping trip two years ago when she got poison ivy all up her backside.

"Didn't like the nickname Scratchy, huh?"

To this all three laughed, before turning more serious once more.

"I think we should go get some clothes from our rooms and good shoes or boots too. If you can find a backpack or duffel bag, grab it too. That way we can free up our hands," Jack instructed.

"Sounds good. I'll take Will to his room after I get my stuff. OK?" Sam inquired.

"Yeah, that's good. Let's get moving, we don't want to be out in the open at night, especially if another storm comes. After we get our stuff we are going to have to look for a way downstairs, our door and the fire escape are destroyed."

Both Sam and Will nodded their understanding, and all three stepped out into the apartment together.

Leading the way, Jack paused as both Sam and Will ducked into Sam's room, and he heard when she spotted her laptop and gasped excitedly. Shaking his head, knowing that it was unlikely the device still worked let alone not knowing if an internet even existed anymore, he retraced his steps back to the bathroom, assured that his siblings were safe.

Entering the small room, Jack carefully pulled the medicine cabinet open as shards of the attached mirror rained down into the sink with a symphony of shattering glass. Once it was open he sifted through the contents and collected what he considered the necessities. A bottle of Tylenol, some cough drops, and most importantly, one of Will's inhalers were added to his makeshift pack as he began pulling the drawers on the vanity open one by one.

Digging through the contents of the drawers he added a pair of tweezers in case one of them got a splinter. He knew the simplest infection now could be fatal. Other than that, however, the only things he added were a pair of scissors, dental floss, and some unopened tooth brushes and tooth paste, along with a couple bars of antibacterial soap. Nothing more, nothing less.

Leaving the bathroom behind, he witnessed as Sam and Will vanished into Will's bedroom, nearest the one that used to belong to their parents. He was impressed. He had expected to have to remind them to hurry. Ducking into his own room, he regarded the devastation briefly once more before yanking the closet door open wide. Quickly selecting a pair of jeans and hiking boots, he changed his clothes and grabbed a handful of assorted garments before rummaging around on the shelf above his head. Finding last year's backpack, he pulled the zipper open and stuffed in the clothes he had gathered inside, before dumping the contents of his pillow case in as well. Rising, he looked about once more at all the items in his closet and room that had meant so much to him before the event, but now they were just things he was discarding in order to keep his family alive. Stuff was no longer important.

Turning towards the door, his heart stopped as a pair of blood curdling screams arose in the hall as the building began to shudder beneath him.

* * * * *

Guiding Will by the hand, Sam stepped into her room for the first time in what felt like an eternity. Here and there upon the walls were posters of her favorite punk bands and dub step icons. On the bed her laptop sat, still opened, just as she had left it when called to the living room by Dad so many months ago. She had been in the middle of writing Mom an email when it happened, but she couldn't focus on the past now. Jack said they were leaving and needed to go. She couldn't dwell on such things, and as such she scanned around her room once more.

Dolls with X'd out eyes littered the floor, and dark makeup lay scattered about the carpet around her dresser in shades of crimson, purple, and black. They weren't important nor vital, but just looking at the small containers, compacts, and vials made her feel more normal, and as such she kneeled for a brief second and collected a handful of beauty products for later use, which she deposited in her pocket.

Turning her attention to her closet, she kicked off her more or less decorative wedge Nikes and pulled out a pair of more rugged looking leather knee boots. God, how she hoped they wouldn't have to run. Unable to change with Will wandering about her room, she selected various garments from both her closet and dresser, depositing them on the bed before digging beneath it in search of a bag.

It took just seconds to locate the black, single strap, backpack that was more an accessory than proper pack, but nonetheless, it was what she had. Looking more like a twisted version of a Raggedy Ann doll, she unzipped the black and white thing's face and stuffed her clothes quite literally down its throat before zipping it closed once more.

"Now listen, Will," she said, gaining his attention. "You're going to turn around like a little gentleman while I change really fast and then we can go get your stuff. Alright?"

"OK," he said, already turning his back.

"No peeking either," she added.

"Eww, gross. Like I wanna see your big ole butt anyway."

Ignoring his insult, she stripped off her disgustingly soiled clothing and pulled on a pair of black leggings. Over her head she yanked a plain black form-fitting tee with parallel tears up both sides, before adding a zipper covered hoodie with a barbed wire pattern that crisscrossed all over it. Next she added a pair of jeans her mom called atrocious, due to all the tears and patches, before pulling on her knee-high boots and lacing them up. That done, she collected Will once more, and began pulling him into the hall behind her, veering once again through another doorway, this time into his room.

"Listen here, pal," Sam began, "We need to be quick so no digging through your toy boxes for half an hour. You get a couple small toys and I'll get you some clothes. Got it?"

"Yup," Will replied, and grinning he spun and went to work, searching for the possessions he prized the most.

Turning her attention to gathering his clothing, Sam went straight to his dresser and began pulling out articles that would be both comfortable and durable, consisting of mostly jeans and tees with a sweat suit for him to slip into now.

"Here put these on," she said, gaining his attention before holding them out to him.

"You better not peek either," Will said.

"Duh."

It was a moment later when Will spoke again, the mischievousness more than evident in his voice.

"OK, I'm done," he said, barely containing a giggle.

Not knowing what he had done, Sam turned to see the stark white of his tight-whities aimed directly at her as he busted out laughing.

"Pull up your pants, you gross little twerp," she spat as he yanked his pants upwards before turning to confront her.

"What you doing, looking at my butt?" A smile split his small face.

"That's enough, Will. Ha ha. You got me. Now where is your book-bag?"

Sam watched as Will looked around halfheartedly before his eyes settled upon her once more.

"It should have been on my doorknob, but it's not," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Good enough, pumpkin. Then I guess we'll just have to do without."

Reaching out for his hand once more she waited as he stooped down to collect the toys he had gathered, and taking his hand she left the room with him in one hand and his clothes packed under her other arm. They were halfway down the hall when Will paused and turned back the way they had come.

"There it is!" he said excitedly as he released her hand.

Turning, Sam watched as Will dashed back down the hall to where a giant steel girder protruded down from what was once the ceiling above. Beneath it, where its jagged tip rested upon the floor of their apartment, was his small school bag. She took a breath to warn him away from it, but it was too late, as he slid to a stop and in one motion he ducked down grasping at the colored canvas of the bag before giving it a single yank. Then the building around them seemed to groan as a nightmare sprang to life right before Sam's eyes. As her heart hammered in her chest, her breath caught in her lungs, holding for just an instant the scream that raged within her.

* * * * *

Though he had already passed the thing, Will suddenly realized what it was that he had seen down the hall. Turning, he released Sam's hand and ran back towards his room. It had been there the whole time, but covered in dust, he just now realized it. Bending down, he grabbed at the strap of his bag and feeling it resist, he pulled with all the might his little body could muster. Like a feat one of the super heroes upon his wall might do to save a damsel in distress, he dragged the backpack free from beneath the iron girder that began to slide towards him.

As the girder moved, it dug into the floor below with a loud cracking sound and the building groaned and screeched around them. Turning to run, Will lost his footing as the floor vanished beneath him as dust exploded into the air.

Plummeting down, something hit him hard, making his ears ring as his scream of pain matched Sam's scream of panic from above.

Hitting a solid base somewhere below, the air was knocked from his lungs as he peered up through the dust to see the girder falling above him. Down and down the giant piece of steel came tumbling in what appeared to be slow motion, but no matter how much time it seemed he had, Will could not get his arms or legs to do what he wanted as the breath seemed to catch in his chest. Not now. He couldn't have an attack now.

Down the girder came, wrapping itself in wires as it tumbled, but they did not seem to slow its descent. One jagged end of the girder slammed to the floor to Will's left, the building jolting again with a groan as the girder leaned precariously over him, threatening to topple. And it did.

Tipping as gravity forced its will on the giant steel beam, it fell, the electrical wires around it becoming taut and catching it, holding it fast. His heart hammered, but his chest relaxed. Will took a breath. Pulling himself back to his feet, he looked himself over. He had scratches and scrapes here and there, but otherwise seemed OK. If he cried over the scratches he would get attention for sure, but he wasn't a baby anymore.

Scrunching up his face, he dusted himself off and turned to look back up to the floor above when something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. Though dust filled the air making it hard enough to breath let alone see, he swore that something moved at the opposite end of the room from him. Leaning forward and peering into his dust-filled surroundings he watched, ignoring the shouts from above. And there it was again. Like a shadow in the dust he could see it move as if on all fours, slinking away from him awkwardly. Though it moved differently to any animal he had ever seen, and was nearly indistinguishable, it was there nonetheless. Then, just as he had seen it, it was gone around a corner.

Blinking his eyes several times, he looked again and watched patiently but saw nothing of note even as the dust began to settle. Shaking his head, he cleared it of fanciful alien monsters and turned his attention to the shouts from above.

"Will! Will! Can you hear me, buddy?" Jack shouted.

"C'mon, baby, please answer," Sam yelled from above.

"Yeah, I'm OK," Will shouted back. "And I'm not a baby."

There was silence for a second and he was sure he heard Sam sob loudly, but within little more than a few seconds their calls began anew.

"Are you hurt?" Jack shouted.

"You OK?" Sam said at the same time.

"Yes I'm OK," he replied, and looked around him as he noticed his backpack just feet away. "I got my backpack too!"

"That's good, buddy. Just stay where you are."

Though he still couldn't see them with the thick cloud of dust raining down from above, he looked up at the girder that stretched from the floor nearly up to the ceiling above. Against the advice of his brother, he tested his weight on the girder, and the wires suspending the higher end of the thing seemed to hold. Snatching up his backpack and the toys he dropped in the plunge, he prepared to climb.

"Did you hear me?" Jack shouted.

“Yeah, I’m right here,” Will replied with a smile, topping the girder to look his older siblings in the face. “And guess what?”

“What?” Sam asked, her face torn between tears and a smile.

“I found a way down,” he said grinning.

Chapter 5

Helping Will from atop the steel girder, Jack sighed loudly before taking a deep breath to calm himself before talking.

“Let’s just get our stuff and get out of here, like yesterday.”

“Agreed,” Sam said.

Within minutes they had Will’s stuff all packed up into his backpack and were ready to descend. Wanting to test the girder’s ability to hold their weight, Jack went first to assure himself that Sam would be safe. Sitting upon the edge of the hole ripped through their caved-in floor, he placed his feet on the girder and carefully shifted his weight onto it. Though it swayed slightly upon the wires that suspended it, it seemed to hold. Reaching out to grab the wires for balance, he moved all of his weight to the beam and began to half climb, half slide down its steep surface.

Once at the bottom he watched as Sam dropped all three of their bags, which he caught one by one before placing them out of the way. Next it was Will’s turn. Looking up and blinking as dust fell into his face, he watched as Sam helped Will to step across the gap and onto the beam. Sitting down, Will shuffled down the steel like some sort of caterpillar, moving his feet, then sliding his bottom, before repositioning his hands and repeating. It was slow, but he made it down without mishap and once he was low enough Jack lifted him off the girder and lowered him to the floor.

“You OK?”

“Yup,” Will replied with a nod.

Next came Sam, as she reached out with a toe to begin transferring her weight as well. The girder swayed, causing her to shift uneasily as she made the transition from floor to angular steel, but she maintained her balance after squeaking oddly and, sitting, she duplicated Will’s method nearly perfectly.

Taking her hand to help her off the girder, Jack turned to look upon their surroundings for the first time, to discover an apartment he had never been in before.

Here and there cracks split the walls, as doors hung crookedly in their jambs. The floor was buckled in places and like above, the northern corner of the apartment was missing altogether. Shards of glass lay scattered everywhere, making some surfaces dangerous to cross as the pieces slid easily beneath their feet. Though much below was the same as above, this apartment had a totally different floor plan. Where the kitchen had been in their home, Jack guessed a bedroom or two had been ripped away when the corner of the building had collapsed. It only took them seconds to find their way into the still largely complete kitchen and begin digging through the already open cabinets.

Looking across the island in the center of the kitchen, Jack watched as Sam stood upon her toes, looking into the cabinets above as Will clawed his way like a rampaging puppy through those below. Assured that they would find any and all available food, he began searching through drawers, digging and discarding anything he did not need. On the third drawer he found what he was looking for. It was not ideal. The blade was narrow and flimsy, designed for filleting fish, but it had a case to protect him from accidental injury. Unfastening his belt, he threaded it through the knife's case before buckling it once more. Satisfied, he turned his attention back to his siblings to see what they had discovered, only to find a pair of disheartened faces staring back at him.

Will was totally and completely empty handed, and Sam held up a can of beanless chili and a small jar of spaghetti sauce. Hardly what they had hoped for. And then it struck him. If the city had been destroyed almost instantly, then likely the people that lived here would have had more in their cupboards than this. Wouldn't they? But the cabinets had already been open. Someone had already gone through them. Another scavenger? If it had been, then that meant that after the event, but before now, there had been a way up to this floor. He already knew the area that led to the corner of the building where the stairs and elevator were missing. Back-tracking through the apartment to where the fire escape should be, Jack stuffed his head out of the curtains, careful not to brush against any of the broken glass that still clung to the window frame. Sure enough, the fire escape was still usable here. Looking down, it appeared it still spanned several floors before damage again made it inaccessible below. Jack pulled his head back in the window.

"Bag it and let's look down below," he said to his siblings, before sticking a leg out the window.

Pulling himself outside, he stood and looked across at the neighboring building. It was burned, nearly in entirety, its empty windows staring back at him like the empty eye sockets of a skull. Shuddering at the thought, he turned to lift Will through the broken window before helping Sam as well. Cautiously they began to climb down the rusted stairs.

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Following Jack down the fire escape with Will in between them, Sam watched as Jack disappeared into the window on the next floor. After a moment to look around, he returned and she helped Will climb through into their brother's waiting arms before she too carefully passed through the shattered maw of glass and metal. Once inside they were forced to circumvent half of the apartment, only to double back through a broken wall in order to find yet another kitchen. A quick search revealed only a can of tomato paste and three boxes of corn muffin mix, all of which they bagged up before leaving.

Down another floor they climbed before repeating the process for no food at all, and then back to the fire escape again to descend yet another floor. Here the fire escape ended, as for several floors below it had fallen away, taking some of the brick siding of the building with it. They would have to find another way down.

Once inside what was left of this apartment, it was readily apparent that they would not have any luck seeking food here. With a near identical floor plan as

their own, minus the security vault, the area where the kitchen should have been had collapsed into the floor below. No longer was that particular corner of the building missing, however, and as such she wondered if they could make their way to the building's staircase. Much of the apartment here was charred, showing proof of the fire that nearly claimed it from below.

"Do you think we can get to the stairs?" she asked Jack.

"I was wondering that too. I don't think we can on this floor, but it looks like we might be able below."

Looking down, she saw what he meant. The collapse of the kitchen here had piled lots of debris in front of the exit door in the apartment below. Wind blew up through the void in the floor and the musty scent of an old fire filled it as it swirled about them. Looking around, she saw no way to climb down in the room beneath them, and held fast to Will to be certain he stayed away from the edge. Looking to her older brother, she could tell he was trying to work out the same problem without any luck.

Feeling her hand tug several times, she looked down to see Will testing the floor by bouncing up and down. Though it did seem to move with his motions it held, thankfully, and she gave him a pair of eyes that quickly stopped his actions. And then it hit her.

Looking up, not down, she found the answer to their problem. In the previous floor there were several bedrooms surrounding a great void that went two floors up. In the floor above that was the same. In those rooms were mattresses that could easily be tossed down through the floors which they could then use to drop down onto without injury. It was genius! Though she wouldn't mention that it was Will's bouncing that gave her the idea.

Explaining her plan, it was less than an hour later when they stood in the same spot looking down upon a mound of various mattresses sprawled throughout the kitchen below. Again it was Jack who went first and Sam watched, holding her hair back tight with both hands, nervous beyond belief.

Sitting himself on the edge of the hole, Jack used his hands and pushed himself off the edge to plummet down several feet before landing atop the mound and half rolling, half bouncing to the bottom. Standing with a wicked grin, he gave a thumbs up and quickly made some adjustments to the mattresses. There was no guiding Will this time. As soon as he saw that Jack was done making adjustments, over the edge he leapt to land upon his back below giggling and laughing as if it were an amusement park. Next it was Sam's turn.

Tossing down their bags, she looked over the edge nervously, picking out the spot she wanted to hit. Taking a step back to ease her nerves, she closed her eyes and hopped over the edge in a seated position, hoping to land on her bottom. Unfortunately she overshot her mark.

Hitting the mattress below, her eyes popped open as she bounced forward, not up as Will had done, and rocketed into Jack's legs who toppled over her. In a mass of twisted arms and legs Sam fought to disentangle herself from Jack when Will, thinking it good fun, jumped atop them both yelling "Weeee!", as he tackled them. Sam wanted to berate him for it, but was simply happy he was being a kid. He hadn't mentioned Mom or Dad a single time since they began this little journey, and she was glad his expectations had not been destroyed.

Finally free after a short bout of tickling Will, Sam climbed to her feet as Jack shoved their little brother, who fell backwards to bounce upon the mattresses once again with a squeal of delight. Then it was back to business. As Jack crossed the room to inspect the door and clear what debris he could, Sam took to the cupboards, to be quickly joined by Will. Pulling open one small wooden door after another, it was obvious that once again they wouldn't be finding much in the way of food. Even so she was sure to look thoroughly, locating two cans of mixed vegetables. Once the cupboards were exhausted, Sam looked to Jack as he pried the door open for what must have been the twentieth time. Apparently having better success than on previous attempts, he shouted in victory as he kicked a wide piece of wood into the doorway to hold the door open before plunging his head through.

Rustling Will's straw colored hair, she motioned towards the door and together they joined their older brother expectantly.

"How does it look?" Sam asked.

"From here it looks good. We'll just have to see how far it will take us," Jack replied.

"Do you think we'll find a good spot to stop for lunch?" Will asked with wide eyes.

"We'll try, little man, but let's get outside first," Jack said.

With that they each took turns ducking through the door and climbed atop the debris outside. From the door they had a fairly unobstructed view of the stairwell which circled the elevator shaft all the way to the ground floor. From the apartment door it looked accessible and structurally intact, and nearing it, Sam's opinion didn't change.

Though the old subway tiled walls surrounding the stairwell were cracked, and the steps were littered with broken tiles, dust and other small debris, it appeared that at least the first flight down to the floor below was fine. She hoped they would have it easy from here on out.

* * * * *

For the first few flights of stairs, Will bounced down with both feet until he realized that the stairs just kept going and going. Stairs sucked big time. In all his years he could never remember having taken the stairs. Mom usually took him down the elevator, and Dad always said he didn't have time to take the stairs. Now Will could see why. What a pain in the butt!

Floor after floor they climbed down, but after the first two there was nothing really to look at. Once they reached each new floor, all they could see was the steel beams of the building and dangling wires with bits and pieces of floor or wall here and there. Everything was charred black and every surface, even the stairs, was coated with a thick black, almost slimy residue that reminded Will of his water color paints for some reason. The whole place stunk like Will's track bag, but overall they didn't run into any major obstacles.

Nearing the ground floor of the building, there was a section of the steel and concrete stairs that had fallen away that they had to jump to cross. Then one full rotation down the staircase they were forced to climb over the broken pieces of stair that had fallen from above.

Finally reaching the ground floor, they passed what was left of the wall of metal mail boxes and stepped right through the still closed, glass front doors of the building.

Outside was even worse than inside, and Will shivered at the sight. He used to walk this road every morning with either Mom or Dad to catch the bus to school at the corner, but now it was almost unrecognizable. Glass from the buildings surrounding them covered the sidewalk and street and everything in between, in a glittering and shimmering layer of jagged edges. The trees planted at regular intervals along the road were nothing more than gnarled, charred posts rising up from blackened earth. And cars littered the streets and sidewalks at random, burned to useless lumps, the metal and plastic of their structures having crumpled and melted under whatever heat had burned them.

Everything in all directions was laid bare and burnt black. It was colorless. Lifeless. Nothing and no one moved upon the street. No cars passed or honked in the distance. There weren't even any pigeons. It was silent. Too silent. A shiver ran up Will's spine and his breathing felt labored. It was the scariest thing he had ever seen, and they intended to walk through it.

Chapter 6

With every step the glass crunched beneath their feet as Jack led the way down the road. All around him evidence of destruction set his mind on edge as questions paraded through his brain that he did not have the answers for. Where had the people gone? There were no bodies, no bones. The cars crashed into the sides of buildings were empty too. The only proof they had existed were the crumbling buildings and streets around them. Beyond that, what had caused all the glass in all the buildings to shatter?

Everywhere he looked there was broken glass. The lamp posts along the streets no longer had decorative bowls covering the bulbs. Even the bulbs were broken. Had it been the heat from the fire or whatever it was that had burned the city? Not a single building they passed had a single pane of glass remaining in any of the windows. All glass was broken. Every. Single. Pane. How was that possible? Explosion? Heat? Shockwave of some sort? Jack had no idea. He wished he had paid more attention in science class.

Moving along the street, he focused primarily on the main question that kept him in a constant state of wonder. In all the kitchens they had scavenged through, the food was all but gone. If everyone had been lost at once, their food would remain. This led him to believe that there were, if not now, then at some point shortly after the event, other survivors in the city who scavenged the food. But where were they? Had they moved on, striking out from the city like Jack planned to do with his siblings? Had something else happened to them? Perhaps as a result of whatever primary event had taken place here? Was it safe to be in the city now, or were there some lingering biological or radiological hazards that would slowly drag them to the same death that had overtaken the city? He hated the

unknowns. More than that, he hated that the whole world was now an unknown. All they could do was keep moving.

Though he had never paid much attention to the street signs, he knew the way to Grandma's well enough without them. Good thing too, as most of them were either black or missing altogether. He knew, however, that they continued heading south until they passed under the interstate. Then he needed to go right until they crossed the low bridge, before taking the next left and following it two streets before Grandma's road. It was a long way to walk, though he didn't dare guess how many miles, he supposed it would take the whole day and most of the night to get there. Sad when it only took about an hour by car.

Mile after endless mile they walked until they found the remains of a small roadside diner. It was hardly recognizable, but the cast iron tables and stools cemented into the patio remained seemingly untouched, minus the fact that any paint that had graced their surfaces in the past had burned away. Guiding his siblings to take a seat, he rummaged through their supplies, pulling out the small camping stove, cookware, their can of chili, and a box of the corn muffin mix. It was experiment time.

Turning the knob and pressing the small red button the camp stove burst to life with a circular ring of flames atop which he sat the small folding pot. Digging out the can opener he had retrieved from the vault, he opened the chili and poured it into the pan. Hitting the already hot metal of the pan the chili sizzled, and the sound accompanied by its scent made his mouth water uncontrollably. Looking at both Will and Sam he could see it was having the same effect on them.

Scraping every bit of chili from the can he watched as it warmed, stirring it occasionally. The hotter it got the thinner it became, and just before it began to bubble he poured a little blue box of dry muffin mix into the pot and stirred it in. Waiting just a few seconds, he turned off the stove and handed Will and Sam each a spoon. Watching them both eagerly dig into the steaming pot, he hesitated to take his first bite, letting them be his guinea pigs. Not that he wouldn't eat if they hated it. Of course he would. He was starving.

Jack watched as Will's eyes widened, taking his first bite, as the corners of his mouth turned upwards.

"Mmm," Will said, with both the spoon and food still in his mouth. "It's yummy!"

"It really is," Samantha added with a grin of her own.

He couldn't wait any longer, and digging in with his own spoon he hefted a heaping spoonful of the steaming brown, thick substance into his mouth and closed his eyes to savor the moment. It had been more than two months since they had eaten a hot meal. It probably could have been a can of dog or cat food and would have tasted amazing, but nonetheless, something so simple as this was spectacular.

* * * * *

Sam blissfully ate her fill of Jack's dinner, and sat back as Will stuffed himself. Helping Jack put their supplies back in their packs, they sat and watched as Will polished off what was left of the dinner, both of them grinning at his progress.

"Do you think Grandma's house is still there?" Sam asked Jack.

“I don’t know. I was hoping we might have a better idea when we get out of the city. You know, see if all this...” he paused to gesture at the destroyed buildings around them, “...continues on outside the city,” he concluded.

“If it does,” Will began unexpectedly, “Maybe Grandma’s root cellar is still OK.”

“You’re a tiny little genius, Will,” Sam said. “I bet it’s still stuffed with canned goodies either way.

Rising from her seat, Sam collected Will’s spoon and the pot. Unable to clean any of their dishes, she wrapped them up in one of her shirts and placed them in Jack’s backpack. Rising after their meal, though all any of them wanted to do was take a nap, they took back to the street headed further and further from what had once been their home.

Walking along the scorched asphalt, Sam noted that the primarily residential areas had changed to that of small shops and strip malls, not that it really mattered. Here, just as before, the buildings were naught but empty half collapsed shells of their former selves, with bones of iron and steel jutting out from the rubble. She passed the buildings wondering about the people who had owned them or worked in them, and what had become of them. Had they had families? Were they all gone, or did they leave some behind as did her own family? Had they died or fled whatever hell had befallen Chicago? The mounting questions forced her to turn her imagination elsewhere, though it did her little good.

Looking down to Will, who marched along holding both her and Jack’s hands, she watched his little face as they traversed the street. Here his eyes would widen and there his face would scrunch up in thought. From time to time his little head would dart this way or that, seeking out something caught by his peripheral vision as he squinted into the distance. Watching her younger brother, Sam could not help but think of the future. Though she would certainly play the role if she needed to, would she have to act as a surrogate mother for him forever? Were their parents out there somewhere? Was anyone out there? Would she ever actually be a mother?

She realized that at fourteen she really shouldn’t be concerned with motherhood, but the situation demanded it. In the months spent in the vault it had been up to her and Jack to take care of Will, and it appeared now that the current state of things was not yet about to change. Not a single sign of life within the city had yet to reveal itself to them. No sounds came from distant streets. No flags waved from the shattered carcass of a building. No bright signs or arrows were painted saying that civilization still existed, and as such she had to believe that at least in this place, it did not. It was a sad and somber reality to dwell upon, but it seemed it was the only reality they had.

* * * * *

Not realizing how much time passed as she daydreamed on in wonder about their world and lives within it, Sam was caught off guard by both the failing light and Jack’s voice when he suddenly spoke.

“We need to find a place to stop for the night. Not only is it dangerous to walk in the dark, but Will needs a few hours of sleep, at least, and we don’t know what else might be out there.”

“What do you have in mind?” Sam asked.

“I’m not sure. We are apparently the only thing that survived this long after whatever happened, and we did it in a metal box. Perhaps we should look for something similar to the vault.”

“Like a bank?” Will asked excitedly.

“Maybe, little man,” Jack answered.

They began moving more quickly up the street then, peering down side streets, seeking a place to shelter the night but never did a bank present itself. Just before dark, it occurred to Sam that they had missed the obvious.

“What about a big refrigerator like in a gas station?” she asked.

“Holy crap,” Jack answered. “We’ve passed like six already.”

“Yeah but look, there are three more up on the corner ahead,” Sam said, pointing.

Approaching the corner they looked at the abysmal buildings and their melted and charred canopies and store fronts, choosing the one that appeared the least damaged, though the difference was marginal at best. Entering the building, they found it much as they expected. The steel shelves were both burned and bare and from the ceiling wires dangled here and there, the familiar tiles of the grid-like ceiling having burned months before. Walking straight to the door nearest the back of the store, both Jack and Sam peeked through it to discover exactly what they sought.

Aside from the cooler that once was exposed to all the now shattered glass doors where product could be removed by customers, there was another cooler in the back of the building. It was charred black on the outside, and looked to be less than half the size that the vault had been, but it would certainly suffice for a single night. Opening the door they glanced in to the near absolute darkness to see what might await them, each of them hopeful.

* * * * *

Walking into a pitch black metal box where anything might lurk was not Will’s idea of a good time. Even from the door the room looked frightening, at least what little he could see between his brother’s and sister’s legs. No way was he going in there without a light. Fortunately for him, he had one.

Taking off his backpack he yanked the zipper open and began digging. Spilling out his robot and various other things both he and Sam had put in the bag, he found what he had been looking for and yanked it free from the bag. Grandpa had been a sheriff for the Chicago metro police department before he retired, and had given Will this gift for Christmas last year. It was one of the coolest gifts ever, and even now Will marveled at it, sure the creator of such a thing had to be a genius.

Touting both an AM and FM radio, the emergency light did not need batteries. He could shake it for a minute or two and then turn it on. It had a flashlight, and even a lantern setting, but cooler than that, it had its own police lights and siren. Flipping the switches to the desired position, Will took the multifunction gadget in both hands and began shaking it vigorously as the flashlight LED began to glow brighter and brighter.

With his whole body moving with the action, Will watched as both Sam and Jack turned, their faces lighting up just as fast as the light in his hands. Smiling in return, and figuring his light would last at least a couple minutes, Will turned

his light into the darkness of the cooler ahead of him. Inside, strewn about like so much unwanted trash, were wire shelves and empty cardboard boxes. Cardboard. Inside the cooler hadn't been burned. Hearing both his siblings gasp at the same time he did, he knew they all realized the implications as each of them surged forward into the room and began digging through the boxes, hoping to find something to eat or drink. It was evident rather quickly that their search was bound to be fruitless.

"Well, at least we still have a good spot to sleep," Sam said, sighing loudly.

"And light to see by," added Jack. "Good job, little buddy."

"Thanks," Will replied with a wide grin.

Turning his attention back towards the door, Will gathered up his discarded bag and spilled the contents while both Jack and Sam stacked and tore apart boxes to make three little beds out of them. It took only a few moments, and Will waited patiently in the doorway.

Coming to his side, Jack inspected the door's handle before turning to look around the room once more. Will began shaking the light again. Watching his older brother look about the small chamber, he saw as Jack dug through a pile of dismantled shelves in the back and produced a pair of the poles that made the corner supports of the shelving units. Carrying them to the door, he lowered both and shoved one end of both poles up under the door's handle.

"Can you hold this, Will?"

"Yup," Will said, happy to be able to help his big brother.

"Here, Sam, help me move this," Jack then instructed their sister.

Setting down the light, Will grabbed both poles with his small hands to find they were much heavier than he had anticipated. Straining under the weight, he watched as Jack and Sam began shoving one of the tall shelving units nearest the doorway, towards him. Will saw movement beneath the shelf, and with a sudden intake of breath he dropped the poles to clatter upon the floor.

There, beneath the shelf, was an amazing, beautiful, and wonderful thing to behold, and rushing forward as Jack and Sam both stopped what they were doing to watch him, he slid to a stop on his knees and gathered up the shiny bottles of pop that had been hidden just moments before. Smiling like a child on Christmas morning, Will inspected the bottles in his lap as both Jack and Sam leaned over to see for themselves.

Two bottles of root beer, and two bottles of Pepsi. His mouth watered. Oh, how he wanted to drink them, but then it occurred to him. Dropping the plastic bottles, he sprawled out upon the floor, pressing his face to its soiled surface. Looking about the room in the light of his lantern he spied several things beneath the shelves all around the room.

"Move the other ones!" he shouted, as Jack and Sam realized what it was he was doing and sprang into action.

One after another the shelves were each moved aside to reveal what lay hidden and discarded underneath them. After half an hour their bounty was gathered and all of them looked on, salivating like dogs over the things they had found. All in all it really wasn't much, at least it wouldn't have been six months ago, but they had added three more bottles of soda to the first four they found, and three bottles of

water too. To add to their excitement they had found a whole box containing six packs of Twinkies and most importantly, a king size bag of Skittles. Yeah, candy!

“We can eat it, right?” Will asked his siblings expectantly.

“Yeah, I think Twinkies are pretty much good forever and probably the Skittles too, kiddo. I think we’re in luck,” said Jack.

“How many gas stations and convenience stores do you think we passed today, Jack? Fifteen? Twenty? I don’t think we should pass any more without at least having a look.”

Will bobbed his head up and down. Now *that* was logic he could get behind.

“Good idea, we can hit the other two across the intersection in the morning,” Jack responded.

“So... Now can I have some candy?” Will pressed.

“Sure... Just as soon as we get that door blocked off. Safety first, buddy,” Jack said as Sam giggled at his frustration.

Carefully putting down the prized bag of candy, Will rose and crossed the room to resume his duty. Picking up the poles, he found them not as heavy the second go round, and wedging them into place, just as Jack had done before, he held them patiently as his siblings began to drag the shelf nearer. After about a minute the shelf was in place, securing the lower end of the poles in position. With the door secured, all three sat in a loose circle upon the floor and began opening their spoils.

Tearing open his bag of mouthwatering, shiny pieces of rainbow-colored candy, Will dumped half a dozen pieces into his waiting palm, and tilting back his head he tossed them straight into his mouth. Gnashing his teeth upon the chewy bits, saliva seemed to flow like a faucet into his mouth as he swallowed time and again, audibly letting his siblings know of his taste buds’ ecstasy.

“These are sooo good,” he proclaimed when finally he swallowed the first round.

Sam and Jack both grinned at him knowingly as they each opened a package of Twinkies and he watched their faces as they too shared in their first bites of delicious sugar-induced bliss. Moans of enjoyment escaped both of them, and he giggled at the faces they made, their eyes rolling in their sockets as both of them tilted back their heads. Then he had an idea.

“Here, you guys want some?” he asked, holding out his prized bag of candy.

“Sure, little man,” Jack said, holding out his hand.

“I’ll have a couple, but you keep the rest for yourself,” Sam answered.

Into each hand he poured a few candies and watched as they repeated their earlier show before he twisted up the bag of candy, deciding to save it for the days to come. God knows he didn’t want to devour the last bag of candy on the planet and never have any again.

“Here, Will, have some Twinkies,” Sam said as he put his candy away.

Accepting the small package with the pair of yellow spongy cakes inside, he ripped it open with his teeth, the way Dad had showed him, and pulled out the first cake. Mushing it into his mouth, he savored the rich sugary taste a minute before more or less just mashing it with his tongue and swallowing the bite whole. His Twinkies vanished before he even realized what happened, but that left him with another treat to enjoy. Selecting a bottle of orange Faygo from their newly acquired collection of drinks, he twisted the cap as Jack nodded to his wisdom

and took a bottle of soda for himself. Hearing the bottle hiss as the seal broke, he watched the bubbles rise through the orange liquid in the bottle before completely removing the top. He had learned the hard way, on more than one occasion, what could happen if you opened a pop bottle too hastily.

Lifting the bottle to his lips, he savored the both cooling and burning sensation the carbonated liquid had upon his mouth and throat. Taking several big gulps, it felt as if he could actually feel layers of ash and grime he had been breathing all day get stripped away as he drank.

With little to no conversation, all three sat around their collection of supplies for a while, each daydreaming about whatever memories these flavors recalled unto each of them before they decided it was time for sleep. Waiting until both his big brother and sister were upon their cardboard beds, Will switched off his light which each of them had taken turns shaking over the last few hours. It wasn't long before dreams of candy stores and cakes drifted him off to a deep restful sleep.

Chapter 7

Jack awoke stiff but refreshed, and looking about his surroundings he found Sam already awake, quietly shaking Will's light while sitting upon one of the shelving units with her back against the wall. It was apparent she had been awake for some time, as she had somehow managed to apply her makeup, which although was becoming more acceptable prior to the event, still detracted from her natural features too much for his own taste. He didn't know whether her style was considered punk or goth or some other form of leather-clad trend that he didn't have a name for, but it was who she identified with and as such he did not usually weigh in with his own opinions. The key word being 'usually'.

"So... you're up awfully early, crow," he mocked her, with a reference to the nineties movie starring Brandon Lee.

"Har har. Your originality is stunning," she retorted. "So... jerk, what is the plan for today?"

"Keep walking, but this time we check for supplies along the way."

"Still heading to Grandma's, then?"

"Why? Do you think we should go somewhere else?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "I just really don't want to see it like the rest of the city. I mean, that's where we have had every Christmas and Thanksgiving for my whole life. I just don't want to have that memory ruined for me. For Will either."

"I know. Me too. But without any more information, I just don't know where else to go. I had thought about heading over to the Great Lakes, but if there were any military still in the area, I think the city would be crawling with them. You know?"

"Yeah, at least a helicopter or something."

They sat in silence for a few moments and Jack couldn't help but let his mind wander. The lack of any sign of a human presence bothered him to no end. Questions swirled in his mind that he had no answers for. He feared the answers.

They had gone a whole day without a single sign of life in the huge city. They had walked miles and miles and found nothing. Not one thing.

“Do you think there is anyone else left?” he asked his sister.

“I don’t know. There has to be, right? I mean... billions... to just us? It just doesn’t seem possible.”

“I know. But we haven’t seen a thing.”

“We kind of have, though. All this stuff is gone, right? All the food in the apartments had to of been taken after whatever happened.”

“But what if it wasn’t just an event? What if the event triggered a disease, or a disease triggered the event and everyone just died?” Jack wondered aloud.

“I don’t think so, if they had, then where did they go?”

“I don’t know, Sam. I thought of that too, but nothing makes any sense. I just can’t make it work out in my head. Nothing adds up.”

“What if there *were* bodies everywhere, but someone cleaned them up?” Sam asked, her voice sounding more hopeful.

“You mean like after whatever happened here they came in, cleared the city, and declared it uninhabitable or something and that’s why there aren’t any people or anything?”

“Yeah, like Hiroshima. Wasn’t there a power plant on the edge of Lake Michigan? Was it nuclear?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know. I’m really starting to wish I paid more attention in school. I’m thinking you might be close, but that still doesn’t explain some things.”

“Like what?”

“The food missing from the apartments and even here, but more than that, why aren’t there any planes in the sky? Not one. There used to be planes everywhere.”

“Yeah, but there used to be airports in Chicago, maybe they don’t have a reason to come here anymore.”

“Yeah, I guess. It just seems too weird,” Jack concluded.

After their chat they both drifted off again into their own thoughts until Will began to squirm around, signaling that he would be awake in the very near future. Without a whole lot of selection to choose from, Jack rose from his cardboard bed and poured the three remaining packs of Twinkies out of the box, and into his lap. Deciding he didn’t want to wait for Will to wake up gradually, he shook his younger brother’s shoulder gently and when he awoke he handed him a sugar and caffeine laden Pepsi to get the day started. *That* should certainly put some pep in his step.

After a hasty breakfast they removed the barricade from the door, and made their way back out into the street. It was time to search for some more supplies. Crossing the road they entered another gas station, but found the only cooler it contained had been destroyed and had no lingering supplies. Minutes later, however, they entered the third gas station inhabiting the intersection and once inside they managed to find a snack-sized bag of chips along with a candy bar and two more bottles of soda. Then it was back to the streets.

For most of the morning their journey led them down the center of the same road, mile after mile, occasionally ducking into the wreckage of one building or another to scavenge for supplies, usually turning up empty. When afternoon came, and the sun beamed down upon them from between wispy clouds Sam froze in her

steps, causing both him and Will to stop as well. Turning to look at her, Jack opened his mouth as she gave him a look that would have turned a rampaging bear away. Watching as she raised a finger to her lips, it was Will who perked up next, turning his head this way and that as if seeking something out. It was only a second or two more when he heard it for the first time. There was a sound in the city.

* * * * *

Sam froze in her tracks, certain she had heard something besides her own breathing and the rhythmic crunching of glass beneath their feet. Turning her head this way and that to look both up and down the road, she heard it again as Jack turned to look at her. He had the audacity to open his mouth, though she quickly silenced him with a look. Straining her senses, she heard it again, and turning her head she was now certain.

Somewhere in the distance ahead, perhaps around a corner or a few blocks away, something or someone else was moving among the streets. They could all hear it now, but it was Jack who made the first move.

Her shoulder grasped by one of his large hands, Jack led her to duck as they moved quickly to the side of the road in the shadow of a building's ruins. All around them the sparkling blackened wasteland stood as if frozen in death, but ahead they could hear the sound growing. Waiting several moments she was able to slow her breathing and listen, as they all did, angling their heads and necks to pick up the sounds. The longer they waited the more distinct the sounds became, and Sam knew that something was moving.

In pairs the crunches came in rapid succession, sort of like a beating heart, but it was accompanied by a growling and grinding sound that raised the hairs on the back of her neck and arms. Whatever it was, it was big. Just when she thought she had located the direction of the sound, another heart-like beat hammered through the crushed glass of a nearby road at a much faster rhythm, moving from a different direction as if to intercept the first and then, like all the sounds had begun, they went silent.

"I think we should check it out," Jack whispered, causing her to jump.

"We don't know what it is," Sam said, fear welling up in her stomach.

"Exactly. We need to know what is out here. We need to know what happened. You guys want to know, right?" Jack replied.

Sam nodded in reply and noted that Will did as well. Letting Jack take the lead, she reached out and took Will's hand as they moved slowly across the crumbling face of the building beside them. Reaching the next corner they cautiously looked out in all directions, before turning right down the narrow intersecting street in the direction of the now absent sounds. It was two blocks in the new direction before they heard another sound, though it did not have the same rhythm as the previous. Even so, they used it to again change direction, turning left, back in the original direction they had been traveling for the majority of the day.

Painstakingly slow they crept along, and Sam silently cursed every crunch of glass beneath her feet. Moving amongst the shadows of the buildings, it was two more blocks when Jack stopped abruptly. Then, unexpectedly, a voice sounded from somewhere ahead, and looking back at her, Jack pointed to the intersection

just a dozen or more yards ahead and they began to move once more, only more slowly and more carefully than before. With each step she could hear the voice more clearly, though it was faint and she couldn't make out the words, but it was a voice. The implications were astronomical. They weren't the only people alive anymore. And then the voice yelled.

Still she had not understood the words it yelled, but the rhythmic thrumming of glass and asphalt sounded once more, only for a second or two and then both the yelling and the pounding stopped. Had whatever made the growl-like sound attacked the man? Shivers lanced down her spine.

Step after tedious step they crept to the corner, and Jack peered around it cautiously before waving for each of them to join him. Peeking around the corner with her brothers, Sam saw something she had not expected at all. There, perhaps three and a half blocks further down the road to their left sat a man on horseback. He wore an odd hat and a long duster jacket like in western movies, and behind him was another horse and wagon, guided by yet another man dressed similarly. Though their words could not be heard from here, it was plain enough to see that they were talking, and seconds later they began to advance down the street towards Sam and her brothers.

Watching their slow advance, Sam labeled each of the strange sounds they had heard before. The beating hearts were the horses' hooves upon the ground and the growling or grinding sound was the cart's wooden wheels cutting a trail through the glass shards upon the road. People. People and horses. Not everyone was dead.

Watching further, the man on horseback turned a corner, steering away from her concealed location, and Sam watched as the horse-drawn cart disappeared around the corner behind him.

"Well, that answers a lot of questions," Jack said, sighing loudly.

"Yeah, but raises a lot of new ones. Do you think we should approach them, maybe at least ask them what happened?"

"Let's go talk to them," said Will, weighing in with his own opinion.

"I don't think so," Jack objected. "Not yet. What if they did this?" he added, gesturing to the buildings around him. "We still don't know anything. They could be dangerous."

"Yeah, but they could also be a lot of help if they aren't dangerous," Sam argued.

"Yeah," Will agreed.

"Guys, I'm sorry, but Dad said to keep you safe, and that's what I'm doing."

And that was the end of it, at least that's what Sam thought before something caught her attention, or rather the lack thereof. The sound of the man on horseback and cart had stopped again.

Lifting her gaze from Jack to the road beyond, the air caught in her chest as she locked eyes with the man on horseback just a block down the street. Without the ability to warn her brothers, her heart began hammering in her chest as the rider drove his heels to the beast's flanks and began thundering towards them. Finally her control over the air in her lungs was restored but all she could manage was a scream, but Jack had already turned around as the rider thundered towards them.

“Run!” Jack shouted as Sam took heed of his words and began down the road the way they had come, half dragging Will with her.

The thundering of hooves grew louder and louder, and briefly Sam wondered how it could be that her track star brother remained behind her and Will when it occurred to her that he wasn't with them at all. He had stopped to buy them time and in doing so, protect them.

* * * * *

Will raced along as fast as his little legs would carry him, pumping out a steady rhythm as his feet slipped atop the broken shards of glass beneath him. Moving as fast as he could, Sam tugged at his arm tirelessly, dragging him to speeds that were unobtainable on his own. Behind them the man on a horse thundered towards them, seemingly with malice in his heart as he gained on Will and his siblings.

One block and then another they ran, when Sam looked back over her shoulder, not at him, but beyond, as her face contorted in fear. Will stopped, dragging Sam to a stop with him, as he spun to look back the way they had come. His eyes going wide, his heart dropped into the pit of his stomach as his airway closed. Barely jogging a block behind, Jack had all but stopped as the man upon the horse was right on top of him.

Faster than Will could even process, the man on the horse reached down as he thundered past and grabbed ahold of Jack's collar, dragging him along with the horse as he slowed the beast to a stop. Reaching up towards his neck, the collar choking him, Jack thrashed his legs about, pulled off his feet by the man in the saddle.

Will felt himself hiccup. He still wasn't breathing. It was an attack. Sam screamed, and everything went black.

Unsure how much time had passed, though it felt like little more than a blink of an eye, Will's sight and hearing was restored. Pulling himself up to a seated position, all was just as it had been before, except Sam was no longer holding his hand. Then he saw her.

Will witnessed in that moment when, like a crazed animal, Sam raced back down the street the way they had run, screaming, with a length of charred pipe in her hands. Fighting to focus as the edges of his vision went black again, Will watched as Sam lunged towards the man whose bearded face was much obscured by the shadow of his hat. In defense, the man leaned away from the blow meant for his head. Sam missed, but it didn't matter.

As she struck the man's shoulder in a glancing blow, he released Jack's sweatshirt as the pipe was driven downwards with all Sam's weight into the neck of the harmless beast that carried the attacker. Frightened by the blow, the beast spooked and reared up on its hind legs, kicking and neighing, spilling the man from his saddle. Smashing to the ground, the man's head bounced as shards of glass scattered around him. Like a bullet, the beast rocketed off down the narrow street, its rider still entangled in the stirrups as he was dragged away at an alarming pace through the river of shattered glass and rubble. Just a foot away from Will the beast and fallen rider passed, spraying up shards of glass in all directions in their wake, but Will had no energy to move away as his vision failed

again. The last thing he saw was Jack regaining his feet with a stricken look of panic on his face, as a strange shadow seemed to detach itself from the wall and slink across the street. Then the world went black.

Chapter 8

Jack didn't know how much time they had until the man who pulled the wagon appeared to avenge his friend, but it didn't matter. Nothing did. Except Will. Clutching his younger brother's limp body in his hands he shook him vigorously, trying to get any sign of life out of him as tears streamed down his own face.

"Breath, baby! C'mon, pumpkin, breathe for Sam!" Sam shouted over and over beside him as he fumbled with the cap to the inhaler.

It was an old thing, having been stored for months in the medicine cabinet even before the day they were closed in the vault. Jack assumed it was more than a year old at this point and hoped that somehow it would still work. Laying Will's head down upon his back he let it fall back, opening his airway, and he pressed the mouthpiece of the inhaler to his brother's now blue lips. Forcing his mouth closed around the inhaler, he pressed down on the canister of medicine and struck Will hard in the chest with the open palm of his hand and waited. Nothing.

On and on Sam wailed, begging the little boy to breathe but he refused to stir. Again Jack pressed down on the canister and this time he pulled Will's face up and breathed into this mouth, pinching off his nose. He had never done CPR. Never even been taught, but he'd seen it on TV enough to have a basic idea of the concepts involved, and he employed them now as best as he could.

Forcing another breath into Will's lungs and then another, he paused and watched and waited. He still had a pulse but made no sign of improvement. Sam continued to scream at him. She'd reached some point beyond an emotional threshold he couldn't afford to reach himself. Leaning down he breathed again into Will's lungs. Watching for any sign from his little brother, his own breath stopped when Will twitched. Then, like a huge weight was lifted off the little boy's chest, he heaved in a deep breath, coughing and sputtering as Jack pulled him up and clutched him to himself before Sam collapsed into them as well. There was no time. They needed to move.

Rising with Will in his arms, knowing full well he couldn't be expected to run, Jack ran for him, carrying his brother as fast as he was able to get away from possible pursuit. Sam followed behind him, but he dared not slow enough to look back. Racing back to the street their own home had been located on, he turned back in their original direction and ran. And continued to run for what felt like hours.

Jack stopped when Will's eyes finally began to flutter, as if they would open, and spinning he watched as Sam collapsed to the ground. Her makeup was a wreck, between her earlier crying and the sweat that now streaked down her face. She wasn't accustomed to running like he was, and Jack imagined it was only adrenaline and fear that had kept her moving this long. But now that they had stopped, she was done. The running was over.

Listening to her ragged panting, he retraced his steps, lowering Will to the ground to stretch his own muscles, now knotting in his back and shoulders. Sam wasn't the only one who was through. Jack doubted he could continue carrying Will much farther. Looking and listening, he strained his senses in all directions but found no signs of pursuit. Even so, he couldn't shake the nagging sensation that they were not safe.

Crouching at Will's side, Jack watched the steady rise and fall of his chest as he worked to level his own breathing. The attack had taken a lot out of his little brother, but he hoped Will would recover soon. Turning, he moved his focus to Sam and grinned slightly at the smug look on her eyeliner-streaked face. She was spent, and they both knew it.

"I think we should keep moving," Jack said, watching his sister's expression turn even more grim.

"I know. Me too," she replied with tight lips.

"I can't keep running while carrying him though," Jack said, motioning with his head.

"Me either. No more running. At least not for a while," Sam replied.

"My sentiments exactly. My back is toast."

"I kept up with you though," Sam grinned.

"Yeah, I noticed. Is there a sale on leather and lace, knee high stilettos in this direction?"

"Ha ha. Seriously, though. Do you think they'll come after us?"

"I dunno. He didn't seem interested in a conversation. I don't think it's safe to try and talk to anyone from here on. Let's just get to Grandma's and then figure out what is going on."

"Did you notice his clothes? He looked weird, like out of an old movie or something."

"I hadn't thought about it, but yeah, he seemed off."

Jack recalled the first time he had seen the man atop his horse upon the ash and glass covered street. He had worn boots and a leather duster, but beneath it he had drab, even shabby, clothing with a wide collared button-down shirt. The only other aspect Jack could recall were his steely eyes hidden in shadow between his wide brimmed hat and thick beard. Picturing the odd man again, a shiver crept down his spine and he quickly shook the memory from his head.

"I don't know who they were, what they were doing, or what they wanted, but they seemed hostile. There could be more of them. Lots more, even. I just want to get us out of the city," Jack stated.

"Do you think we'll make it out tonight?" Sam asked.

"No," Jack replied after a minute of contemplation. "We need to find a safe place to spend the night again."

Jack could barely believe his own words. He had been attacked this same day in this same city. There were men out there in the city who likely were searching for them, yet he knew it was their only choice. At least their safest one. Last thing they needed to do was run into trouble in the dark. No. They would have to sleep out the approaching night and strike out again the following day in hopes of getting out of the city. It was the best and safest option they had. At least he hoped so.

* * * * *

Breathing heavily between their words, Sam felt much like Jack's track bag that she had become accustomed to avoiding over the last few years. Sweaty, dirty, stinky, and worn out. Even now, after having stopped several minutes ago, sweat dripped down her face and into her eyes as her hair stuck to her head and face in wet, seemingly irremovable clumps. Smearing her hair back from her face with the palms of her hands, she dropped her pack and half crawled, half shuffled to Will's side.

Looking down on his still form, she found herself shaking her head as she raised her eyes to her equally concerned older brother.

"I haven't seen him this bad since the first days in the vault," she stated simply.

"Yeah, but he'll pull through. He's a tough lil guy."

"Yeah," Sam said with a grin.

"Speaking of tough, thanks for going all ninja warrior on horse guy back there."

"You're quite welcome," Sam grinned, "After all, I felt it was my duty to save a damsel in distress."

Though she fought to keep herself as quiet as was possible, her weary brain and need for a change in emotional state caused her to laugh more loudly than she thought safe at her own joke.

"If I weren't so tired, I just might slug you for that one, dork," Jack responded.

"You might try, that is if..."

Sam stopped speaking as movement caught her attention and Jack also turned his gaze to the ground between them. There, sprawled amongst layers of glass and dark greasy ash, Will blinked his eyes up at them as one of his small hands reached up to the side of his head. Reaching down, Sam softly wiped the hair back from his face, smoothing it as she stroked his head.

"How are you feeling my little monster?" She asked.

"My head hurts."

"Well, we can probably handle that," Sam grinned. "Think you can walk for a while?"

"Sure he can," interrupted Jack, "He's a big tough man."

"Yeah, I can walk. But are we going to eat soon?"

Yup. He was OK. If Sam knew anything about Will, it was the fact that so long as he was eating, he was going to be fine. The kid was a regular garbage disposal so far as food was concerned. Especially candy.

"Why don't you take a Tylenol and eat some of your Skittles, and we can stop for dinner a bit later? Would that be OK?" Sam asked in her best mommy voice, watching as Jack began digging in his pack for the Tylenol.

"Okey dokey," Will replied, carefully rising to a seated position.

Sam watched as he struggled to reach into his pocket, at the same time Jack produced the small bottle of medicine from the first aid kit contained in his bag. Within minutes, Will swallowed the pill she gave him after several deep drinks from a water bottle. He still had trouble with pills. When finished, however, he stuffed a fistful of candies into his mouth and climbed to his feet with a little bounce before seeking out his pack and waiting for them to rise as well. Sam could not help but grin. Though she and Jack had run for countless hours, he was a

rested little ball of energy, just raring to go, while they were both weary and sore from the day's events.

"So I guess you whacked that guy bad enough he left us alone, huh?" Will asked as Sam climbed to her feet.

"I hope so, lil guy, but we don't know how many of them there are so we have to keep moving."

"Let's go then, slow pokes," Will said, with a grin that bordered on both sarcasm and cunning.

Reaching out her hand, Sam helped Jack to his feet before bending to retrieve her own pack. Carefully she wiped the bits of glass and dirt from her backside before grabbing Will's little hand in her own. Within seconds, Jack too had his pack and taking Will's other hand they began down the sidewalk once more.

It was well on into afternoon as they crept among the shadows of the skeletal buildings around them. Though they moved with as much haste as they were able, often their imaginations caused them to pause suddenly and strain their ears for sounds that did not come again. Sam peered around every corner as they crossed intersections, and into the remains of building as they moved like predators amongst the rubble. She didn't feel like a predator though, instead she felt more like the mouse that tempted the cat.

For hours they walked until the afternoon became evening and her legs trembled with every step. Whether it was fear or the day's exertion that led them to waver beneath her she could not be certain, though supposed it was probably a combination of the pair. No matter how far they went, however, she still found herself thinking of things behind them. Not just the events of the day's attack, but months ago, back before the event. She had hated things then, yet now she longed for what she had loathed just months before. It was odd how the world could change you just by changing around you. After shaking off her memories, she quickly concluded that she would much rather go back to school and worry about what people were saying about her in the hall, than worry about who else was alive in the world and what they would do to her and her brothers if caught.

With a shudder at the thought, Sam squeezed Will's hand slightly, calmed by the reminder that they were all OK so long as they had each other. All they had to do was be careful.

* * * * *

Scrambling over a pile of bricks, Will held the hands of both his big sister and brother, feeling their unease with every step. Both Jack and Sam were on edge, their heads jerking to one side and then the other in response to imagined sounds. Will knew they were worried about the man on the horse. But he also knew that the dark played tricks on you, and when you thought there was something to be afraid of, most of the time there really wasn't. Unless it was a cat. Cats were creepy like that. Getting up in the middle of the night to slink around in the dark, and jump and climb on things for no reason. And they ate frogs. Eww.

Block after block they traversed the rubble and piles of debris as the evening grew darker and darker around them, until they reached an intersection with several gas stations where just beyond he could see an overpass. Looking out across the intersection from behind a charred carcass of a pickup truck, Will

could tell that the road was obviously wider than all they had crossed during the day. He watched as the burned remains of traffic lights swayed in the breeze above them, suspended across the street by melted and twisted wires that appeared they would give way at any moment.

For long minutes he joined both Jack and Sam looking up and down the street, peering into the shadows searching for any sign that might betray another presence out there somewhere in the growing darkness. After what seemed like an eternity that increased the time between the now and his dinner, Will finally followed Jack's lead across the road as Sam trailed behind a few steps. Mounting the opposing curb, they stepped into a blackened parking lot belonging to what used to be a fast food restaurant connected to the service station. Though the plastic emblem of the yellow arched "M" on the building had melted away during the event, Will recognized the franchise by its telltale roofline despite the fact that most of the building had collapsed. It seemed Jack recognized it too as he aimed them towards it without a second's hesitation. Will found it peculiar that Jack had hated working at such a place just a few months prior, yet now he was leading them into one in search of a safe haven to spend the night. Will just hoped they still had chicken nuggets, though he seriously doubted he'd be *that* lucky. Oh my God, and ketchup, everything was better with ketchup.

Picking their way through and over portions of collapsed roof and ceiling, they dodged between steel tables that remained fastened to the concrete and tile floor as they approached the bent and twisted stainless steel counter where once a teen like his brother would have stood wearing a stupid hat. Will chuckled. He *had* to say something.

"Jack, I'd like a ten piece nugget meal with barbeque sauce and ketchup please."

"Shh," Jack warned, fighting a smile as Sam snorted, trying to suppress a laugh of her own.

Rounding the corner of the mangled counter they pressed further into the dilapidated building past scorched metal cooking implements that were as alien as flight controls to Will, though he had little time to ponder what it was the items were once used for. Weaving first one way and then back the other they moved among the wreckage until Jack brought them to a sudden stop. There before them was a large metal door, not unlike the cooler they had slept in the night prior, just bigger. Testing the handle, Jack pulled it open to be met by something totally unexpected.

Like something from within had been pushing on the airtight door, it burst open causing Jack to jump and Sam to scream in surprise as a foul smell filled the air. Pulling his bag over his shoulder, Will yanked his police light out and began shaking it before aiming into the smelly darkness beyond. Flipping the plastic switch, he watched as the metal room filled with storage racks and cardboard was illuminated. Yet still the source of the smell could not readily be discovered. Pinching her nose, Sam was the first to step into the metal confines, and rifling through the few boxes that had not been already broken down and flattened, she deemed the cooler empty of anything putrid, disgusting, or foul. Then, lifting one of the empty boxes to her nose she quickly changed her mind. The smell was from the empty containers that once held food products.

“We could toss them outside,” Sam offered.

“No,” Jack replied, “If we can smell them, so can anyone else who might come this way.

“We can find a place that doesn’t stink,” Will suggested.

“It’s not safe, buddy,” Jack answered, “It’s getting too dark and we don’t want to be out shining around your light. Someone could see us.”

Figuring that their decision was finalized, Will removed his backpack again and dropped it upon the floor. Stink or not, he was hungry.

“If we’re staying, can we eat *now*?”

“Sure can,” Sam smiled, dropping her own pack before bending to clear a space for them to eat.

Within minutes the floor was cleared as discarded cardboard was piled into stacks in the back of the cooler, and they all sat down to enjoy a meal of the spoils they had found in the morning and previous night. It wasn’t much, and it certainly wasn’t the healthy foods any adult would suggest they eat, but they ate anyway, and each enjoyed it without complaint.

It wasn’t until after their meal that Will and Sam were both enlisted to help Jack rig the door closed using pieces of the shelving in the cooler and a bit of wire scavenged from just outside the door. Pulling the door closed as tightly as he was able, it was when he pressed his shoulder into the shelf, wedged there by Jack, that his head rested against the outer wall of the cooler beside the door as it was sealed closed for the night, when he thought he heard a sound outside. It sounded very much like the shuffling and crunching of broken glass accompanied by a clip clop, clip clop that caused the hair on his neck to stand up. The darkness was finally playing tricks on him too.

Jack secured the last metal unit into place, allowing Will to stand clear of the door and wall. The room was sealed and the sound vanished into the darkness outside.

Chapter 9

His eyes popping open, Jack reached out instinctively to his side where the night before he had placed Will’s light. Brushing the floor with his fingers he fought through a second of panic, skimming the concrete surface of the cooler’s floor until he felt the cold hard plastic of the light. Snatching it up, he gave the light a shake and waved it around, brandishing it like a torch into the darkness. Rising, he felt as his muscles tensed, his shoulders and legs threatening to cramp if he pushed them too hard. He was dehydrated and malnourished. He couldn’t expect his body to handle the abuse he had put it through the previous day without it reminding him of his limitations. Cautiously, he rose to a kneeling position and shined the already dimming light into every corner of the room, noting both Sam and Will still asleep as he sought the source of the sound that woke him. Could it have been a dream?

Nothing found, he sighed loudly and allowed the light to fade again into darkness as he sat silently still, a perfect mimicry of death. With naught but

darkness he focused his hearing on the breathing forms of his siblings, and smiled to himself as he noted Sam's low snoring. He wished he could record it to play back to her at a later time as proof, knowing she would deny it if accused. Before long, Will began to thrash about a bit before rolling to his side, a sign that he would soon be waking up. Jack was surprised how loud their small sounds were inside the confines of the cooler, that is, until his attention was drawn elsewhere.

With a loud clatter, a series of crashing sounds erupted outside as the tinkling of glass shards raining down upon the ground followed, sounding like wind chimes in a storm. A moaning sound then chased the crashes and the musical glass sounds fell to silence, when just as soon as the sounds came they were just as suddenly gone. So too were the sounds of his sibling's breathing. Shaking the light in his hand slightly he allowed it to light ever so dimly as he pressed a finger to his lips, noting that both Will and Sam were now sitting and facing him with fear clearly etched upon their faces.

Taking his cue they remained silent, turning their attention to the door, all of them straining to hear any further sounds beyond those of their own hearts pounding in their chests. Jack listened for what felt like forever, and when he was certain no more sounds were coming, he continued to listen further, without moving, afraid to give away their hiding spot to anything or anyone who might be lurking outside. After what must have been more than two hours, poor little Will could take it no more and finally broke the silence.

"Guys?"

"Yes, baby?" Sam asked him in a hushed tone.

"I *really* gotta pee," he admitted.

"Let's get the door open and peek outside," Jack replied after a moment's thought, not wanting to linger in the city any longer than they had to.

"Can we eat after I pee?"

"Yes, Will," Sam answered their little brother. "But we'll have to hurry," she added, turning her pleading eyes up to Jack. She was asking for his agreement. This took no thought, and with a single nod of his head, he gave it.

Jack found it odd and yet comforting how Sam had so easily taken on the role as a mom for Will. She was a natural with him, but then again, she kind of always had been. Even when Will had been a baby she had always volunteered to hold him, or feed him. It was almost as if she had been training for years for all of this to happen. It was kind of creepy thinking about it like that, but he was glad to hear her sound so grown up and mature. Will needed her to fill in for Mom, and she was doing a great job.

"OK, Sam. I'm gonna untie the wire and pull this shelf back a little. You hold the other one up when I lean it back, and ill poke my head outside and see what's what."

"You got it," she said rising to join him.

Watching as Will shuffled out of their way, Jack carefully untied the wire binding the two shelves together, shifting the first one back several inches as he strained to prevent it from making noise as he returned it to a vertical position. Sam, seeing his intentions, grabbed hold of the opposite end and helped him, both of them being more careful to remain silent than ever before in their lives. Once

the first shelf was removed, Jack leaned the second one back precariously, allowing Sam to take the weight of the shelving unit and turned back to the door.

Grasping the stainless handle, he slowly and carefully pulled it upwards, feeling the pull of its inner spring mechanism tighten until it came to a stop. Wrapping his other hand around the base of the metal to muffle any sound it might make, he pulled up on the handle once more as he felt, more than heard, the final click that signaled its release, and cautiously he pressed his shoulder into the door feeling as the air seal broke and the door inched open with a metallic groan. Again he froze, as did both of his siblings.

With his ear to the small opening in the doorway, he strained his senses, hearing nothing more than a low breeze singing through the wreckage and ruins of the city, like a mourner of the dead. Reassured, he pressed again against the steel of the door and as it opened wider he leaned out carefully, looking out into the morning, searching every shadow. Here and there things like torn canopies of buildings or shredded insulation still clinging to the ruined framing of walls fluttered in the hollow breeze, causing his eyes to dart one way and then another, but no sign of danger showed itself. The view seeming clear, Jack pushed the door the rest of the way open and motioned for Will to join him.

Darting out of the cooler like a caged animal offered freedom, Will vanished around the corner, the sounds of his movement coming to an abrupt stop as he sighed loudly from out of Jack's sight, obviously relieved of the pressure threatening within him. Smiling at Will's audible relief, Jack turned back to Sam.

"Let's get him fed and get out of here. I don't want to stay in the city."

She didn't even reply, choosing instead to acknowledge his words by spinning on her heel to begin rummaging through their packs. If Samantha had become Mom, Jack supposed that he had become their dad, taking on the role of leading their family. Watching as Will reappeared from around the corner, he knew he would do his best to play his role no matter how much he didn't want it.

Reentering their shelter, he sat with his siblings as Sam handed both him and Will a pack of Twinkies and a bottle of soda. It wasn't much. Certainly not a meal. But for now it would have to do. Eating quickly, he waited patiently as the others followed suit and helped them pack up their meager belongings before striking out once more into the city.

* * * * *

After having to listen to Will pee against the side of their shelter for like five minutes straight, Sam couldn't help but wonder how such a small child could possibly hold so much fluid. Though the severity of their circumstances was not lost on her conscious thoughts for even a moment, she couldn't help but ponder the oddity of what they faced. Yeah, it was gone. Everything was gone. But besides family and friends and those they loved, what was really lost? Commodities? Pleasures? Convenience? Sure she had indulged in her share of modern conveniences and technology, but every advancement they had before the event was really just to replace something that had already existed on a more personal level. Television and newspapers had replaced town meetings and gossip. Phones had made it so you didn't have to face a person to say things that you wouldn't have said, had phones not existed. Social media removed real connections and

friendships and replaced them with ratings, whining rants, and new ways to bully people. What was odd, was that before the event she had hated the way the world was. She had despised the fakeness of it all. Yet now, here in this world, she found herself missing the simplicities of numb mindlessness and uncaring that had come with the old world. Easy was gone.

Plunging her half emptied bottle of root beer down the throat of her backpack, she rose to her feet, pausing a moment to allow the effects of her sore muscles to settle before she stretched her legs, rising to her toes, before reaching down to snatch up her pack and shoulder it. With a nod to Jack she watched as he stepped free of their metal walls once more, and reaching down she took Will's hand. Swift and silent was the order of the day.

"OK, Will. We have to move fast and be quiet."

"Like ninjas?" he asked with wide hopeful eyes.

"Exactly like ninjas," Sam said with mock sincerity before smiling in response to his happy nod.

At least *that* was easy. Weaving back through the collapsed building and all of its grills and deep fryers, they rounded the counter and dodged the tables to step back through the remains of the front wall of the building and into the parking lot beyond. Here Jack clung to the walls, preferring them to the open streets, and looking about, Sam noted the source of the sound that had alarmed them all earlier in the morning. There had not been a presence out here. Instead, the pole holding up the traffic lights at the intersection had bent over, the lights and wires crashing to the ground sending the glass that littered everything scattering beneath it. The same shards of glass that moved beneath their feet with every swift step.

For hours Sam moved on in a mindless trance, following and mimicking Jack's every move as they crept from one devastated building to the next, as strip malls turned into small tightly packed homes in what was once a poor region of the city. Now there was little left but concrete and brick foundations littered with charred bits of broken memories and smeared streaks of blackness. The whole community had been wiped from the earth as if washing it away to start over, removing its filth and depravity to replace it with something new or better. Perhaps that was just her missing the way the old world worked, but Sam could not help but feel that this was not an end. Tragic, yes, but it could not be all. Could it? There *had* to be more. There had to be some good from all this loss. She hoped against hope they would find a new and better beginning somewhere beyond the city. There had to be something. Working to refocus her train of thought, she looked down upon Will who still crept upon his toes like a ninja, even hours into the morning. He deserved a new beginning.

Eventually as the day progressed, Sam's mood lightened, mostly due to watching her little ninja move like a cartoon cat across their obliterated world. At some point they had crossed the threshold of homes that had once been owned by the impoverished into apartment buildings and warehouses, as signs for the interstate began showing up here or there where they had not been completely destroyed or charred beyond recognition. Though she paid scant attention to any of the signs in the past, they gave her hope now. They proved that the edge of the city was nearing, and she no longer felt safe in the city. Just seeing the signs

seemed to take a weight off of her chest. She couldn't wait to get out of this place. It felt like a cemetery.

* * * * *

Creeping upon his toes, carefully selecting places where he could avoid the glass below, Will moved ahead. Slinking here, and springing across the cement ground there, he moved like the wind and no one could catch him. No way, not ever. Jerking his head from side to side, he sought out those who scoured the city for them, but locating no enemies, he returned his super vision to the ground beneath him. It was a fun game, but would have been more fun if Jack and Sam played along.

Instead, Jack moved up ahead with his shoulders slumped like he had just lost a track meet, and Sam sighed or giggled from time to time behind him, her mind undoubtedly on boys or some other such nonsense, as Mom would say. If Dad were here, he'd play along. Dad was an awesome ninja and could probably destroy all the bad guys. But Dad was probably out saving Mom, so he would just have to be a ninja all by himself.

Sometime long after his belly started growling, they passed under a big concrete bridge and Will pretended to pass through the enemy's tunnel, darting from one dark shadow to another to evade detection from enemy sentries. Once out of the tunnel they turned left and climbed a twisty ramp up to the road above and Will realized that he was just about to the top of the enemy mountain fortress. Victory was his!

Rounding the last bend he skirted the charred carcass of a four door sedan, following closely on Jack's heels, impatient to reach the highest point. Pouncing atop a fallen sign, he countered for its rocking surface and kept his balance as it tipped under his weight. Bounding back off the sign, Will landed nimbly between any major shards of glass, and began moving once more in a crouch. Whipping his arms about, he pretended to slay the last of his samurai enemies as a grin spread across his face.

Running to the edge of the bridge where the concrete had been smashed away by a car during the event, he thrust both of his arms up to the sky, carefully celebrating his victory. Bouncing up and down on his toes like a boxer, Will turned all around as Sam smiled her biggest smile at him. But her smile did not last.

Even though he had done his best to celebrate in silence, had he done something wrong? As Sam's smile faded she raised her hand to her mouth and he could see her fingers shaking. But she wasn't mad. Turning his attention to Jack he could see that his older brother had gone momentarily rigid too. Something else was wrong.

Turning away from the frightened faces of both Jack and Sam, Will looked in the same direction as they were, and his breathing caught in his chest. There, on the street below, raced a man in a long coat upon a horse in the distance. Though he was miles away, it was obvious that they had been spotted as the horse and rider charged directly towards them.

Chapter 10

With a lump in his throat, Jack's stomach twisted within him. It was the same man on the horse. Even from this distance he knew it, and the man had seen them. There was only one thing they could do. Turning, Jack grabbed Will's wrist as Sam's panic-stricken face resolved and she turned to follow his lead, as she took Will's free hand. Together they turned east upon the interstate and began running. Even from so far away, the rider would be able to see which way they were going. He could move five times faster on the horse than they could on foot. He would catch them in an hour, give or take. Jack was counting on it.

Weaving in between fallen signs and destroyed cars, Will led his siblings as fast as he could, guiding them on, looking over his left shoulder again and again to mark the rider's progress. Down the far slope of the overpass they ran, scattering dust and glass as they went. When they reached the divided lanes of the interstate only a hundred yards further he led them into the grass of the median, before dragging them to a halt between the two opposing lanes of traffic.

"Now you listen and listen good," Jack said, the sternness in his own voice sounding in his ears the same as his father had that last day. "Follow the grass back towards the overpass. Stay off the glass and ash on the road. Go under the overpass, but be careful he doesn't see you. You'll have to be fast and hide up near the top, where the bridge crosses over. Hide and I'll come back."

"You can't just leave us," Sam pleaded, tears already beginning from her eyes. "Not like Dad."

"I'm not, just trust me, there is no time. Now go!" Jack shouted, shoving Sam and Will away from himself as he turned and began sprinting away.

Measuring his every breath he stretched out his strides, feeling the air pass over his face and through his hair. Running was freedom. Here in this moment, he could get away from anything. In the past he had used it to get away from Mom and Dad's nagging about his grades or preparing for college. He had even used it to get over his grandfather's passing, but he couldn't use it now. Couldn't enjoy it. Leaving Sam and Will behind felt like a betrayal, even if he knew it was the only way. Glancing back, just once, he saw their fleeing backs. They had done as he had told them.

Stretching each stride to the last inch he pushed his sore muscles and veered off course, listening to his boots upon the pavement before moving back into the grass. Ahead, maybe two miles, was a rise and then sight ahead was lost. Two miles. Twelve minutes, maybe more if he was slower now than he had been months ago. He had to keep up pace.

Again he swerved onto the concrete, leaving tracks in the ash on its surface. They were probably useless, but if the rider had companions who were following, they would follow the tracks. At least that's what Jack hoped. One mile down.

On and on he ran, feeling his pulse level out at its normal running pace and he matched his breathing to the perfect clock of his heart. With every beat he took a stride, and with every stride he watched the ground sweep beneath his feet. Minutes slowed as the world seemed to stretch out to infinity in front of him but on Jack raced, refusing to give up. Another half a mile down.

Faster and faster he pushed himself, feeling his lungs tightening from the strain as his body threatened him with cramps, but there was no time to slow, he just knew he had to keep going. Leaning forward he pumped his legs harder and harder, driving them down into the soft grassy ground and he plunged onward, topping the rise that was his goal. Digging his heels into the soil, he slid to an abrupt stop and turned to witness exactly what he had bet their lives against.

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She couldn't believe he was doing this. Not now. Not like Dad had done. Could he be serious? But then she realized that this wasn't like Dad. He wasn't stuffing them in a box saying *stay inside as long as you can*. No. He said *hide and I'll be back. I'll be back*. That was different. Blinking the tears from her eyes, Sam gritted her teeth and pushed away her pain and hurt and grabbed Will's hand, as Jack turned and did what he was born to do. Away from them, as fast as his legs would carry him, Jack sprinted as if trying to outrun death himself. And perhaps he was.

Turning, Sam looked into the eyes of her little brother knowing it was not fair to him to say what she had to, but knew that it might be their only chance.

"Hurry, Will. We have to do what Jack said and let the rider chase Jack, or else he might get us."

"But, Jack..."

"No buts, little man. Let's go!"

Jerking her little brother nearly off his feet she tried to mimic her older brother and run, but Will's little legs couldn't keep pace. Like Jack had warned, they followed the grass, moving as fast as they could, back in the direction they had come. Already she could hear the rhythmic falls of the horse's shod feet upon the asphalt of the city streets and with every sound it grew louder. They weren't going to make it.

Turning, she spared a look back over her shoulder to see Jack already an incredible distance away. He was so fast. On and on the sounds of the horse came as Sam began to think that they would reach the overpass in time. But her hope was suddenly torn away from her as her hand yanked back driving her to the ground.

Rolling upon the grass, she spun to look upon Will who had gotten his leg entangled in the tall grass and tripped, pulling her with him. It wasn't Will's fault, but his fall had ruined their chances of making it to the underpass and Sam knew it. On and on the horse came, its hoof falls now echoing out from the very underpass they were supposed to hide in.

Dragging Will back to his feet, Sam pulled him through the grass, her heart pounding in her ears as a scream threatened to spring from her lips. They couldn't go to the underpass. She knew that without a doubt, and then it struck her.

All about her, on both sides of the median, charred vehicles sat abandoned and destroyed as if the event had happened sometime around rush hour. Though far from whole and even further from ideal, they provided for her and Will a place to hide, allowing Jack to carry out his plan of leading the rider away. Ahead the hoof beats began to slow.

Turning abruptly, Sam pulled her younger brother with her as she neared the pavement. Again her arm tugged. As she looked back to her little brother, he

swung his head wildly from side to side, reminding her of Jack's warning. *Stay off the road. Good call.* Turning again she pulled him another dozen feet nearer to the underpass, dropping to the ground and pointing under a large SUV.

Watching as Will vanished under the hulking piece of charred metal, Sam dropped her pack and kicked it under before dropping to her belly and pulling her body beneath it too. It was slow going, and with all the rubber melted from the tires the clearance was barely enough to permit her.

Cursing her bubble butt, as Mom had called it on more than one shopping trip, she nudged Will farther beneath the metallic mammoth and together they hid in silence. She hoped for all of them that Jack's plan worked. She could not and would not tell Will that Jack was gone too. She couldn't break his heart like that. Not again.

* * * * *

Will slid over, crushing the thick grass beneath him as he struggled for a more comfortable spot and vantage to see the road beyond. He could hear the horse approaching and the sound sent shivers down his spine, causing his leg to jerk, accidentally kicking his sister. Fortunately, she didn't yell at him. She didn't even look in his direction. Instead, they both watched on towards the underpass, staring intently across their narrow field of view as the horse's steps slowed to a crawl somewhere just out of sight. Will wondered what the man was doing out there on his horse. Why was he chasing them? What did he want? He knew people could be mean. Mrs. Dervish, his first grade teacher had been mean, but she'd never tried to hurt him. This was different.

Flattening down the grass in front of his face, Will dug his toes down into the ground and pushed himself forward for a better view. Apparently Sam had another idea, and grabbing the back of his pants she pulled him back under the truck again. Still the horse moved slow, but Will realized that it was now moving in a different direction. Not only that, but it was getting close. Really close.

Turning slowly, he watched Sam's head slowly swiveling to follow the sound and he did the same, listening to every fall of every hoof as they grew ever nearer. Holding his breath for fear that the man would hear him, Will watched as the horse's hooves came into sight just a short distance away, riding the edge of the road. Then, at his absolute closest to their hiding place, the rider stopped his mount. They had been discovered. Will knew the man had found them. Panic surged within him and when he moved to crawl out of hiding and make a run for it, Samantha's reassuring hand reached out to him and touched his arm. The rider yelled and his horse leapt forward again.

Off down the pavement the rider raced, his horse's hooves pounding out a steady rhythm that grew farther and farther away with every passing second. After a few minutes of listening to the retreating sounds, Sam released his arm and she began to move. Will didn't know what the plan was now, but instead of asking, which is exactly what he wanted to do, he simply followed her and extracted himself from beneath the SUV. Seconds later they were on the move towards the overpass, just as Jack had told them to do.

Climbing up the sloped wall beneath the overpass just moments later, Will found that there were several great places to hide, and quickly picked one in the

deepest shadow where he could see out and down the road a long way in the direction Jack had run. Jack said he would be back and Will knew he would be. They just had to wait until he got back. Will hoped it was soon. He was hungry again.

* * * * *

Standing atop the small rise just two miles from the overpass where he hoped Sam and Will had found a safe hiding place, Jack watched as the rider emerged from under the overpass. Still atop his steed, the man did not notice him at first, but Jack had a plan. Turning, he faced away from the rider, and took a deep breath.

“Run!” he yelled waving his arms like a stark mad, raving lunatic.

Then, looking over his shoulder as the rider began to move towards him, Jack leaned forward and began pumping his legs again. His ploy had worked, the rider thought them still running. All of them. Racing down into the ravine between two hills, Jack took to the grass to eliminate leaving tracks for the rider to follow. It was a simple plan, really, and looking around, he spotted the perfect location to complete it. With the thundering hooves growing louder and louder, Jack reached the small car and heaved up on its partially closed trunk lid.

Inside the trunk were bits and pieces of blackened clothing and a melted tire that smelled worse than death, but there was no time now to find an alternative. More or less rolling into the trunk, Jack reached up to grasp the underside of its lid and pulled it down until it was nearly sealed. All that was left to do now was wait and listen as the rider thundered nearer.

Chapter 11

Laying in the trunk of the small car with something pressing uncomfortably into his ribs, Jack listened as the thrumming beats of the horse’s shoed feet grew near. By sound alone he knew when the rider reached the crest of the ravine and slowed as he guided his beast down the slope. Jack listened intently as his heart hammered in his chest to match the beat of the horse’s hooves. Down the rider came. Nearer and nearer. The horse left the road as its steps became muffled in the grass. In the darkness of the trunk, Jack shook his head. The rider must have noticed that the trunk wasn’t closed.

Feeling sick to his stomach, remembering the rider’s steely eyes, Jack braced himself to kick out at the rider as soon as the trunk came open. And then the horse was on the road again, its hooves pounding away from him, continuing on in the direction he had led the man. His plan had worked. Sighing in relief, he waited several moments to let his heart slow and the adrenaline fade from his blood. Now, he just needed to get back to Sam and Will.

Counting the seconds in whispered breaths, for nearly twenty minutes Jack listened as the rider thundered away until he was certain it was safe to leave his hiding place. Twenty minutes, and it would only take about twelve to get back to his brother and sister. Cautiously, he pushed the trunk lid open.

Looking about he was surprised to find that evening was already upon him, the sunlight in the sky fading more rapidly than he would have imagined. The day was nearly gone and they were still in the city. There was no way he would stay here another night. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Jack sprang forward into a dead run.

Keeping completely to the grass this time, in order to leave no trail that gave away his deceit, he pressed himself just as hard as he had earlier, stretching his stride and pushing every step to the limit. It was only moments until he reached the top of the ravine and looking back he could see no sign of the rider. Assured, he continued on as fast as his body would carry him all the way back to the overpass where his siblings should be hiding in wait.

Slowing to a jog as he approached the ever darkening underpass, he focused on lowering his heart rate and leveling his breathing. It was not until he walked nearly half way through the concrete structure when he heard a familiar gasp and looked up, to be greeted by familiar faces.

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Sam could hear Jack running in her and Will's direction and found herself focusing on his muffled footfalls. She had seen him run enough over the last few years to know his stride and pacing, though until now never thought she would recognize it by sound. Listening to him slow as he came nearer she found herself relieved, knowing he wouldn't slow if he was being followed.

Peering out of her darkened hiding spot among what she could only call the rafters of the overpass, she glimpsed over to see Will's smiling face. Looking down, Jack came into sight, huffing and puffing as he fought to breathe normally. He looked up then, his eyes connecting with her own for a moment in a look that said *I told you so*. And indeed he had. He had said he would return and he had come back. Sam wouldn't have to tell Will that Jack was gone. A weight lifted off of her shoulders that she hadn't even realized had been there. She felt lighter, happier, and more secure. She couldn't help but smile in reply as Jack turned his attention to Will, who was already scrambling from his hiding place to rush down the concrete wall.

Down their younger brother half slid to the outstretched arms of Jack, who caught him up like a scene from a movie where a veteran of a war was reunited with his family after years of hardship. But wasn't this the same? It certainly felt the same. Watching as Jack leaned back, catching Will midflight in his arms, the two hugged each other tightly and Sam found her eyes becoming moist. Again. She was so tired of tears.

She had been worried when he left but never believed for a moment that he wouldn't come back. Or had she? Sure she was relieved, and happy beyond measure that Jack was here, as was Will, but had she thought about losing him? Though her mind said the answer was an obvious no, her heart screamed yes within her. In that moment she realized that Jack could have been gone forever, taken from her and Will in an instant and they would have never gotten a chance to tell him goodbye. They would have been alone and lost without him in a world where nothing was left but desolation and loneliness. She wanted to hug the breath out of him too.

Pressing her body up from the concrete shelf, she began to slide forward as a flicker of movement caught out of the corner of her eye made her freeze and turn in its direction. There, in the darkness upon the opposite shelf as she, something moved in the shadows. She saw the glint of eyes, and watched as shadows moved within the darkness, hinting at its size and shape. There was something there, and it was watching them. She wanted to scream but couldn't find the air. She wanted to climb down the wall but found herself frozen, her body unwilling to cooperate. For that instant she could do nothing but watch as it moved awkwardly through the darkness towards the opposite end of the cement structure.

Again and again she tried to make out its shape, watching as it appeared that it was leaving. Down to the end of the shelf it maneuvered amongst the darkness. But it didn't leave. Instead, reaching the farthest corner from her it turned and backed into the corner, its reflective eyes peering back at her across the darkened distance. There it waited. Unmoving. Unblinking. It stared. Sam willed her own body to move.

Never taking her eyes off the creature she rolled over the edge of the shelf and slid down upon her back to the roadway below. Instantly Jack and Will were upon her, pulling her up and off the ground and into their arms but it brought no comfort. Not now.

Raising her arm, she thrust out a finger towards the thing that still watched, and finally managed to stammer.

"There. There in the dark. Something is there, Jack. It's watching us."

"What?" Jack asked, as he spun to peer in the direction of her finger.

Though she still felt stiff as the effects of fear held her in place, Jack released her and lowered Will to the ground before turning to have a closer look. She wanted to warn him against it, but couldn't manage the words. Something within her warred with her impulse to scream and vent the fear out, telling her to let Jack go and things would be fine, but she didn't trust it. On Jack walked, slowly towards the concealed eyes.

Darkness outside the underpass grew thicker by the moment and here, under the road above, was becoming nearly impenetrable. But still Jack moved for a better look. Watching as he neared the end of the tunnel, Sam saw him pick something off of the ground before leaning forward as if to try and peer into the blackness. Then, as the scream broke from both her and Will's lungs, the watcher lunged from its concealment to kick off of one of the great cement girders above, before launching out into the blackness of the night and vanishing.

Startled beyond anything she could ever recall, Sam felt her heart trying to hammer its way out of her chest as she reached up to cover her mouth that, though soundless, still remained open. Will trembled, clutching to her leg, just as startled as she. Away went her fear, and in its place an odd calm washed over her as she looked down to the boy who clutched at her.

"It's OK now, baby. Whatever it was, it's gone. Jack chased it away."

Though Will didn't reply, he was breathing heavily but fine, and Sam brushed her fingers through his hair to calm him as Jack retraced his steps towards them.

"What the heck was that?" her older brother asked.

Sam shook her head in reply. Her mind couldn't make sense of what she had seen. At least, what she thought she had seen.

* * * * *

Will had to pee again. But not now, not with *that* thing out there. Nope. He was gonna wait and hold it as long as he could. Maybe forever. It didn't matter now.

Wanting to know what *they* thought about it, he began listening to Jack and Sam's conversation.

"I think it was a monkey or something," Jack said, already leading them away from the underpass.

"A monkey? Like a chimp or something? Cause that thing was bigger than a monkey," Sam replied after a moment.

They walked as they talked, though slower than they had done over the previous days, and Will wondered what kind of monkey looked like that. He'd been to the zoo lots of times and never seen a monkey like that, even if he couldn't tell exactly what it had looked like. But, instead of interrupting, he kept his opinions to himself.

"Maybe a baboon or chimp, I dunno. It moved like a monkey anyway, but I didn't see any fur. Did you?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so, but it was so fast and it's dark."

"Yeah I know, but I was pretty close and it looked weird, like skin but different. You know?"

"Maybe it got burned or something or maybe radiation made it lose all its hair?" Sam offered.

"Just more questions, I guess," said Jack. "But we need to move. You guys screamed really loud. The rider might have heard you, and who knows what or who else might have heard?"

And with that Will gave his hand to Sam, and through the darkness they took to the median of the interstate and turned west away from the city and the rider.

Though he didn't want another run in with the monkey thing or the rider, it was only about an hour later when Will just couldn't go any further. Shaking his hand free from Sam's, he dropped his book bag and began running towards the nearest abandoned car. He heard Sam giggle while he peed but it didn't matter. At least it didn't feel like his tummy was going to explode anymore. But the problem with peeing was that now that his bladder wasn't full, he was hungry again. He knew they needed to keep going. Jack kept on saying it. But they had been moving all day and now it was night and they hadn't eaten since breakfast, and Will was certain if he didn't eat soon his stomach would swallow another one of his organs.

"Guys?" Will asked.

"Yeah, buddy?" Jack replied.

"I'm hungry."

"I know, little man. Me too. But we need to keep going a little longer. Eat your Skittles while we walk and when we find a safe place I'll cook us something."

That was good enough for Will. Candy now and hot food later? Yup. That would do it. He thrust his hand into this pocket, pulling out the twisted red, plastic bag and untwisting it carefully he tipped his head back and poured a mouthful of candies into his already watering mouth. Whoever invented candy was a genius and Will hoped one day he could thank that person face to face. If he or she hadn't died in the event.

Tramping along through the grass for several more hours, it had to be sometime near midnight when Jack approached the remains of some sort of delivery truck on the shoulder of the road. It was a tall thing as Will approached it with his siblings, and he looked up at it, wondering what it had been used for. An air conditioner-looking box protruded from part of the back of the truck that was separate from the cab. It reminded Will of a moving truck, except for the air conditioner.

Rounding the back of the truck they found it closed, and Will watched as Jack reached up and worked the handle, thrusting the wide door upwards. Looking inside they found the truck nearly empty, containing a wooden pallet and a cart used for moving boxes.

“Looks like we found ourselves a room for the night,” Sam said.

Before he even knew what was happening, Sam lifted him up and placed him in the back of the truck before she used her hands on the floor and hopped up, pulling herself over the edge too. Seconds later Jack was inside, and handing Sam his pack, he turned and pulled the door down behind them. Fortunately there was a handle on the inside too, because Will heard the door click when it closed.

After a moment to move the pallet, Will helped Jack and Sam pull out their cooking supplies and the jar of spaghetti sauce along with a couple other cans of goods they had managed to scavenge along the way, and Jack went to work opening cans as Sam set up their small camp burner and pot. That done, they allowed Will to pour in the sauce and vegetables and he watched as they were all mixed together and the smell of it all began to fill the air as his tummy growled over and over and over.

It could have been because of all the walking, or because he was starving, but he barely tasted his food as he ate from one of the emptied cans with a spoon from the security vault. It wasn't anything special. Just some veggies and some sauce, but it tasted like heaven, and Will finished all that was left while Sam began painting her face.

As Sam and Jack worked to put their supplies away and wipe off their dishes as best they were able, Will laid down on the metal floor of the truck's box and wondered about the monkey creature they had seen. It had long legs for a monkey, and he hadn't seen a tail either. He would have to remember to ask Sam and Jack about it when they weren't busy.

Chapter 12

Jack awoke and immediately regretted it, hoping sleep would claim him once more. With his muscles in knots he struggled to calm them, stretching which appendages he was able and trying to relax those he was not. His head pounded like there was a drum between his ears, and no matter what he did, no amount of the pain subsided. With muscles clenching in painful agony, he reached out to his bag and felt through its contents. With his fingers wrapping instinctively around the bottle, he pulled it from the canvas bag and using his teeth twisted off the top.

Cool water poured into this mouth and throat, and just moments after swallowing several mouthfuls he could actually feel the change spreading over his body. Water. His body needed water, and a lot of it. But there wasn't a lot to be had. No. For now he would have to sip and conserve.

Laying upon the cold metal floor he found that the sensation reminded him of the vault back home, but at least *there* he could drink all the water he wanted. Even if it had tasted funny and been discolored at the end. A prisoner in his own body, Jack was forced to wait until his cramping muscles relaxed before pushing his thoughts of water aside and sitting up.

Giving both Sam and Will a shake he woke them, allowing them to get their bearings before he raised the door to their hiding place a few inches and pressed his face to the floor to look outside. By all appearances it had rained during the night as every surface shone with the reflection of that element which his body desired. But all in all, nothing appeared different and so far as he could tell, they were alone.

Shoving the door open the rest of the way, he swung his sore legs over the edge and hopped down to the edge of the street below. The world was different now that it was light outside. Sure, they had walked on the grass median the day before, but it had become dark hours and hours before they had stopped walking. Where in the city and just beyond there had been only charred and burned stumps of once magnificent trees, now, having traveled further from the city, the scenery was much, much different. Looking about him he was surprised to find that the forest south of the interstate was intact and trees flourished, their leaves turning off color with the coming of fall. Trees were alive. The world wasn't destroyed. Maybe only the city had been consumed in whatever catastrophe had transpired. It was something to hope for, anyway. And hope he did.

Carefully and silently he crept to the corner of the truck, and peered back the way they had come the night before. Nothing moved. No one followed. Sighing to himself, Jack turned back to the pair of faces that watched him for any sign of danger. It was odd how he had taken on this role. They depended on him. They expected him to know what to do, where to go, and in all honesty, Sam was likely more educated about half of this stuff than he was. She was the good student. She could read things once and recite them years later. But it wasn't her job to protect them or lead them. It was his. Dad had given it to him.

Reaching up to run his fingers through his too long hair, Jack pulled his hood over his head. The morning was both cool and damp and smelled oddly like worms. It was a day they would usually stay indoors, all gray and miserable, but they didn't have the luxury now. Their supplies were dangerously low again. They needed to find a place that could sustain them for a while and for right now that place was Grandma's house. They needed to move. Jack felt like something was coming and he didn't want to be here when it came.

Waving both Sam and Will to him, he watched as they gathered their packs and swung their legs over the edge of the truck's box just as he had done. Reaching up, he grabbed Sam by the waist and helped her to the ground before snatching Will up just under his arms. Twirling once, with his little brother smiling in his arms, he placed him on the ground beside their sister and looked them both in the eyes.

“We have to keep moving today. We don’t know if the rider is still looking for us or if I threw him off for good. We need food and water, badly. If we hurry I think we can make it to Grandma’s by tonight. Think you can do it, champ?” Jack asked Will.

With another smile and a nod he had his answer, and turning he led them back into the grass and away from the truck. It was only a few hundred yards when Sam smacked him in the back of the head, grinning like a fool at him with her dark eye shadow and lipstick.

“What was that for?”

“Cause you’re an idiot. Well, actually we both are.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked, reaching up to shove her away by her shoulder.

“It rained last night, genius. We need water, even have bottles, but didn’t think about collecting rain water?”

He *was* an idiot. All around them were heaps of abandoned cars that were warped or burned and on their surfaces, at least some of them, were areas where the water was pooling. Sure it was murky and stained dark by ash residue, but it was fresh water. Better than nothing. Within an hour, all of their empty bottles were refilled with almost clean water. For Jack, at least on the water situation, things were looking up.

* * * * *

It was midday when Sam thought she had heard the sounds of hooves carried upon the breeze that gusted from time to time, threatening another storm. The day had grown steadily colder, the wind picking up and changing direction over the hours. Now it blew steadily from the north, carrying the smell of ash and decay. Though they had been careful all day to keep moving swiftly and dodge any areas where they might leave tracks upon the ground, she doubted the rider would give up looking for them, though she didn’t know why.

Hearing the sound upon the wind the first time, she swore to herself that she had been mistaken, but even so she focused on listening more intently in case it came again. And it did. This time, more distinct than the last, she heard the falls of the horse’s hooves upon the road, and looking to Jack she knew it had not been her imagination. There, etched upon his face that looked at her for the same reason, was a mix of shock and fear that she knew mimicked her own features. The sound came again and Will looked up at them. They had all heard it now. There was no mistaking it. The rider was coming.

Looking all about them for any sign of the rider, they began picking up pace and grabbing Jack’s arm she pointed off to their left, to the trees beside the interstate. He nodded and led them off course, aiming for the forest beyond. Grandma lived in these woods, though miles and miles away. She wondered how long they would have to hide in the woods, though she didn’t wonder long.

Sam led Will alongside Jack and over the two lanes of interstate from the median. Within seconds they plunged down the hillside and into the trees beyond. Under the canopy of the forest felt like a different world altogether. Leaving behind the ash and destruction was a nice change, considering that someone was searching for them with ill intentions. Here and there ferns gathered amongst the

great trunks of old trees. Every time the wind gusted, droplets of water fell from the branches above to rain down on them and Sam discovered a problem they hadn't anticipated before. Here, like the paved roads covered in slimy ash residue in and around the city, was a surface that marked their passing with ease. Every step they took disrupted the fallen layer of leaves upon the ground and in several locations the ground was so moist they left tracks as they passed. If the rider found their trail, they would be easier to follow now that they had left the hard packed, manmade surfaces.

There was less light in the forest, much of it blocked out by the canopy of trees above, but even so, one didn't need much light to follow an obvious trail. Sam could only hope that the rider missed their trail and continued on down the interstate in search of them. Or even better, she hoped the rain would come and wash all evidence of their passing away. But her hopes were quickly dashed when a horse neighed in the distance behind them. He was gaining on them.

"Run," Jack said with a determined look on his face.

Sam didn't hesitate. Making sure Will understood with a look, she began to pick up her speed, letting him set a pace for her that his smaller legs were comfortable with. On they ran. Again. Oh how she despised running. Sure it was great for her booty and abs, not to mention the definition in her legs, but really? Couldn't they just catch a break?

For an hour they continued moving as fast as Will could go, hearing their pursuer from time to time as a storm settled in above them. Though they needed to keep going, Sam watched as Jack slid to a stop just a few dozen yards ahead, holding out his hands in warning as she guided Will to slow also. There, in the ground at Jack's feet, was a small chasm in the ground about the size of her old bed, back home, where she wished she would just wake up this very instant. But she knew that wasn't going to happen. Sadly, this wasn't just a dream.

"Why don't we just go around it, Jack?" Sam asked, both out of breath and aggravated.

"I have a plan. We can't run forever."

And just like that the storm broke above them as lightning flashed in the distance. Wind whipped through the trees, howling a mournful sound as water was caught up in its grasp to lash at Sam's face. Nodding her understanding to Jack, she turned to Will and pulled his hood up and over his head, guiding him away from the hole so there were no accidents.

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Rain poured down through the trees, seeming to dance and sway in the wind in all different directions before striking the ground in a strange symphony of sounds that only a forest could make. Here and there lightning flashed through the trees, casting shadows that seemed to move with lives of their own as thunder rumbled in the heavens, shaking the ground beneath them. But Will paid all of it scant attention. Instead, he watched as Sam and Jack worked furiously in the storm to create a trap.

Gathering limbs, his brother and sister began lacing them together across the opening in the ground. It was slow going at first, trying to find branches stout enough to span the distance, but weak enough to give beneath the rider when he

crossed, but as Jack and Sam worked, their pace increased and before long the hole was all but covered. Unfortunately, it was quite obvious.

Lighting flashed and with it shadows danced all around them, but Will stayed focused on his siblings. He hated storms. Next came leaves, lots of leaves, which Jack and Sam piled in a thin layer atop the boughs they had used to weave their trap with. With the rain and wind, the leaves were quickly laid flat just like those everywhere else, and those that were caught up in the wind were carried off, hiding all signs of tampering. Still, however, Jack wasn't done.

As Sam came to retrieve him, Will watched Jack drag two large branches into place on either side of their trap, making a funnel that led to the hole. Then, dragging his feet, he left an obvious trail up to the hole before skirting around it and doing the same upon the other side. Thunder rolled across the sky, causing Will to jump slightly, but it was not the thunder that scared him. Even after the thunder faded to nothing, the sound of thrumming still sounded, and it was getting closer. The rider was nearly on top of them. Will began to run.

With Jack and Sam to either side of him, Will tried his best to run faster than ever before, but with the wet leaves and uneven ground he found himself struggling just to stay upright half of the time. Try as he might to avoid it, he slipped and fell several times, but fought the urge to cry each time and ignored whatever pain came with the fall. Jack and Sam needed him to be like them, strong and fast, and he was trying so hard. That was, at least, until he heard the scream.

It wasn't the scream of a person, though it was joined by a shrieking panicked yell of a man. No. This was the scream of a fear or pain-stricken animal that was innocent. One that didn't understand what was happening or why something had just happened to it. One that was hurt and afraid. It was the spine-tingling scream of the rider's horse, joined with the fearful yell of the rider himself in the distance behind them. They had found Jack's trap. Will knew all along that Jack would catch the man. Jack was smart and strong, just like Dad.

Though he expected them to go back, Jack and Sam led him on through the woods, continuing in the same direction they had been going for hours. Eventually the rain stopped, not that it mattered with all of his clothes soaked, but it was a nice change, he supposed. Through the evening they kept moving, though slower than earlier in the day, and by nightfall Will could hardly keep walking. His eyes were heavy and his legs felt like lead weights. When he fell, twice in a row and tried his best to get up the second time but couldn't, Jack picked him up and they kept moving. On and on. Will tried to stay awake. He tried to see where they would go or what would happen, but his eyes betrayed him. He should have known they weren't his friends. Every time he ever wanted to keep them open, like on Christmas Eve when Santa was supposed to come, they never did. Never. They always closed and put him to sleep. This time was no different.

Chapter 13

It was early morning when they reached the road. If Jack was right, this was the first road that ran parallel to the interstate, meaning if they simply crossed it and kept going straight, the next road would be Grandma's road. But he couldn't just cross it and keep going. He was exhausted. Sam was exhausted. She could barely walk. All of them needed sleep, and a place to dry. If they kept on going wet and tired like this they would get sick. Jack looked up and down the road, locating a driveway just a few hundred yards to the west and turning he guided Sam towards it, with Will still in his arms.

Though they walked, or trudged, more or less, it took little time to reach the driveway and looking down it Jack saw a man-made structure that had survived the event. It was not the house. No. Walking down the driveway, Jack looked at the charred remains of the house that had collapsed and fallen into what had been its basement. Instead, the building he had his eyes on was a small metal storage shed that seemed to be completely intact.

With his hopes of finding Grandma's house intact dashed, he hung his head and dragged himself towards the small metal building. Sliding the door open, he inspected the prefabricated building that before the event could have been purchased at any home improvement store. It was maybe ten feet across and ten feet deep with storage shelves along one wall. In the corner was a walk-behind push mower and on one wall were shovels and other yard implements, but Jack didn't care. Placing Will in the center of the floor, he watched as Sam stumbled through the door like some kind of zombie and he slid the door closed behind them. Without any form of latch or handle, Jack crossed the small space in two steps and grabbed a pair of shovels. Wedging them against the door on either side to prevent it from sliding, he did his best to seal them in, knowing all the while that if someone wanted in, they could easily find a way. But there was no help for it. They couldn't go on any further.

Lying himself beside Will, he grinned at Sam opposite of him, who was already snoring lightly, and closed his own eyes to join his siblings in sleep.

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Waking with a start and gasping for breath, Jack blinked away the image of the rider latching onto him from behind like he had done in the city. With his heart racing he wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, looking all about him, noting that light entered the building through the door's poor weather seals. Unsure how long he had slept, and not daring to find himself back in the nightmare he had just escaped, Jack sat up and pulled a bottle of water from his pack. Drinking thirstily, he returned the cap to the bottle and debated waking Sam and Will to continue their search for Grandma's house.

Unsure if it was morning the next day, or evening the same day he had entered the storage shed, he decided against waking his siblings, allowing them to rest while he went out to explore. Rising cautiously, he removed both shovels from the door and placed them against the wall. Carefully, inch by painstaking inch, he slid the door to the side just enough to pass through the opening before turning to close it once more.

Looking about he found there was little to see but the collapsed wreckage of the house. Where there had once been a manicured lawn and flower beds, now long

grass and weeds covered everything, creeping even across the driveway in places where cracks had formed in the concrete. Nearing what was once a home, Jack peered down into the cinder block basement that was once its foundation. Piled amongst the fallen burned timbers were the remains of a bedframe and some springs from mattresses. The burned shells of several electronic devices littered the debris, but more or less it was mostly just a loose pile of charred wood and broken dreams. Jack wondered how many people had lived in the house. Had they known this was coming? Did they try to hide from whatever the event was? Were they alive somewhere out there? Everywhere he looked were more questions without answers and Jack realized that more than food and water, what he and his siblings needed were the answers to their questions.

Carefully picking a path, Jack climbed down into the basement that looked like an oversized fire pit, using the charred pieces of lumber as hand and foot holds as he made his way into what had been the basement. Nearing an old shelf that still stood in the corner of the large concrete room, Jack spied the rows of jars upon it that he had hoped to find. Though many were broken from the impact of falling debris from above, it appeared that several remained in one piece.

Clearing a few fallen bits of timber that remained between him and the shelf, Jack began sifting through the mason jars of varying sizes upon the shelves. Upon inspection, the vast majority of the jars on the shelves showed signs of cracks, but many more had blackened substances within, though any vinegar or preservative solution was gone, having leaked or been evaporated away by the heat of the fire.

One by one Jack picked through the jars, discarding them again and again. It took several minutes to inspect them all and sort through them, but when it was all said and done he managed to find two intact jars of pickled eggs on the bottom shelf, nearest the concrete wall behind it. Placing each of the smaller jars into the pockets on his sweatshirt, Jack turned back the way he had come. He had managed to find breakfast. Odd breakfast, but breakfast nonetheless.

* * * * *

Samantha woke abruptly to find herself being shaken quite violently by hands entirely too close to her throat to be comfortable. Her eyes popping open, and nearly bulging from her head, she tried to make sense of her surroundings as it bounced around, Will's face coming into and out of her view as she rocked this way and that. Somehow making the connection between her shaking body and Will's face, against the urge to vomit, Sam tried to create words.

"Wi... Wi... Will... st... st... stop it!" she finally managed.

Fortunately he listened as her world slowly spun and bounced to a stop, with Will's small face just an inch from her own as he stared at her a serious look upon his little features.

"Jack is gone. I looked outside and don't see him," Will admitted.

Something must have begun shaking her again because it felt like the floor had just dropped out from beneath her as the urge to vomit returned and the world began spinning again. Had the rider escaped the chasm in the woods and tracked them? Had he taken Jack? And then her panicking stopped. She couldn't afford to lose control. Will sat there looking at her, his breathing coming in wisps and hiccups. Sam took a deep breath.

Sitting up more suddenly than she should have as her world settled around her, Sam looked to Will and reaching up, she grasped both of his shoulders.

“Honey, I don’t know where Jack is, but we’ll go look together, OK?”

He nodded, words having become too complicated. Pulling him close she hugged him, though not tightly, afraid she might push him into an attack. He was already worried. It wasn’t like Jack to just leave them. Not unless something had happened. But she couldn’t focus on that. Not now. She had to focus on Will.

“OK, pumpkin, you need to settle down so we can go look for him.”

“K.”

“No, I mean it, Will. You take some deep breaths and calm down.”

She watched him nod and hiccup his way through a few attempts at deep breaths, before his breathing finally calmed over a span of several minutes. Once she felt he was in good enough condition to go outside, she picked up one of the shovels leaning against the wall and pushed the door open, screaming and nearly peeing herself, dropping the shovel, as a face just outside the door yelled *boo* at her.

Grinning like a fool, she slapped him in the chest, cursing Jack for his childish behavior. Will, who had been close to an anxiety induced asthma attack minutes before burst into laughter, clapping one hand over his mouth and the other around his mid-section as he doubled over in a fit of giggles. Sam wasn’t about to take such abuse and so she tackled Will to the floor and began tickling him as Jack stood in the doorway laughing at both of them.

Not wanting to push Will too hard, Sam relented in her tickle attack as both she and Will turned their attention back to the door. There Jack stood with a small jar in each hand. Though a year ago she would have turned her nose up at the pickled eggs, something she had tried and detested exactly one time. Now, they strangely looked delicious. She couldn’t wait to bite into one. It was strange wanting to eat the eggs, but stranger that she knew she didn’t like them and still really wanted to eat them.

After the three of them devoured an entire jar of pickled eggs, they packed up their bags and each of them shouldered their stuff before walking out of the shed. The sky was clear and the cold northern wind had ended. Sam couldn’t help but feel that this day would be better than those behind them.

* * * * *

Will, although having to spend another whole day walking, was rather enjoying the mood of the day now that they had full bellies, and both Jack and Sam seemed happier. He walked or skipped between them, beneath the trees above, just enjoying their company and the scenery as they passed. He had started the morning by counting squirrels, something that he hadn’t seen until now. There were birds too, and once he was certain he had heard a dog bark in the distance, but didn’t hear it again.

After tiring of counting squirrels he looked to the trees, admiring the leaves that were turning multitudes of colors, something he had only witnessed in his box of crayons for months while they were locked in the vault. Now, color was all around him, a swirl the like of which he couldn’t remember aside from cartoons. He sure

missed cartoons. Robots and talking sea creatures and animals sharing bodies. Not having cartoons was a bummer.

It was shortly after noon when his stomach began growling, but not in a hungry way. Feeling the pressure build, his tummy really starting to hurt, he picked up his pace, moving ahead of both Jack and Sam by several steps before giving into his body's urge and releasing the pressure in his tummy. It took only a couple seconds to see the devastating effects of his biological attack.

Sam and Jack had been talking about what they might find over the days to come when, turning around, Will watched as Sam's face scrunched up and Jack raised his sleeve to cover his face. Sam tried to say something but her breath got stuck, and she gagged. Twice. Will couldn't help himself. He began laughing hysterically, watching as Sam tried and failed to recover several more times before her rendering of speechlessness was overcome by her stubbornness. He was still laughing when she tackled him again.

Tickling and pinching, Sam climbed atop him, pinning him to the ground as he struggled and thrashed against her attack.

"Stop, Sam," Will laughed as he tried to dislodge her with his legs.

"Never, you stinky little monster," Sam replied, redoubling her effort.

"You asked for it," Will warned, and tightened down his tummy, releasing another blast.

Back Sam rocked, tipping off of him, but now it was a joint attack. Rolling to his side so he could regain his feet, Will watched as Jack grabbed Sam's arms, pinning her down.

"Come and get her back, buddy. Tickle her till she turns purple."

Will didn't delay. Half walking, half lunging, he climbed atop Sam's legs and began tickling her ribs as she took a turn at thrashing and kicking amongst her laughs, screams, and giggles. He didn't know how long they played, but it felt great. Before the vault they hardly ever found time to play with him. It seemed his pickled egg ammunition had run out, and like all things, it couldn't last forever, and soon enough, or perhaps too soon, they were back on their way in search of Grandma's road.

They found it only three hours later, stepping out of the forest onto a narrow paved road that wound both east and west away from them through the trees. Nearly straight across from them a mailbox thrust up out of the ground beside the road, declaring the address as one twenty one, Sherwood Lane. Grandma's house was only a short way away, being the only address in the two hundred range. Turning left, Jack led them down the street, each of them falling silent. Will worried that Grandma's house would be gone like the one they stayed at last night. He watched as they passed two more mail boxes. They were getting closer.

Remembering Grandma's hardwood floors and green curtains, Will walked head down as they followed the quiet road. Nearly every memory he had of Grandma's was a good memory. There wasn't any computers or internet at Grandma's, so Jack and Sam always played with him there. They always had holidays at Grandma's, and holidays not only meant that he didn't have to go to school, but he also got spoiled and Grandma kept a dish of candy on the coffee table. It couldn't be gone. It just couldn't.

It took them only twenty minutes to reach the drive at the end of which was a mailbox with the flag upon it still in the up position. Turning down the driveway they all moved slower than they had before, but in the end it was inevitable. Rounding the bend in the driveway, the trees parted revealing their first view of the house they had spent countless holidays in.

Chapter 14

Stepping into the clearing that had once been Grandma's and Grandpa's yard, Jack surveyed the scene with knots in his stomach. Though he had imagined himself prepared for the worst, expecting another pile of cinders, ash, and rubble, in truth no one could prepare for what they found. Reaching to Sam, he wrapped one arm around her shoulders, pulling her close as Will clung to their legs and together all three of them took it in.

It was not the total loss that Jack had expected, but neither was the house untouched. Though the whole of the front porch remained, and much of the façade to the right of the front door still stood, the second floor had collapsed entirely and the whole left side of the building was gone. It, like everything they had seen so far, had burned, though the trees around it seemed untouched.

Here and there charred pieces of furniture and blackened lumber protruded out of the rubble, some of it still clinging to bits of colored paint. The house was gone and with the discovery their memories would always be tainted. Jack wished he could have protected Sam and Will from this, especially after seeing the devastation of their own apartment. Now it felt as if there were no more safe havens for them to run to. Everything they had known had been taken. It was literally all gone. But even though both Will and Sam were crying, Jack didn't let himself have that luxury. He had to focus. It was his job to look after them and keep them all safe, and he reminded himself of why they had come.

Sure they had hoped to stay at Grandma's, in a familiar place, and wait for news of rescue crews, or whatever, but that was not what had brought them here. It was the cellar that had brought them. The promise of food. Not to mention the well out near the garden that had a hand pump. Food and water. The only essentials they needed to keep going. If they could load up on supplies they had a chance to find out what had happened. They had the means to keep moving and find someplace safe where they could stay, at least for a while. He reached down and hugged both Sam and Will into him tightly.

"Guys, I know it sucks. But we can't stay here like we hoped. Maybe a day or two, but that's it."

"Where are we going to go?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," Jack admitted. "But if we can fill up our water bottles again, and maybe find some food, we can keep going, and as long as we keep going I know that we will find someplace safe."

"OK, Jack," Sam said, wiping away her tears and smearing her makeup further.

Poor little Will tried to steel his resolve too, but Jack could see he was struggling. He needed something to get his mind off of all this negativity. It wasn't good for him.

"Hey, Will. Everything looks so different with the lawn all grown up and stuff. Think you could help me find the doors to the cellar?"

The small boy nodded, and wiping away his tears with the back of his sleeves, he released their legs, turning to look out past the remains of the house. Then he was off, half running, half bounding through the tall grass that for him was nearly chest level. The cellar had been an old creation, made of field stone and mortar, separate from the actual house and underground. Will hoped it had survived whatever had happened.

As they worked their way past the house and into what would have been the back yard, Jack followed Will, knowing full well where the old root cellar was, but letting his brother guide them. Looking back, Sam followed behind, letting him blaze a trail for her through the weeds, her face a mask of emotionlessness that made her look older for some reason. Turning back, he watched as Will vanished into the weeds ahead.

"Found it!" Will yelled as Jack approached.

"Good job, buddy," Jack complimented.

"Very good," Sam added, coming up beside them.

The double doors to the cellar were old and wooden, hinged from either side of the structure and meeting in the middle of the entryway. Vines and weeds had begun to creep across their surface, partially camouflaging the entrance, but it was there, and it was whole. Kicking away the weeds, Jack cleared away any debris from the handles and found much to his disappointment, a hindrance to his plan. There, across the handles of the cellar, looped a short length of chain with a padlock securing it in place. The cellar was still there, but they were going to have to work to get it open. Reaching down he tugged on the lock and then the chain, before bracing one foot against the door and pulling as hard as he was able. But even against his best efforts, the doors remained secured.

"Looks like we're gonna need something to pry these open," Jack said.

"Like a crowbar or something?" Will asked.

"That would work," Jack replied. "But anything like a shovel or metal pipe would probably work," he added, remembering some such pipes jutting out of the remains of the house.

"I saw some pipe!" Sam exclaimed.

"Me too," Will said.

It didn't take any urging. Both Sam and Will turned and rushed off towards what was left of Grandma's house, and Jack followed to lend them a hand if needed. Rounding the house, they reached the corner where once would have been the bathroom. Though the old cast iron tub could be seen down in the crawl space filled with bits of burned wood and ash, the pipes that had fed it still thrust out of the jumble below within easy reach from the outside of the foundation.

Reaching the pipes, both Sam and Will each grabbed one and Jack watched as they pulled and yanked, trying to twist the pipes this way and that to no avail. They were going to have to work together if they wanted to succeed.

* * * * *

Sam pushed and pulled the slick piece of once grey pipe that was now coated in ash and some slimy substance she didn't care to think about. Though it refused to come free from whatever held it, each time she pushed or pulled she could feel it shift slightly. If only she were stronger.

"Hey, guys, mind helping your weak girly sister over here?" she asked sarcastically, playing her best damsel in distress. "It moves if you pull on it."

That was all it took for both boys to lend their hands and muscles to the task. At first they all three tried pulling on the pipe, and it did move, but only slightly. Then working together, they pushed the pipe and watched as it leaned away from them by several inches. With what Sam felt was proof that they were making progress, she and her brothers worked the pipe back and forth as it moved more and more in each direction. Before long they were moving it rapidly and then, with a snapping sound from somewhere down in the mound of burnt memories, it broke free as they all three tumbled over backwards in a tangled mess of arms and legs that had them all laughing at themselves.

Working to disentangle themselves they each regained their feet, and Sam grasped the pipe and pulled it up and out of the mess below. It wasn't overly long, perhaps a foot taller than she. And with satisfaction in her heart she carried it back to the cellar where her older brother accepted it, before wedging it into the chain and beginning to pry.

For several long minutes he tried this angle and that, moving the pipe about in search of a better point to leverage the chain, but no matter what he tried he couldn't manage to get it to work. The chain kept sliding down the pipe, or the wood of the doors bowed, it seemed as if they were destined to fail. Until Sam remembered an old movie she had seen where prisoners used their shirts to bend the bars of their cells and escape.

"Hang on, Jack. What if you put the bar through the chain like this?" she said, taking the pipe from him and demonstrating. "Then we twist it round and round until it breaks?"

"You're a genius!" Jack said, smacking his forehead.

Jack took the free end of the pipe and together they began twisting it until the chain became tight. Bending over, it was uncomfortable to manage, let alone get any leverage, so Sam got down on her hands and knees, waiting as Jack followed her lead and again they began to push round and round as Will stood a safe distance away to avoid being hurt should something go flying when the chain broke. But it didn't break. Instead, the handles on either door began to bend closer and closer together as the pipe became harder and harder to twist and before they knew it, both Sam and Jack were panting, having come to a complete stop, unable to twist it further.

Just when Sam was about to give up, Will jumped down beside her and wrapped his little hands around the pipe and together all three gave a great shove as the wood of the door began to rip. Shoving again, the bolts for the handles began to tear free from the doors and with a final heave one handle came free entirely with a loud crack, like the sound of a gun that echoed through the trees around them. The door was open. Sam collapsed to her back panting as Will stood up to look down at her with a big smile on his face.

"I knew I wasn't too little to help."

“No, you sure weren’t,” she smiled back at him.

Sitting up again, she watched as Jack removed the pipe and tossed it aside before looking at her somewhat impatiently. Rising, she grasped one door while he reached for the other and together they pulled the doors open, letting them fall back to rest upon their hinges. Looking down into the small stone and mortar room, Sam could not help but smile, her eyes beginning to water slightly at the sight. There, down in the cellar, was the first place they had seen that was completely unchanged. Shelf upon shelf sat stocked with canned food in mason jars, and all of Grandpa’s yard tools were hung nicely upon another wall. It was exactly as she remembered it the last time she had been down here.

Looking across the shelves she could see the product of that last visit. Sam let the tears flow as she witnessed the jars of jam she and her grandma had made with help from Mom. There, down in the small confines of an old root cellar, were the clearest memories she could recall in that moment of her mother, the context of all her other memories having been destroyed by fire and ashes. But this... This remained untainted, unaffected, and unchanged by whatever had happened. Not only did they have plenty of food, but here were shelves and shelves of stored memories. Sam sobbed loudly as Will came to hug at her waist. Jack just looked at her with a sad smile, his own eyes blurry with moisture.

* * * * *

Food glorious food. Will’s tummy growled. He had spent a lot of time helping Grandpa in the garden when he visited, and as such he had been down here lots of times. Climbing down the wide wooden steps, he ran his fingers across the edge of the shelves, eyeing all the jars of yummy goodness the womenfolk had made for them. That’s what Grandpa called Mom and Grandma. Womenfolk. It was kind of a funny name, but Will liked it. Grandpa was funny like that. He had told Will lots of funny things, and showed him how to do stuff that Mom had said he was too little for. Grandpa always argued, and taught him how to do it anyway. He missed Grandpa.

Looking at all the food, he remembered when he had asked his grandfather why they bothered to make all this food to save in the cellar. To which he was told that it was in case there was an emergency, or if the stores ran out of food. Will had thought the idea of stores with no food ridiculous, but now he saw just how smart Grandpa was. Old people might not know much about computers or driving fast like everyone else, but they knew stuff other people didn’t. Will was sure of that.

Shelf after shelf, Will inspected the stores of food, from candied yams to raspberry jam and pickled venison. Not his favorite foods, he would admit, but they looked darn good right now. Here there were beans and there was a shelf of strawberry preserves. So far as Will could tell they could live here for a long time. And maybe, just maybe, what Jack and Sam said was wrong, and Mom and Dad *would* come back and find them right here. Jack might have given up, maybe Samantha too, but not Will. No way. No how. Dad went and saved Mom, and they would be coming back. He just knew it.

Looking up to both Jack and Sam who both stood there watching him like some sort of manikins, Will picked up a jar of jelly and waited to see if they would

protest. No negativity forthcoming, he twisted the top with all his might until it made a loud popping sound, and the ring and lid both came free. Victory was his.

Without a care, Will dug his fingers down into the jar of jelly, scooping out the yummy sweetness and scraping it off his fingers and into his mouth. Swishing it around with his tongue, he swallowed lump after gooey lump, unable to fight the smile that came with every single bite.

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It was hours later when, with all their bellies filled, they sought out the pump in the yard that produced water for the garden. Finding it in working order, Will had watched as Jack pumped and pumped until finally a trickle of rusty water began to flow. Only a few minutes later, a gush of clear and clean water came out with every motion of the pump's handle, and together they worked to refill and close all of their bottles of water.

Visiting Grandpa's pee-pee tree before going back down to the cellar, Will heard both Sam and Jack discussing leaving, an idea he really didn't like.

"A day or two maybe," Jack said. "But we can't just stay here, we need to go see what else is out there. Find out what happened."

"Jack, we can't take all of this with us. If we leave it behind, who knows what we'll find out there. We can't just think that we'll keep finding everything we need. This could be it. We don't know," Sam argued.

"This can't be it, Sam. We know there are other people. We've seen other people."

"Yeah, people that wanted to drag you off and do God knows what to you," Sam interrupted.

"Yes, they obviously weren't what we had hoped for. But if other people are alive, that means that out there somewhere are *good* people, and a *good* place for us to live with Will."

"I'm not arguing that, Jack. I'm just saying. We have it pretty good right now. Why leave that, when we don't know where to even go? Why not stay and see if we can figure out what happened?"

"Find out how?" This time it was Jack to interrupt.

"Grandma's house. Neighbor's houses. There has to be something. I don't know. The whole world can't just blow up without some evidence as to why."

Will wanted to tell them that he wanted to stay, but he couldn't tell them anything they didn't already know. He didn't like their tones. He didn't like that they didn't agree, but he kept quiet, listening to see where the conversation was going. There was a few moments of silence as a whole range of emotions played across Jack's face, but finally, with a deep sigh, he turned his eyes back to Sam and nodded.

"OK, Sam. You're right. We can stay. At least for a little while. By day we'll go out and see what we can scavenge and what we can learn, and by night we'll stay right here, but we are leaving. We have to leave while there are enough supplies for us to leave with and get us away from here. We can't wait until we run out again."

"OK, Jack," Sam said.

Watching as Sam stood up, Will saw her cross the few feet separating her from his big brother and she hugged him.

“I think that this is best. Let’s get some sleep tonight, and tomorrow we can see what we can find out about what happened,” Sam half whispered.

They were staying. Good.

Chapter 15

The morning had gone better than any over the last few days, and Jack was thankful for it. Waking up, they had all eaten their fill of whatever enticed them, knowing that the day would likely be long and laborious. Once finished, they emerged from the cellar, closing the doors behind them, and approached the ruined remains of Grandma and Grandpa’s house.

Though the building was more or less destroyed, the front porch and part of the front wall of the house remained, and this is where Jack knew they would find some clues to what had happened, if any existed here. The rest of the house had burned, and anything that had any answers had likely burned with it.

Leading his siblings up to the storm door upon the home’s front porch, Jack pried it open, swinging the door wide, its bottom edge dragging the surface of the top step. The whole room had shifted, he supposed, and as he let go of the door it remained open. Cautiously stepping inside the small room, he looked around, seeing what it was and recalling what it had been the last time he had visited.

Both ends of the small porch held a rocking chair that his parents had bought his grandparents at the Amish flea market in Shipshewana. Though their color had changed, probably due to the heat of the fire, they looked rather well preserved. Indoor outdoor carpet stretched across the small space, the far end having shriveled and darkened to a sickly shade of blackish green. Here and there shards of glass littered the floor, but to Jack, all of this was unimportant. What he had hoped he would find, he did find, and here, in the small enclosed porch, were a collection of newspapers in various states of ruin. Most were all but destroyed by the rain that had come through the windows over months and the sun beating down on them, looking like little more than giant spitballs, but others were better preserved.

Looking under the rocking chair to his left, he saw a rolled paper, that although faded, looked dry and protected beneath the chair’s seat. Next to the chair’s rocker, another paper laid, still inside the plastic bag it had been delivered in. Leaving the doorway he approached the two papers that appeared in the best shape, allowing both Sam and Will to enter behind him.

Picking up the newspaper that remained in its plastic, he slid it from the semi-transparent sleeve into his lap. Removing the rubber band that secured it in a roll, he unwound the paper, scanning the top of the front page. The headlines were useless, one article dealing with problems in the Senate, and another about asteroids passing near to earth. Moving on, he scanned further across the page in search of the date. No good. It was printed months before they had been locked in the vault by Dad. Ugh.

Discarding the first newspaper, he looked across the small room to Sam and Will who both carefully worked through papers in far worse shape than those he had chosen. Refocusing himself, he took a deep breath and lifted the other paper, the one that had been under the chair. Unrolling it upon his lap, he found that it was not a whole paper as he had presumed, but just the first few pages of a paper loosely rolled, making it appear bigger than it actually was. Opening it and spreading it across his lap, he found that its condition was much worse than he had hoped as well. Though some of the ink remained, the majority of the page had been a photo that now was too ruined to make out. The text of the articles had all smeared together, proof that although under the chair, water had saturated it on multiple occasions. None of that was what caught his attention though.

With all the small print gone and the large image destroyed, the paper would provide him almost nothing, except for the headline that stretched all the way across the top of the page. It was smeared, and the ink had run, but the print was so large he could still easily distinguish the letters, and a knot formed in his stomach. *IS THIS AN INVASION?*

Over and over he scanned the words, looking all about the page for anything else he could read but nothing else was legible. Flipping the page over and scanning through the next page, the result was the same. All but the main headline on the first page had been washed away. Lost. The answers might have been there months, or maybe even just a few short weeks ago, but they were gone now. Frustrated, he looked up and Sam was staring at him intently, one eyebrow slightly higher than the other, a questioning look upon her face. Turning the paper over, he held it up for her to read for herself as her expression fell, a deep frown taking its place.

* * * * *

An invasion? Sam couldn't believe it. Who would have invaded the United States? Sure, they had no shortage of enemies, she supposed, but none that would dare invade. Nuke maybe, but invade... No way. Unless they nuked first, and then invaded. That would explain a lot, like why the city was destroyed, or why the monkey thing didn't have hair. A nuclear bomb could destroy a city, and the radiation could make an animal's hair fall out. Things were starting to make sense, but not all of it. Where were the people? Or at least their bodies? Who had invaded? Why?

Looking up to Jack, she knew he didn't have the answers. He himself was scouring through the remains of other newspapers upon the floor, hoping to glean something else useful. Returning to her work, Sam carefully began separating the pages of the paper between her knees upon the floor. The first several layers of pages had been ruined and were too wet to work with, but peeling them away, the lower layers still held nearly perfect text. The problem was not the legibility, but the fact that the pages were damp. Moving them, she had to be extremely careful not to tear them to shreds as she pulled the pages apart.

Looking over to her smaller sibling, she found he was doing almost precisely the same procedure as she, and within minutes so too was Jack. Together, all three of them began separating pages, spreading them about to dry, as they worked hour after long hour through the tedium together. Though she didn't make an actual

effort to read any of the pages as she worked, it was impossible to ignore the words that stood out among them, especially headlines. One said *Judgment day has arrived*, and another asked the question, *Is this the end?* There was a smattering of pages that appeared irrelevant or unrelated, but Sam did not bother trying to distinguish any page's importance, deciding instead to just keep working and read what she could when the pages dried.

It was evening when they called it quits, collecting the pages that had dried through the day in an effort to bring them to the cellar with them. In stiff, crumpled piles the various pages were gathered up, and Sam followed both of her siblings back to the cellar. The day had been long and primarily quiet, each of them concentrating on the task at hand, but even so, they spoke enough to decide they would eat before settling in to see what they could learn.

With all of them anxious, however, their meal was short-lived, and before long they were back to the disfigured pages, searching the contents for any answers they could find.

* * * * *

When Will had entered the vault months and months ago he remembered that he had not been the best reader. At school he received extra tutoring, and was making progress, but then the event happened. Months inside a steel box could really change a person, and with nothing much to do inside the vault, Jack and Sam had both read with him, and helped him to sound out hard words, and before they finally opened the door, he could read anything in the vault, and had, multiple times.

Sure he preferred his comic books, or even a couple of the story books that were written for an audience Sam's age, but in this task, Will was excited that not only could he help his brother and sister, but he could read just as good as either of them. This in mind, when his siblings took up their first pages, he too slid one off the top of their pile and began working through its contents. It wasn't long before he discovered something interesting.

Continued from page 1A:

...are undermined by their technological capabilities. With their infrastructure destroyed in every major city, analysts and military advisors say it is time for Europe to throw in the towel and run. At the same time, rumor spreads that Canadian forces, although sustaining heavy losses, have found a way to disrupt the enemy's stealth technology. Could this mean the battle is turning? It has been less than six hours since the attack commenced, and all sources say that this massive strike is likely to spill over onto American soil within hours, not days. We can only pray that our military is up to the task.

—Written by Chief Editor, Mckenzie Rayne

Finishing the article, Will didn't know what to say to Jack or Sam, and without words of his own did the only thing he could think of. He began the article again, this time reading it out loud for his siblings to hear. Glancing up between the sentences he read, he looked over the page to two pairs of transfixed eyes, their expressions frozen, and mouths open in disbelief. After finishing the passage once

more, the cellar fell silent for what seemed an eternity as everyone processed the information.

“Europe, Canada, and the United States? Stealth technology? Who could it have been? The Chinese? But why?” Jack asked no one in particular, continuing on without awaiting a response. “They have been working on stealth for years. They made aircraft, drones, and who knows what else. What if they made stealth long range nukes? They certainly have the manpower. Even the direction makes sense. First Europe and then over the pond to Canada, and then here. It’s like no one saw it coming.”

“Like a blitzkrieg?” Sam asked, referencing the German’s rapid assaults in World War Two.

Will just listened, not knowing anything about most of what they were talking about. He tried to put the pieces together like Sam and Jack had, but it didn’t make sense to him. He didn’t know stuff about China or Canada. All he did know is that he was scared. Europe was attacked first, and Mom was in Europe. Maybe that’s why Dad had to leave them in the vault. Will wished Dad was here now.

Rising to his feet, he crossed the small room with tears running down his cheeks, aiming towards the outstretched arms belonging to Sam, thinking in that moment that nothing could get any worse. But he was wrong. Way wrong.

Chapter 16

Hearing the words that Will had read made Jack feel dizzy, but it seemed to have a deeper effect on the smaller boy, who stood with tears streaming down his face. Watching as Will was collected into Sam’s arms, Jack thought to speak again but decided against it. He and Sam could talk about it after Will was asleep. Turning to help calm and comfort Will, Jack was caught completely off guard when the door to the cellar was ripped open from above, as a cold wind swept through the small room and the darkness of night stared back at him from above with eyes of steely grey.

Like his nightmare the day before, the bearded rider strode out of the darkness with blood in his beard and a tree branch under one arm as a crutch. Though he limped heavily, he carried a shotgun under the other arm that was more than enough warning for Jack to stay still. The man was covered in red brown mud, his duster seemingly having changed colors from black to this new hue, and in the man’s face was a strange look that bordered on disbelief, fear, and anger. Jack did not doubt the severity of the situation.

“You kids are hard to track,” the man said in a deep and sinister tone. “I wouldn’t have found you if it wasn’t for this,” he added, holding up an empty red Skittles wrapper.

Jack cursed their luck as his eyes darted around the room looking for some way to get Sam and Will out, his eyes falling on the shovels and rakes hung neatly on the wall.

“Now now, boy. Let’s not go there again,” the man added, his expression grave before being overcome by a fit of coughs.

Watching the man's shotgun bounce with his coughs, Jack slid across the floor, placing himself between the man and his siblings. If he was going to hurt *them*, he'd have to get through him first. The coughing lasted a few minutes, ending with fresh specks of blood in the man's beard, but he remained blocking their only exit.

"I probably would have missed you again, had it not been for your light there," he said, pointing to Will's police light. "Still, you kids did good. It's no wonder you made it this long all alone. You're resourceful, intelligent, and fast on your feet. You're gonna have to be to keep ahead of them."

Again the man was wracked by coughing. Jack's eyes returned to the wall of tools. If he moved quickly he could get a shovel and hit the man before he knew it was coming. If he wasn't fast enough, it would be another story altogether, and Sam and Will would be all alone. That thought stilled him, causing him to look again to the rider who had been chasing *them* for days. The coughing stopped.

"I realize I may have had the wrong approach the first time I saw you three in Chicago. I wasn't tryin' to hurt ya, though. I was trying to keep you away from them," the man stated.

Jack tried to make sense of the man's words. Who did he mean by them? The Chinese? He wanted to ask, but the man beat him to it, obviously seeing the confusion on his face.

"They have scouts everywhere, finding those of us who are left and picking us off. They have a big force coming this way, that's why me and Charlie were leaving the city. We were trying to scrounge up some supplies when I spotted you three. If I hadn't seen you, and been sent halfway across the city being dragged by my horse, I probably wouldn't have made it. When I got back, looking for Charlie, he had been taken. They got him."

The man kept talking but wasn't saying much and Jack was getting frustrated. He had put together that Charlie had been the man driving the wagon, but who had got him? Who were they? He almost asked, but then the man started talking again.

"They'll be here in a couple days, their scouts are already in the area. Got me one this morning," the man bragged. "You kids can't stay here or they'll find you. Keep going south, head towards St. Louis, I heard once that resistance fighters have a base there. You kids shouldn't be alone. I'll take ya as far as I can, but I ain't gonna make it too far," the man said, bobbing his head towards his leg. "Ya'll did good with that trap back there, but I busted my leg. Had to put down my horse too. I'm sorry if I scared ya, but it had been a long time since I saw any kids, and I just panicked. I didn't want you kids getting caught."

"Wait. What?" Sam asked from behind Jack.

"Yeah, what are you talking about?" Jack asked.

"Whudaya mean, what am I talkin' about?"

"Who are they? And what happened to everything?" Jack demanded to the rider, whose face paled dramatically as his mouth fell slack.

"You mean to tell me that ya'll don't know what's going on? Holy cow. Where have ya'll been? Under a rock?"

"In a security bunker." This time it was Will who spoke up.

“Oh man,” the rider explained. “You kids... Wow,” he said, shaking his head. “Look, I can explain it all on the road, OK? I usually don’t advise traveling at night, that’s when they’re moving around, but you can’t stay here.”

Jack didn’t know what to think. Was it the truth? Could he be a friend? Ally? Was he trying to trick them into leaving to keep all the food for himself? But he said he would come with them... Could they trust him? He had no way to know. He needed more answers.

“Listen, *stranger*,” Jack said, accentuating the word. “I don’t know who you are, or why you have been following us for days, but unless you have some more specific answers, I would prefer you just be on your way.”

“Kid, seriously, there isn’t time. All you need to know is that I am not going to hurt you. I am trying to help. They are coming this way, and I can’t protect you from them. If we had more time we could probably find a way to secure this door and hide from them, but there isn’t time. We have to run, and we have to do it now.”

Jack was beyond aggravated. The man wasn’t telling them anything. Not anything of use. Rising to his feet, Jack reached over to the wall and pulled a shovel down from it, showing the man his seriousness. He wouldn’t wait for the man’s explanations any more, and in that very instant, he realized he wouldn’t have to.

* * * * *

Sam watched and listened to the exchange primarily between her brother and the rider, and felt uneasy beyond belief. She didn’t know how, but she knew what the man was saying was true. They *were* in danger. They *did* need to leave. Regardless of the argument she had given Jack the previous day, now she wanted to leave. *Right now*. But it was too late.

Out of the darkness behind the rider, something leapt upon his back, driving him forward as he tumbled down the stairs with a startled yell. The shotgun discharged, making her ears ring as smoke filled the small space, making everything look surreal. Looking across the floor she clutched Will to her, rolling to cover him as much as she was able with her own body.

When the rider settled at the bottom of the stairs, the thing was on top of him striking and beating him about the chest and face; the rider, barely able to defend himself from the barrage of blows, raised his hands trying to defend himself. The thing atop the rider was odd, and yet familiar. She had seen one just a few nights before, fleeing the shadows beneath the overpass.

Looking like a cross between an ape and a man, the skin-toned creature pummeled the rider relentlessly, seemingly bent on the rider’s destruction. But it appeared to Sam that Jack had different plans.

Out of the smoke Sam’s brother appeared, wielding the shovel he had claimed from the wall of tools. Swinging it once, he struck the creature as the metal head of the shovel rang like a tuning fork. As if in slow motion, the creature slumped to the ground beside the rider, who used his arms to scoot back and raise himself up against the stairs. Looking at the odd angle of the rider’s leg, it was apparent that he wouldn’t be going anywhere without help. Even a crutch would be of little use now. Rising cautiously as the rider began coughing violently, Sam pulled Will up

with her and joined Jack in inspecting the odd attacker. It was almost like a man, but wasn't. Instead of four fingers and a thumb on each hand, it had three. Instead of a pointy human nose, it was longer and flat, like some species of ape. It had larger, more bulbous eyes and a wider jaw, but that was all Sam was able to note, as their inspection was cut short.

"Listen, kids. You grab what you can and go now. They would have heard that gunshot and they will be coming. Go south. "

"What about you?" Sam asked.

"I'll try and keep them busy a while. Give you a head start. You three just get some supplies and go. Keep moving all through tomorrow. They hide during the day, they don't like the sun. They have some kind of thermal vision or something. Can't see you if you're inside an insulated space, or behind certain kinds of glass. That's why they break it all. They're strong and fast, but don't seem too smart. Just keep moving and hide good. Go south and find help."

That seemed like enough information for all of them, and Sam sought her pack, noticing as Jack handed his shovel to the rider. It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

With more mixed emotions in his head than he could ever recall, Will rushed about the small confines of the cellar collecting jars of food and dropping them into his bag. The world had been ruined by monsters. Monsters! Neither Jack nor Sam had even considered it when he had suggested it months ago and in several conversations since, but he had been right. Pausing momentarily, he looked back over his shoulder at the thing on the ground. It was still breathing. He could see its chest moving. He put his pack on his back and picked up his police light.

Within seconds, they were headed towards the stairs and the door above it, but Will couldn't just leave. Turning, he was nearly bowled over by Sam following behind him, but he didn't even flinch. Looking to the rider, who was not only injured but obviously exhausted, he placed his hand on the man's shoulder in the darkness.

"Thank you," Will whispered to the stranger.

"You're welcome, son. Now you kids get going."

Without another word, Will turned and ran up the stairs, grabbing Jack's waiting hand as Sam took his other arm from behind. Into the night they ran, a strange whooping sound calling to them from the forest behind from dozens of locations. Moving as fast as they dared in the dark, it was all Will could do to keep focused on running, his mind seeking to go over all they had heard. Distracted, it was maybe a half an hour later when two shots split the night time air, echoing off the trees all around them. Will knew two things. He would never see the rider again, and there was still much more to learn about what had happened in the world around them.

