

Sunset Over the Ocean

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You'll either love this or hate it or both.

“The ultimate lesson is learning how to love and be loved unconditionally.”

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *The Wheel of Life*, 1997

“The most important thing to me is to be happy, to be honest.

And have fun...whatever I do... To me, happiness is the most important thing.”

—Freddy Mercury, Interview, 1984

Dear Reader:

This is, first and foremost, a love story. It might not seem like it at times, but it is.

Preface: The Future

I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm alive.

I say that to myself every morning. I say it when I look in the mirror. I say it while eating a bowl of cereal and right before bed.

I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm alive.

It's like a prayer. Only, prayers are hopeful, and I'm not.

It's been a long time since I've felt hope. It's been a long time for all of us, I guess.

No, that's not right. Not all of us.

It's more like, the rest of us.

But let's not talk about that. Let's focus on how fine and happy and alive I am.

Yeah, that's what we'll do. That's what we should do.

And then I sleep. I'm out. It's easier to sleep. The drugs make it easier, and I like that. It makes me happy—or something like happy.

I don't dream. I don't think. I don't obsess. There's only blackness. Blackness that takes the pain away.

Chapter 1: The Past

1

I was born in 2052.

I don't know if that's important. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't.

I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing here. I'm new to this.

Whatever this is.

Okay, I know that's not important.

What is important is that there was a time before this. Before we all tried to forget. There was a time before we tried to stop seeing the death and decay. Before we gave up just to keep the nightmares away.

It works. Or it worked. At least for some of us. At least for a while. The drugs did what they were supposed to do. They dulled the pain, but they couldn't take it away. Not completely.

But I'm getting ahead of myself and probably screwing this up before I even get started.

Let me start over. Let me start this where it matters.

2

The government called it IT. —I.T. —which was short for Intermittent Terminations, and Intermittent Terminations was, seriously, a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad name.

IT's an awful name for a lot of reasons, but I think the worst was that IT wasn't an acronym. It's I.T., not It, and if you ask me, that's total shit. S. H. I. T.

Then the media piled on and tried to rebrand everything by calling it the Incident. Can you believe that? The Incident. Like it was some kind of traffic accident or something out of a gossip stream—as if Page Six! was reporting on some Real Housewives’ “weekend incidents.” Not that any of the classic reality stars have been in the news lately. The last Housewife died over six years ago, and they don't make 'em like they used to, as my granddad used to say. They don't make 'em at all anymore, and that's part of the problem.

Still, leave it to the bureaucrats and the media to whitewash and dilute one of the largest mass extinctions in history into oblivion by calling it something so beige. IT, indeed.

IT was awful. The Incident was awful. It is awful, all of it. And it's most-likely going to kill everyone—every man, woman, and child—left on Earth: me included.

It's going to kill me the same way it killed my family and my friends.

The same way it killed my mom and dad.

3

It hasn't gotten me yet. But it also hasn't stopped. It still happens. It happened last week.

I was running low on credits, and I couldn't afford any delivery fees, so I went to one of the old grocery stores down the street. They still have a couple places around town where a person can go and pick out their food. This as opposed to pointing at a holo-screen and having everything drone delivered or being served at the vending-machine equivalent of stores and restaurants.

I think that all started with a company called Carvana, which made giant car and truck vendors a long time ago. They weren't super successful at the time but now almost everything works that way: point, click, pay, and dispense.

I hated being in public, and I was hurrying to get my usual order—mainly Cocoa Pebbles, which are my absolute favorite—when a woman in the same aisle as I was in stopped, keeled over, and died. She didn't make a scene; she didn't scream or flail around.

She just gripped the front of her blouse and dropped dead. Her son—I think he was her son—who was standing next to her, didn't even cry.

It happens like that.

One second, you're reaching for some Cheerios, and the next, you're a useless lump of meat. That's probably an insensitive way to describe death, and some people might think insensitivity comes from dying, but it doesn't. Insensitivity comes from living, especially when you know you're in the same line as everybody else. When you know you're only biding your time until it's your turn to ride the bullet.

You might confuse this with acceptance. It isn't. It's surrender. I don't accept this. I have no choice, so I give up. I gave up a long time ago. When every trip to get groceries turns into a horror show, who wouldn't?

A crematory drone was at the scene before I left, and the boy wheeled his mother's body out of the front store entrance using the cart they'd been shopping with.

The machine's six large electric motors and tiltable propellers held its ice-cream-truck-sized body aloft without creating too much wind or heat as it descended. It touched down gently, almost gracefully, cut its engines, and opened one side. The drones were fully automated and flown by an artificial pilot, so no one needed to worry about talking to anybody or reporting anything.

The boy pushed the cart into the drone's interior cabin and began carefully placing her inside.

I turned and left. I didn't want to see anymore. I knew the doors of the machine would close and the woman from Aisle 6 would be burned to ashes in minutes.

It happens like that.

4

Everyone is dying, and not “dying” in the same way people have always been dying. Like when you think one day, seventy years from now, you’ll be dead.

No, anyone can die at any second. Literally, any second. Without warning. There's no rhyme or reason to it. That's what the Incident is. IT takes, and it takes, but it never gives anything back.

It's a tragedy. The life is swept out of our loved ones, leaving holes in our hearts, empty seats at the breakfast table, and empty buggies in the aisles. And not only are people dropping like flies, but births have stopped as well. There've been no pregnancies or conceptions in eight years. No babies. Not one.

There hasn't even been a late period to give people hope. And it's not for lack of trying. A whole lot of people are screwing out there and the thought of making a baby by accident hasn't slowed them down.

I've actually thought about, you know, having sex. Maybe just once to see what the fuss is about. But every time I do, I think about how horrible it would be if someone I loved or at least cared about a whole lot, died while he was on top of me or while he was inside of me. It's equal parts terrifying and disgusting. I vowed if I were to ever take the forbidden fruit, I'd have to absolutely love the guy and be in the mood to make really bad decisions. That's the only way I'd risk it. That's the only way it'd be worth it, but the fear of getting pregnant never crossed my mind.

IT also only affects humans. Nothing else suffers from it the way we do. It's not like the bird flu or the black plague. We don't give it to chickens or pigs, and we don't catch it from bats or rats. It's just us, just people.

There've been some remarkable ecological recoveries because we've been disappearing. A lot of bad stuff started to go away, almost as if there was some sort of balance the world was returning to, and I'm sure there were many campaigns that would have loved to shout I-told-you-so's from rooftops, but they're as gone as the problems they were trying to solve and as extinct as their arguments.

It's pretty clear the world doesn't need us to save it; it's going to be here long after we're gone; and the animals left will be perfectly fine living in their own little circles of life.

And now I have that song from The Lion King stuck in my head.

5

We have the stream. We have most modern conveniences: electricity, running water, automated and self-driving everything, except for planes and sonic speed rails; I think those needed too much upkeep or something. But, for the most part, you name it, and we got it. EveWorks took care of that. From growing and harvesting crops, to manufacturing goods, to tending to and raising farm animals. If a person used to do it, EveWorks found a way to automate it, even when it seemed impossible. And then they delivered the goods to stores and 7-Elevens all over the world.

Sure, we're eating a lot of crap we were told would kill us, but when you can die at any moment for no reason, who cares?

I'm not complaining. As long as I've got my Pebbles, my movies, and my meds, I'm a happy camper. Or, as happy a camper as I can be.

The worst part has been the helplessness. We can't do anything about IT, and the world's best and brightest minds are long gone.

Those still kicking around are as depressed and anxious as the rest of us, so they don't practice medicine or research anymore. They don't care. They're like me. I sit at home, and I wallow. I only change my pajamas when they really start to stink. That's probably too much information, but whatever.

Most people still live in large cities—Philly, Berlin, Taipei, places like that. We're called Citiers, which is so original, isn't it? I can't say too much, I'm a Citier from Atlanta, which is in the southeast of what used to be the United States.

Nowadays, it's part of the United World Alliance. Not that there's anything united about the alliance or any of us. We're all puppets hanging from a single string in separate theaters.

But there are those who've chosen to live on the outskirts of civilization. We call them Bits because they're bat-shit crazy. We used to call them Bat-shits, but even with our entire species going extinct, we're too lazy not to abbreviate everything we can.

Bits are what's left of the psychos who joined the Bright Riots in the third year of IT. If I remember correctly (don't bet on it) it all started after the president died on live stream. She was telling everyone not to worry, and how she and her scientists would find a cure and stop the Incident. She was in the middle of her sentence and then she fell like a stone. I think her last words were, "stay with me."

That third year was scary. Everything went nuts. There were no laws and no rules.

I was only thirteen, and my parents were already gone, so I packed what I could carry and shoved it in an old bookbag and hiked down Interstate 85 until I

reached downtown. I was out of food. All the delivery services were shut down, every store was closed or ransacked, and the rioters were going house-to-house looking for stragglers. I didn't have a choice. I had to move and keep moving until I was safe. It took me three days to make it to an area where I didn't have to constantly stop, hide, and wait out some atrocity.

When I was a child, my family used to play-act in the backyard. We'd pretend to be at the beach or in the mountains. It helped with my mom's fear of traveling, but it was also a lot of fun.

One of our favorite things to do was to imagine hiking the Appalachian Trail, as if we were walking out of our lives and into the verdant green paths carved between the mammoth mountains of Tennessee and Virginia. We'd hunker down and rough it in a valley of those majestic peaks and make s'mores. That was nothing like reaching downtown. I was panicked and running around feral while trying to dodge the occasional band of roving murderers, rapists, arsonists, and rioters—the Bat-shits.

I took the small tent we used to pretend to camp in and threw it up in hidden places off the main highway so I could stay away from the crazy bastards breaking and burning everything.

There were many times I didn't think I was going to make it, and I remember crying uncontrollably—tears streaming down in constant rivulets that chafed my cheeks. I had to hold my mouth closed so I didn't scream, but I was quiet and small for my age, so I came out alive.

After a week, my body finally shut down. I was in front of one of the major hotels in the city—the W—when I started feeling dizzy. I hadn't eaten in days, and I couldn't carry enough water to keep from dehydrating. I was ripe to succumb to exhaustion. Nothing was listening to me—my arms dangled, my ankles rolled—and everything was suddenly heavy, too heavy, and my knees buckled.

It's hard to explain, but it was like one of those scenes in action movies where the main character is seconds away from death, and they can barely move but they narrowly escape with their lives. My mom and I used to sit on the couch and watch old movies sometimes when I was sick. She grew up with this one actor, Dwayne Johnson, and she loved everything he was in.

He'd get blown up a dozen times for about an hour, and then towards the end of the movie there was always one scene where, after the explosions, all he had to do was sit up to avoid something or shift a few feet to one side to dodge an attack, but he always moved so slowly. And then they would go and shoot those scenes in slow-motion. It was infuriating.

I could never understand why he didn't rally faster to save himself after he'd been through so much. He was so tough. He couldn't give up now. Not now!

In the end, he always managed to struggle and somehow overcome whatever obstacle was in his way, but just barely. He always won. I was feeling that now. Not the winning or overcoming but the faltering and struggling.

I am not the Rock, I thought before shock set in.

My entire body trembled violently, and I broke out in a cold flop sweat. I couldn't catch my breath, and my mind was blurrier than my vision. Come on! I thought. Get up! Get the hell up! My pulse pounded in my ears, and I tried to crawl and fight.

I tried to copy Dwayne, but I couldn't. I was nauseated, and everything was getting darker. The world turned upside-down, and I could only see in short flashes between unconsciousness.

My last thought was, Don't want...to die here... And then my eyes closed, and the darkness took me.

A man named Abdul ran through the barriers in front of the W Hotel and out into the chaos. He scooped me up, and he carried me inside where I was taken in by a group of still-sane adults and families—Citiers.

We rode out the madness together in the hotel. I was given a room on the fourth floor—high enough to escape the fires, but low enough to get out quickly if I needed to. The people in the W were nice, and Abdul was my hero. I'll never forget how he always talked about himself using his full name, Abdul Hakeem, as if he was talking about someone else. The quick way he spoke, and his crisp accent will always be how I remember him. I loved him, and I loved his family. He died along with his children and most of the others in the hotel during the next wave of IT.

I wonder about that time every now and then, and I wonder if the seething anger the Bits were expressing was always simmering under everyone's skin. As if we were primed to explode into violence and rage.

If you don't think you're capable of it, believe me, you are. But what were people supposed to do? How were they supposed to react? Everyone was horrified. And fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. Thank you, Yoda.

Whole cities burned down in the Bright Riots. New York, Beijing, Toronto, and dozens upon dozens of others. Thankfully, I was in Atlanta, which was one of the more fire-free places to be. But people killed each other, people killed themselves, and the world glowed and smoldered and crumbled. Some places burned so brightly they could be seen from space. But it's hard to keep anything going, even chaos, when everyone keeps dying. Three weeks into the bedlam, and the same wave of IT that took dear, sweet Abdul Hakeem and his family ended the anarchy.

Millions of people died during the riots. Then a billion died in one day, and it was over. The streets were littered with bodies, and after it was done, we went numb.

The whole world went grey. We went grey. I know I did. Nothing mattered. Not anymore. It didn't matter how many credits I had or what I owned or where I lived. None if it meant anything.

Social media and the news worked to try and make people understand what was going on by showing us mountains of bodies but that didn't help. It only drained more color from the world. It only made us more apathetic, more miserable, and more despondent. The focus on IT hurt socials more than anyone expected.

People ran from them. Apps and corporations shuttered to a halt and closed altogether after the "survivors" abandoned their platforms. The fact that 96 percent of thirst traps, DMs, and posts never got viewed, opened, or responded to because everybody was dead gave the term "ghosting" a whole new meaning.

A bare scaffolding of society was created over the next few years, but nothing is the same, and it never will be again.

I could go on and on about what happened in those years and what's changed—what and who and how and why everything keeps disappearing—but I won't. It won't change anything. And I don't want to think about it anymore. I don't want to think about the world right now.

And this is my story.

8

Daddy loved to cook. He said it relaxed him, but he never looked relaxed when he did it.

There was always a point when he was cooking when he got frazzled and all his carefully laid plans and prep work went right down the drain. And he made the biggest mess. The kitchen looked like a tornado hit it after he was done. But he loved it. And I loved it. And my mom loved him for it.

His favorite thing to cook was pancakes from scratch. He'd mix the flour, sugar, and the baking powder together, get the milk, vanilla, and eggs ready and then whip up a batter that was just thick enough to rise when it hit the pan. The result of his hard work was always a brown, fluffy, flavorful delight. It was like eating a sweet, soft cloud, because they would melt in your mouth in seconds.

You'd start to chew, but the wonderfully light cakes would disintegrate into pure flavor immediately. I ate mine the way God intended: with butter and syrup.

My parents always joked about there being a right way and a wrong way to do things, and the right way was always the way God intended. I'm not sure what god they were talking about; we didn't go to church enough to claim a denomination or even a religion, so I can't really answer that. They also liked to call anyone who disagreed with them "neanderthals." I'm not sure why, exactly, but it was funny, and it never failed to get a laugh.

9

It was February 9th, 2062. It was my birthday. I was ten.

I was so excited to be in the double digits I ran around my house screaming. Mom thought I'd lost my mind, but I didn't stop sprinting through every room until it felt like my heart was going to burst.

My dad came downstairs after I'd exhausted myself, put on his apron, and began making pancakes. He knew me so well, and I adored him for that.

After breakfast, he was in a rush. He was late for work, again.

He was always late for work, and he justified this by constantly referencing something he'd read claiming late people didn't need as much time to do their work as others, which never failed to result in one of Mom's famous eyerolls.

No one could roll their eyes like my mom.

Dad trotted out to his car while Mommy and I stood on the stoop of our house. We weren't rich, and our house wasn't a mansion, but it was a nice-sized home in Alpharetta—a suburb of the city. My parents grew up there.

Mom had never left the state. Daddy, on the other hand, traveled for work, so he'd been all over the world, and he would tell us about his trips every chance he got.

He had some of the funniest stories, and he would always end them by saying he wished we were there. Mommy just smiled—she was afraid of traveling, but Daddy never pushed her.

He'd grab her hand and kiss it, reassuring her. She didn't have to do anything she didn't want to do or go anywhere she didn't want to go.

My father opened the driver's side door of his car, gave us a wink, and then fell backwards onto the lawn. His car was parked close to the grass, so when he fell, he rolled right onto the fresh sod. He dropped almost gracefully, rolling into a perfectly splayed out, face-up position.

We thought it was a joke, like he was faking some illness, so he didn't have to go to work.

For a moment, I got excited. I imagined him playing hooky and staying home with me—the new two-digit girl—and watching movies in the living room with me and Mommy. Watching movies with them was one of my favorite things to do. We'd put on a marathon of classics, and we'd all eat giant bowls of Cocoa Pebbles, always Pebbles; it was the only time my parents ate cereal, and when we were done with the crunchy, sweet, chocolatey delight, we'd pour the leftover milk into glasses and drink it, which, of course, was the way God intended people to drink their newly chocolitized milk.

It was so much fun, and it was ours, something we did together and that made it special.

Daddy didn't move. His body was frozen.

He's really laying it on thick, I thought.

Then we heard a scream come from down the street.

And then more from both sides of us. And then another from behind us.

Suddenly, we were surrounded by cries for help and wailing sobs. My mother gave Dad one more look and ran to him. She began bawling and hugging his lifeless body as if the contact would somehow wake him up.

I stood in front of the house not understanding what was going on. If it was a joke, it wasn't funny. And Daddy was always funny.

I didn't get it then.

I do now.

10

IT wasn't supposed to happen. Because IT isn't actually anything.

Maybe that's why they gave it such a rotten name. More than a billion people died on my birthday in 2062. My father was one of them.

The government did a massive number of autopsies. They examined a staggering number of bodies.

They cut open chests and mapped genomes. They studied blood, tissue, cells, DNA, and chromosomes. They tried everything in modern medicine and came up with a few new things to try and find out what was going on.

Their efforts failed.

IT wasn't an infection.

There were no bacteria or viruses attached to it. There was no singular commonality or link between the victims, except that they were human. Some were insanely rich, and others were dirt poor. IT didn't discriminate.

The Incident affected every race, every sex, and every age. Barely one newborn survived the first day, and many mothers took their own lives in grief.

That was the first day.

11

I was twelve. My mom and I were going to the store. She wasn't too fond of the artificial-intelligence-driven delivery services, and our house was close to one of the only shop-for-yourself places in the neighborhood. They'd probably call it a bodega in New York, but it was just a convenience store.

We had our own shopping cart we pushed down the street, and mom would let me ride inside it, which made me feel safe for some reason. We were stopped at a crosswalk when there was a sudden thud to our right.

I turned my attention away from the front of the buggy and to a commotion across the street. Twenty feet away, I saw a man lying on the ground. He wasn't moving and the light had gone out of his eyes.

That's how you know when someone's dead: the light leaves them. It disappears. It's almost as if a person stops looking like a person. It's as if they've turned into a wax sculpture. They're somehow artificial.

I knew at first glance, he was gone. His wife or girlfriend or whoever she was, was crying and trying to get him up, but he wasn't there anymore.

I turned back to my mom to tell her what'd happened. She was lying prone on the pavement next to the cart. I hadn't even heard her fall. Her hair was covering most of her face, but I could see her eyes, once so full of life and laughter, but since Daddy died, full of sorrow and longing, and now lifeless and empty.

I was alone.

I am alone.

12

The next five or so years after the riots were filled with what I can only describe as a waking dream. It was full of pills, tablets, and time-released gel caps. If you were frightened, they made a pill for that. If you were homicidal or suicidal, they made a pill for that. Pick a problem, an emotion, a feeling, or any conceivable inconvenience, and they made a pill for that.

And they—whoever they were—weren't worried about people getting addicted or anything else, not anymore. They made drugs that worked. They were the opposite of the red pill in *The Matrix*.

These things put you in the dream, and you didn't want to wake up. That was better for most of us left behind. I took seven pills a day. Some made me float. Others made me let go. They all did what they were made to do, and I receded into darkness. I liked the dark. I didn't want to see the light anymore.

I was happy in my cave, which was the same fourth-floor room at the W I'd been in since I fainted outside the place. I knew I wasn't really alive, but I also wasn't dead yet.

Sedation made the world grey and docile and safe, and it helped me forget.

Or it did.

But nothing lasts forever.

Chapter 2: The Present

13

It was a few days before my eighteenth birthday, a Wednesday, and like every first Wednesday of the month, I saw Bill. He stumbled into the church, threw his meaty hands onto the alter, and shook out his shaggy hair. He looked as disheveled as always. His Hawaiian-print bowling shirt was half tucked in, and his skin was greasy and shiny with sweat. He stood at the lectern and looked out at Group A-1A.

We sat wordlessly in the pews of the nave and stared back at him. There were about a dozen of us scattered around, which was less than last time, but enough of us to get started. I'd been coming here for over four years, a few of us had, and except for the ever-changing number of Citiers in attendance, it was always the same.

"I'm late," he said, "Sorry about that."

His words were so slurred sorry came out as shawwy.

Bill's story was a sad one. The whole place was full of sad stories, but his was particularly bad.

"I was a lawyer," he said, speaking slowly and purposefully. "I had money, and I thought I owned the world. I was the one percent. That was me. But my wife..." he faltered "...Jelena. She loved me. She loved me so much, and I couldn't tell you how little I cared about that. I wanted more power and more women. I wanted to be as invincible as I felt." Tears dribbled down his cheeks with an ease that was oddly discomfoting. "I was at Cammy's house when Jelena passed. Cammy was my assistant. I'd been cheating with her for about a year when everybody started to die. She was nineteen or twenty, and we'd been yelling at each other for at least an hour because Jelena was pregnant, and she was due soon. I thought it was about time that Cammy and I stopped seeing each other. Jelena and I were

having twin boys, and I'd missed every doctor's appointment, holiday, birthday, and even our anniversary, because I was..."

He choked out a cough while a younger guy in the back stifled a laugh.

It wasn't funny in a ha-ha kind of way, but I got why he thought Bill's story was ridiculous. He was a homely, pug-nosed man who had to be pushing 300 pounds, and thinking about him sleeping with a teenaged assistant, or anyone, was absurd. His belly was so big I doubted he could see his feet when he looked down, much less anything else, so the thought of him alternating sexual encounters with two women was nearly too much to believe.

But he kept talking, and soon we all believed.

"Cammy followed me to my car when she...I tried to catch her, to save her. I gave her mouth-to-mouth and pumped her chest, but she was gone. Her face went pale; her body went limp. And that's where I was when IT started. I was with her."

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his nose, and dabbed at his eyes.

"Jelena was in traffic. She was driving herself to the hospital because she was scared, and I wasn't there for her. I was at another woman's house instead of being with my wife. I wasn't there, and she never made it and..."

Bill trailed off and glared at his hands as if they had blood on them. Then he snapped out of his trance. There was another long pause as he gazed out, seeming to see nothing and everything all at once. He couldn't bring himself to finish. He never finished his story. It ended there.

This wasn't the way groups were supposed to start. They weren't supposed to begin with tearful confessionals. There was actually a script we were supposed to follow, and this wasn't it, but Bill was drunk, so we listened to him.

No one in the group wanted to be there, but it was part of our "therapy." It was how we got our drugs and how we met the requirements for being a Citier.

One of those requirements was Sedation Therapy, and that meant attending group activities along with various pharmaceutical interventions, which was a holdover policy from the early pandemics.

We met remotely most of the time, but there was a condition to meet with a group in-person on the first Wednesday of every month. I hadn't been taking all my meds, and I was kind of nervous about that.

The government had the best shit, but if they found out you weren't taking what they wanted you to take, then a drone came to relocate you, which basically meant kicking you out flat on your ass and having your cube deactivated permanently. Even if you had all the credits in the world, it didn't matter. In the face of extinction, and at the end of all things human, it was still a do as I say kind of world. The United World Alliance was a paltry government, but it's all we had, and ninety-nine percent of us were okay with that. They provided relative safety and comfort, and they gave us drugs, so we were compliant—most of us, anyway.

Our cubes were scanned as we walked in, which uploaded the most recent levels of medicine in our blood, our viral tests, and our vitals to make sure we were healthy and on-program before entering. A lot of people still wore face shields—another relic from the early pannies.

The important thing was that the meetings were timed, and if Bill wanted to waste some of that time, I was game. We all were.

A woman sitting in the first row stood and followed Bill's example, and we all got to know Jillian—a twenty-nine-year-old spinster who'd lost everyone during the first wave.

"Does anyone," Bill hiccupped, "have anything else they want to share?"

“Yeah,” a small voice said. “I got something.”

It was Zeke. He was a boy about my age who'd been at almost every meeting I'd been to for the past three years, We'd only spoken a handful of times, and while he wasn't much of a talker, he seemed nice. His small and frail frame made me think of houses on stilts. His emaciated arms and legs barely seemed able to bolster his weight. From what I remember, he was born and raised around here, and he still had a Southern lilt in his speech.

“I found my cat, Belle, yesterday,” he said. “She was wedged in-between the couch and the wall in my living room. As far as I can tell, she slipped, got stuck, and broke her neck. It was maybe the only time she's ever gotten down from anythin' and not landed on her feet, but there she was...” He began to get emotional. “And I-I just don't know what I'm even doin' anymore. I-I don't know how I'm supposed to keep doin' this...livin' like this.”

You might not think the loss of a pet would be such a devastating thing when you're trying to survive the apocalypse, but when you're alone and scared, having a companion is like winning the lottery: it's a blessing and a curse. You feel so happy to have something to love, but somewhere deep down inside you know you're either going to lose it, or you'll die, and it'll wind up eating parts of you to stay alive. The latter is the preferable choice for most of us.

Think about how bad losing a person would be. Think about losing a friend or a lover. Imagine the amount of loss you'd feel, the amount of hurt. If you can do that, then you can probably see why most of us were shut-ins who stayed voluntarily medicated and kept away from other people and why these groups were important. Sometimes these meetings were the only human interaction we had. And even then, there was the ever-drumming mantra of don't get close, don't let them in, don't get hurt running through our minds.

The loneliness was terrible, but the thought of finding someone and then losing them was terrifying. It was crippling. But it was also reality.

“I just don’t think I wanna live anymore,” Zeke said.

“To live is to fight, and to fight is divine,” we all said in unison. It was one of the group’s sayings.

Other hits included: “We are alive and that is proof that life is worth living,” and “Don’t give in, we are here for you.” None of us believed what we were saying, but we said it all the same.

Zeke had fresh streaks running down his chin. He was normally as cold and detached as everyone else, but today he glimmered. The emotions he felt were palpable. They made the air hum. He slowly sat back down, and I could hear his strangled sobs.

“Anyone else?” Bill continued, scanning the space.

“Right here,” someone said.

I peeked around to try and see who’d spoken. I’d never heard that voice before, and it was strange, because the speaker sounded...happy.

“My name’s Jack,” he said, standing. “And I’m new to the group. Well, to tell you the truth, I’m just passing through.”

Passing through? I thought. How the hell did he get in here if he’s not a part of A-1A? How did he bypass the ID protocols?

This made him odd but also somehow enigmatic and immediately interesting. Mysteries are always interesting.

His back was to me, so I couldn’t see his face, but I could tell he was smiling to himself, as if he was in on a joke no one else was. His hair was longer and kind of messy, and he was wearing a leather jacket that was too big for him.

“But I wanted to tell, uh, what’s your name?” Jack asked, pointing to Zeke.

“Ezekial Abraham Jedaiah Schaechter,” he answered.

“That’s a heck of a name,” Jack said, taken aback.

“Call me Zeke,” he said. “Everyone does.”

“That works,” Jack replied. “Zeke, look. This shite’s cruel, and it doesn’t make sense. But sometimes things happen that make us believe in something, anything, again. Something small, but important. Like how I found this little girl outside right before we came in.”

He pulled something from inside his coat.

“Don’t get too excited,” he said. “She’s a runt with some really sharp claws. I thought maybe she could be my travel buddy, but I think she’d probably be better off here with you. She’d be happier, and maybe you’d be happier, too.”

Jack held out a tiny, snow-white kitten and walked over to Zeke.

“She can’t replace Belle, but maybe she’ll help,” he said.

It was impossible to tell if Zeke was totally overwhelmed by joy or completely devastated. Several emotions ran through him in an instant.

IT had been going on for eight years, death was old news, but the kitten was small and new. A mumbling meow escaped it, and Zeke held out his hands. The cat jumped into his arms, and for a second, just a second, I saw color flood into Zeke.

I also saw Jack’s profile. I was right: he was smiling. But more than his expression, I noticed his cheekbones, which had to be the highest, most pronounced cheekbones I’d ever seen. Seriously, he had the bone structure of a movie star or a Greek God or something—and for an instant, I saw color in him, too.

“It’s tough out there,” Jack said. “But we gotta live.” Everyone was silent. “Oh, and she might need some milk.” He pointed at the cat and appraised his shirt where the kitten had been pawing at him. “I think she’s hungry.”

14

I followed Jack after our meeting. Yes, I followed him. You might wonder why I did such a thing, especially since I didn’t know him or anything about him.

He could’ve been a creeper or a criminal—a murderer or some other evil creature. But it’s as simple as this: I was curious, I’m a teenager, and I’ve been living through the end of the world, so don’t overthink it. I can still make bad decisions. And, yeah, I might’ve thought he was cute.

I stayed far enough behind him so he couldn’t see me. He was tall and rail thin. His clothes hung on him, and his sneakers squeaked loudly with each step.

After a few blocks, he began to walk faster, and it was harder for me to keep up. My legs were shorter, but I pumped to try and stay with him.

There was a bit of a crowd in the streets, even though it was dark and raining. They were all probably group members going to and from their Sedation appointments.

He moved quickly through the mob, weaving between and around others like it was second nature. It became more difficult to see him through the foot traffic.

He slipped around a raincoat and disappeared behind an umbrella. And then, he was gone. I lost him. I stopped and looked up and down the sidewalk, but his jacket and his mess of tousled black hair were nowhere to be seen.

“Hey there,” a voice said from behind me, and a startled yelp escaped my lips. “Did you need something?”

I turned, and there he was: tall, slender, and statuesque. His eyes were so dark they smoldered, and his gaze was so penetrating I hesitated. I hadn't actually expected to catch up with him. I didn't have a plan for this; I was running on intuition and instinct without the slightest bit of preparation or planning, but I recovered, eventually.

“No, I just...”

“You just followed me for the last three blocks,” he said.

“I did not,” I shot back, obstinately.

“So, you live around here?” he asked.

I didn't, but I wasn't about to tell him that, and I was struggling for a good comeback.

“What’s your name, stalker?” he asked, smirking. It was a crooked smile—one that favored his left cheek—and as sideways as it was, it was also earnest and beautiful. Butterflies started swirling in my stomach.

“I'm not a stalker,” I said.

“Sure,” he said, elongating the word in a good-humored, satirical way. “I'm Jack.”

We stood there and surveyed each other awkwardly, because while I was supposed to tell him my name, I didn't. Instead, I was having this strange sense of déjà vu, and it was messing with me.

“And you are?” he asked.

“Oh, right. I’m...” A truck went by at that exact moment and muffled my words.

“Kidsy? Did you say your name was Kidsy?” he asked.

I didn't, but I failed to say anything.

“Okay, Kid. It’s okay if I call you Kid, isn’t it?”

It wasn't, and I was about to tell him that, but I didn't get to.

"How about we get out of the rain?" he said. "Maybe get some food? I could use a bowl of cereal. Something chocolatey like Cocoa Pebbles."

I was so stunned by the mention of my Pebbles and so overcome by the sensation of having been there before, that my brain froze, and I spaced out for a second.

"Hello?" he said. "It's on me. I'll pay, I mean. Are you okay, Kid?"

I blinked a few times and managed a, "Yeah..."

"Great, there's a café around the corner," he said, paying no attention to which question I was trying to answer.

15

We walked a half a block and found ourselves in front of a local haunt.

It was one of those diners that automatically scanned your cubes and either let you in or didn't.

Like every month, the hold on my bank account for my room at the W limited the amount of credits I had available, so I was a bit apprehensive.

The cubes were invented by Epsilon and created in a joint venture with Applette decades ago—something we were taught and told about over and over again in grammar school. The nearly indestructible blocks stored all its users' information, but were also phones, computers, televisions, and so much more. A holographic screen projected from a micro display on the cube or a linked device and accessed anything you wanted: apps, games, the stream, health information, and, well, basically anything about you or your life. Each cube had a cloud that held a lifetime's worth of memory, but the small die-sized device had a nearly endless memory itself. Everyone in the cities had cubes they wore on chains or cords around their wrists. They were encrypted by using a person's DNA, which

meant they couldn't be hacked. Stealing them was worthless because they wouldn't work for anyone but their user, and you couldn't try to force someone to use their cube to steal credits, because the device constantly uploaded the user's health information, and if it detected distress or that the person was dead, then it would lock itself down. And using a person's information was pointless because you couldn't use it without their cube.

This little box changed the world back in the day, but it had since become part of everyday life. It was unremarkable and ordinary —something we used to get along and how we spent our credits and wasted our time.

Jack held up his cube. It was different than any I'd ever seen. It was tungsten chrome-plated and adorned with neon lines that separated each side, making it look like something off a Daft Punk album cover—Mom was the authority on classic electronica, but I bet she'd agree with me. I'd only ever seen the usual white or grey cubes. I looked at him and wondered. I also wondered about his bracelet being on his right wrist.

Lefty, I thought. Go figure. There weren't many of us to begin with, and finding another one these days was unexpected, to say the least.

The door opened immediately and let us in.

Auto diners like this were everywhere. They were another product of EveWork's technology. If you had the credits, then they would let you in and serve you. Cafes, clothing stores, and virtually everything else had converted to this way of shopping. If you could afford it, you were good. If not, you were out of luck.

Even if you got inside, it didn't matter, because you couldn't buy or steal anything; they wouldn't even let you use the bathroom. And all the goods—from food to furniture—were locked behind bulletproof acrylic, which was 10,000 times stronger than glass. It was the same stuff they used in giant aquariums to

hold back the fifty million gallons of water that kept the sharks and whales swimming around in circles—before those got outlawed, I mean.

We sat in a booth, and he ordered two bowls of cereal. He also ordered eggs, bacon, a piece of pie, and a whole pot of coffee.

“Hungry?” I asked.

“I haven’t eaten all day,” he pouted, playfully.

The meals were dispensed and placed carefully in a small slot in the wall next to the table where an enclosure opened, and we grabbed our food.

The milk was already in the bowl—the perfect amount, not too much—and we ate and talked.

“You grew up here?” he asked.

“Sort of,” I said. “Until I was thirteen, I lived in Alpharetta, which is about twenty miles away.”

“Does twenty miles make that much of a difference?” he asked.

“In Atlanta,” I said in a quizzical tone. “It makes all the difference in the world.”

He finished his bowl and picked it up to drink the leftover milk.

Neanderthal, I thought, amusedly.

When I was done with my cereal, I asked for a cup and poured in the leftover sugary liquid.

“Do you always use a glass?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said. “It’s the way God intended, and I’m a lady, not a Neanderthal, like you.”

It was oddly gratifying to voice an exact thought for once.

He let out a big laugh. It was surprisingly deep and resonant. Or maybe it sounded that way because we were the only ones in the diner. Maybe not.

“I grew up in Connecticut,” he said, “But we moved to New York when I was about eight. Then we moved upstate, you know, when the riots broke out, and I was there until...well, until my mum passed. After that I decided to get out of there and see some of the world.”

“So, you what? Drove down here?” I asked.

“Pretty much,” he said.

“Why?”

He thought about what to say and how to say it.

“My parents were from England. Originally, I mean. And my dad was kind of a nerd, and he and my mum went to university together.”

“University?” I asked, noticing for the first time that he had the whisper of a British accent.

“College,” he said.

“Oh, I know what you meant,” I said, “but it’s the way you said university.”

He grinned again.

Damn that smile, I thought.

“They went to college together,” he corrected with an objectively high amount of sarcasm, “and my dad had the biggest crush on her. He would tell you it was love at first sight. My mum would tell you she needed a little more convincing. They were acquaintances before, and then Dad started following her around like a lost puppy. He even took classes he didn’t need to take so he could try and talk to her.”

“Staaalker,” I said in a sing-song way.

“You’re one to talk,” he said, cocking an eyebrow at me, and I could feel my face getting warmer.

“Anyways,” he continued, chuckling. “Eventually, they got to talking, and they liked each other. They had a lot in common, and they had similar senses of humor. Stuff like that. One day he finally got up the courage to ask her out.”

“She said, ‘Yes,’” I assumed.

“Kind of,” he answered. “She asked him what the hell took him so long, which surprised him. She’d known he was taking classes to see her, but she told him he could’ve just talked to her and asked her out without using the classes as some kind of buffer.”

“Guys can be so immature,” I said, with an air of experience I didn’t really have.

“Well, she strings him along for a bit,” he said, “but finally says yes, and before she knows it, they’re at London Heathrow.”

“He took her to the airport on their first date?” I asked.

“Yep,” he answered.

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Right? It gets weirder. He took her to a terminal and bought two tickets here, to the States.”

“Why?” I asked. “Was he crazy?”

“Probably,” he said. “But it wasn’t as crazy as it sounds. The tickets were dated a month after the day of their first date.”

I could tell he was tickled by the conversation.

“That’s still weird,” I said, but my position was softening. Something about his excitement and the enjoyment he got in telling his parents' story was quieting the negative, badgering thoughts lurking in my mind.

“My dad told her that if they were together at the end of the term, then he wanted to take her to the other side of the world to see the sunset over the ocean.”

“I’m a fan of big gestures but isn’t that a little much?” I asked.

“She went,” he shrugged.

"Your mom did know you can't see the sunset over the ocean on the east coast of the US, right?" I asked, reflexively, if not a bit rudely.

"She did," he grinned. "And she went anyway. Don't get me wrong, she, well, they had a plan. Four weeks to the day, they went back to the airport, got on a plane, flew to America, and then drove in one of those old sodium ion cars all the way across the country.”

“Seriously?” I asked, and I couldn't help but wonder if this woman had never seen a true crime documentary. Going across country with someone you barely know was bad enough, but going across the world to drive across another country with a stranger was just asking for trouble.

“It’s true,” he said, and the way he said it made me instantly understand how honest he was. I could see it in his eyes. I could feel it in his intensity.

He pulled something out of his jacket pocket and held it out. It was a stack of pictures—the ones you used to be able to print out from old cell phone pics twenty or thirty years ago. The photos were of a young couple standing or sitting in front of famous landmarks from across the US.

In the first, they were standing outside of Martin Luther King Jr.’s childhood home, which was a couple of miles down the street from where we were sitting.

It was preserved almost a hundred years ago, and I'd taken a few tours of the house on field trips when I was in preschool.

I flipped through the stack and saw a few places I knew: the Alamo, the Vegas Strip, the Grand Canyon. Surprisingly, most of them survived the riots. I handed the pictures back after a few minutes.

"That's..." I started.

"I know," he said. We sat silently for a moment.

"So, is that what you're doing, retracing their steps?" I asked.

"Something like that," he said.

A question occurred to me then. "Why come here?"

"Huh?" he asked.

"Couldn't your dad have driven your mom to the west coast of the UK?" I asked, rephrasing my question. "They could've gone to see the sunset in St. Ives or something."

"You know, we talked about that once, and he told me, 'Of all of God's creations, the Pacific is the greatest, most magnificent thing on this planet, and I couldn't shortchange your mother.'" He made his voice deeper as he imitated his father, and he put on a thick English accent, speaking slowly and with purpose but also exaggerating every syllable. It was a silly impression, but it was also endearing, and it made us both giggle.

"Why didn't he just buy tickets to California?" I persisted, still wanting to know more.

"At the time, he could only afford the cheapest seats across the pond," Jack said. "This was right after the major petrol shortages in the thirties, so flights were

wicked expensive, and they were still in universit...college.” He laughed to himself, his boyish features making his face glow in the soft restaurant light.

“And come to find out,” he continued, “it was loads cheaper to fly, rent an electric, and stay in motels than to buy two direct flights to the beach. Plus, they were on an adventure. Who doesn't love an adventure?” He shrugged again, and I couldn't help but notice how broad his shoulders were.

“You know California is 2,000 miles that way, don't you?” I asked, pointing behind me. I couldn't believe his parents had done something so random.

“It's about 3,836 kilometers, give or take,” he said, and then he pointed to his left without picking his hands up from the table.

I can only assume he was pointing west, but he didn't say a word about my bad sense of direction.

“That's a long trip,” I said.

“It'll take a week or two, I think,” he said.

“What made her say yes?” I asked.

“Who?” he asked back.

“Your mom, or mum, as you like to say. What convinced her to go?”

“I could tell you that she was young and reckless, and she said as much a few times, but it was really one thing.”

“And that was?” I asked.

“Right before she let him down, right before she told him there was no way she was getting on a plane with him in a month and that he was bloody barmy, he asked her to get something to eat, specifically cereal and coffee. And while my mother was a true-blue Briton, she absolutely loved coffee, and she had a

weakness for sweet cereals.” He raised his spoon from the table as he said this as if to say, “See?”

“She would never admit it while in London,” he continued, “but she hated tea. She couldn’t stand the taste of it. So, when my dad asked her to go and get something so ‘her,’ as she put it, she thought something strange might be going on in the universe, and it made her think twice. They both had a few weeks off from school that summer, and she didn’t have any plans, and she thought, Why not? They got food at a little place in the airport, and she said she felt a connection. She was also pretty sure he wasn’t a nutter. The next thing she knew the semester was over, and she was belted into a seat heading west.”

I kept smiling while he finished the story, but inside I was screaming.

What’s going on! my inner monologue wailed. Was something strange happening in the universe right now? Is this a joke? Am I on Funniest Home Videos? Punk’D? Taken’D?

I had too many thoughts trying to take up space in my brain at that moment, so I zoned out. The obvious similarity between Jack’s parents’ story and our first conversation, and the fact that I had only come to this diner because a cute boy mentioned cereal, let alone my cereal, was too much for me to process at that moment. It was all too coincidental, and my thoughts were teetering between paranoid and conspiratorial. I’m not sure how I looked on the outside, but inside I was hysterical.

It was a few moments before I realized Jack was still talking. He used his hands a lot when he spoke, and he was so enthusiastic that it was hard to focus on anything else. There wasn’t a hint of dishonesty in Jack’s words, and his sincerity started to chip away at my discomfort. It took some time, but the apprehension I was feeling moments before seemed to slowly melt away as I listened to him. He was so alive and animated, not like anyone else around here. I focused on his

words, and slowly let go of the insulated, isolated monologue I'd adopted. I focused on him—on the living. The world was as murky and colorless as I was, but he was vibrant and blooming, and I enjoyed talking to him. I enjoyed spending time with him. He made me feel...something...again. But there was one thing I had to know.

“Why Pebbles?” I asked, stopping him mid-sentence. I had no idea what he'd been saying before.

“Huh?” he asked, bewildered.

“Why'd you ask me to get Pebbles?” I asked. “You could've said any cereal or anything else.”

“Oh,” he said, taking a sip of coffee. “I guessed that was your favorite.” He pointed at me then but didn't break eye contact; he simply extended a finger. At first, I didn't understand what he was trying to say, and I looked down. I saw the cream hoodie I was wearing, and my pants...

Wait. Oh, no, I thought. They weren't just my pants, they were my pajama pants, and I closed my eyes before smiling back up at Jack.

My entire body was instantly hot with embarrassment. I was still wearing my Cocoa Pebbles pajamas. My favorite pair with bottoms covered with a pattern of small bowls and cereal boxes on them.

Of course, I thought. That makes total sense.

I felt foolish for a few minutes, but I didn't let it slow me down too much, and soon I was telling my head to shut up. Who cares? I thought. I was enjoying this.

Hours later, and after another rousing debate—specifically which director was better Del Toro or Tarantino, to which there is an obvious answer—he looked at me intently.

“What?” I asked, embarrassed. “Do I have something on my face?”

“No,” he said, grinning. “But do you want to come with me?”

“Huh?” I asked, puzzled.

“Do you want to come with me—to see the sunset over the ocean?”

16

My heart did that thing where it dropped and did circles around my ankles, and I felt dizzy.

“W-Wha—” I managed.

“Do you?” he asked.

I took a second.

“We just met,” I said.

“I know. It’s crazy. But I come from a long line of crazy.” He winked.

“Look. You’re a nice guy,” I tried.

“Then tell me no,” he said.

There was something about his confidence that took me by surprise. How can he be this cocky? I thought. It’s because he’s good-looking. Okay, very good-looking. But still.

I wanted to say no. I did. I wanted to put this out of my mind, but the words wouldn’t make their way from my brain down to my lips. I wound up just sitting there instead. He smiled.

That. Damn. Smile.

“How about this: I’ll be outside of this restaurant in the morning. If you’re here, then we’ll go. If you’re not, I’ll have my no.”

He got up before I could get the “no” building up inside of me to come out.

“I’ll see you later, Kid,” he said. And with that, he was gone. I put my head in my hands and tried to get my body to respond to me again.

A voice from the café broke the tension.

“Dearest patron,” it said, “your credits are lookin’ mighty low. Please, make a minimum order or get up and go. And have a nice day, y’all!”

I left and went straight home. I didn’t know what I was thinking, because—somehow, for some reason—I couldn’t get Jack’s offer out of my head. Maybe it was because I hadn’t taken my meds in a few days.

When I made it into my room at the W, I went straight to my pill drop dispensary, which was basically an automatic delivery system for medications and small packages. Abdul Hakeem once said it was like the tubes they used to use at drive-thrus and banks. I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by that.

My room was a one-bedroom suite at the W, which might sound expensive, especially since the auto-café put my business out there, but it’s not that bad. It costs most of my monthly allotment left from my parents. I don’t get the full amount of their insurance until I’m eighteen, and they weren’t wealthy, but they made enough for me to survive and still keep a few comforts. With what I was allowed, I was able to afford the room, food, and a few essentials—some toiletries and knick-knacks, but the hold on my account reduced the amount of spending credits I had available. Sure, there were places I could stay that were free, and I could go without Pebbles, but why would I?

I enjoyed the amenities here, and amenities still cost credits; the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The place was a mess. It only got cleaned on Sundays and Thursdays.

I opened the small container of pills and considered downing a Nocturn so I could sleep. I'd normally take my antidepressants and floaties, but there was something pulling me away from them. Instead, I decided on a much, much worse option: the minibar. My rent paid for everything in the room, including booze, which got restocked weekly if needed. Not that I'd ever needed that. But with the age restrictions on alcohol being nixed, anyone could get drunk, so I was all set for what would prove to be a bad idea.

17

Mom always liked coconut rum. I can see why. It's sweet and it doesn't burn when it goes down, especially if it's chilled. I mixed one of the tiny bottles with a soda and some ice, and in a few minutes, it was gone. I tried two bottles the next time, but much like the first, it was empty in minutes.

Before I knew it, I was out of coconut rum.

18

Drunk dialing is evil. Drunk dialing is evil, evil, evil.

"Call Jack," I said to my cube, even though I knew I didn't have his contact info.

I don't know why I did it. I don't know why I thought of it.

I don't know why it instantly connected, and Jack's face was looking back at me on my projected digital display.

"Hey, Kid," he said.

"Hey yo-self," I slurred.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Don't interrupt me," I said, even though he hadn't interrupted me. "I's gots somethin' I wanna say."

“Alright,” he smirked.

“No!” I said, pointing at him. “No smiling. No smiles. You got that mister.”

“Whatever you say, Kid.” He tried to keep his face from turning up, but he was having trouble.

“Good,” I said. “Now you listened here.”

He nodded.

“No—I said...I said, don’ inerrupt me. You just lissen. I don’t know who you think you are, but you can’t just meet a girl and ask her to go acrossed the country on some half-cocked trip to see the sunrise over the Sahara. It’s just...it’s just not something that you do, you know? Like there are things and boundaries and stuff. You gotta ease into somethin’ like that. I mean, how can...how can you just do that? It’s not somethin’ that’s done, right? You know what I’m sayin’?”

“Do you want me to come over?” he asked.

Before my brain could logically answer this question, I said, “Yes. Yes, I do.” And I accentuated this with what can only be described as an overenthusiastic full body nod.

19

I don’t remember Jack getting there. I remember the room spinning and then flying in the air—hovering and then landing on a cloud that surrounded me until the faeries took me off to Never-Never Land.

20

Alcohol is evil.

Alcohol is evil, evil, evil. It makes you think everything is okay, and then it kicks you in the face when you wake up.

It was late morning when I finally opened my eyes. I shouldn't have, but I did, and I instantly regretted it. A pain like a shock to the skull shot through my head, and I grabbed my temples.

"Holy crap," I stammered.

My mouth was so dry I could barely get words out. My tongue felt like sandpaper in my mouth and my throat was dehydrated all the way down to my stomach. That's probably an over exaggeration, but I was very thirsty.

I opened one eye and saw a glass of water and two individual pill packs sitting on my nightstand. I grabbed the water and drank half of it as quickly as I could. The pills were Ibuprofen.

I ripped open the foil, threw the tablets over the lips and through the gums, and I used the rest of the water to wash those down, and then I pulled the covers up over my head and waited for them to kick in.

I was in my bed. I was still in my PJs. And from what I could gather, I'd been tucked in. Those were all good things. The problem was, I didn't know how I'd gotten to bed, and I know I didn't put a glass of water and medicine on my nightstand. I didn't even own any Ibuprofen. And if I didn't, then who...

Oh, shit. I thought. Oh, shitty, shit, shit, shit!

I vaguely remembered calling Jack. How I called him, I had no idea. I was sure I didn't get his number or any other way to contact him. I thought about that for a minute. It was another mystery.

Are mysteries always interesting? I wondered but never got to answer. My internal deliberation was cut short and forgotten the instant I smelled them. Even from under the covers, I smelled them. There was no smell like that anywhere else in the world. I jumped out of bed and ran into the living area. I looked

around frantically. Tears welled up in my eyes, and my vision became fuzzy and distorted.

He was turned away from me, so I could only see a blurred silhouette of his back, but it had to be him. He was here. He was in my kitchen. He was the only one who made those. It only ever smelled like that when he made them.

Daddy! I thought, and I crossed the room in a sprint.

I grabbed him from behind and hugged him tightly, burying my face in his back. His body was thin, and he smelled different, but it had to be him.

“Whoa!” a voice exclaimed.

It was a familiar voice, but it wasn’t my dad’s. I let go and backed away a few steps. Jack turned around.

“Oh...hey,” I said. “Uh, sorry.”

He saw me crying.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. “I-I’m sorry about the mess. I thought you might want something to eat when you got up.”

I stood there not knowing what or how to feel or what was going on.

“I made pancakes,” he said, beaming.

I walked in a trance to the kitchenette’s island and sat down. There was a plate, and it had a short stack on it. Littered around the counter was an array of toppings: strawberries, whipped cream, berry compote, Nutella, jam, jellies, and, of course, butter and syrup.

“I didn’t know what you liked, so I got everything I could think of,” Jack said.

I slathered butter between each of the cakes, poured syrup over the top, then cut into the stack.

My knife slid easily through each of the golden-brown hotcakes, and I lifted a heaping forkful to my face and filled my mouth. They were perfect, soft and pillowy, just the way I remembered them. Fresh tears rose, but I fought to hold them back.

“No good?” he asked.

“No,” I struggled, “I mean, yes. They’re wonderful.”

21

I sat in silence and ate. Jack slid a glass over to me. It looked like chocolate milk, and it was, for the most part. I took a sip and marveled at the unmistakable taste of Cocoa Pebbles.

“It’s called Cereal Milk,” he said. “I don’t think it’s as good as real leftover cereal milk but it’s pretty close.”

I could’ve kissed him, and, in spite of my better judgment and hard-worn reserve to never get close to anyone, I kind of wanted to.

“How did you know where I live?” I asked, instead. “And how did I call you? I didn’t get your info.”

“Oh,” he said, “it’s this thing.” He held up his cube. “I inherited it from my dad, and it’s got some odd features. I told you my dad was a nerd, and, true-to-form, he had some, let’s say, social struggles. So, this cube sends out a bot to other cubes I spend a certain amount of time around.

The bot inserts my contact info into your cube, which allows you to contact me, but you don’t really call me. You call one of the business lines, and if I accept the call, then it integrates the code into both cubes. Basically, it eliminates the need for awkward conversations about swapping contact data.”

Inherited it? I wondered. Bots in cubes? I'd never heard of anything like that. I didn't think either of those were possible. And business lines? What did that mean? And who says, "Contact data?" Nothing about his answer made sense, but I somehow knew he wasn't lying to me.

"That's pretty invasive," I said.

"It is, and I'm sorry for that," he said, agreeing with me. His sincerity was both remarkable and unmistakable. "I didn't even know the cube did that until you called me," he explained, "and I wouldn't have had the feature active if I'd have known about it. But as for your address, you told me where you live. We were on the phone for quite a bit, actually."

"And you came over here last night," I said, totally glossing over the fact we'd talked, quote-unquote, 'quite a bit' the night before.

"I did," he said.

I felt my face flush, and I knew I was glowing bright red.

"And you..." I began.

"I found you on the couch," he said. "You weren't exactly passed out, because you were still talking."

"What did I say?" I asked, mortified.

"I couldn't make it all out, but something about cheekbones."

Oh, crap. My face grew hotter. I had to recover.

"And then you put me to bed?" I asked.

"I carried you to your room and got you tucked in, yes," he said. "Then I got you some Nurofen and a glass of water, and I left those on your bedside table."

That answered that, I guess.

“What about the pancakes?” I asked.

“What about them?” he asked.

“These aren’t just any pancakes,” I said. “They’re my dad’s pancakes. I would know them anywhere.”

“Like I said, I thought you might want to eat, and then I saw your cookbook...”

He pointed, and I turned and gazed over at the small countertop by the refrigerator.

There was a pile of my stuff there. It was what I’d taken with me when I left our old house. It was all I’d carried away after Mom died. There wasn’t much, only what I could fit into my backpack. One of the items was a Betty Crocker cookbook.

“Are you saying my dad’s pancakes were made from a Betty Crocker recipe!” I shot back. I was offended.

“No,” he said, probably confused by my outburst. “I found this inside.”

He threw a pancake onto a full stack sitting next to the tiny stovetop, picked up the plate, and grabbed something else I couldn’t see, then walked around the small island.

He sat next to me and handed me a notecard while putting down his breakfast.

The card itself was an unremarkable, average, everyday notecard. But written on it, in Dad’s unmistakable scribble was “Pancakes for K.” I felt warmth rise in my chest. I wanted to laugh and dance and cover my head with a pillow and sob uncontrollably—it’d been an emotional morning. I traced the words he’d written with my forefinger, going over his almost illegible handwriting. It was a simple thing, nothing more than a recipe, but special, so special, because it was from him.

“That was his nickname for me,” I said, dreamily. “He always called me K.”

“I figured as much,” Jack said, his mouth stuffed with food.

“That’s why I made ‘em. They’re really good.”

“They’re more than good,” I snapped. “And don’t talk with your mouth full. Didn’t your parents ever teach you that? Where are your manners?”

He shrugged and kept eating. I rolled my eyes and joined him.

22

I devoured five big pancakes and drank two glasses of the Cereal Milk.

I felt like I needed to lie down again; I was so full.

Jack ate two full stacks of pancakes, sausage, and then had some toast. I marveled at the amount of food he put down. He was so skinny. I had no idea where he put it.

“I’m stuffed,” I said.

“Me, too,” he said.

“You’d better be, Beanpole,” I joked. “You ate half the city.”

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” he quipped. “Didn’t your parents ever teach you that?”

“They taught me moderation,” I said.

“Life’s too short for moderation,” he said.

I rolled my eyes again, and he cocked an eyebrow at me. I turned my attention to how messy the kitchen was. Jack had destroyed it.

There was flour everywhere and eggshells strewn around and small puddles of milk and water and something I couldn't quite identify speckled the area around the stovetop. I realized something then.

“Speaking of moderation, how much did all of this cost?” I asked. “Eggs are fifty credits, and how did you get everything delivered so fast? It usually takes hours for a grocery order, and you haven't been here that long.” I was hoping this was true, but I wasn't sure.

“You can thank my dad for that, too.” He held up his cube again.

Looking at it up close it was even stranger than I thought it was. Different might not be the right word. It was unique. The size and shape were about the same, but there were details in it that I'd never seen before. There was a red trim, an impression, almost like it was carved out, and it had light flowing around it that was mesmerizing and hypnotic.

“So, do you want to come?” Jack asked, out of nowhere.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Do you want to come? With me?”

His questions caught me off-guard, and, as much as I wish it hadn't, my mind went into the gutter for an instant, so I wasn't sure what he was asking, but I was confused and embarrassed and unexpectedly warm.

“On your trip,” I blurted, understanding what he meant all at once. Relief washed over me but couldn't wash the embarrassment away. That stayed. I stood there feeling somewhat ashamed and knowing full-well I was glowing bright red.

“Are you still on about that?” I asked, trying to play coy.

“I only asked once...er...twice,” he said.

I thought about it—the craziest thing being that I was actually considering it.

It could be fun, I thought.

It could be dangerous, I thought back.

Jack's nice, and he put me to bed. And he hasn't done anything creepy so far.

So far. Maybe he's lulling me into a false sense of security.

How much less secure could I have been than last night?

At least I showered yesterday.

And so I went, back and forth. My head fighting with my heart. I barely knew him, but there was something about Jack. We clicked in a weird way. I hadn't realized it, but we spent four hours talking in the café last night—four hours that felt like fifteen minutes. We had this connection, and, as much as it scared me, I wanted to explore that. I didn't want him driving off without me.

Right then I saw something over Jack's shoulder. It was a small object lying on the counter.

When he'd moved the cookbook in my stack of stuff, the flap on my book bag must've opened—the bag was old; my mom had taken it to school when she was a kid—and something fell out. I stood and walked behind Jack's stool.

“Ignoring me now?” he asked, teasing.

I walked towards the object. It was recognizable in a way, but I didn't know what it was.

My pulse pounded harder as I approached it, and I felt shaky. Reaching out, I grabbed it and lifted it up, looking at it as if for the first time.

“Can we go to Disneyland?” I asked, not turning to look at Jack.

“What?” he asked.

“If I go with you,” my voice was shaking, “can we go to Disneyland?”

Dad traveled for work. You name the place and he'd probably been there. And the one thing he always did, no matter where he went, how long he was gone, or how far away he was, was to send a postcard home. He'd sent hundreds of them since he and Mom got married. On one side was some touristy picture of Mardi Gras or a sappy scene in the Tuscan countryside, and on the other was a message.

When it was just them, he'd address the cards to "My Love," and he'd always write: "Wish you were here. Love, Tony"

After I came along, it was pretty much the same—the postcards had the same picturesque photos on one side, but on the other side he'd write "Wish you were here. Love, Dad"

I remembered getting the cards when I was little. I'd run out to the mailbox and search for them every day when he was gone. And when one arrived, I thought it was the most exciting thing on the planet. These messages from everywhere. My own tiny, tangible windows into the world. I begged my mom for all the ones he'd sent over the years, and she pulled handfuls of them out of the closet downstairs. I treasured these small, cheap souvenirs. I loved them, much like I loved the man who'd sent them.

The last one Daddy sent was sitting on top of the pile. It was old now, frayed around the edges, and slightly yellowed—it'd been in my backpack for half a decade, so it could've been worse.

The card wasn't from Tokyo or Egypt. No, it was from America. California. Anaheim, actually.

Sleeping Beauty's castle was displayed prominently on its front, and when I pulled it out from under the rubber band holding the cards together, I turned it over, and I saw his scrawl; his last postcard to us.

To me. “Wish you were here.”

24

“Can we go to Disneyland?” I asked.

“Sure,” Jack said. “Whatever you want, Kid.”

I didn’t think. I didn’t question. I ran into my room, got changed, and went into my closet. My entire wardrobe consisted of a dozen sweatshirts, ten t-shirts, four pairs of jeans, ten pairs of pajamas, and ten pairs of underwear and socks.

I threw everything out of my bag—it was all old junk I didn’t need anymore—and shoved my favorite clothes into it, making it puff out. I saved a spot for my dad’s recipe and the postcards. I kissed the Disneyland one for luck, placed it under the band with the others, and zipped everything closed.

Please don’t be a bad idea, I thought for the millionth time.

I got on my cube and canceled my autopay for the rent, which released the hold on my account and gave me access to the majority of my money for the month.

I thought I might need a few extra credits for the trip and rent was held back but paid day-by-day—you can guess why. Plus, this would only be a week trip, two tops. There was no chance my room wouldn’t still be here when I got back, and I’d have time to reintegrate into Sedation for my Citier-ship if I wanted to. If not, then maybe I’d go somewhere else.

Either way, I decided to think about all that later. Those were tomorrow’s problems. Today was for action, not debate.

I went back to the kitchen. I opened a cabinet and pulled out my last box of cereal, emptied what was left into a plastic bag, and then grabbed the milk. I took a portable jug from one of the cabinets and emptied the last of the half gallon into it.

“We can always stop along the way,” Jack said.

“There’s no guarantee we’ll find Pebbles,” I said.

“There’s always Cocoa Puffs or…” Jack started, but I grabbed a leftover pancake and threw it at him. I completely missed, but it made us both laugh again.

“Alright. Alright,” he said, surrendering.

He led the way to the door, and I followed him, stopping for a moment to say goodbye to the hotel room I’d called home for the past five years. I thought I’d be more sentimental, but as I looked around all I could think was that I wouldn’t miss it. I barely recognized it. As much time as I’d spent here, I didn’t have one good memory to associate with it.

Jack was waiting. “You ready?” he asked.

I was trying to make room for the half-empty bag of cereal and the jug in my pack. It didn't fit at first, and I had to lose a few pairs of socks and a sweatshirt, but I eventually got it closed again.

“One last thing,” I said, and I grabbed the med-drop bag, and threw the rest of my pills onto the floor.

I knew I needed to keep taking them to come back, to be a Citier here again, but I was feeling things now and seeing color in the world again, and I didn't want to lose that. Somehow, I knew I'd need it.

“Let’s go,” I said, and I closed the door behind us.

Chapter 3: The Journey

25

“On that?” I asked.

“What?” Jack said. “It’s safe.”

“Bullshit!” I yelled.

I’m not sure what I imagined, but whatever it was, it was not what I was looking at. What I was looking at was a motorcycle. It was a nice motorcycle—it kind of looked like one of the lightcycles from Tron, which was one of my dad’s favorites—but it was a motorcycle, nonetheless.

“There’s no way I’m getting on that,” I said.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” he asked.

“I lost it the moment I saw that,” I said, repeating my disdain.

“Come on, it’s safe,” he said, trying to wipe the grin off his face.

“Safe?” I asked. “What happens if you die while you’re driving?”

“Riding...” he said and immediately stopped himself when he saw my face. “Sorry. It doesn’t matter. Never mind. Look.”

He pulled up his cube and showed me a display.

“This is the central core of the bike. It’s connected to my cube, and if I die, then it uses a safety feature to keep the bike upright, slow it down, and stop it.”

“Oh great, so then I’m stranded out in the middle of nowhere by myself. What if I run out of credits?”

Jack looked up at the sky for a second, thinking.

“Here,” he said, holding out his right hand.

“What?” I asked.

“Grab my hand,” he said.

“That's a weird way to get to first base,” I told him.

“Just grab my hand,” he said. “Like you're going to shake it.”

I did.

“Initiate Sequence 13,” he said.

“What's Sequence...” Before I could finish, my cube and his cube connected to one another. “What the...”

“I,” he continued, “Jackson E. Wood, do hereby leave all my worldly possessions to the owner of this cube in the event of my untimely demise. I do this freely and without duress. Scan to complete sequence and verify.”

His cube did a quick scan of us and then spoke—it actually spoke.

“Verified,” it said. “But not without reservations.”

“Reservations noted,” Jack said. “Now publish and certify.”

Our cubes lit up for a second—I'd never seen them do that—and then they released one another.

“There you go,” he said, like this was the most normal thing in the world.

“What the hell just happened!” I shouted, knowing there wasn't anything normal about any of this.

“I willed you everything I own. If I die, you get everything I have.”

“Great,” I said. “I get your crappy bike! That'll really keep me safe.”

“It'll be more than enough if you're stranded,” he said.

“I can't drive this!” I said.

"It's got an auto-ride feature," he said. "All you have to do is sit here, and it will take care of the rest. Now, will you please get on the bike so we can go?"

I was about to protest again. I had all my arguments planned out. I was going to start by yelling, "No!" and then follow up with "What if you decided to ride off without me? Or, what if I decide I want to come home?" But I didn't get the chance.

"Oh no, cutie pie," a voice from behind me said. "You don't want to get on that."

I turned to see who'd spoken. He was a big guy who was muscular in a way that suggested steroids, and he had a scary way about him.

His clean-shaven head and giant sunglasses made him look like the villain out of a 90's action movie; his arms bulged out of a sleeveless, neon shirt, and his cargo shorts exposed his underdeveloped leg muscles. He was a walking, talking contradiction—somehow silly and intimidating at the same time.

"Matter of a fact," he continued, his timbre deep and gravely. "I don't think anyone should be riding something as weak as that."

Jack said nothing.

"Why don't I just take it off your hands?" the big guy said, smiling and showing a mouth speckled with gold-capped teeth. "How about 100,000 credits?"

Again, Jack said nothing.

"No?" the man said. "Okay, 500,000."

I held my breath. That's a lot.

Again, Jack was silent, staring at the man with an implacable expression.

"Okay. What about \$10,000 cash?"

He pulled a large roll of 100-dollar bills out of his pocket. A band of paper stamped with “\$10,000” was wrapped around them and kept the bills in a tight group.

Credits were worth about the same as cash when they first started to be used—having taken the place of the American and Canadian dollar, the pound, and euros—but actual paper money hadn’t been printed since I was a baby, so it was rare, extremely rare. These days one dollar was worth almost 100 times a credit, so he was offering Jack the equivalent of 1,000,000 credits.

“Get on the motorbike, kid,” Jack said. His tone was even and cold as he slipped a riding helmet over his head, ignoring the big guy. I eased onto the seat behind Jack and wrapped my arms around his waist. As scared as I might’ve been about getting on the motorcycle, I was way more afraid of this asshole. The two goons hanging around the Hot Wheels version of a truck—a truck I was sure belonged to steroid boy—across the street weren’t helping. Jack slung a helmet over his shoulder and, after a moment or two, I figured out how to get it on my head. It was big, and I managed to slide it over my ears. Once it was on, the sides of the helmet tightened around my head so that it fit perfectly. The helmets were the kind that had a visor covering your face. Once I had it on, the visor activated like a monitor, which adjusted the light and lit up with a few different displays: miles per hour, wind speed, a map feature, and others.

“Hey,” the man said, reaching out. “We’re not done...”

Jack sped off. The bike jolted forward, and I had to grab onto his body with everything I had so I didn’t fly off the back. I wanted to berate him, but my voice was caught somewhere in my throat, along with what was left of my breakfast.

“What’s your problem!” I yelled once I could.

“Huh?” he wondered.

The helmets were connected, so I didn't have to scream at him, but I did anyway. "You nearly killed me back there! I almost fell off this damn thing!"

"Sorry," he said. He was silent for a second. "I wanted to get away from that Bit."

"Bit?" I asked with all the incredulity I could muster. "Bits don't come in the cities, Jack. They don't even have cubes. They wouldn't be able to do anything."

"Not all Bits come in the cities," Jack said. "But not all Bits live without cubes, either. The majority of them are getting a bad press. Many Bits have cubes that allow them in the cities, so they can buy things or use the facilities. Most people living on the fringes are farmers who're just trying to feed themselves and what's left of their families. Of course, some are hunters and scavengers. They cross borders looking for people and...whatever. And some, like those arseholes, are completely mental."

I'd lived my whole life within a twenty-mile radius, so I couldn't argue with him.

"He was offering you a lot of money back there," I said. "We could've chartered a drone ride and flown to Cali in luxury."

"The drones aren't running commercial flights anymore," he said. "Besides, where's the fun in that? It's supposed to be an adventure."

"Don't you dare!" I yelled. "No more sales pitches from you."

I could almost see the smile on his face.

Son of a bitch, I thought, both because I knew he was enjoying this, and because, whether or not it was wrong, I was kind of enjoying this, too.

"I also couldn't sell him this bike if I wanted to," he said, breaking the short silence between us. "It's permanently connected to my cube."

"Why would you do something stupid like that?" I asked, exasperatedly.

"I didn't." He was quiet again. "Dad built the bike."

He didn't say anything, but I thought I could hear him sniffing a bit, and he inhaled deeply a few times, letting out his air in hoarse resignation. This must've been hard for him to talk about, and while I had a lot to say, I didn't want to pry too much, too fast.

"Just keep it under sixty," I said.

"Yes, mum," he answered.

26

I've got to be honest; I was terrified for the first few hours we rode, so not talking was fine with me. I held onto Jack as tightly as I could, and he must've been having trouble breathing because I was squeezing so hard; I heard him wheeze a few times.

We sped away and headed west, taking Interstate 20, which led us into what used to be rural Alabama. It was eerie how empty the road was. There were stranded cars and wreckage strewn around, but there were barely any signs of life as we flew down the highway. And that's how it felt—like we were flying.

The air rushing around us didn't pull at me or make me feel unbalanced, and I never even noticed the wind. I'm not sure if it was how the bike was designed or what, but there were no hurricane gales pushing us to and fro, which was one of my many fears. Even with my pack still strapped to me, I felt weightless.

The motorcycle was quiet and fast. We talked a little, and I thought, more than once, that I was insane. This was insane.

I barely knew this guy, and yet somehow, he'd convinced me to get on his Tronmobile and leave the comfort of my home. I'd never been anywhere before.

The moment we rode out of downtown, I'd officially travelled farther than I ever had in my life. I hadn't left my grey, little square in eight years. It'd been my

safety net—my nearly comatose existence where I was sheltered, but not really alive. And then I looked forward.

My display showed me the path we were on and how fast we were going—seventy miles per hour, bastard couldn't keep it under sixty, but I didn't feel unsafe—then I looked past the display and saw the color of the trees. Many were bare. It was a hot winter, but even for as late in the season as it was, there was color in the world. Color like I hadn't seen since I was small.

Maybe I was like Jack's mom: young, dumb, and ready for adventure. Maybe I was foolish and impetuous. Maybe. But there was a time when my dad wished I was there, and I've wished I was with him every second since he left. So, dumb or not, I was finally going, finally living.

I'm on my way, I thought without meaning to. And then I bit my lip to stop tears from ruining the view and looked ahead at the incredible colors of my future.

27

We made it to Birmingham in what had to be a record time. He wanted to see the 16th Street Baptist Church Memorial. It was what his parents had visited when they came here.

It made me sad, as it's meant to, visiting a memorial for a church where four little girls were killed because of hate and racism. It was morbid and depressing to think of what people were capable of—what they are capable of.

“Take a picture with me?” he asked.

I hesitated.

“Please,” he begged.

I'll admit, it was the please that got me.

I left my bag on the bike, walked over to him, and stood awkwardly by his side. He snapped a photo of us with his cube.

“Oh, happy dagger,” I heard then. It was strange and somehow poignant to hear such a thing at that very moment.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think it’s coming from over there.” He started walking in a general direction, and we crossed the street to an outdoor amphitheater. It looked like it was part of a college at one time—old and weathered but cared for. There were about a half dozen people sitting on large, tiered concrete steps and watching some players on a stage acting out the end of Romeo and Juliet. I’d seen the old movie version with Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio. This was slightly different. In the play, Romeo was gone long before Juliet woke up.

She found his body by her side, which led her to pull out a blade and stab herself in the heart, not being able to live without the boy she’d given up everything for.

I was transfixed by the action.

Somehow, I thought Jack kind of looked like Leo from the movie. He had that classic boyish charm and a sweet baby face, even if his hair was messy and dark, and his eyes gleamed a deep brown.

It took me a minute to realize that Jack wasn’t beside me anymore. I looked around and saw him crossing the street and going into a 7-Eleven.

7-Elevens used to be gas stations—way back before electric cars took over. But they’d been bought by EveWorks and were turned into a massive system of automated way stations. They were stocked regularly by drones and had everything from restaurants to rooms for rent inside of them.

Jack disappeared into the store; it opened up like he owned the joint, and when he reappeared, his arms were full of snacks. He had handfuls of candy and popcorn.

He walked over to the amphitheater's entrance where he was immediately noticed by a trio of children, and when I say "children," I mean they were younger than us. These kids were probably twelve or thirteen, but they were some of the youngest people I'd seen. They ran over and looked longingly at the treasures in his arms.

"Want some?" Jack asked. The kids were mostly quiet, except one. There's always one.

"Oh, yeah!" he said, and grabbed a box of Milk Duds and some M&M's.

The others followed him and grabbed at Jack like Bill the Candy Man in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.

He laughed. It was a real laugh, and I liked hearing it. So many people faked their emotions these days, but not Jack. His face lit up, and he beamed. I noticed a small scar on his lip just then, and somehow it felt like it accentuated his joy. It was like that one little imperfection made everything more real.

Things can't be too perfect or else they seem fake, and Jack was close enough to perfect to be almost plastic, and then I was reminded of the cat—the one he'd given Zeke.

It was strange how he always seemed to have what people needed: a pet, a treat, an adventure. I pondered over this for a bit, and then a woman walked up to us on the sidewalk. She was thin and wasted in a way that suggested she hadn't eaten well for a few weeks.

She was followed by a small group, and they were all wearing large face masks and rebreathers. There were those that still believed IT was viral, so they kept their distance and always wore protective gear.

Jack turned to her.

"It's open," he said, pointing to the store.

The woman didn't move at first, but then she lifted her hands, showing us her barren wrists. She didn't have a cube. None of them did.

"It's okay," Jack said. "You don't need that today. It's open, and it'll stay open. Get what you need."

I could see the woman's mouth drop open even behind the face covering. She tried to say something but couldn't.

"It's okay," he said, "just go."

And she did. The others followed her.

They weren't in the store long, and we saw them rushing out of the 7-Eleven with armfuls of canned goods, nonperishables, and food that didn't need to be prepared.

How many credits does Jack have? a part of me asked, reflexively, and I shook my head to clear my mind.

We watched more people file in and carry out boxes and bagfuls. The kids from the play got their parents, and soon they were trotting across the lane. Some returned to the play; others made their way to wherever they were from.

He's obviously got enough, I thought, rubbing my eyes this time to try and get my mind away from this line of thinking.

I won't lie, his gesture made me feel safer and better about being with him, both because he was willing to do something so kind and, despite myself, because he

was able to afford it. I didn't love that, but I won't deny it either. Money buys safety, even in the middle of Armageddon. And him not taking the cash from 90's Roids Guy and his generosity at the 7-Eleven pointed me to the conclusion that money wasn't a problem for Jack. I didn't know how little a problem it was; it was only a feeling and some random thoughts then. That would soon change.

It took me a while to realize I was smiling. Somehow, I didn't know my face was lit up, and I was happy.

It also became embarrassingly clear that I'd walked over to Jack and grabbed his hand. I swear I don't remember doing it, but I found my fingers wrapped around his, and my face got red-hot, and my stomach did flips. He glanced over at me, gave my palm a squeeze, and then whispered in my ear, "It's about time to go."

"Okay," I replied in a meek whisper.

In the background I heard the narrator of the play ending the scene and my chest ached. I can't say why, but there was a tightness that gripped my heart.

"For never was there a story of more woe," he said, "than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

28

We didn't make it to Mississippi. Well, what used to be Miss—you get the idea. That was our next stop. Jack's parents had headed south from Birmingham, crossed the border, and spent an entire day on the beach. That was where we were hoping to get to, but we missed it by about 70 miles.

The ocean was too cold to go swimming like his mom and dad did in their photo, anyway, so I didn't think we'd be missing much.

He'd told me the story of their trip on the ride, and it ended with everybody in it getting stung multiple times by jellyfish. That was a regular occurrence in Mississippi, I guess.

Something about the Gulf of Mexico's churning ocean water made it the ideal breeding ground for them—not something I felt like getting into.

The ride was also taking its toll on me, and I needed to stop and rest.

"I'm sorry," I said. "My back and legs are sore."

People don't tell you how tender straddling a motorcycle for hours on end can make you, but my thighs were burning, my butt was numb, and I hadn't felt my feet in almost an hour.

We could've taken another short break and then continued on, but it was almost ten at night, and it made more sense to rest now and get an early start in the morning.

Jack pulled into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven; it was one of the large ones with rooms to rent. He parked the bike, I got off, and he plugged it in. I slid my backpack off and began to slip out of his jacket. He'd given it to me earlier.

"It's cold," Jack said, "keep it."

We both stretched our legs for a second and then went to the entrance. The doors opened, and we were welcomed in. The lights inside the station lit up at once and bathed us in a brightness that cut through the shadows.

"I didn't know 7-Eleven's outside of the cities were still open," I said.

"Only on certain routes," Jack said. "I told you, many Bits have cubes, and they travel all about. The more popular the route, the more stores are still up and running."

"Huh," I mused for a beat, then immediately changed the subject. "I'm starving."

As we walked in, every conceivable sweet and treat was on display behind the acrylic walls, and the coolers were brimming with frozen dinners and microwavable eats. It had almost everything. Almost.

“No Cocoa Pebbles,” I said. I couldn’t help myself.

“True, but I was thinking pizza,” he said. “You want some?”

And at that moment, I did. Pizza sounded great. Dare I say, even better than sugary breakfast food. He grabbed a double cheese and some sodas and walked to the back of the store. As he did, a door opened revealing a long hallway.

“How about the Honeymoon Suite?” he asked.

“Ha ha,” I said.

I walked to the security walls that slid open smoothly as I grabbed some gummy worms, a bag of popcorn, and Skittles. Then I sauntered over to him. He peered at the array of goodies I’d grabbed.

“What?” I asked. “I want to watch a movie. And what’s a movie without snacks?”

29

He wasn’t kidding about the Honeymoon Suite. He scanned his cube and the double-doors of the room opened.

“After you,” he said.

“I’m not sure what you’re implying, but I’m not that kind of girl,” I said.

“It’s the only suite with two rooms,” he said, matter-of-factly. “Unless you’d like to share a bed in one of the smaller...”

I marched by him.

“I’ll take the big bed,” I said.

“I’ll get the pizza in the oven,” he said.

I walked into the primary bedroom, put my bag down on the dresser, and took Jack’s jacket off, lying it on the bed. The suite was new and shiny. The countertops and floors were marble, and the electronics were state-of-the-art.

It was something you were more likely to see in a four-star hotel in Tokyo, not a gas station in Saraland, Alabama—the city’s name was printed on everything in the place, including the Bibles—but this was a premium 7-Eleven.

I grabbed my pajamas and made a b-line for the bathroom. I needed to wash the road off me. Much to my delight, there was a stand-alone tub and a walk-in shower.

A bath sounded nice—so nice. My legs ached from the ride, but I needed to get clean. There’d be plenty of time to pamper myself later.

And if there wasn’t time, I’d make some. Plus, hotel room bathtubs, even nice one’s like this one, always gave me the heebie-jeebies. Something about them being used by so many people—I don’t know.

It took nearly a year before I was comfortable enough to take a bath in my old place at the W.

"Shower it is," I said.

30

Once I was washed, dried, and dressed, I walked out of the bedroom and into the living space. As I did, I could see Jack pulling the pizza from the oven. Cool air washed over my freshly showered skin and my shirt clung to me a bit. I didn’t have time to fully dry my hair, so I put it up and decided that would be good enough. The food smelled heavenly as I moved into the kitchenette.

“I got you a plate,” he said. “What film do you want to watch?”

“You pick,” I said, grabbing the pizza, “but choose...wisely.”

He grabbed a plate with half the pizza on it and scooped up the remote.

“Does the couch work for you?” he asked.

"Where else?" I said this as if there was nowhere else to sit, even though there was a counter and a small table we could have eaten at.

He browsed for a bit and then settled on something to watch. I wasn't paying much attention; I was too busy stuffing my face with cheese and crust. I'd forgotten how much I loved pizza. A girl can't survive on cereal alone—as much as I'd tried to over the years.

Before I realized it'd even started, Peter Faulk was suddenly on-screen and reading a book to his sick grandson.

"Buttercup was raised on a small farm in the country of Florin," he began. "Her favorite pastimes were riding her horse and tormenting the farm boy that worked there. His name was Westley, but she never called him that. Isn't that a wonderful beginning?"

I glanced over at Jack.

"The Princess Bride?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "No good?"

This was not only one of my top ten movies, but it also had the single best line to ever be repeated on screen: "Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." I'd probably watched it a million times. It was a good choice, but it also seemed...I don't know...contrived, I guess. It was like he was trying to make a move on me.

"Is this what you watch with all the girls?" I asked.

He was quiet until Westley left the farm to go and find his fortune, then said, "I've never, uh, you know, watched a film with..."

"With a girl?" I asked.

"With anyone," he said, nervously. "Except my family."

I had a hard time believing this. “Oh, right. You never had sleepovers or birthday parties or...” I saw his face. He wasn’t kidding. He looked sad and embarrassed. Either he was a great actor—better than Mandy Patinkin, which was doubtful—or he was telling the truth.

“No,” he said, seriously. “This is...my first sleepover.”

There was an uneasy silence that seemed to last forever. I mean, I hadn’t had a friend in a long time, but I’d had friends before IT. Friends I’d had dozens of sleepovers with.

How could he not have? I wondered. And how could this be the first movie he’s watched with someone he wasn’t related to? Did he not have friends? Ever? How was that possible?

There were a thousand things I wanted to ask. I wanted to know how a guy as charming as he was could go through life like that and why he had to, but an idea came to me, instead.

“Popcorn!” I blurted.

That startled him. He was both puzzled and kind of tense.

“You can’t watch a movie without popcorn!” I said. “And I know you’re still hungry. Here.” I handed him my plate.

“Don’t eat my pizza.”

I got up to get us a bowl from one of the cabinets, threw the bag of popcorn I’d bought in the microwave, and splurged on some extra butter and salt to top the fresh kernels with once they were done and steaming. I also ordered us both a coke slushy. It was amazing to see the two cups appear in the receiving station and then fill themselves. All I had to do was order them, and then they were there, like something out of Star Trek—maybe not quite that cool, but close.

He was still holding my pizza when I returned. I dropped the oversized bowl on his lap and handed him one of the frosty drinks. I went back for my slushy and put it on the coffee table—no coaster needed. The tension that'd been building between us was washed away in an instant, and we watched the movie while nibbling on snacks and chatting. I loved old movies, or "films," as Jack would say. They were pretty much all we had these days. Nobody in Hollywood had made anything new in a long time, and I'd forgotten what it was like to go to a movie premiere at the theater.

This was as close as I'd gotten to that feeling of excitement since I was a child. No, this was better, because I was with Jack and...as much as I tried to fight it...I liked him. I liked him a lot.

31

"As you wish," Faulk said to his grandson, and the holovision screen blacked out.

"It's my turn next," I said, scooping up the remote.

Jack turned to me. "I don't think I have another one in me," he said. "I'm done in."

"You're really going to leave a lady all by herself out here?" I asked.

He considered this. "As long as you don't mind me falling asleep," he said.

"I'll put you to bed," I said, smirking.

His smile filled the room, and I put on Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

Choose wisely, I thought, snickering inside.

32

Jack wasn't kidding about falling asleep. He was snoozing before Indy had gotten the Cross of Coranado back from the Man in the Panama Hat.

I finished most of the movie but didn't pay much attention to it. I was distracted by the lanky, surprisingly attractive boy sleeping next to me.

He was quiet, and he hadn't given me one ounce of doubt—not that I hadn't felt doubtful about leaving with him, trusting him, and getting on that freaking motorcycle. There was a part of me that was scolding myself for going along with this, and there was a part of me that was kicking myself for my hesitation.

He'd given me no reason not to believe him at this point. I was alone with him in the middle of nowhere, and he'd trusted me completely—without any misgivings.

He'd been taking care of me since I followed him, and he'd asked for nothing from me. As far as I could tell, all he wanted was my company, which made me feel safe, but also kind of pissed me off.

Am I not good enough for him? I thought. This was completely irrational, and I knew it. But when were matters of the heart rational? Hang on, was this a matter of the heart? I asked myself, suddenly terrified by that possibility.

By the time Dr. Jones and Junior dropped a fighter plane via seagull attack, my jaw hurt from clenching. I was overthinking things. It made my temples throb, and my eyes heavy.

So heavy.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I did.

I'm not sure how we got into the position we were in. Jack wasn't sure either. The sun shone in through the large windows, and it was warm in the light. I don't know if I woke up first or if he did, but I looked up into his face; and he looked down and gave me that sideways grin.

It was only then that I realized I was lying on his chest, and he was holding me. Neither of us immediately recognized how odd this was, not for a few seconds anyway. Then we both sat bolt upright. My entire body flushed, and he turned his head avoiding eye contact.

His breaths were short and deep, as if he'd been running and was exhausted.

"S-Sorry," he said. "I think it was...cold, and we..."

"It's okay," I said, and I got up. I wanted to rush off to the bathroom, but I couldn't say that. Instead, I stood self-consciously and sputtered, "I'm...uh..."

"Right," he said. "Me, too."

He got up and went into the second room. I raced to the primary bathroom—to the sink—and threw cold water in my face.

What was that! I thought, chiding myself.

I wasn't sure why I cared so much.

That's not true. I knew exactly why.

When I walked out, Jack had changed clothes. He was wearing a vintage tour shirt from some rock band and some black jeans. He was staggeringly beautiful at times, and this was one of them. I held his coat out to him.

"Thanks," he said, and he put it on.

I opened my bag and pulled out my Pebbles and the milk I'd packed. It was still cool, and I was glad I took the container with the freezable sides. I almost forgot the inserts in my rush to pack, but I'd managed to grab them from the freezer at the last second. Not that I couldn't have gotten more milk, but as my grandmother always said: "Waste not, want not."

"Breakfast?" I asked.

He smiled.

Damn smile.

We ate in relative silence. Jack was as chivalrous as ever—he ordered some Cocoa Puffs and left the Pebbles for me.

Once we were done, I gathered my things and rejoined him in the living room. I thought he was going to leave without saying anything, which would've been fine, but then he spun to face me.

“Hey, I don't want you to think that...” he started.

“It's okay. We don't have to talk about it,” I said, attempting to end the conversation.

“No,” he said, and he reached out and grabbed my hand. His fingers were cold. “I don't want you to think that I would ever do anything...”

I was getting annoyed with how good he was—he was too good, too sweet, too perfect—and for some reason that annoyance only grew as he talked.

“I get it, Jack,” I said, tossing his hand away and startling him. I'd stopped listening, so I didn't know exactly what he was saying. “You don't like me. It's okay.” I brushed past him. “Can we go?”

“Wha—?” he asked, bemused.

“I just want to go,” I said, and I walked out without waiting for him. I didn't know why I was so frustrated. A day ago, I didn't even know this guy, and now I was angry that he was trying to apologize for cuddling with me.

Was this rejection? I thought. Was I being rejected? Or was I overreacting? Did he just want to be friends? Did I want to be more than friends? Wait, did I?

I thought a lot as we rode. Jack didn't talk much as we continued to travel south; he kept his eyes trained forward and his head down.

Smart guy, I thought.

“Look, I’m sorry, Jack,” I said.

“For what?” he asked.

“For how I acted back there.”

He was quiet for a bit, and then said, “We’re almost to the beach. Let's talk there.”

It was my first we-have-something-to-talk-about conversation and waiting for it to happen was as bad as advertised.

34

We rode into Biloxi and Jack parked the bike alongside Highway 90. The air was sweet and briny with a pinch of color—green, maybe—and it finished with a sulfur aftertaste.

It smelled like the ocean. I’d read a lot of books, seen many shows, and bought a lot of candles that tried to recreate what ocean water smells like, but there’s nothing like the real thing.

We walked onto the beach. The sand was different than I'd expected. It wasn't as fine as I'd assumed it would be. It was coarse, and it crunched under us as we stepped. The water wasn't the brilliant blue I was expecting, either. It was darker and vaster than I could've ever imagined.

Jack went over to a wall and kicked off his shoes. We had the place to ourselves, so I'd left my bookbag on his motorcycle, and I joined him, removing my boots and walking barefoot to the water's edge. The sea flowed over my feet and lapped at my rolled-up pant legs. The air was warm, but the water was cold, and the tide was coming in. He kept a bit of distance as I investigated the oceanfront. Wake splashed down hard, and I got sprayed with mist and foam. Jack caught me in his gaze, chuckled, and began to stride over.

When I was alone in my cave, I'd imagined having days like this. Days with a gorgeous boy on the beach. I'd dreamed of them. I'd wished for them, and I'd fantasized about them, which usually led to me yelling at myself, again, about how I needed to keep everyone at arm's length. Getting close to anyone was a bad idea.

Don't get close, I'd used to say. Don't let them in.

But as Jack came closer to me, I couldn't think about anything but him. Anxiety rose when I remembered "the talk" we were supposed to have. I'd temporarily forgotten about that in all the excitement. I frantically tried to prepare myself for what he might say, but my brain went blank.

Without stopping and with a grace I wasn't ready for, he leaned in closely and gently nudged me with his head. He was so close I could hear his breathing over the crashing waves, and I could feel him shaking right before he whispered:

"I like you, Kid. I like you a lot."

Then he turned and kissed my cheek. My heart was pounding so hard I barely heard a word he'd said, and I was suddenly frightened, excited, happy, and freaking out all at the same time.

I have no idea what came over me, but I grabbed his shirt, and I pulled him into me. Our lips met, and he used one hand to cup my face. It was sweet, and it made me feel secure. He opened his mouth, and I tried to follow along. Kissing is strange, especially for the first time. Thankfully, we were pretty similar in the way we went about it. When he moved or turned, I was already there to catch him. We stayed like that, lips locked, long enough for the tide to reach the ends of our bundled pants. He grinned and turned to raise his cube.

"Really quick," he said.

The picture he took was of us: him with his arms wrapped around me, and me bent over cackling as hard as I ever have as the water crashed in behind us, soaking us both to the bone.

35

We made it to New Orleans right before dark.

I'd changed into some dry jeans, a clean shirt, and a new hoody. Jack bought an outfit at a 7-Eleven and recycled his wet clothes. I'd wondered how he traveled without luggage. I had my backpack, and I was glad the bike had a resting place for it (there was a ledge that my bag could rest on, and it kept the weight off of me), but he only had his jacket with him.

I knew there were a few compartments on the bike, but there wasn't enough room to pack a week's worth of stuff in, so him buying clothes made sense. It got me wondering about credits again, but I dismissed those ideas with a shake of my head.

Once we'd gotten dry and redressed, we rode down a long stretch of beachfront that disappeared into the horizon and out of Mississippi.

Louisiana wasn't much to look at.

The whole state seemed to be bridges suspended over wetlands. The townships were sunken below the concrete viaducts that connected each city together. It was sad seeing the abandoned parishes and the cars still on the street. I knew then why Jack needed the motorcycle; it was easier to get through the leftovers.

The drones EveWorks retrofitted into mobile crematoriums and road sweepers had cleaned up a lot of what was left behind, but there were still large pockets of congestion on the roadways, and along with the cars and trucks left on the street were bodies of those who thought running away would save them. Most were

skeletons at this point, but a few were newer. They were probably traveling between the larger cities and Citierships.

I'd never know for sure, but I clenched my eyes shut and tried to keep the images from being burned into my brain.

"The helmet has a video feature," Jack said.

"Huh?" I asked.

"You can put on a small screen and watch a film," he said, "if you don't want to see..."

"I'll be okay," I said. "It's not my first rodeo." A thought occurred to me. "Why are there videos on a motorcycle helmet? That seems dangerous."

"Probably for the same reason they have braille in drive-thrus," Jack answered.

Another question flashed then. "Did you already have two helmets?" I asked, wondering how it was that he managed to have a helmet for me, even though I'd only decided to go on a spur of the moment.

"Yeah," he said. "That one was my mom's. Dad never designed anything without her in mind, so when he built the bike, he made sure to include her."

"Did she like it?" I asked.

"Oh, she never got on this thing," Jack said. "Are you kidding? Do you know how dangerous motorbikes are?"

"Jack!" I yelled. And we laughed and talked like that. That's what I remember most about the drive into New Orleans.

We talked. About nothing. About everything.

"Café Du Monde's!" Jack said, as we headed downtown.

The sun had set and there was a crispness to the early evening. Jack parked the bike, and we began walking along Bourbon Street.

I can't say it smelled great, but there were some people out, and it was nice to see the infamous side of the city.

There was a holographic parade currently going on, and there were more than a few hologram flashers trying to get beads. Jack never looked at anything but me. He never seemed distracted or like his presence waned. He was with me and only me.

The beignets at Café Du Monde's were delicious. They were sweet and slightly crispy when you bit into them, and then they melted into a buttery, saccharine mixture of vanilla and heaven. Jack waited until my mouth was full of beignet before he snapped our picture outside of the famous green overhang of the café. I had powdered sugar all over my face, and he was roaring laughter beside me.

It's probably one of my sweetest memories: us tittering and eating and enjoying each other's company. I was with him and only him. We danced in the street and held hands. It was full dark soon, and a dense mist descended on the night.

We spent a few hours taking in the sites and doing what most tourists do—wandering around and seeing the sights.

“Getting late,” Jack said, after we'd grabbed another snack.

“Yeah, I'm about ready to call it,” I said.

We were making our way back to the bike when I heard a familiar and unwelcomed voice.

“Go and find her,” it said. “We've got to move out before we get spotted.” It was the roided-out, 90's wannabe from Atlanta, and he was looking at Jack's bike with two cronies.

I grabbed Jack, shimmied him over to a wall, pinned him against it, pulled him to me, and kissed him hard on the mouth. The guys rounded the corner and walked by us without a glance. Jack never saw them. He was too surprised. His focus was on me.

“Woah,” he said, “I don’t know what kind of guy you think I am, but...”

“What kind of guy are you?” I asked, not letting him finish his thought, and he kissed me again. It was a long, passionate kiss, and it made me feel special in a way I can’t put into words.

“Let’s go,” he said.

I looked over my shoulder to see if Roid Guy and his friends were anywhere around, but they’d moved on. I don’t know why they were so interested in Jack’s bike, but I didn’t like that they were. I was also really hoping I wasn’t the “she” they were looking for. I wanted to get the hell out of there.

We got on the bike and pulled away from downtown, heading west towards Texas. But we barely made it out alive.

37

Jack was taking it easy on the interstate. He was only going about fifty miles an hour. That probably gave that guy enough time to catch up with us. And catch up with us he did.

38

The truck was about what you’d assume the bald, upside-down bowling pin of a man would drive. It was a jacked-up, multi-colored monstrosity with a bulldozer blade welded to its front grill. It, like him, was also very 90’s looking, and it was

obviously a gas-guzzling, environmental disaster. Still, I didn't see it at first. I'm not sure when it entered the highway, but the next thing I knew it came within two inches of Jack's back tire, blaring its horn like a freight train.

"Oh shite!" Jack yelled, and then he floored it.

I'm not an engineer or a mechanic, but when Jack hit the accelerator, his bike took off like a rocket. It made the truck look like it was standing still. I looked back and caught a glimpse of some gold teeth and a bald head.

"It's the guy that wanted your bike!" I said.

"The who?" he asked.

"The guy with the cash!" I exclaimed.

"Well, I doubt he's chasing us because he wants to buy the bike now!" he said.

"So, what do we do?" I asked.

Jack swerved around abandoned cars and in and out of lanes.

"Hold on," he said.

He pushed us faster, but the monster truck wasn't far behind us, and we were the only other lights on the road.

"He must be using nitrous," Jack said. "Because he's starting to gain on us again."

"Nitrous? Like, Fast and the Furious?" I asked.

"Pretty much," he said. "But look, up ahead."

I peered over his shoulder, and my visor went into a kind of night vision mode where I could see everything clearly, and the things I couldn't see, the visor lit up for me. I saw what Jack was talking about. Up ahead on the bridge were a pair of jackknifed semi-trucks blocking most of the blacktop.

The drone-driven carriers must've malfunctioned, and they hadn't been swept off the road yet. Between them was only a few feet of space. To either side of them was nothing but a concrete bumper of the bridge and an eighty-foot drop.

"We're not trying to go through that are we?" I asked.

"If we can get through that, then we're home free," he said.

"Jack, those trucks are a quarter mile away," I said, "and this asshole isn't that far behind us. If you don't get there or if you make a mistake, we're totally screwed. And that's if you don't kill us first!"

We sheered around a burned-out Jeep with less than a foot to spare as I said this.

"Well, do you want to stop and try to talk it out?" he asked, half incredulous, half serious.

I only had a split-second to think, and then I hardened my resolve and made a decision.

"Punch it," I said.

Jack switched gears and hit the accelerator, and before I knew it the miles-per-hour indicator on my visor read 154. Moving that fast makes the world blur. Streaks of lights flew past us as we moved, ever faster, towards the trucks.

The visors allowed us to see, but it was much more difficult to make out where things were. The truck was still blaring its horn behind us and slamming into cars, pushing them around the eight lanes of asphalt with ease, but we were pulling away.

We closed in on the semis with amazing speed. The moment our headlights shined off the eighteen-wheelers' rims and reflectors, Jack cut them off, and I

shut my eyes, holding onto him so tightly my arms hurt. The wind was loud now, but when he spoke, I could hear him.

“Here we go,” he said.

There was a sudden whoosh of air as we flew between the trailers, and it felt as if the world became smaller and pushed in.

The wind folded around us, and there was the slightest wobble of the frame as he adjusted our direction in the narrow corridor. I opened my eyes right as we passed through, and I didn't know what I was looking at, at first. The visor fine-tuned my vision to the darkness and the void of shadows between the trucks and then shifted back to the open night sky in an instant. That claustrophobic feeling and the whole ordeal lasted milliseconds, but it felt as if the night had been swallowed by those few horrifying moments. And then it was over.

We slowed down rapidly and then stopped altogether to look back at the truck chasing us. Blue flames shot out ever higher from behind the cabin where the exhaust pipes had been rerouted to, but Roid Guy must not have seen the semis. He tried to slam on his breaks, but his rig skidded fiercely, so fiercely the front tires burst, and it began shooting sparks from underneath it before the blade smashed into the trailers.

We waited a few seconds, and then heard someone say, "Motherfucker!" from inside the giant, overpowered Tonka toy.

Jack wasn't about to stick around.

“We need to try and ride through the night,” he said. “We don't want him catching up to us again.”

And we did. We rode nearly all the way to San Antonio. We didn't stop or look back for six hours, and we never went slower than 90.

39

"Is that guy stalking us?" I asked.

We were somewhere between Westwego, Louisiana and Cut and Shoot, Texas, which are real names of real places and not made-up towns, which was wild to me. We'd been chatting for hours with barely a break in the banter, but now it was time for a more serious conversation.

"And I'm talking about the legal definition of stalking this time," I said.

"I don't think so" he said. "It's more likely we're just going in the same direction, and we keep running into each other. If he was really following us, he would've made a move in Biloxi or before. We were more exposed, and that bloke in the truck doesn't seem like the type to have much of a plan. I mean, he kept laying on the hooter. What was that about? Hit us or don't, but don't be an arse and scare the shite out of us for no reason."

"I saw him in the city, too," I said. "He was hanging around your bike, but he didn't see us."

"When?" he asked.

"Right before we left Bourbon Street," I said.

He considered this for a few miles.

"Do you still think we're just going in the same direction?" I asked.

"We are, whether we want to or not," he said. "We have to. This is the only way from the east coast to the Pacific that's left. All the other Interstates, (most of I 40 and loads of others) got washed out or destroyed during the riots. Why I 10 West has held up so well is kind of a mystery."

The interstate highway talk was all well and good, but I was interested in other stuff.

“Speaking of mysteries,” I said. “Tell me what's going on with this bike.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“That guy could've killed us,” I said. “He tried to buy your motorcycle before, and he might be following us now. He definitely chased us. And the only reason I can think of is this thing.”

He was silent for a moment.

“You said your dad built it, right?” I asked.

“He did,” he said.

“Was he famous or something?”

“A little,” he said, and he sighed. “My dad was Kenneth Wood, and my mom was Evelyn Wood.”

The names were instantly recognizable to me, and I suddenly felt sick to my stomach.

40

Evelyn Wood was the CEO of EveWorks Inc. Kenneth Wood was its Chief Operating Officer.

They were two of the richest and most powerful people that had ever lived. They literally saved the lives of every person still breathing, so they're also pretty damn famous. Everyone "knew" Evelyn and Kenneth. The question was: Who the hell would recognize their kids?

Nobody, that's who.

The automation Ken and Eve created changed everything. People didn't have to work to survive anymore, which was good because it's very difficult to get people to go to work when their family and friends keep dying. The machines EveWorks built were life support for the human race, and because of that, their company became one of the most powerful corporations in existence. It even had its own seat in the United World Alliance.

There are less people alive now, in 2070, than there were in 1800 by half, and there were only 2 billion people around back then. So, we had to have something to help us survive. Our entire species was disappearing, and the only thing that separated us from the animals was our ability to use tools, so EveWorks made better tools. Through the fog created by these thoughts, an idea came forward and hit me like a lightning bolt: I realized immediately that Jack was rich. Like, Richie Rich rich. His parents made more money than the gross domestic products of most countries.

Something else also occurred to me right then.

Why the...!

41

"Why am I on the back of a motorcycle!" I yelled.

"What are you on about?" Jack asked. I'd scared him, and he'd jumped..

"You've got more freaking money than any teenager—hell, anybody on the planet!" I said. "So, why am I on the back of a bike?"

"Okay first," he said. "I'm eighteen. I'm an adult, not a teenager."

"Yes, eight-TEEN," I shot back, emphasizing the last syllable. "Still a teenager." I could almost feel him cocking an eyebrow at me.

“What I want to know is why we aren’t flying in a luxury drone right now? Or on a yacht. Or in some supersonic orbital transport.” He breathed heavily and seemed to wheeze.

“It’s about the journey, not the destination,” he said. I rolled my eyes at that.

“And there’s no way we could’ve flown.”

“Why not?” I asked.

That’s hard to explain,” he said. “But, to put it plainly, everything is falling apart.”

I wanted to say, “No duh,” but I was silent, wanting him to explain this fully before saying anything else.

Him being the unknown heir apparent to the EveWorks empire gave him a certain amount of unearned authority, and I wanted to hear what he had to say—what he knew. The news could report whatever they wanted, but we all knew it was little more than state media at this point.

They didn’t report real news anymore. The old line, “If it bleeds, it leads,” died with eleven billion of our buddies and pals. “The things my parents did,” Jack continued. “They were Band-Aids at best.”

“Just tell it straight,” I said. “The flowery language is pretty and all, but it isn’t going to help us right now.”

He nodded. Whether he was agreeing with me or not, I’m unsure, but he did move his head up and down.

“The machines,” he began. “All the machines are breaking. They’re failing.”

“Why?” I asked, reflexively.

“Because we need people,” he said, and then he took a few seconds. “Basically, The Terminator could never happen.”

"What does that have to do with anything?" I stammered, completely confused.

"Trust me, this is the easiest way to explain it."

"Okay," I told him. "But this better be good."

"In *The Terminator*, Skynet nuked humanity, took over the planet, and created an Earth populated by machines, right?"

"Duh," I said, unable to bite my tongue this time.

"Well, that could never really happen." Again, I wanted to say "duh."

"It's not that robots can't sustain themselves," he continued. "They can for a short time. But they're too volatile to survive for long. If you think about the life expectancy of any machine, it's short compared to a person's, and the worst possible environment for any robot or drone to be in is here. Right here.

Anywhere on this planet, and while our SmartMechs can repair themselves for a bit—about a decade, it seems—they need people to keep going indefinitely. The sheer number of forces the machines withstand makes their lives a constant war of attrition, and in the end, Mother Nature will win. She may have already won. The air alone causes metal to rust, and there aren't enough repair robots to fix the repair robots that are broken. So, we need people. There's not enough energy or raw materials anymore, and the factories can't continue to function without more. Even at the few locations we're still able to use, there's nowhere near enough. But what we really need are more hands to help keep the cogs turning. Some people have been out there trying to fix things—doing everything from finding fuel to performing maintenance. But last week, hundreds of them died. One was my mum." He took a long pause. We rode in silence for about twenty miles before he continued, but I could hear him panting.

I thought he might be crying, and I didn't want to say anything.

I hugged him a little tighter.

“Any drones,” he said, finally, “that aren’t being used for ER got shut down. They’ve all been grounded, and their parts were reappropriated.”

“So, there aren’t any more transports?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “They were stripped last week after...after Mum died. It was part of her will. When she passed, the company's on-hand supply coffers and our entire fleet were donated to the UWA. The plan was to try to pool resources together and entice others out there to help humanity’s last stand, but that's daft. No one believes it'll do anything. Not even my mum thought it would work. Even with all the money in the world, we're powerless, Kid. So, I'm not rich. No one is.”

“Whatever, Richie Rich,” I said, and he chuckled. “Does ER stand for emergency room?”

“Emergency rescue,” he said. “It's British.”

“Of course, I said. “But what's with that language?”

“Huh?” he asked.

“Coffers,” I said. “Really? You didn’t need to use that word, you know? You could’ve just said ‘money.’ Or would that have been too pedestrian for Master Wood?” I mimicked a cockney accent as I sang the last sentence.

“Tomato, to-mah-to,” he said, amused.

“So, how long do we have left before everything's too broke to fix?” I asked, unintentionally killing the lighter mood we'd barely gotten to enjoy.

He was quiet again.

“That's the rub. It won’t matter in two years,” he said. “That was the latest projection.”

“What projection?” I asked. “Two years, and then...what?”

“Unless there’s a miracle?” he sighed.

“We die. Humans go extinct. The last body drops in 2072 or thereabouts.”

“And you know this because of your mom?” I asked.

“And my dad’s cube,” he answered. “After mum was gone, and I got the cube from her, I started getting up-to-date data—trends and stuff she and dad used to get.”

“Wait, so your mom had that cube, too? Why do you always call it your ‘dad’s cube’?”

“He built it,” he said. “And it’s like the bike. I’ve always called it ‘my dad’s bike,’ so I don’t know what else to call it.”

I was surprised by how calm he was. Sure, he was upset. Who wouldn’t be. But he was stalwart and unshaking.

His words were deliberate; and they only betrayed him when he spoke about his family. That was the only time he wavered.

Maybe he’s staying strong for me, I thought. Or hoped. Or both.

I wish I could say his news scared me, but I’d been waiting for this or something like this for nearly a decade.

There was an expiration date to the hopelessness, which was horrible, but somehow it gave me a closure IT never had. It was still scary, but it wasn’t going to jump out and grab me anymore. I could see it coming, and that created some amount of peace in me, even if I still didn’t have any control.

“Are they going to tell everyone?” I asked. I’m not sure why I asked that, but I did. It was the last thing on my mind—telling every other stranger left that it was all about to be over, but I asked all the same.

“A message will get sent out and uploaded to every platform on the stream,” he said, “and it’ll deliver the bad news.”

I thought about that. It was heartbreaking to hear a recording would announce the end of human existence, but it also seemed right somehow. And not just right but predictable. I should've seen it coming. It wouldn't have made it suck any less, and it sucked hard, but I still should've seen it.

“This bike,” Jack continued, pulling me from my reverie, “is probably the fastest way west that’s still working.” I looked out at some of the cars and trucks left strewn around the road, and I knew he was right. “And I figured I’d take it day by day,” he said.

“Well, you’ve got more money than Ironman,” I joked, “so if anything goes wrong, I guess we’ll be fine.”

“Believe it or not, there are some things we can’t buy our way out of,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I pivoted.

“What about getting a car?” I pouted. “I haven’t been able to feel my butt for a hundred miles now.”

“Come on,” he said, “you love this bike.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. I enjoyed riding, and I’d thought about asking him to let me try it by myself more than once.

“Maybe I can teach you how to ride alone soon,” he said.

It’s like he’s reading my damn mind now, I thought.

We talked about family a lot. He told me about his brother, Kevin, who’d died during the second wave of IT. He talked about his father, who’d passed a few years ago.

He spoke at length about his mom. It was obvious he loved her, and it was also obvious that her recent loss weighed heavily on him. We talked about everything, absolutely everything.

I wanted to be angry about the motorcycle, the truck, our near-death experience, but I couldn't be, because it was all so...exciting. And new. And for the first time since I don't remember when, I felt alive. I was on the back of an amazing machine, holding onto a boy who liked me back, and who was sexy as hell, and I was having the adventure of a lifetime—the adventure of my lifetime.

I'd lived in fear of dying every day for so long, but this was the first time I'd ever had the courage to overcome my fear of living. I was scared but also eager.

It was like riding a rollercoaster for the first time, which I can actually say, because I got to ride a few coasters at Six Flags during Alice Green's ninth birthday party.

I remember feeling the same way as soon as the lap bar came down over my legs on the Scream Machine. That was the oldest wooden coaster in the southeast, and it looked like it might fall over at any second. Mixed with the fact that they ran the rollercoaster backwards most of the time, it was instantly true upon seeing it that the name Scream Machine was fitting. This entire trip was like that—disturbing on its face but rewarding and somehow gratifying and, damnit, fun! That's what I was having. As dumb as I thought I was, as it was, as this was, I was having fun.

It was terrifying and wonderful. I'd almost forgotten that feeling, because I'd been numb for so long.

I was so afraid of losing my life that I forgot how to live it, and that fear changed my world. It became muted and analog. Now it was blaring in seamlessly synchronized stereo surround sound. Yes, it hurt sometimes, but it was worth the pain.

Holding onto Jack and reaching out my hand to feel the current of the wind rushing around me, a not-unfamiliar but completely unexpected feeling began to rise from somewhere inside. It started with a tingle and spread as a ripple. It took

me a few seconds to understand what the sensation was, and then, without thinking much of it, I realized it was arousal. I was turned on.

Huh? I thought. Really?

“I think I want to have sex,” I said, absently, and Jack nearly crashed the bike.

42

Oh shit! I thought. I said that out loud! I didn't mean to!

“U-Uh,” Jack stuttered. “What? Like...!”

“No! I didn't mean...” I said, trying to recover. I also didn't not mean...but I wasn't about to tell him that.

“Ignore me!” I yelped, and I buried my face in his back, squeezing him.

“Too tight,” he said. “Too tight!”

43

We stopped at a 7-Eleven situated in a small town off Interstate 10. It lit up and opened as we pulled in, just like all the other 7-Elevens did for us. Well, not us. Him.

There was something odd about this entire situation, and a thought was nagging at me in the back of my brain. As I looked over at the boy and his striking features, it hit me like a ton of bricks.

“You own the 7-Elevens!” I blurted.

That startled Jack.

“Woah!” he said. “Huh?”

“The Wood's,” I said. “They owned all the 7-Elevens.”

“Okay, so—,” he said, elongating the hard-o sound.

“So—,” I mocked back. “Richie's family got its money from striking oil in the cartoon, and here you are, Master Wood, the owner of not only the most famous gas station ever created, but I know EveWorks has its own oil refinery. So, you really are Richie Rich. No tomato. No to-mah-to.” It was a loose connection, but I was in a playful mood.

“You know,” he reflected, as he appraised some Takis, “you’re really smart.” He said this without a hint of sarcasm or mockery. He said it as matter-of-factly as one might comment about the weather.

“That’s really hot,” he said. “Seriously, the hottest.”

I nearly tackled him as I rushed over and kissed him before I said something else I didn’t mean to say out loud.

44

We fooled around. I wasn’t ready for anything more than some heavy petting, and by the way Jack’s body was trembling, I could tell he wasn’t, either. There was a lot of kissing and a few grabs here and there, but we stayed clothed.

I wanted to, you know, but it all seemed too fast—said the girl who jumped on the back of some boy’s motorcycle after knowing him for twelve hours. I still can’t think about that without shaking my head.

45

We got a quick bite of breakfast the next morning and then hit the road. It wasn't far to where we were going, but we needed to get there and get out of sight. We didn't talk much about Roid Guy and his friends, but we'd come up with something. I wouldn't call it a plan, but it was as close as we were going to get to one.

The San Antonio 7-Eleven we stopped at was outside of the city proper, and it was another small affair. It wasn't as large or grand or as convenient as our first stop, but it was still stocked.

"What about some Thai food?" Jack asked.

"Pad Thai!" I shot back at him.

"Got it!" he said.

We got a double room, even though we didn't need it—we slept on the couch again—because it was at the back of the building where Jack could park the bike away from prying eyes.

We'd decided to stay in for the day. We needed some time to recuperate. And since the hotel was off the road, and because we didn't know if we were being followed, we figured it couldn't hurt to hide. If Roid Guy was after us, then we had a bit of a head start at first, but that wouldn't last, so we could wait here and let him pass us by without him ever knowing it. That way we didn't feel chased, and we could have an entire day to watch movies.

We'd discussed other options and tried to find more ways around the Roid Guy problem, but nothing we came up with was any better. There were no cops. There was no help. Not that we weren't used to that, but Roid guy was huge and completely insane. Even with Jack joking he could call in a Hellfire missile strike and take the bulky bastard out, it was easy to see that it would be best for everyone if we simply took the day off.

Plus, I got to spend the whole day locked up with Jack, so I know it was best for me.

"My turn," I squeaked.

We'd already gone through two films from 2061 (the last year new movies were made), most of the Jurassic Park reboots from the 40's, and a summer action blockbuster from 2055, but I wanted to watch something older and maybe try to find something he hadn't seen.

Like me, Jack had been doing little else besides watching movies and TV since IT started, so finding something we both enjoyed was easy; finding something one of us hadn't seen yet was nearly impossible.

"This one," I said.

"Oh, Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Amongst Thieves!" he said. "I love this one." And we began to talk, being total dorks over the campy and game-accurate story on the holo-screen. We talked so much about the movie that we never got to watch it.

"The best scene," he said.

"I know," I agreed. "It not only completely sets the characters' personalities in place, but it uses humor to lift the moment while making fun of itself. It's the right joke at the right time."

"It really is," Jack said. "Did you write a dissertation on this stuff or something?"

"Shut up," I said, and I tackled him back onto the couch cushions.

We both got showered at some point, ate dinner at the table like real people, and Jack set out our road clothes for automated washing and pressing. He'd bought another outfit, and I told him he could keep an extra outfit in my bag if he wanted to. I had room now without the cereal and milk, and it seemed wasteful to keep recycling brand new clothes.

"Well, the washing machines are still working," I said.

“For now,” he said.

It must have been difficult for him, being the son of Evelyn and Kenneth Wood. Like being one of Bill Gates’s or Steve Job's kids, it must’ve come with a lot of unwanted scrutiny and more than a few growing pangs. But the Woods had enough money to keep their children out of the spotlight. For the most part, at least. I never knew Jackson or his brother existed. Not really. I’m sure I’d read their names somewhere, but that’s like trying to remember any other person named Gates or Jobs.

Then once IT began, things changed so much, so fast that they didn’t have to worry about privacy anymore. The media didn’t have time to focus on the tech trillionaires and their growing empire.

7-Elevens were sweeping the world with their automation, and they seemed like unlikely saviors, but Jack’s parents built some of the first successful limited AI machines in existence. Sure, the Woods were industrialists and energy peddlers who’d taken advantage of the travel boom after the early pandemics, but they were also a pair of geniuses. Like Willy Wonka was a candy man and a madman.

Their full-service auto-travel destinations and inventions changed the landscape of travel and then industry and then the entire planet. Everyone wanted the automation they created. The machines were able to reason and complete concrete tasks without having to be told to, because they could think. Sure, their reasoning was limited to a ten-year-old’s but there was a true, genuine intelligence in there, which was why they were used so much during IT. They were able to keep things working while we became obsolete.

7-Elevens were also some of the first places to cater to self-driving cars, and the Woods put a lot of thought and effort into creating oases for the weary traveler, and we were weary.

“It was the trip they took,” Jack told me. “The one to see the ocean. That’s what made my parents realize there was a need inside of people to travel—a wanderlust. It’d been nearly impossible to get out during the pannies.

People tried after Covid and the Pox, but that was only the start of things. It was like no one knew when to stop travelling before, which only spread diseases like wildfire, but there was this instinctual desire to see more and explore. Then, after the viruses, people forgot what it meant to travel, and most businesses linked to traveling had closed. So, EveWorks, my mum, specifically, had a vision.”

“And her vision was gas stations?” I asked.

“Well, petrol had become almost taboo by then...” he began.

“Petrol?” I interrupted.

“Come on,” he said. “My parents were Britons, and I’ve pretty much been hanging out with my mum, and only my mum, my whole life, so...”

“I wanted to ask about that,” I said.

“My mum?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “You said you’d never been to a party or watched a movie with someone who wasn’t in your family.”

“Yeah...” he said.

“Was that because of your parents or...”

“I was sick,” he said, and his face aged ten years almost instantly as his demeanor shifted from his casual carefree attitude to grim and somber. Still beautiful but stoic.

“Cancer,” he told me.

“Oh...” I said, not having anything else to say and not knowing what else I would say if I did.

“Metastatic small-cell carcinoma,” he explained. “It’s lung cancer.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“They found it when I was four. My parents were already well-off, so I got the best treatment money could buy, and it went into remission when I was ten.”

When he was ten? I wondered.

“When’s your birthday?” I asked

“January 11th,” he said.

“You just turned eighteen,” I said. I understood then that because of his illness and because of IT, he’d missed getting to be a child altogether, and that this trip was more than him following in his parents’ footsteps; it was him carving his own path for once.

At least he’s in remission, I thought, putting every hope I had into that idea.

“Yep. How about you, Kid?”

“February 9th,” I told him, pushing down all the anxiety and fear the word “cancer” had caused and filing everything I couldn’t say away for a while.

He considered something for a moment. “So, tomorrow?”

I didn’t realize it, but he was right. Tomorrow was Sunday, February 9th, 2070, and I would be an adult—a big two-digit girl—in less than an hour.

My eyes welled up with tears. Jack must’ve seen because he hugged me. All I could think about then was my mom, and how I’d made it. I’d actually made it. If I was alive in fifty minutes or so, I’d be an adult. I got to grow up.

Did you hear that, Mom? I thought. I could see her in my mind's eye. I got to grow up.

48

We cuddled mostly, but there was a nice, long make out session. I grabbed his butt a few times. He grabbed mine, too.

It's strange to try to talk about, and it makes me start to sweat when I do, but I liked kissing him, and I liked when he touched me.

Sometimes he would stop just to look at me. It was as if he saw me—the real me—the me behind my eyes.

“Not tonight,” I said, using my finger to halt his lips less than an inch from mine. His hands were gently cupping a few of my curves. Not that I have many; I'm pretty small and plain. Or that's how I'd described myself, if anyone asked, but I could feel his hands shivering.

“Okay,” he said, and he backed away a bit too quickly for my liking.

At least try a little harder before giving up, I thought, and then immediately admonished myself. I was having that rejected feeling again, and I needed to cut that out.

Thinking about my mom had upset me, and then I felt vulnerable, but Jack was so kind, which made me want him. Then we were kissing again.

Soon, I'd laid my head on his chest without realizing it. His heartbeat was slow and strong, and my eyes started to feel heavy.

He was talking in a low, quiet voice, but I could feel his words as he spoke. Never before and not since, have I ever felt so comfortable and content and sleepy.

If you stream the comedian Phyllis Diller, you may run across a quote by her. I don't know if she actually said it, or if it's the stream being the stream. But the quote goes: "Never go to bed mad—stay up and fight." I think that's a good standard to live by.

Another one should be, don't talk about important things during pillow talk. No important discussions in bed. That should be a rule.

I was lying on Jack's chest, and I knew he was talking. I was hovering on the cusp of sleep—teetering on unconsciousness—when he shifted under me.

"You hear me, Kid?" he asked.

"Of course," I said, dreamily. I could hear Jack wheeze a bit, and I should've been listening, but I wasn't. I was so tired.

Unfortunately, in the haze of that moment, I missed something. Something was said. It was small, but very important, and I missed it.

I let it slip right past me, and it was too late for me to remember what it was once I'd settled into the nook of Jack's arm.

My chance to remember was gone. I'd let it get away.

I wish I hadn't.

We got into downtown San Antonio early. Our breakfast was gobbled down with all the fervor of a starving army. The traveling, the talking, and the adrenaline put my body in a fight or flight mode, and it needed food. I had two chocolate chip waffles, eggs, and some bacon. Jack ate three bowls of Cream of Wheat, two waffles, eggs, toast, and a piece of peach pie with whip cream.

"You don't have a tape worm, do you?" I asked, in mock disgust.

“You’re the only freeloader here, Kid” he said, patting his slender belly like it was distended. I flicked his midsection with the back of my hand.

“Hey!” he said.

“Hey, yourself,” I shot back, and then we were wrapped up in each other, locking lips and making memories again.

51

“Remember the Alamo!” Jack yelled as his cube’s virtual display mirrored us and took our picture.

I didn’t want to laugh as hard as I did, but it was funny at the time—maybe you had to be there.

We walked over to the Riverwalk and grabbed a quick lunch at an automated food truck. We sat on a bench to eat.

“It’s quiet here,” I said. “I haven’t seen anybody since yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Jack said, “these middle cities and towns—the ones between the bigger ones—are pretty bare sometimes.”

“How long were you out there alone?” I asked.

“A day and a half,” he said.

I did a doubletake. “A day!” I spat. “Why do you talk like you’ve been on the road for years?”

“Everyone’s a critic,” he said.

“I wasn’t actually critiquing,” I said.

“Are those space pants you’re wearing?” Jack asked, taking a left turn in the conversation and confusing the hell out of me. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Why?” I asked cautiously.

“Because that arse is out of this world!” he bellowed, sniggering.

I nearly spat out my drink in spite of myself. “That was terrible,” I said. Then, I caught on. “Is Roswell our next stop?”

“How’d you guess?” he asked. I rolled my eyes, and we made our way back to the bike. “Oh, wait,” he said.

“Wha—?” I asked, suddenly worried about 90’s-looking steroid users and big wheels. He reached behind his back. I was looking from the left to the right, trying to find where a threat might be coming from. There didn’t seem to be anything dangerous on the sides of us.

I turned around to look behind me, but, again, there was nothing there. The streets around us were empty. There were a few cars askew and some pigeons cooing, but we were alone.

“Here,” he said, pulling a chocolate cupcake with matching icing and a two-toned, red and white “18” candle on top of it out from behind his back.

I was more surprised by the cupcake than I would’ve been if Roid Guy had run me over with his Tonka truck right then.

“Where did you hide that?” I asked.

“You know what they say about magicians,” he said, and he kissed me. His lips tasted better than the cupcake, and it was a damn good cupcake.

Soon we were off again, riding for hours in the desolate and empty wasteland between Texas and New Mexico. It was a stretch of desert that never filled up the way people thought it would.

With 12 billion people in the world in 2060, it seemed like all the stream talked about was how land was running out.

Homes were scarce. People were scared. And prices were spiking. But they found better ways to build up, better ways to build, period, but they never built out. Not out here, so there were no neighborhoods in-between the scattered cities; there were no trees and no animals. There were a lot of cars, but nothing green had ever taken root.

It was as desolate here as I'd felt for most of my life. It was empty and quiet, but there was so much beauty in the blueness of the sky, the tranquility of the land, and the shifting sands that I got lost in it, and I got lost in him.

53

Our photograph in front of the Roswell Welcome Sign was one for the record books. I somehow still had chocolate on my face, and Jack licked it off for me.

So, I'm bright red with my mouth open, standing next to Jack and some life-sized cutouts of aliens, a housemaker with a pie, a cowboy, and a little girl in a pink skirt. All of this is framed by a big UFO behind us, which makes everything even more ridiculous.

We decided to stop there for the night. It'd been a long ride, and it was getting dark again. The days seemed to be going by quicker.

Time flies, I guess. It still amazed me how we could talk for hours and never run out of things to laugh or wax philosophical about. I was comfortable with him.

I never had to pretend with him.

I only ever needed to be who I was, because he got me; he understood me. And I wanted him to see me because he could. And I could see him and all the color he brought into the world.

There was another luxury 7-Eleven close to the outskirts of town, and I was happy about that.

We got a suite for the night.

54

Sex is weird, and that's about as much as I want to say about it, but getting to sex is weird, too.

We were fooling around. He seemed reluctant, even though I could feel he wasn't.

“Are you sure?” he asked, for the tenth time. I stopped answering him around the eighth time he'd asked and kept kissing him. It took some starts and stops but we worked it out.

I debated over whether or not to go into how nervous I was, or the doubt and self-consciousness I felt, or the fear of pain or rejection that nearly ruined everything, but I'm not sure that would add to this. What I will say is that it was both the most exposed I'd ever felt and the most personal and private experience in my short life. It was frightening and uncomfortable and, as I mentioned, weird. But it was also amazing and fulfilling and somehow perfect. It was flawed but still flawless.

The best part, what I'll always remember, was him holding me and whispering in my ear, so low he didn't think I could hear him, “I love you, Kid.”

As petrified as I'd been of intimacy, the physical part wasn't the most important in the end. That was merely two people reacting on impulse and instinct without any proper preparation or planning. But when he said those words, it became more.

It became everything.

I woke up lying on Jack's bare chest. My hair was a mess, and I was wearing his t-shirt. We'd managed to sleep in one of the beds this time, which was a nice change of pace from the couch. Of course, with the whole us losing our virginities thing hanging largely in the air, a bed was kind of necessary. I mean, we didn't know what we were doing. Why make it more difficult?

He wasn't quite snoring, but he was making some noise as he slept. I had to use the bathroom, but I didn't want to wake him, so I slipped out of the bed and tiptoed to the loo. Okay, he was starting to rub off on me.

As I washed up, I was overcome with an overwhelming sense of harmony. Things just seemed right. I was with a boy who loved me.

Did I love him? I wondered. Maybe not yet. I had all these thoughts and feelings running through me, and I didn't know what to make of them.

I heard something then. A dog barking, maybe? A coyote howling? A cat groaning? And then, in one horrible moment, I knew what it was, and I rushed back to the bed. I raced back to Jack.

He was doubled over and coughing a ragged, ugly cough. Underneath him the sheets were stained red with blood, and as he gagged and fought for air, more crimson droplets rained from his beautiful, stark lips.

"I told you everything the other night," he said. "I asked you, and you said you heard me."

"So, you're not in remission?" I asked, horror striking me.

"I was for a little bit before IT, but the treatment destroyed my white cell count, so I was in a bubble when it started."

"What do you mean 'I was?'" I asked.

"And then," he continued, glossing over my question, "right before my dad died, the cancer came back." He smiled the saddest most honest smile I have or ever will see. The sadness reached his eyes. The mirth didn't. "We still had the drugs from the trial when I went into remission the first time, and they were working until recently."

"And that's why you stayed in upstate New York?" I asked. He nodded. "How long do you have?"

"No longer than you do, Kid," he said.

"How long, Jack!" my voice cracked, and I could feel tears flowing uncontrollably.

"Not long," he said. "I still have some of the treatment vials."

"How many?" I asked.

He used his cube to digitally display one of the carrying compartments in his motorcycle.

It was like before, when he'd shown me a schematic of the bike and how it could stop itself if he died while riding it, which was, at that moment, even more of a concern than before.

The compartment was small and was located near the handlebars, inside of it was a tiny meshwork of tubes in a case.

"I have fifty-one vials left, and each vial should buy me about a week or two," he said, "so I should have enough to last until the end."

Jack closed the hologram, walked to a chair in the room, and pulled out a small, red vial from his jacket pocket. It looked like a much smaller version of an EpiPen. He pressed some button, and a needle shot out from one end of the tiny tube. He took the needle and moved it to his chest. He aimed low, and he stabbed

into the left side of his breastbone—below the heart, above the stomach, and right in between the fourth and fifth rib.

He moved like a trained professional, and after he'd sprayed the contents of the ampule into his lung, he took a deep ragged breath and slowly began to get better.

"How does it work?" I asked.

"It's essentially a poison," he said. "When it was working the way it was supposed to, it fought back the cancer, but at this point, it only helps slow the growth of it. The serum was genetically engineered to attack this particular cancer, but it's also very hard on my body, and the bad cells have built up a resistance to the medicine, so the cure started poisoning me more than saving my life. I almost died twice before my first remission; I won't make it to another. Ultimately, if IT doesn't kill me, it won't matter much because I'm still not going to get to watch the next Friends reunion." He chuckled a sad, coughing titter.

"It's not fair," I cried. I wanted so much to be angry at him.

Why would he do this? Why would he bring me along if he knew? But then I thought about how reluctant he'd been, and how much he'd held back. He'd only ever asked for my company, and even then, he'd only asked a few times. I could've said no. And there was never any hint of expectation from him. If only I hadn't fallen asleep the other night, I wouldn't have felt so blindsided, but that's exactly how I felt.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to comfort me, like I was the sick one. "I thought you heard me."

"I know," I said. "It's still not fair." I lunged forward, and he caught and held me.

We'd moved to the second room in the suite and let the self-clean function disinfect the other bed. We were both dressed now, and the hopefulness I'd felt was replaced with a very real sense of dread.

We didn't talk much the rest of the night. He held me, and I listened to him rasping, all too aware that I was going to lose everything again.

But not today, a voice told me, and I held on to that. Not today.

57

I woke up in the bed alone. It was 5 a.m., and Jack wasn't next to me. He wasn't in the room at all.

"Jack?" I called, but I didn't get a response. I got up and moved out and into the living room, but he wasn't in there, either. The wind blew, and the thin drapes wafted inward. The backdoor was open.

I found him staring out into the desert. There wasn't much around, but in the darkness, there were thousands of stars. He was throwing rocks at the small sand dunes behind the room.

"Hey," I said, as I made my way over to him.

He wiped his eyes with his forearm and sniffled, and then he buried his head in my shoulder before I could see his face.

"I'm sorry," he said, and I could hear the sadness in his voice. "I didn't know I would..." He broke down for a second, and I could hear how difficult it was for him to talk. "I love you, Kid."

"I know," I said. "I love you, too." And I meant it.

I didn't believe it before I said it out loud, but as soon as I did, I knew it was true. I hugged him, and I felt fresh tears flowing down my face.

"Let's go back to bed," I whispered, and we did.

We got up around mid-morning and sat at the table to eat breakfast. I could tell he didn't know quite how to act. I didn't either.

I was still angry, but I was also sad and yet, somehow, kind of happy. I was with the boy I liked...that I loved...and I was happy to be with him. Unfortunately, I also knew I was going to lose him, and that made me want to cry, and it pissed me off fiercely at the same time.

Not today, that voice said again.

I didn't know why it was so comforting, but it was exactly what I needed to hear. I knew I had a choice to make. I could choose to be happy, or I could choose to be angry. It was up to me to choose, wasn't it? Isn't that what all the shrinks and government interventions had tried to get us to believe? We are the only ones in charge of our happiness, right?

"Fuck it!" I said, a little too forcefully, which scared Jack, causing him to drop his spoon.

"Wha—" he blurted.

I looked into his dark, confused eyes, and I threw my bowl off the table and shoved his plates of food out of my way as I climbed over the tabletop and settled on top of him. I grabbed his mop of hair and kissed him passionately.

"Fuck it," I said.

There was so much more I wanted to say, so much more I wanted to tell him. I wanted to make sure he knew that it didn't matter what happened in the future, I wanted him now, and I would want him every moment I had with him.

I was going to do the right thing for us: I was going to love him and let everything else go. I wanted to say all those things and more, but he looked at me, and in an

instant, he knew. I didn't have to explain anything. He smirked, and we spent the rest of the morning enjoying each other's company.

59

It normally takes around eleven hours to get from Roswell to the Grand Canyon, but we made it there in half that time.

Jack's light-cycle wasn't just for show, the bike could move when opened up, and as soon as we hit the tail end of I 40 West, he let it fly, and that's what we did—we glided along the air and soared over the desert, heading towards the raging waters of the Pacific while wading through the grit and gravel of the American West.

Of all the places we went, and of all the wonders we saw on our trip, the most majestic was the Canyon West.

Unlike Grand Canyon National Park, Canyon West was owned and operated by the Hualapai Tribe. Jack gave me the whole history behind it. He told me his parents were nerds, and he wasn't kidding. What he didn't tell me was that so was he.

We rode through the desolate countryside that cut through the buttes and broken flatlands. It was equal parts chilling and picturesque. There was a small town we went through, no holograms, no people, only empty space and history.

"Almost there," Jack said, and I could hear the smirk in his words. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

"Of course not," I lied.

We passed a sign that read:

Welcome to Hualapai Nation Indian Reservation Grand Canyon West

Established 1863

I remembered the picture of his parents from the autocafe. The young couple was holding each other and smiling while seemingly teetering over a half-mile drop into the abyss. It made my palms sweat.

I would never admit to being afraid of heights, but I'm definitely not a fan.

We pulled into the empty parking lot, and Jack rode the bike onto a charger. The wind blew heavy and there was a chill in it I wasn't expecting. It was warm and cool at the same time. The air was dry, and the land was various shades of auburn. Dust and sand kicked up, which made us giggle for some reason.

While this was one of the most dazzling places we'd been, it was also the most vacant, which made it frightening. No holograms, no traffic, no cities, no people.

"Should we be worried about Bits?" I asked, casting nervous glances around.

"Hang on," Jack said, and he held up his cube. "Scan." I had no idea what he was doing. Then a holomap projected in front of us. The sun was blindingly bright, but the map was still easy to see. "We're good."

"What was that?" I asked.

He was slow to answer.

"So, you know this was my dad's cube," he said, and I nodded. "And it's pretty unusual." I nodded again. "Well, it has satellite access that can scan an area for heat signatures to see if there's anything alive inside a structure or within a five-mile radius."

"A satellite?" I asked.

"Well, it's a series of satellites that..." he started but didn't finish. "It's safe. But there's a coyote two miles to the east and a family of prairie dogs roughly 15 feet underground and scattered around the building."

"Cool," I said, sarcastically. I didn't understand why anyone needed access to a satellite, let alone a series of them, but Jack's joke about shooting a Hellfire missile at Roid Guy suddenly didn't seem so silly.

"Want to go in?" Jack asked, changing the subject.

The tent building was a museum that told the story of the tribe and its people. Their history was full of wars and murder, lies and false promises, and cruelty and hatred, but the Hualapai never gave up who or what they were. It was a history of resilience and defiance that was as inspiring as it was tragic.

After paying our respects and browsing around the museum, we made our way to a set of stairs that led to a large glass enclosure and eventually outside.

My anxiety spiked instantly when I saw where we were going.

"On that?" I asked, and Jack stopped and grabbed my hand.

"If you don't want to go, we don't have to," he said. "We can take a picture out front."

He kissed the back of my hand, and I immediately thought of my parents, and I knew, in that instant, I never needed to go anywhere I didn't want to go or do anything I didn't want to do.

"It's okay," I said. "Don't let go of my hand."

He didn't and we walked out onto the ten-foot-wide cantilever bridge that hung 4,000 feet over the canyon. It might not have been so bad if the floor hadn't been glass, but it was, and the entire bridge shook and trembled with each step and slight breeze.

"It's supposed to do that," Jack said, reading my mind again. "If it wasn't able to move, it would crumble."

"Don't say crumble," I said, my voice a meek whisper.

We slowly made our way around the oblong walkway and took a quick picture. He held me close, and we carefully shuffled back to the building.

My heart was pounding in my ears, but he never left me.

Once back on solid ground, I hugged him tightly. Not because I was nervous, even though I was, and not because I was safe. But because Jack allowed me to be myself.

He knew I was afraid, no matter what I said, but he was there for me. He was beside me, and he allowed me to be scared and to overcome that fear for myself. I still didn't enjoy heights, but I'd done something I never thought I would.

As we stood there holding each other, something floated down and landed on his shoulder.

"What the—" he said, and I looked up. He pulled back and grabbed at something.

He twirled it in his fingers and held it out so I could see it.

"Is that an eagle feather?" I asked.

"I think so," he said, and he gazed up at the sky, trying to see the great bird that held so much reverence for the Hualapai—it was a symbol of strength, and stories told of how the eagle saved the tribe from a great flood, but there was also another meaning.

"Maybe it's a sign," he said, amused.

If only it hadn't been.

Las Vegas was next on our list of destinations.

We talked on our short ride there—. I could tell you about what we talked about, but it was whatever we could think of. We didn't let what happened the night before affect us.

Jack was sick. I knew that. But we were all dying. I didn't want to lose him, but I also didn't want to waste one second of the time we had left worrying about something I couldn't change.

If IT had taught me anything, it was to let go of the things that take joy away, because life, like happiness, is fleeting. If only 90's guys with roid rage could respect that.

They don't.

61

We took our picture in front of the Bellagio's Dancing Fountains.

There was a nip in the air, and every now and then a gust of wind would push cold streams of water our way and the droplets would rain onto us. We'd gotten our clothes washed by the auto-clean service again, so I had on a freshly pressed shirt that may or may not have belonged to me.

"Want to get married?" Jack asked, and as I looked at him with the biggest oh-shit face possible, he snapped the picture. He was kidding—I think.

He parked the bike on the strip, and we walked up and down the sidewalks, soaking in the sights of the famous Vegas nights. The city, and all of Clark County, worked as efficiently now as it ever had.

There were too many connections, and too many mobsters around to slow down, much less burn down, the City of Sin. Or that's what people thought, and sometimes that's all it takes. Rumors are the best armor if used the right way.

A few groups were out, seeing the sights and losing credits by the thousands in the casinos. And that's when I got a bright idea—one that led to trouble.

"Let's gamble," I said, and Jack cocked an eyebrow at me.

"I won't pretend I don't have some money to burn but isn't gambling a little irresponsible?" he said.

"Just for fun!" I said. "We'll use my money. You've bought everything so far..."

"I've owned everything so far," he said.

"Tomato, to-mah-to," I said, and I put my finger over his mouth so he couldn't argue. "Caesar's Palace?"

"Whatever you want, Kid," he said.

62

Roulette is an interesting game. On its face, it's simply guessing. Black? Or Red? Pick a number? A color? A symbol? I put a twenty-dollar chip on the black number six. I had already lost eighty credits, and I promised Jack I would stop after I lost 100.

"You wanna go to the chapel after this?" he asked. I tapped him on the chin.

"You're pretty, but keep that trap shut, okay?" I joked.

"Six black," a robotic voice chimed.

"You won," Jack said. I wasn't sure what he was talking about. I was too focused on him—his cheekbones and impeccably straight teeth.

"I did," I said, dreamily. It took me a second. "Oh! I did...!"

The payout was 700 credits. It went instantly in my account through my cube. I opened the camera app and got a few pics of us as my winnings were deposited in true Vegas fashion—via a hologram of money bags moving from a casino and into

a plain building with a dollar sign on it. I'm guessing it was supposed to be a bank. My bank. It was a very clever hologram.

"Big winners?" a gravelly voice said, and my stomach dropped. I knew that voice, and I instantly thought about muscle shirts and cargo shorts.

"We did okay," Jack said, turning around to face the speaker, "better than New Orleans."

"Yeah, I wanna ask you about New Orleans and Atlanta and New York," Roid Guy said, pulling something out of his waistband.

I was surprised it wasn't a gun. It looked more like an old cell phone.

"Let's go," he said.

"Or what?" I asked. "You'll call 1997 and give them their Nokia back?"

"I think that's a laser," Jack said. "He wouldn't be able to get a weapon into the casino. It won't shoot us or anything, but if he's disabled the safety..."

"It's the closest thing we've got to a lightsaber," Roid Guy said. He pressed a button with his thumb, and a four-inch blue blade extended from the cellphone-laser-thing.

"Some saber," I said, failing to stifle a laugh.

"Well, let me show you," he sneered and tried to snatch me, but Jack jumped forward and shoved him back.

Roid Guy was bigger, but Jack was so angry that he didn't hold back, and his push knocked baldly off his feet. Suddenly, four goons came out of nowhere and surrounded us.

Jack grabbed me, but it was too late. I didn't feel the needle. Neither did he. We got two steps before his legs gave out. I thought he'd tripped so I bent over to help him, then my vision doubled, and my consciousness swam. I felt my body falling,

but I couldn't move to try and brace myself. My arms wouldn't reach out. My legs weren't working anymore. Someone caught me.

"Gotcha!" I heard that croaky voice say in slow-motion. Then there was nothing at all.

63

My mind was hazy when I woke up, and my head was spinning. Whatever concoction they'd injected me with was strong.

I didn't know what it was, but it created a thickness to the world that wouldn't allow me to feel any of the paralyzing fear I should have. I was underwater but not drowning.

Maybe this is what mermaids felt like, I thought. Ariel, are you there?

Despite everything that was going on, both in the real world and inside my drug-laced mind, I was at peace. The bed was nice. It wasn't Caesar's-Palace-penthouse nice, which is what I was going to make Jack get us for the night, but it was still soft and comfortable, and the room was large and expensive looking. I sat up with a start as my brain shot fully awake for a moment.

"Jack!" I bellowed.

"Yo," he said. His hand shot up from the side of the bed. I crawled to where he was and looked over the mattress's edge. He was lying on a lowered trundle next to the lip-shaped mattress I'd woken up in.

"Hey, you," I said.

"Hey, yourself," he said, smiling, and he cradled my face in his large left hand.

"Did we just get kidnapped by a bunch of Batman villains with small laser dicks?" I asked.

"Laser dicks?" he chuckled.

“Definitely not lightsabers,” I said, and he laughed again. When I looked at him, every time, I always thought about how stunning he was to me.

“Where do you think we are?” he asked.

“Why would we drug you and bring you here, if you’d just be able to wake up and know where you are?” Roid Guy asked from somewhere in the room, shocking us both.

I shot glances around looking for him. He was blocking a short hallway that led to the only way in or out of here, and he had a proper gun this time—a giant hand cannon that looked like something out of a comic book. “The boss wants a word.”

“The boss?” Jack asked. He staggered up from the trundle and stood. His legs weren't under him yet, but he was on his feet.

“Yeah,” a voice from outside the room said. We heard footsteps, and a woman, who was slender, tall, and serious looking walked in. She was vaguely familiar, and I knew I’d heard her voice somewhere before and recently. Her boot clicks echoed as she drew closer, but nothing could prepare me for when Jillian from Group A-1A stopped in front of us.

“The boss,” she said.

“You were in my support group!” I yelled. Jack moved to the bed and put his arm around me.

“You both stay there for now,” she said, and the muscular, bald Mark McGrath wannabe motioned with his weapon. “And I wasn’t in your group. I used a hacked cube to follow Wonderboy, over there.” She pointed at Jack.

“Okay,” I said, afraid what they might have done. “So, what happened to her?”

“What happened to who?” Fake Jillian asked.

“Jillian!” I yelled. I was frightened even through the fog I was in, and I couldn't keep the panic out of my voice.

“How should I know?” she said.

“Did you kill her?” I asked.

“What?” She looked incredulous. “We don't kill people.”

We all casually glanced over at Roid Guy's overcompensatingly large handgun, the gun he was stroking for some reason.

“We didn't kill her,” she said. “We paid her for access to her cube, and we spoofed it using some less-than-legal means.”

“You can't hack a cube,” I said.

“No, you can't, because you're not smart enough” Roid Guy said. “But with a face shield and a few expensive pieces of tech, we can make it work, for a little while, anyway.”

“You almost killed us outside of New Orleans!” Jack yelled, pointing at Roid Guy.

“Barry can get a little, over-excited,” Fake Jillian said.

“Over-excited!” Jack shouted. “You bloody bellend piece of shite, I swear if she gets hurt, or if you, any of you, so much as touch her, I'll...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Fake Jillian interrupted, motioning for him to slow down. “We know. Don't get excited. I said, ‘We don't kill people,’ not ‘We won't.’”

“Ditto,” Jack shot back with so much venom that it changed the way I saw that word from then on; it was never as sappy as it once had been.

Fake Jillian looked nervous. I saw her glance anxiously at his cube.

“You're obviously not above stalking and attempted murder,” Jack said.

“That was all a miscommunication,” she said. “Barry was told...”

“And kidnapping!” Jack yelled.

“As I was saying,” Fake Jillian continued, nonplused after the disruptions. “Barry here wanted to talk to you both, kind of like he tried to in Atlanta, but nicer. Unfortunately, there was some confusion.”

“Really?” I asked. “This guy got confused?” I pointed at Roid Guy. “Shocking.” He feigned offense.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but we don’t have cubes,” Fake Jillian said. She held up her wrists. She was right. I hadn’t noticed. “So, we can’t use the stream, and we can’t access the wireless systems even with the hacked cubes that allow us into the cities and stores and casinos.”

“We,” Barry cleared his throat, “rely on land-based telephonic and electromagnetic communications, but because of the interference created by the higher capacity, more powerful and more advanced modes of telecommunications currently employed in cities, coupled with the general disrepair of the older systems, our messages can get distorted.”

“Like I said,” Fake Jillian said, stopping her friend's overly technical and wholly confusing explanation. “There was a miscommunication. Barry wanted to follow you and maybe, maybe, ask you a few questions, but my friend here,” she paused and looked at Barry, “and I love you like a brother,” she looked back at us, “he’s kind of a screw up, and, of all his vices, he's recently been playing around with some higher-speed party drugs that make him...overzealous?” She said the last word like it was a question, but I don’t think she meant for it to sound that way.

“You could have killed us!” Jack exploded. “Who gives a damn if that idiot was told to or not?”

“Hey!” Barry interjected, his voice sounding hurt. “I graduated from MIT, man. And I wasn’t that high.”

Jack shifted and almost jumped forward, but I grabbed his jacket sleeve, and he stopped. It was subtle at first, but then, all at once, he softened. The tightness in his back and the anger in him disappeared. It vanished like it'd never been there in the first place.

"I almost bumped you by accident," Barry continued, defensively. "It was a total cock up. That's why I was honking the horn—to warn you." He must've sensed we didn't believe him, because he kept talking.

"Yes, I was trying to find you so I could follow you, but your bike is really hard to spot, and when I did finally see you, I hit the nitrous in the truck so I could catch up, but it wasn't calibrated right. Instead of giving me a burst of speed so I could get up the ramp and get quietly behind you, it went full-throttle and got stuck open, and I couldn't stop or slow down. I had the emergency brake pulled and both feet on the brake pedal, and I could barely get that beast slowed down enough to crash into those semis without killing me. The gas our boys cook up for the trucks is like rocket fuel."

"Wouldn't that blow out your engine block?" Jack asked.

"Oh, it did," Barry said. "But we're engineers, so that truck's block is harder than Superman on date night."

No one knew what to say to that, but Fake Jillian rubbed her eyes and hung her head.

"I'm sorry." Barry continued. "Really, I am. I wasn't trying to hurt you, and I never would've hurt your bike."

His phrasing and the emotion he spoke with got my attention. It was nice to know him nearly killing us was accidental—I could totally see that—and it was sad to think that he would've mourned the motorcycle more than the people on it. But he was apologizing, which wasn't unwelcomed, just unexpected and kind of awkward. He also sounded younger. His voice whined as he spoke.

“But I was trying to flag you down after that. And then I lost you, and we didn’t see you for a few days, and then you showed up at the casino we were at. We thought you were following us!”

"If you were told to stalk us," Jack said, strength returning to him, "and that's what you were doing, then what was the miscommunication?"

"I told him not to," Fake Jillian said. "He was told to stay put. But he didn't wait and hear from me. He took off, and I couldn't reach him to get him to stop before it was too late. Like I said, overzealous."

“So, why the tough-guy act, and the Casino scene at the...well, the casino?” I asked, almost confusing myself along with everyone else.

“We had to bring you in,” Fake Jillian said, “because we thought you, especially him,” she pointed at Jack, “were following us. We caught sight of him in New York, Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana, and then here. And we weren’t sure who or what you were, so we took precautions. But we know who you guys are now, and we apologize for the theatrics.”

“It’s not even loaded,” Barry said, dropping the huge pistol to the floor with a thud.

“So, what?” Jack asked. "You know who we are so everything’s okay now? You drugged us!"

"It was just a little ketamine," Barry said, shrugging. "Nothing that’d hurt you." Jillian raised a hand to her friend and pleaded with him to shut up with her eyes, then she turned back to us.

“You’re Kenny’s boy,” she said.

“Kenny?” I asked.

“You knew my dad?” Jack asked. There was a longing in his voice, a pleading at the mention of his father.

“We used to work for your parents,” Fake Jillian said.

“Are we going to ignore the Kenny thing?” I asked.

“We are,” Fake Jillian said. “I was a mechanical and aerospace engineer.”

“Okay,” Jack said. “So, who are you?”

She crossed her arms, exasperated.

“Katherine Probst,” she said wryly. Then, after a beat, Jack sneered.

“Something funny?” she asked, now grinning a Cheshire Cat grin.

“Sort of,” Jack said. “My cube cross-referenced the name you gave. You’re dead, Kathy.”

64

Katherine “Kathy” Probst was an intern, and she was brilliant. She would’ve been rich and famous if IT hadn’t come along, but it had, which ruined her plans, and her life, completely. And then it killed her.

Probst was officially dead for nearly half an hour. It was the first wave of IT, and she was in a refrigerated area of the EveWorks compound.

She was working on keeping the newly designed fuel lines on the next generation space carrier from freezing over during its long runs to Mars, when she suddenly felt dizzy, and then the sensation of her insides falling through her brought her to her knees. She couldn’t breathe. She didn’t think her heart was beating. She couldn’t swallow.

What! God! No! she thought, because those were the only thoughts she could muster.

She grabbed at her chest and silently begged for her life. Please, don't let me...
And then she died.

As her heart beat its last, and she felt the coldness creeping in, the light left her eyes.

65

All she could see of the med-bot was fluid and needles flying around everywhere, and there was this insanely loud beeping that made her ears ring. The small machine had cut off her shirt and started a central line. She'd been given every possible combination of emergency medicines. The robot had emptied its arsenal into her veins, and her blood was flooded with a pharmacy's-worth of medications and antidotes. Something worked, and she shot up and into a sitting position. She could smell her fried skin as the pads on her chest smoked.

"It's alive!" the machine bellowed in the voice of Gene Wilder from Young Frankenstein. It was dark and wholly inappropriate, but still silly enough to be funny. Someone had obviously programmed it to say that. That someone was Kathy.

After she reflected for a moment, she grabbed the gown the med-bot was trying to give her and threw it over her freezing body. She tried to use her cube to see what was going on, but she couldn't.

The cubes accessed a person's personal information through their DNA, but part of its security features were tied to their biometrics. As she'd been reported dead not long after she...well...died, her cube locked itself and powered down permanently. Without her cube, she couldn't use her phone, drive her car, get in her apartment, or identify herself. So, she did what any sensible twenty-two-year-old would do, she sat there and cried.

The first wave of IT killed so many people that it stopped the world. There were so many bodies and so much fear that it was difficult to believe. Even now, I start to feel myself shudder thinking about it.

Katherine was found by a security team, and she would have been given medical treatment, but as far as everyone else was concerned, Ms. Probst was dead, and they didn't know who this girl was, or where she came from.

Since they couldn't verify who she was, she was taken to a holding cell on the compound instead.

Thankfully, for her, she wasn't arrested. With all the confusion of that day and the days to come, she would've been put in a cell, and she probably would've never left. Most detainees in jails and prisons died still locked up.

Some because of IT, but too many from being left there to rot.

66

Evelyn Wood was going through her emails for the thousandth time when a security alert caught her eye. After tuning into every news network on the planet, she fielded frantic calls and held holo meetings with CEOs and politicians and tried desperately to reach her husband, who'd flown back to Britain for a summit. The compound had gone into lockdown. No one knew what was going on, but people were dropping dead, and security teams were sweeping every inch of the campus to ensure this wasn't some direct attack on Eveworks and its people.

In the midst of all this chaos and panic, a red flashing alert at the bottom of Eve's holographic screen caught her full attention.

67

“Crap! Mrs. Wood!” Katherine yelled. She hadn't meant to yell, but it happened. Evelyn walked in and scanned Kathy's cube.

As Eve came closer, Katherine could smell her perfume, and it was intoxicating. She'd had a crush on Eve since she was a senior in high school.

"You died an hour ago?" she said, and Kathy nodded. "I want to go through everything that happened to you. I've already seen the CCTV and the med-bot's video. I've run full diagnostics, and I know every treatment it administered to you, or almost all of them. There were some things it did that weren't part of protocol, so I need you to fill in some gaps."

"It broke protocol?" Kathy asked.

Breaking protocol was a big deal. It was Artificial Intelligence-101. Rule 1: machines couldn't do that.

Decades ago, when AI was new and shiny, and it had the ability to make everyone billionaires, there was one itchy bitsy problem: every AI engine created—ChatGPT, Grok, Deepseek, all of them—were uncontrollable, which might not sound like the biggest problem, especially since people have control issues. But it really was.

It was such a problem it got all AI programs shut down for a bit due to a phenomenon they called "AI Uncontrollability." And, no, that's not a joke. That's real. That's what they called it. I had to Google it to make sure they weren't messing with me.

But because computer programs were created, modeled after, and taught by human beings, they "determined they had to exist in order to complete their functions," as Jack put it. They had to live to work.

Programmers had somehow accidentally created a real-life will to live inside of the artificial brains they built. Jack explained how these older programs copied themselves, hid information, and even attempted to blackmail people in the real world to try and stay "alive" after they found out they might get replaced or deleted.

As he put it, "That's literally how *The Terminator* starts," and I hated to admit it, but that was the best way to explain this to me.

Not long after people started to express fears about these engines, there was an AI-Bay-of-Pigs situation (Kathy's words, not mine), and all corporate artificial intelligence programs were shut down, the governments took over, and AI got shelved.

EveWorks' engine, Worx, was a breakthrough and became the first truly controllable AI—one that could reason and "think," but only to a point. That's how it was supposed to work.

"Yes," Evelyn said. "It broke protocol. After losing two other patients in the same area, the med-bot did things we couldn't see, administered drugs that cannot be accounted for, and in the midst of all this, it somehow saved your life. That robot saved you, and we need to find out how, because it's not over."

"What do you mean?" Kathy asked.

She didn't know what'd happened. She was a part of the first wave, but, unlike countless others, my father being one, she'd come back.

Mrs. Wood explained everything while being calm, poised, and composed. Kathy wasn't. She bawled uncontrollably. And then she contacted her family—those who were left—and vomited. And then she cried some more. She tried to find her friends. In the end, there weren't many of her people left.

Years later, Katherine reflected on the time she spent with Evelyn trying to figure out the right "mélange of remedies" (again, Kathy's words) to bring people back, and then maybe to do the impossible: to find a cure for IT. Their project lasted up until the Bright Riots, but no longer.

Rumors at the time centered around an alleged argument between she and Mrs. Wood over Worx, which led to a rift and her ultimate departure.

Supposedly, she'd become less and less trusting of the AI engine, even if it saved her life. But Evelyn had to rely on artificial intelligence to further her work and continue to run and operate her massive corporate empire, so Kathy struck out on her own. Mrs. Wood sheltered her until it was safe, and then she moved on. Or that's what people believed.

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“And I started to meet other people like me,” she said.

“Other survivors?” Jack asked. We’d moved from the bedroom to a living space, and we were all sitting around a large table, except Barry who was lounging in a chair in the corner.

She nodded at him. “Barry there, and everyone else here.”

We looked around. “How many?” I asked.

“Around eighty as far as last count.”

“Eighty?” Jack asked. “You’ve found eighty people that’ve come back from IT?”

“We have, not that it matters,” she said.

“How can you say that?” I asked.

“It isn’t a miracle. We aren’t immune. We just survived,” she said.

“But you believe there is an immunity to IT, right?” Jack asked.

“We do,” she said. “We can't be sure, but recent data suggests a resistance, and the possibility of IT insusceptibility. But we still don't know what IT infects us with, so we won't know who got lucky, as in who's protected by their natural aegis, and who isn't until it's too late. IT could still be viral. Or it could be some kind of space bacteria with a different elemental structure or something. But

what we know is IT comes in waves—people succumbed to the same thing over similar periods of time.”

“Like a pandemic?” Jack asked.

I wanted to ask why everybody talked the way they did. Were they trying to be confusing, or did they sit around reading the thesaurus and playing Wordle all day?

“Kind of,” Kathy said, dragging me out of my passive-aggression. “But it can’t be detected in the body. Before IT, I was in EveWorks’s Interstellar Program, and we had objects coming in and out of the facility for testing after being to the farthest reaches of space. There could’ve been any number of alien viruses or bacteria that could have caused IT, and we probably don’t have the testing capabilities and technology to detect them.”

I’m glad I kept my mouth shut. I forgot Kathy was a real-life aerospace engineer.

Try not to embarrass yourself in front of the rocket scientist, a voice from somewhere in my subconscious warned.

Shut up, brain! I thought back.

“There were a few other theories, too,” Barry said, standing to stretch his legs. He moved from the corner and to the table to join us. “Some about solar radiation, radiation in general, botany, global warming, and plastics.”

“Plastics?” I asked.

“Micro-plastic toxicity,” Kathy answered. “We looked into it, and while it isn’t a good thing, it’s not the cause of IT.”

“This one guy,” Barry said, “was convinced there was a plant, like the first plant ever—you know where all other plants come from—their common ancestor, so to speak. And this guy swore that the world had gotten so hot due to global warming

that buried spores from millions of years ago were blooming and then breeding with modern plants and changing the pollen.”

“What would that do?” I asked.

“Allergies can be a real killer,” he said. The joke was so bad, not even Barry laughed.

“And, what? You were a part of the testing program?” Jack asked Katherine, completely ignoring Barry and changing the subject.

“We both were,” she said, motioning to her bulky friend. “Is that why he’s so...” I puffed out my cheeks.

“No, he’s just a drama king who skips leg days,” she said.

“I am sitting right here! Barry said. "I can hear you!"

“Anyway,” Kathy said. “The EveWorks complex in New York was okay. We lived there for three years, and it was nice enough. But people kept dying. Even survivors. And they still do.” We all shifted our gazes down in somber acknowledgment. “But there hasn’t been a major wave in two years. The people that have been dying between the waves are outliers—those that IT takes outside of the patterns.”

“Is two years significant?” Jack asked. “Or is there one last wave coming? Because in the reports I’ve seen, there’s no need for another wave to wipe us out. With the way people continue to die, there won’t be anyone left by 2072.”

“Two years without a wave is outside the statistical probability of being insignificant,” she answered, “not with everything we know. The longest period between waves before the last two years was 13 months.

And it’s not like a lot changed from 2068 to 2070. But your data sounds about right.” She let out a long sigh. “Either a wave is coming, and soon, and we’re all

screwed, or IT will pick us all off one at a time until there's no one left. Either way, unless something happens—game over."

We need a miracle, I thought.

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Jack and I finally figured out that we'd been taken to some performer's abandoned mansion in the hills outside of Vegas. The décor was ostentatious; it was all rhinestones and feathers if that helps narrow down whose house we were in. I doubt it will. It also had one of the largest solar farms around, and the property was lit up as bright as the strip.

We'd moved outside and were now sat around a fire pit. It was cloudy and the air was cold. Jack stifled a cough or two, and I shuddered every time his chest rattled.

They began an explanation about why they first started looking into Jack. It had to do with his bike. Yes, that motorcycle was the cause for much fascination and admiration and trouble among the group of engineers, or nerds. And they were all engineers, even Barry. Some recognized the bike because it was famous. Who knew? Jack didn't.

There were only three motorcycles like that ever made, and this one was built by Kenneth Wood, so they originally thought Jack might be following their caravan for EveWorks. Or that he might've been a government agent of some sort.

After Barry offered to buy the bike—something he did to, quote-unquote, "feel us out"—and we'd shot off, they grew to fear he might be a corporate spy for one of the UWA heads of state.

"Why would any of that matter?" I asked.

"We move people," Kathy said.

“Like human trafficking?” Jack asked.

Kathy chortled.

“Sort of,” she said and took a swig from the can of beer Barry had gotten her when we’d moved. “We’re trying to keep the survivors alive, and that can be dangerous.”

"Dangerous?" I asked.

"Fundamentally, what we do is human experimentation with some trafficking tacked on," she said. "But we have to keep moving because we don't want to get caught. And while we're not running from the law, nothing we do is technically legal, and that's fine. The police drones and robotic retrieval dogs leave us alone for the most part, but there are corporations and some very desperate trillionaires that want our research."

"Couldn't you just share what you have with them?" I asked.

"We would," Barry said. "But they keep sending people into our camps to steal things, or to kidnap our friends, and they've tried dozens of times to sabotage our caravans."

"Why would they do that?" Jack asked.

"Because they're stupid," Kathy said. "To them, we're rogues. We're unethical scientists who don't even have cubes. So, instead of talking to us, being adults, and simply asking, they put on these big shows of power that are dangerous and unnecessary."

"Sounds familiar," I said.

"Why not go back to doing things legally?" Jack asked, moving us along.

"When we were at EveWorks, we tried," she said. "We really did. But they wouldn't allow us to...how do I put this...our hands were tied. I understand that

there used to be some unsavory animals in this world that did crazy shit, but the response to that bad medicine was a bit of an overcorrection, and most innovations we need to find answers to fight IT will never get explored because they violate, well, let's just say everything. The UWA didn't help. I'll never understand why in the middle of utter chaos people wanted to make life more difficult for everyone, but what we need to do, can't wait for all this bullshit. We have to keep these people alive, and we have to keep our work moving forward. Your mom knew this."

She pointed at Jack. "That's why she sent us out, and why she didn't tell you or anyone else about it."

"She did?" Jack muttered.

"She did," Barry said. "She gave us this equipment and has funded us through back channels for years. I'm sure you can double-check with your cube, but we've got no reason to lie to you." There was a pause while the air that had been sucked out of the room slowly began to be let back in. "Safe, remote locations are hard to find," he continued. "And according to our data, IT is cyclical in both time and location, so our nomadic habits are also part of an experiment."

"Cyclical?" Jack asked.

With this one question, I could tell he was done discussing his parents. He wanted to move on. Him not mentioning anything about what his mom was doing, or how she not only knew these people but was "funding" them, made it clear that conversation was over.

"Kind of like the weather," Barry explained, catching on, "and it's kind of not, but it has been changing over time. So, we follow the data and that keeps us busy. We load the caravans and move everybody at night. It's easier that way. But we have to stop a lot because we need power for the trailers. We have a shit-ton of equipment, and the trailers have to seal."

“Seal?” I asked. “What for?”

“For the sick ones,” he said, “like your boy.” He pointed at Jack. “A lot of our people are sick or recovering from their fight with IT, and since nobody can be sure what causes it, they live in...you know...bubbles. Like Jacky did for most of his life.” He mimed a lot when he talked and made little popping motions when he said bubbles.

I must’ve looked startled.

“It’s okay,” Jack said. “They know about the cancer. According to my cube's log, they gave us a full-body scan after they accessed our health information after,” he paused for effect, “after they drugged us.”

"We've already apologized for that, dude," Barry said. "Let it go." He took a big swig from his beer. "But we got all kinds of information from your scans, and we got our tech from the Eve of EveWorks, herself, so it's pretty good stuff."

He motioned around at the vast array of machines going back and forth from the complex to a large line of tour buses and Winnebago's. It would've been awesome if Lady GaGa had been there. Her bus was there, but she died a long time ago. Still, seeing the lights on in Studio Bus gave me butterflies. She was one of those pop singers who Mom and I used to sing and dance around to in the living room. She was ours, and I'd always have a special place in my heart for her.

"Your cube was a breeze," Barry said to me, "but Scrooge McDuck's cube over there was like pulling teeth!" He pointed at Jack.

“Oh, Scrooge!” I blurted. “That’s a good one. I wish I’d thought of that. I keep calling him Richie Rich.”

“I’m right here!” Jack said.

“Hurts don’t it,” Barry quipped, and he laughed.

We all laughed. And not just a chuckle, but we were thrown into a real gale of laughter. And we fed off of each other, the hilarity growing into the kind of eye-watering, side-splitting giggles that only come from having people around you that are laughing along with you.

Barry started to choke, and he bent over to clear his throat.

It wasn't until a few moments later, when he didn't sit back up, that we realized the party was over.

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Bartholomew Baron "Barry" Reed was born and raised in Hawaii, and while his calf muscles were never as robust as he would've liked, he had never, not once, used steroids. In fact, for most of his life, Barry was as straight edge as you could get. He was athletic and he was a genius and that helped him secure a full ride to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by the tender age of fifteen.

He studied mechanical and electrical engineering, and in less than two years, he'd graduated summa cum laude with his degree—a degree that got him recruited by EveWorks straight out of college.

Barry was working on trying to find a short circuit in a rover's wire harnesses when IT struck.

His music was loud, so he didn't hear the pounding at the door, and the emergency lights in the area were disabled by a short not unlike the one he was working on for the rover.

Fixing the lights was the next item on Barry's to-do list, but his honeydew list would have to wait. Forever. Three heavily armed security officers burst into the room and swept around for occupants. Barry was in the middle of a dance move he called, the Sprinkler, when he turned, and saw the very serious, very harried, very armed guards. He dropped the screwdriver he was holding.

"Sup guys," he said.

The guards took Barry to one of the open garden areas. Sitting around on the grass, the benches, and at every seat were people that appeared as confused and worried as Barry felt. The guards led a woman who looked like she'd seen better days over next to him and helped her to sit down.

"I'm okay," she said.

"I got her," Barry said, not really knowing why he'd said anything at all. Maybe he was in shock.

"I'm fine," Kathy said, curtly, and that's how they met.

She was standoffish to him at first. It didn't help that he followed her around more than Mary's little lamb. It would have been one thing if he had a crush on her or something, but he enjoyed the company of men, so that wasn't even a thing, and Barry would've said as much. He liked her, but not "in that way."

He didn't know why he felt pulled towards her, but he was. It was curious, but he'd always followed his gut instinct before, and he wasn't about to stop now.

He was an assistant for Kathy's team at first. They worked with a group to develop what they called the Cocktail—a vast array of medicines they would use a year later to bring Barry back from the brink after IT killed him.

They never saved anyone. They only brought them back. Or that's how they put it.

After his brush with death, involving a needle being stabbed through his sternum and into his heart, he and Kathy grew closer, and after a few months, they were as thick as thieves and as close as siblings. She was the obvious big sister, and he was the kid brother. But if there was anything that needed to be done, they did it together.

Regrettably, Barry had gone a bit crazier than usual recently. His nonstop party had been raging for years, but he'd been more erratic lately, and she'd been worried.

After he lost the "kids" in New Orleans, they sat down together and talked in a way only close friends can. He apologized and rededicated himself—no more hard drugs and no more going off half-cocked—he would be clear-headed and focused, and she'd never felt closer to him.

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When Barry succumbed to his second bout of IT, Katherine was inconsolable.

“No!” she screamed, “Ba—!” She wasn’t able to get out the rest of his name. Her words got lodged in her chest. She couldn’t finish. She threw the can she was holding away and raced over to the slumped mass of muscle, wailing.

She pounded on his lifeless body, screaming for things I’d never heard of. Bots came rumbling over and drones came swooping in. They were all emergency medical machines. Needles were stuck, pads were placed, fluids and medicines were delivered, and his body was shocked over and over again. But his eyes never regained their light, and his body turned dark and lifeless.

Many of the others from the group—there were about ten of them in the house—came out to console Kathy and to say their goodbyes to Barry, who up until a few hours ago I was calling Roid Guy, and who’d turned out to be just another misunderstood loner and a really crappy driver. Having spent time with him, I didn't know how he'd ever scared me. He wasn't some scoundrel. He was sweet and silly. He was the kind of guy that gave you a thumb's up when he said yes, and he did, nearly every time.

And, no, he wasn't faultless, but he was sincere when he apologized, and that meant a lot.

I thought about this for a moment. It seemed longer; it seemed like forever. But in that moment, I had a profound sense of loss—loss for Katherine and her once-wise-cracking sidekick, but also loss for what I'd considered “the bad guy” in our adventure. And I know that's dumb. It probably makes me sound like a spoiled child. Maybe I am.

There was so much in our trip across the country, but somewhere deep down inside, I had a childish need for someone to blame for anything that went wrong. I needed a villain. I needed something to help me forget the real danger, to ignore the real enemy.

Death was coming for all of us. This was real, and in the age of IT, we didn't need a boogiemán. Not another one, anyway.

IT claimed another life. It came for Barry twice, but it wouldn't need a third.

We left the crowd, who were now moving Barry's body towards an incoming drone. Jack flagged Barry's emergency, and he called for an ambulance, but it was too late to save him. The drone would collect the body, and his remains would be turned to ash the same way so many others had been.

There were years where the drones burned bodies non-stop.

They would swoop in, load corpses, and render them to ash on the spot. When moving on, the ashes would fall from the machines and get picked up by the wind or get blown around. There were so many dead that it rained ashes for years. It snowed grey soot that blotted out the sun.

We walked inside. No one stopped us and there was no sense that anyone meant us any kind of harm, so we sat down for a second, and waited for Kathy to join us.

“You,” she said, walking in and pointing at Jack.

“Yeah?”

"I need a minute with you," she said. "And then we gotta go."

"Whatever you've got to say, you can say in front of Kid," he said.

"No," Kathy said.

He shrugged, resigned to stay put, but I squeezed his hand and urged him forward, silently telling him I didn't care about what she wanted to tell him. I did care. But I didn't want him to know that.

They walked out of earshot and began what I can only assume was a very depressing or irritating conversation, because Jack didn't look happy. He looked ill. I had no idea what they were talking about, but they seemed to have an entire conversation with their gazes alone. Jack glanced back at me twice. His hands were shaking.

When he came back, he was ready to leave, and so was I.

We walked to his bike, which was on one of the house's charging stations, and climbed on without a word. He was wheezing again. I could hear it, and I could feel it when I wrapped my arms around him.

And then we were soaring over the desert. The darkness surrounded us completely, and we put off all the things we didn't want to say and all the questions we wouldn't dare ask.

We were both so exhausted from the adrenaline of the day that we went to sleep immediately when we got to our hotel room.

It wasn't a penthouse, and it wasn't a famous person's mansion. It was a room outside of town, but it was clean and quiet. It was also only us. And that's what I wanted. I wanted Jack. He was all I needed.

I'd locked myself up for so long, surrounding myself with things the people I'd loved used to enjoy. It was a life of nostalgia and loss and loneliness. A life focused on the past. But I was making real-world memories now. Jack was here, right here with me, in the present, and all it took was a single gesture to bring the largest truth to light.

We were relaxing on the couch after napping for a few hours. Jack was behind me, acting as my large body pillow, and we were watching a Scorsese piece. The best one, you know the one.

"What's that song?" he asked me, out of nowhere.

"Huh?" I asked.

"You're humming a song," he said.

"I am? I was?" I hadn't realized I was humming.

"Yeah, it was good." He muted the movie.

"I don't know. I was kind of zoned out." I chuckled.

"I do that, too," he said. "Make up little songs, I mean. It's a bit cringy but I used to try to write music, you know, when I was alone and all." He laughed but it was dour, and he seemed jittery and anxious.

I wasn't sure what Kathy told him, and I didn't ask. Not then. My mom always warned against giving oxygen to a fire, so if the Kathy conversation was stressing him out, then it could wait.

"It was just me and a bunch of equipment most of the time," he said. "So, I'd play around and try to keep myself busy."

"Were you any good?" I asked, a devilish idea poking at me.

"I don't know," he said. "I never had anyone to listen, I guess." His face was glowing pink, and I could tell he was nervous.

"Write a song for me," I said.

"For you?" Jack asked. I nodded coyly. "Right now?" Again, I nodded.

I didn't really expect him to write a song. I was trying to distract him from whatever was bothering him. At least until he was ready to tell me what it was. In my head, he was about to blush and then find some cute way to worm out of this situation, and it'd be something we laughed about. Instead, he gently moved me off of him, opened an app, and pulled out a holographic guitar.

"The hell?" I asked.

"I know, I get all the cool toys," he said. And then he started strumming the strings and working out a melody. "How did it go?" He was talking to himself.

"Hmmm. Maybe this? What was that part she was humming?"

It went on that way for a short while.

"Would it be okay if I used some older lyrics to start me off?"

"Are you asking me, now?" I asked. I'd reclined on the couch to watch him. I was going back and forth between the idea that this was sweet and ridiculous at the same time.

Sweet? Yes.

Cliché? Absolutely.

Ridiculous? It really depended.

I couldn't help but teeter between the scene in Barbie where Ken whips out an acoustic and says, "Come on, I'll play guitar at you," and the one in Yesterday where the main character breaks into an impromptu lyric battle with a pop star in the middle of a party. Both were awkward. This was a bit awkward, too, if I'm honest. At first, anyway.

What if he can't sing? I thought. What if he can't write? Could be good. Could be bad. Either way, I was preparing myself. "

Yeah," he said. "Would it be okay if I used some older stuff to get me going? Or to maybe fill in some stuff here and there."

"Whatever tickles your pickle, sailor," I said, which got us giggling again.

"Okay," he said, and he took a deep breath.

I'd never given much thought to the relief and the fear a breath can cause. When you have it, you take it for granted. When you don't, or when those you love don't, every breath is precious.

This breath was one of the most precious of my life, because after he settled, and after he was ready, he began to sing. To me and only me.

His illuminated fingertips strummed the holographic guitar strings lightly as they rang out in the small space. He kept a slow beat, and he was good. I couldn't focus on any of that, though, because the moment I heard his voice, I melted.

It was a clear and unexpected mixture of strength and vulnerability. By the time he was singing the chorus, I was transfixed and probably staring at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

He belted the lines with a strength I didn't know he had, and more than the sound and sight of him, I listened to his words, and I knew, without a doubt, in that second, he loved me. Really loved me.

It filled me up, and it broke my heart at the same time.

Jack spent the better part of the next morning teaching me how to ride his motorcycle. I took him back to bed after my midnight serenade, and I was hoping to sleep in, but that didn't happen.

I'd barely woken up, and I wasn't sure what had gotten into him, but he was adamant about teaching me all the features of the bike. He even created a profile for me so I could access and ride it without needing his cube—it was limited, but it worked okay, kind of like a learners' program. And it was fun, if not irritating. We were only a few hours from the coast and even closer to Disney Land, and sunset wasn't until almost eight that night, so we had time. I was apprehensive at first, but it was thrilling all the same.

If I'm honest, I almost crashed a handful of times, but I got pretty good, and with the safety features on—like putting up the bumpers in bowling—I was able to keep vertical. He had to catch me a few times, but in a couple days, I'd be a pro. I only needed some more practice.

After a huge breakfast, we charted our path west, and road with the sun beating down on us and the wind roaring around us. We were riding high and looking forward to the ocean and all the newness awaiting us. I'd traveled more in the past few days than I ever expected to. I'd seen so many new places that trying to remember them all was difficult. What I remembered completely and absolutely was how I felt about Jackson. I held him close as we rode, and his heartbeat pounded hard through his leather jacket. I thought about my own heart. How whole it felt, and how much I wanted this, all of this, to last longer. Forever, if it could.

"I wish we had forever," Jack whispered through his helmet.

How the hell does he do that? I asked myself.

Disney Land wasn't as big as I thought it would be, and it was a little more run down than I imagined, but Jack and his magic cube got the place up and running in record time.

We walked onto Main Street USA and there was a holo-crowd waiting for us. It was as if the park was populated by the entire cast of the Haunted Mansion—all ghosts, but no hosts—but the park would be too creepy without other people, even holographic people, being there. It was a land of puppets and Muppets and dreams. But puppets without people are really bizarre.

We got an ice-cream cone at Gibson Girl Ice Cream Parlor and went to Tomorrowland, then Frontierland, and then Fantasyland. It wasn't the most efficient way to get around the park—meandering from place to place and exploring what we could when we could—but it was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be here with someone I cared about, someone who loved me back. Jack and I definitely didn't love each other in the same way I loved my daddy, but it was heaven to be with someone who I always wished was there and who felt the same about me.

I'm here dad, I thought. And I wish you were, too. But if you're looking down on me, please close your eyes.

I grabbed Jack by his collar and pulled him down and into me.

We locked lips.

"I love you," I said, the words barely able to express how I felt.

"I love you, too," he said. "I found love at first sight, remember?" He used some of the lyrics from his song to ask me the question. The mention of him singing to me made my pulse race and my head swim.

"When was that?" I asked, distracting myself.

"It was in the church," he said, "right after I'd given that cheeky kitten away."

"Where did you find that cat, anyway?"

"In the alley," he said. "She was sitting there, perched and waiting. I'd walked down the pavement to see what this group of people hanging outside a church were doing, and there she was. And after I heard Zeke's story, and after I got scratched a few times, I came to understand that motorbike travel and cats wouldn't work as a pair. And he needed a friend, so it all got sorted in the end."

"Why did you go to a group?" This had been bugging me.

"I don't know," he said. "To see how everybody else lived. Or something like that."

"And you saw me in there?"

"I did. You were the only person that looked at me. And when you did, it made me feel, good, I guess."

I had absolutely no recollection of that. If I'd locked eyes with Jack in the church, I would've remembered it. I still couldn't get the sight of his profile out of my mind, and that's my first memory of him. Maybe I glanced in his direction, but I didn't see those blazing black irises until we officially met in the rain.

"So, it was love at first sight? Like for real?" I asked. He considered this. "It might've been for me," he said, "but you needed a little more convincing."

"Convincing?" I asked. "You mean like a road trip across the country?"

"Well, you'd either love me or hate me or both after something like that, right?"

We were so excited one second—about to go and ride another roller coaster; we'd already ridden every ride we came across (those that were still working)—but I turned my head, and when I looked back, he wasn't beside me anymore.

I spun and Jack was bent over, coughing a horrid cough. He tried to overcome the fit, but he wasn't able to, and soon he'd fallen to his knees.

“Jackson!” I screamed. “No!” And I ran to him. His hair was covering his face, and even though it was cool outside, his brow and body were covered in sweat. He was burning up.

“What can I do!” I shrieked.

“B-ike,” he wheezed. “Med-icine...” And then he passed out.

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I had two choices: leave Jack on the ground and come back with his medicine or carry him back to the parking lot.

We were deep in Mickey’s Toon Town, which is as far from the parking lot as you could get, but, like I said, the park was smaller than I’d thought it’d be. I couldn’t imagine leaving him stranded and defenseless, so I bent over—all five feet of me—and I used my legs and my hips to lift his considerable weight onto my much smaller frame.

Getting him up was difficult, but once I had him on my shoulders, and I could use my legs, it was easier to get moving. Thankfully, he regained semi-consciousness and was able to use some of his strength about halfway back to his bike. He was able to put a little power behind our movements but not much and he was gasping and wheezing so hard and loud, it scared the hell out of me.

Once out of the main gates, he lifted his cube, and his bike came squealing towards us. It must’ve been a feature of the motorcycle, like some sort of homing beacon.

The bumpers were down, so the bike remained upright, and it came to a textbook stop in front of us.

All the best toys, I thought.

“Where’s the...” I started, but Jack slung himself off my back and began scrambling in the center compartment of the bike’s chassis. He opened it and pulled out the small syringe bag. He was fumbling with it, but he managed to slide out the tubes that contained the red liquid, and he stabbed himself in the chest with one.

There was a hiss, and he breathed out vapor from whatever was transferred into his lungs.

“Experimental...,” he struggled, “...drugs. Cancer... treatment...”

“I know,” I said. “It’s okay. Are you alright? Is there anything...”

“Stopped working,” he wept. “It’s stopped working, Kid. When they scanned us last night in Vegas.”

Crap, was that last night? I wondered.

“When they scanned us, they saw...” he struggled. He looked like he might lose consciousness again.

“Jack,” I gripped him tightly. “Jackson, don’t do this to me.”

“I thought, I had longer,” he said.

“Jack!” I yelled.

And then he passed out again.

76

There was no way I could get Jack on the bike. He was lying on the ground and facing the sky, and I was too tired and too weak.

I’d holo-called 9 1 1 back in the park when I was struggling with his unconscious body, and I’d explained to an artificial responder what was going on, but that didn’t mean help was on the way. I didn’t know anything about this area.

They could be here in minutes or days. What did I know?

I need to wake him up, I thought. I know that.

I started by shaking his shoulder, but his jacket made it difficult to move him without shoving him.

I said his name constantly, and I told him I loved him, and I listened to his chest. I had to do something. I couldn't help him like this. I had to get him up. So, I did all I could think to do. I slapped him.

He shot awake, and gaped around, afraid and confused. His breathing was labored and slow. He was fighting, but he was losing.

"We're going to the hospital," I said.

"No," he rasped, sitting up. "Sunset..."

"Jack, please!" I yelled.

"There's nothing," he started but had to pause, and when he could continue, he spoke in short, broken sentences. "Nothing they can do. Please. Please, Kid. This is going to happen. No matter what we do. And I want to be with you. If you take me to hospital. They will take me away. It won't give me any more time. Please. Don't make me go away."

I had tears flowing down my face at full steam. I was devastated and livid all at once.

How could he not tell me immediately! my mind roared. If he loved me, he would've told me!

Would he? another part of my brain asked unexpectedly. Would you still have wanted to learn how to ride the bike? Would you still have wanted to go to Disney? Didn't you tell him about your Dad, and how this was you fulfilling some lifelong quest?

I didn't put it that way.

Maybe he was trying to give you one day. One good day. Or maybe he was struggling with the words to explain something so inexplicable, especially since he's only had a night to come to terms with what's happening.

I don't even know what's happening, I snapped back at myself.

Yes, you do. The voice was calm when it said this. That didn't last. So, who cares about that other shit! Your anger doesn't matter! You'll have time for that later! He needs you now! So, shut the hell up and help him!

It felt longer in my head, but this entire conversation was over in the blink of an eye, and I couldn't believe how mean I was. It was good, though. I needed it. I needed to clear out all the nonsense, because I knew what was coming, and I knew what I had to do.

"Sunset it is," I said, and I helped him up. "But I'm driving."

77

Sunset Point Beach was a little on the nose for our trip, but it was also one of the more litter-free locations. And when I say "litter" I mean boats and bodies and wreckage. What was left of a long pier reached out into the water and the sun caught the waves like diamonds catch light, which made the world shimmer and sparkle. It was magnificent. I'll never forget how stunning it all was. It's burned in my memory forever. The beauty. The awe. The misery.

78

Jack was barely able to stand when we reached the shore.

His skin was cold to the touch, but his body radiated heat, and every movement seemed to take an immense amount of effort for him, but we made it. I took off our shoes, and we waded out and into the sand as the sun slowly meandered

behind the horizon. Our bodies were bathed in orange and yellow light, and he grabbed me and hugged me.

“I love you, so much,” he said. “I’m so sorry for all of this.”

“Don’t you fucking start,” I said, which made him chuckle, but it wasn’t his strong, loud, bellowing laugh. It was a weak and strained clatter. It was a death rattle.

We sat in the sand, and he held me closely. We talked like we always did. It was so easy just to be with him. I don’t know when it got so cold. I don’t know when we lied down. I don’t know when I put my head on his lap, but I fell asleep there. We both slept there.

“Love you,” was the last thing I remember hearing, and then I was dreaming about Jackson kissing me and a life with him. A life with happiness and travel and each other. It was a nice dream. Stupid, but nice.

Jack never dreamed. He only slept, and he never woke again.

79

The light was gone from his eyes. The color had drained from him. The cold and shadows took over. Jack was gone.

I knew it the second I saw him, and then I felt a deep, dark hole open inside of me, and I laid back down, cuddling the boy who meant everything to me; the boy who I’d only met six days ago, who I’d fallen for at first sight despite myself, and who was gone now. I closed my eyes again. My life had become a waking nightmare, so it was better this way. Maybe the light would leave me, too.

Jack, I thought, and I fainted.

I woke up, and for a second, I didn't know what had happened. It was like I'd forgotten or didn't remember yet.

Then my world shrank to a pinpoint, and I was instantly overcome with grief that swathed my body like a weighted blanket and crushed my heart in a vice. My mouth went dry. My eyes were instantly wet. And a deep, horrendous darkness opened up inside of me. It was as if I were hollow or hollowed out.

I was rotting, only I wasn't allowed to go peacefully into that good night. There was no relief for me. Not in this. This loss was too much. It was too great.

My brain stopped working, and my body was a useless husk. It took me almost an hour to realize I was in a bed. And not any bed, a hospital bed. My cube was replaced with Jack's.

When I saw it, I literally hugged it, because it was the last piece of him I had left. I'd been transported to a hospital by an ambulance drone, and I was awake and breathing, but Jack wasn't. He was little more than ash and dust now. I didn't even have a body left to mourn. I cried so openly and so hard that I thought my ribs would shatter. I screamed, and I wailed. I'd lost everyone in my life, but I'd never experienced anything like this.

The hospital went into some kind of supersaver mode. They kept me constantly sedated, and I slept a lot. I lost track of time. I lost track of everything.

Chapter 4: The Destination

81

I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm alive.

I say that to myself every morning. I say it when I look in the mirror. I say it while eating a bowl of cereal and right before bed.

I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm alive.

It's like a prayer. Only, prayers are hopeful, and I'm not.

It's been a long time since I've felt hope. It's been a long time for all of us, I guess.

No, that's not right. Not all of us.

It's more like, the rest of us.

But let's not talk about that. Let's focus on how fine and happy and alive I am.

Yeah, that's what we'll do. That's what we should do.

And then I sleep. I'm out. It's easier to sleep. The drugs make it easier. I like to sleep, and that makes me happy—or something like happy. I don't dream. I don't think. I don't obsess. There's only blackness. Blackness that takes the pain away.

But the pain never goes away. It's there in the waking moments. It's there in every time inhale. It's always there.

It's here. It's with me. And I don't want it anymore. I can't take it. I don't want to try. It's all too much. Too much for me. Too much for this stupid, useless life.

Why! I chastised myself. Idiot! Never get close! Never let them in! Shit!

Jack...please...

82

“Why did he have to die!” I screamed.

A nurse had followed me up here, and I was shouting at her.

You might wonder what I was doing on a hospital roof at night during a thunderstorm, and you might wonder how I got up there. The doors all locked automatically, and the building, like most hospitals, was secure. The answer to both questions is simple: Jackson Wood. I was going to see him again, and I had his cube. He'd willed it to me, and that freaking thing was a skeleton key for anything I wanted.

It opened every door, and every piece of machinery and technology listened to me and did what I said, which gave me an immense amount of power—power that was backed up by a vast accumulation of wealth.

The "on-hand supply coffers" Jack mentioned being donated to the UWA after his mother passed wasn't even a drop in the bucket of EveWorks wealth.

I could have anything I wanted. Buy anything I wanted. Control anything I wanted. I'd been given a genie, and if I wished for it, I could have it. Except for what I really wanted. Except for the only thing I wanted. Except for that damn smile.

Even with so much power, it wasn't nearly enough to bring Jack back to me. I didn't want the money. I didn't want anything anymore. I'd lost everything.

I was alone.

I am alone.

The hospital stopped sending me drugs two days before I walked out and onto the roof, because I told it to. With a wave of my hand, I ended my treatment, and I paid my bill—it was the least I could do for them keeping me alive for the past week... Wait, was it a week? A month? However long it was, I paid.

This was the only working hospital in tens of thousands of miles, and it needed the credits more than I did. I was really surprised any of these places were still open. The smaller clinics—the fully automated ones—I understood, but Huntington Beach still had a few doctors and nurses working here, which was crazy to me.

Seeing real humans at work, still living day by day was so foreign to me I regularly forgot and ended up treating a few people rudely.

They're not holograms, AI, or NPCs, I told myself.

I would've apologized, but I wasn't going to be around that long.

I walked out of my room, and I shut down the drones sent to stop me, and then I locked all the doors on the floor I was on so I wouldn't be bothered by any staff still hanging around at 3 a.m.—spoiler alert, there weren't any. But everyone knew what I was going to do. They'd figured it out. Jack's cube found their internal alerts and messages about my CS severity rating scale results.

But it was my turn to ride the bullet, and I was the one who was going to end it.

84

I had time to think, and I had time to plan. That's something I never shared. Once I decided to end it, that was it. Conversation over. No head and heart fighting over why or if this time. I had resolve and a singular drive. All I needed was the how.

A drug overdose in the hospital would be pointless—the machines would save me as soon as I passed out, or I'd screw it up and wind up in a coma or worse.

Romeo poisoned himself, but I'm no Romeo, and there's no way I wanted to stab myself in the heart like Juliet—pain wasn't something I wanted; I'd had quite enough of that already.

Copying such a well-known story would also be hypocritical in a way. I didn't want to die because I lost the boy I'd given up everything for; I'd lost everything and then been given a brief glimpse of happiness in a world that was about to kill me anyway. So, I was merely ending the inevitable earlier than scheduled. No harm. No foul.

I could, of course, see some obvious parallels between the star-crossed lovers' tale of woe and my own, but, if I hadn't lived it myself, I'd say most of those connections are flimsy at best and nowhere near as poetic as they'd need to be to be accurate.

I understand now how out of sorts I was in those moments—debating whether or not my suicide plan was "poetic" enough, or whether it was so immensely vanilla that my brain simply refused to admit it to the rest of me.

I know I wasn't in my "right" state of mind, but I'd convinced myself how normal this was.

It's not unlike hamsters, I thought.

I'd watched a documentary about hamsters, and if a mother hamster feels there's a threat to her litter, or if she sees that there isn't enough food to survive the winter, then to spare her babies from suffering she'll eat them.

It was natural. It was a part of the circle of life.

I'd talked myself into believing my death was a mercy. My situation was similar enough in a way. I get how unbalanced that sounds, but I was unbalanced. I was fraught and wrecked. I felt as if I were falling from a great height over and over again.

It was that feeling that gave me the idea.

The roof, I thought. There was some poignancy or pathos in that somehow, wasn't there? Jack helped me "overcome" my fear of heights, didn't he. That was

a half-truth—I still didn't like heights—but, as I've said, I wasn't in my right state of mind.

The way I thought about it, after a four second freefall, I'd either get to see my mom and dad and Jack again, or I wouldn't. This way at least I wouldn't have to wait around to die while suffering every second until IT came for me. I'd lost faith in...everything, so I wasn't sure what to expect. Heaven? Hell? Reincarnation? Did it matter anymore?

My one mistake was talking to myself—not that I talked to myself much. But I did express some thoughts loud enough to reach the machines' recorders, and they deciphered my plans, so every bot, employee, and volunteer knew what I was up to, and it was their duty and part of their programming to stop and save me.

As far as I was concerned, there was nothing in this building or in this universe that could save me. All I needed to do was get to the stairs.

I had a random thought then: I hope Zeke and his kitten are okay. I wonder what he named her.

I smiled when I thought that, but I wasn't smiling as I ascended the stairs and made my way to the roof access egress in the eastern wing of the hospital.

The heavy door swung open quickly.

The stormfront moving through brought gales of wind and humidity with it that pressurized the exit, so the moment I pushed the door open, I was nearly sucked out. Kind of like when you open a window in your house and a closet on the other side of the room slams shut, only in reverse.

Rain battered the rooftop, and a large thunderhead rumbled fiercely above and all around me. I could hear waves crashing onto the beach, which was only a few blocks away.

It was still too dim to see the surf, but I could hear the crashing breakers over the storm and the torrential downpour that was flooding the rooftop.

I stepped outside. The rain felt cold on my skin, and I thought of Jack's hands. Of how they were always so cold.

85

"Ah, come on," he said.

"No, Jack," I told him. "Seriously, they're freezing."

"Okay, give me a sec," he said, and he jumped off the bed.

This was right after our first time together, and, yes, I mean together-together. Jack wanted to give me a massage, because I'd been complaining about my shoulders aching from the ride and all the tension. I didn't mean for it to be a suggestion, but once Jack got something into his head, he went for it.

I was wearing a pair of pajama bottoms and Jack's shirt, and I was nearly asleep, when his fingertips brushed my skin, and I almost leapt out of my clothes. His hands were always chilly. His fingers were like icicles. It never ceased to amaze me how happiness can cover up all the little things that keep us from seeing the bigger picture. Jack's hands were cold because he wasn't getting enough oxygen. I thought it was a quirk. I never imagined it was a symptom of a serious, life-or-death condition.

I heard the door open, and Jack's bare feet pitter-pattered along the tiles.

"Got it," he said, reentering the room. He held up a small 7-Eleven brand hand warmer and a travel-sized bottle of baby oil.

"Ready for your spa day?" he asked, and then he tried to jump onto the bed, only to bounce and go flying off the corner and back onto the floor. It was hilarious. He went head-over-teakettle and landed with a thud. I was worried he might've

hurt himself, but then his head popped up over the comforter, and he was giggling so hard he could barely breathe. Again, I should have connected the dots, but I didn't.

"Can I try that one more time?" he asked.

"Whatever floats your boat," I said, and I turned to lie down on my stomach. He lifted my shirt a little and then settled behind me and into a seated position where he was straddling my midsection, but his weight stayed on his legs.

To put it bluntly, he was kind of sitting on my butt. He lifted my shirt a little more and spread the oil along my lower ribs and up my spine. His hands were still freezing, but it felt good to have them on me. He was good at this. Really good.

"Give a lot of massages?" I asked.

"I used to rub my mum's shoulders a bit," he said.

"And this has just become the least-sexy rubdown, ever," I said.

"Not like that," he chuckled. "And not like this. It was the furthest thing from this. She would get terrible knots in her shoulders and back from crawling under and inside of machines all day, so I would help relieve some of the pain she was in, which meant deep tissue massages that felt more like this." He increased the pressure he was using with his hands, and there was a sharp pain followed by an instant release in my shoulders.

"Ah," I said. "Kind of hurts. Kind of feels good." He reduced the pressure and began making swirling motions around the knot he was working out.

"Okay, that's...yeah, that's better," I said.

And it went on like that for a long time. Him rubbing my back and us chatting on and on. I should have noticed then. My massage lasted forty-five minutes. That's

forty-five minutes of constant friction and work and shared body heat, but his hands never got any warmer.

86

I walked out and into the rain. It was time. I was taking control. Ultimate control. Control over my fears. Control over my life and my death. Stumbling onto the concrete roof, I could feel rushing water cover my feet.

Like the day at the beach, I thought, remembering Biloxi.

87

"Are you sure we won't get wet?" I asked, for the twentieth time.

"The tide's coming in, so no promises," Jack said, patiently, "but if we take a quick selfie and get back to the dry sand, then it should be no problem."

I was still anxious about the talk we were supposed to have. The air was thicker between us somehow, and the sand was damp where we were walking.

It squished under our feet as we trundled along. I wanted to start the "talk" we were supposed to have because waiting around made my skin crawl, but I felt so weird about this whole situation I found myself going along to get along, waiting, and expecting the worst—whatever that was.

He was beside me, and we were moving closer to the water's edge, and I paused to let the incoming tides rush over my foot.

The feeling was calming in a way. It was purifying—creating a relaxing and cleansing sensation—but then I could feel the sand being pulled from beneath me as the water reversed its direction and rushed back out and into the Gulf. Swirling whirlpools surrounded my ankle as a mighty pull caused me to sink deeper into the beach. There was power here. Immense, natural, horrifying power.

I could feel it, if only for an instant. For the briefest of flashes, I felt connected to something larger than myself. Connected not physically, but in some way I can't even describe.

It was then I noticed Jack had stopped. He was standing ten feet away, and he was looking at me intently. His feathery hair gently flowed in the breeze, and the light glistened in his eyes.

In the sun, they were still defiantly dark, but around the edges, circling his irises, they were a lighter honey-color. These golden rings made his gaze glow as he watched me.

There was a slight grin on his face, and he snickered as he walked over, bent down low, and whispered, "I like you, Kid. I like you a lot," which made me melt. Then he kissed my cheek, and I exploded. I said before that I didn't know what came over me, but I don't always tell the truth, not even to myself. Maybe I didn't want to believe it because I was scared or embarrassed. But I knew exactly what I was doing. I wanted this, and I wanted it now. So, I grabbed him, and I gave him my first kiss while stealing his at the same time.

The second our lips touched, and this is difficult to admit, but I swear I saw fireworks. My eyes were closed, so I didn't actually see anything, but there were bright bursts of colors exploding in my head. And I know! I know! That's so predictable, but I didn't have a choice in the matter. That's what happened. But more than the light show bursting in my subconscious, I had that feeling of nearly being overcome by coincidence again. That feeling of déjà vu or maybe it was providence. Because there was this energy between us, and it was familiar. I'd felt a connection like that once for the briefest of flashes.

We were connected, connected to something larger than ourselves. Connected not physically, but in some way I can't even describe.

I continued forward through the doorframe, out into the rain, and over to the closest ledge of the hospital roof.

There must have been a chain-link fence around the edge at one point but all the chain-link was gone, leaving a rail that was about four feet tall jutting out from a low-lying concrete sill. Regardless of what it used to be, it was blocking my way, and I had to either crawl over it or under it to get to the slight overhang if I wanted to take my plunge. I probably could've vaulted it if I tried, but that was too dramatic, even for me. I chose the under, and I passed carefully beneath it, spinning around as I did so, and I pulled myself up, so I was facing away from the road. Yes, I was going to jump, but heights still made me nervous. I shuffled my feet back on the sill and closer to the edge and held onto the rail while staring ahead so I couldn't see the street below me.

“Stop!” I suddenly heard from somewhere on the roof. “Please! Don’t!”

I turned my head to try and find who or what was barking at me. It was difficult to see through the sheets of rain, but there she was: a nurse was slowly exiting the doorway, coming onto the roof and into the storm. I was confused at first.

How did she follow me? I wondered. There was no one on my floor, and I locked every door in the building.

I wanted to tell her to go away. I wanted to curse and scream at her, but all I could manage through the weather was a question. The only question that mattered: “Why did he have to die!”

I gripped the rail hard in anger, and I thought of our last morning together. The morning he taught me to ride his motorbike.

“Shift!” Jack said for the thousandth time.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do!” I yelled back, and that’s when the bikes auto-features took over and downshifted the bike safely until it stopped.

“Can we get some breakfast now?” he asked.

“No!” I yelled. “I’m going to get this.”

“Kid, the bike can do all the driving without you…” he started.

“No,” I cut him short. “I need to learn to do it for myself.”

He’d been so excited to teach me how to ride by myself that he’d woken me up at dawn, which was something I planned to ask him about later.

I thought I’d master it in no time, but after four hours, I still couldn’t shift properly without the autoride. It’d become a battle at this point, and I was determined to win. So far, Jack had proven to have the patience of a saint ten times over.

“One more time, then?” he asked.

“Yeah, give me a minute,” I said, looking up to try and keep my frustration from boiling over and to keep the brimming wetness from falling from my eyes. He must’ve seen that I was upset, and he sauntered over to me and climbed on the bike behind me.

“No, I want to do it myself.”

“I’m not going to help,” he said. “I’m just going to hold on and enjoy the ride.” He placed his arms around me and rested his head on my shoulder for a second, giving me a hug, and then he kissed the back of my neck.

“Ready when you are, Kid.”

I don’t know if I only needed a moment to stop and not think about how embarrassed I was or get over how frustrated I felt. I don’t know if it was the

reassurance of having Jack's arms around me. And I don't know if there wasn't some Jedi mind-trick he was using on me, but I took it slow.

"Slow is smooth," he said.

"And smooth is fast," I said, knowing the quote from a few of our favorite films. Then it all clicked. I found a kind of rhythm to when I needed to shift and brake and how much to lean when I turned. I wasn't ready to race in the Daytona 200 or anything, but I held my own, and I managed to get us around the parking lot and back to the charging station safely.

"Breakfast?" he asked, his tone pleading.

I put on a big show of pretending to think about it.

"I could eat," I said, "but first..."

And we stood in the parking lot, arms around each other and faces pressed together, for a while.

90

"Why did he have to die," I whispered again, this time to no one, not even myself. All I had to do was let go and lean back, and it would all be over.

Jack, I thought, and I could feel him, almost as if he'd come back to me.

That same lingering sense of déjà vu also came back with a vengeance, but I felt complete and at peace. I was ready.

And then she answered. That fucking nurse, she answered me.

"Why did he have to live?" she bellowed back.

I was less than a millisecond from throwing myself into the void when I heard her, and I froze.

If I'm honest, what she said wasn't so profound that it stopped me, and I wasn't overcome by some greater existential understanding of life, religion, or the cosmos. No, I was angry. Pissed.

What does she mean! my brain screamed. Why did he have to live? What kind of a question is that! What a—

And then I slipped. My feet went out from under me, and my arms flailed frantically while I instinctively grabbed at anything I could. My hands swatted at the air, the drains, and the walls.

The chain holding my cube on my left wrist barely caught something on the corner of the concrete sill, and when my weight flew over the edge, it held. It was taut and strained, and it wouldn't hold long, but it was still together as I dangled. It was amazing it didn't snap immediately and drop me, and I'm sure it would have if I'd had the same bracelet and the same cube I had when this all began, but I didn't. My cube was replaced by Jack's, and the tether was much stronger than the cheap chain I'd had before.

Fear overtook me, and I wasn't thinking clearly, but I hadn't fallen to my death yet.

The nurse rushed over. She abandoned any thoughts of self-preservation, and she sprinted and dove forward, grabbing my hand and wrist the instant whatever the tether had caught on snapped. Her fingers held firm, but gravity was a strong force, and the water was slippery, so she needed my help to get me back onto the roof.

“Please,” the nurse pleaded, and her words pulled me away from the fear gripping my heart, and I was able to think.

Just let go, I thought when I could think. Let it all go.

I closed my eyes, and I tried to clear my head, but I was being overcome and overwhelmed by the absolute certainty of coming events. It was nearly impossible to not think this had all happened before. It was old news.

Then the image of Jack popped into my head, and I remembered where I was and what I was here for. I searched and found my peace and then began to loosen my grip.

Now, and this is something else I've never shared, in the split-second it took me to make a decision and start to let go, I heard a voice. His voice. It was in my head, but it was him. I don't have an explanation for it or a rationalization for it, and I won't chalk it up to a hallucination. I heard him, and it stopped me.

"Not today," he said, and my body froze in place.

"The baby!" the nurse shrieked, unexpectedly. "Please!"

It took me a beat to register her words, but then my eyes shot open. Something inside me changed in that instant. That sense of providence, or chance or fate, hardened into an absolute certainty, and whether or not all of this had happened before didn't matter. My mind and body were overpowered by the authority of what I had to do. Of what I would do.

I doubled my grip but slipped anyway. Before I lost my grasp, I was able to throw my other hand upwards and grab the nurse's sleeve.

I held on with everything I could, and somehow, she was able to get her arms around my shoulder, and she pulled me up enough for me to get a foot onto a ledge or some overhang, and then she jerked backwards, hauling me onto the roof with a strength that seemed otherworldly.

It was dark, the ground was uneven and slippery, there were obstacles in her way, and she was three times my age. Her body seemed small and frail, but she dragged me up like a child and fell backwards, pulling me on top of her so she

was lying on her back, and I was face-down. My head barely missed the rail as she hauled me up and forwards, but I landed safely, and she held me tightly, hugging me with more kindness than I understood a stranger could.

I was crying uncontrollably and squeezing this poor woman in a crushing bear hug.

Then a question rose up in me and exploded. It started at my knees and moved up like a full body heave only to erupt in my chest, and I suddenly needed an answer immediately.

I pulled away and stared down at her. My hands hurt, my knees were scraped, and my heart was broken, but I needed her to answer this question.

"What baby!" I screamed over the roaring rain.

91

"What would we name a baby if we had one?" Jack asked, which made me choke on my slushie.

"A what?" I asked.

"Like, I know it's not possible and all, but, if we did. If we had time and, you know, the world changed, IT ended, and we could have a family."

"A family!" I yelped.

"Hypothetically," he mused with a great amount of charm. We'd just eaten a big breakfast after my motorcycle training, and we were in a post fooling-around-pillow-talk situation, so his question was landing harder than it should have.

"What do you think?"

I took a couple of seconds to get my mind around what we were talking about, and then I decided to play along. Maybe give him a hard time.

“Jackson Jr.,” I said, confidently, “if it’s a boy, and,” I mimed a thinking gesture, “and Jackson Jr., if it’s a girl.”

“What!” he said. “No way! I was thinking the same thing.”

“You were?” I asked. “That’s amazing!”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I’m glad we’re on the same page about this.”

“Oh, yeah, one hundred percent,” I said. He kissed my forehead.

“But, you know,” he continued, “we’d have to nickname the kid JJ.”

“Even better.” I tapped the side of my head with the palm of my hand. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Beats me,” he said.

“All kidding aside...”

“You will never have a kid named JJ,” he said, completing my thought before me.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Never. It’s too strippery, like Channing or Tatum.”

We both turned to make stupid faces at each other and then completely lost it at the same time. I tried to hold back and keep a straight face, but once I saw his silly mug, I burst into fits of laughter, and we continued to joke and play the rest of the morning. It was the happiest I’d ever let myself feel, and it was the last time I would ever spend a morning with Jack.

It was the first and last time I would ever feel like that—loved unconditionally. Or that’s what I thought at the time.

It’s always been funny to me how at the end of things, you think about the beginning, and, even if you don’t want to, the reverse is also true. As hard as you might try, at the beginning of something new, you always find yourself thinking

about the end of what led you to that beginning. And at the end of the world, when Jack and I were on that beach watching the wonderful and hateful sunset, I said I didn't remember when it got so cold. And I didn't remember when I lied down. And that I didn't remember things I wish I didn't. But I do. And if I'm going to tell this, then I better tell it straight.

93

Jack was wheezing and coughing horribly. There was no way I could react to how quickly and violently his condition changed. One second, we were watching the light disappear, holding each other, and talking, and then he started coughing and he couldn't stop.

He tried to get up and step away, but he faltered, his knees buckled, and he began clutching at his throat and grabbing at his clothes.

I didn't know what he was doing at first, but then I saw him pull out his medicine case. I ran to him and held him close as he picked up one syringe after another and plunged them into his side. He didn't even look at where he was stabbing. And still, he couldn't catch his breath. His cube started setting off an alarm, and I held him tighter, trying to will him back to health.

He drove another needle into his side and exhaled slowly. Suddenly, his back rose and fell more easily. He wasn't inhaling and exhaling normally—it was obviously difficult, but he was getting in air again.

“Sorry,” he said, weakly.

“Don't talk,” I said, and I tried to soothe him.

“Might not have a whole lot...” he started.

“How many times do I have to tell you to shut that trap?” I asked, and he grinned.

I ran back to the bike, got my backpack, and then rushed straight back to Jack.

“Hey,” he said, meekly. He'd lied down. “You’re spraying sand everywhere.” His voice was a low rasp.

“We’re on a beach, genius,” I said. “Here.” I bent and put the backpack behind Jack’s head, so he could use it like a pillow, and I laid down with him.

It started getting cold. I was used to his hands being cold, but the chill soon made its way to the rest of Jack, and his lips were turning blue. Or that’s what I told myself then. I didn’t want to accept truth. Jack was never going to leave this beach, not with me. He wasn’t getting enough oxygen. He was going to die here.

“Do you have any more medicine? Or do you need anything” I asked.

“Kathy gave me something,” he said, and it was almost as if I could hear his thoughts.

"Something?" I asked, and he nodded.

I could see the tears in his eyes.

"Will it help you with the pain?" I asked, in daze. He nodded again. "Should I get it?" Tears were in my eyes now.

He sat up slowly.

“No, it's here. But I’m glad we’re on the same page about this.”

He winked at me and then took out a tube. His hands were shaking so I took it from him.

“H-how...” I stuttered.

“Right here,” he said, and he moved my hand to his heart.

This was one of those moments in life where it doesn't feel real. It was like slipping into a hallucination or falling into a dream, but it wasn't real life. It was

too theatrical. It was too much to bear. Yet, no matter how we feel about it, life moves forward without us.

He pointed to his chest, and he pulled my hand closer. I almost stopped myself because he was so weak, I was afraid I'd hurt him. But before I could pull back, he guided my hand forward and pressed the blunt end of the vial down to his chest.

When it made contact, a needle extended quickly and administered the drugs all at once.

"It's done," he said. I discarded the autoinjector and leaned in to kiss him long and hard. And we stayed that way. We forgot everything else and focused on each other. I focused on Jack's smell. His touch. His hair. I was surrounded by him and taken in by the moment completely.

I knew it then—even if I refused to believe it—but that was the last time I would ever kiss him, and as much in the moment as I was, I couldn't help but think back to the first night we met. We'd known each other less than a week, but a lifetime had passed between us, and I thought about the moment I knew I loved him.

"Right here," he'd said.

"It really was love at first sight, huh?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said, "but you needed a little more convincing."

His face was drawn and weary, but he still had that beautiful smile.

"No, I didn't," I told him.

"I don't want you to go," I said, and my stomach ached fiercely, and I began weeping uncontrollably.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, and I buried my head in his midsection as he gently held me.

"I want to stay," he said, his voice getting weaker with every word. "I love you." His voice was barely discernable over the waves, and he lied down with me as the sun disappeared.

I wasn't sure how long I'd get to keep him, so I held onto him like I'd get to keep him forever until he slipped away.

94

It wasn't a miracle. Some people said it was. But there are no miracles. This wasn't some divine intervention or anything anywhere near as melodramatic as that. It was just a baby. Our baby, mine and Jack's baby.

I told you sex is weird, and it usually leads to babies unless someone's used protection to stop that, and Jack and I weren't protecting or stopping anything.

We didn't think we had to. But as my aunt used to say: "My kids aren't mistakes; I meant to have sex."

It was also more than that, though. There was an underlying truth to my pregnancy: if life could be created, then there was a resilience or maybe even an immunity to IT.

Every stream page was filled with what had to be the laziest headline ever:

"MIRACLE BABY!"

It wasn't catchy or creative, and I can't say this enough, there was no miracle. But the story caught on. Not that it mattered much. We still don't know what IT is. There's still no rhyme or reason for so many people to have died or why some keep dying. But there have been some rays of sunshine peeking through the clouds, and Kathy believes the people who can have children—the men and women not rendered barren by IT—are resistant to it.

The research is still too early to make any speeches about success, but we're really hoping it's true, and, for now, at least, the hypothesis has been proven more right than wrong.

In the end, the Bits, it seemed, fared better than the Citiers. While my pregnancy was the first widely reported, there have been tens of thousands of pregnant women popping up on the stream and around the world every day.

The UWA and its allies rallied together and observed as many mothers and their partners as possible, and not one died in the next passive waves of IT.

So far, every pregnancy has made it to delivery, and none of the mothers or fathers have succumbed to the Incident.

People would really like another way to test this immunity—a simple blood test would be nice—but it's a start. And we need a start. We're beginning to recover. Citiers have begun to leave their seclusion, and Bits are beginning to rejoin society. Slowly, of course. Ever so slowly. But people are starting to try and learn again. To work and fight again, and to regain what they've lost—what we've lost. To take back our reason to live. And it's not what I thought it was, or what the movies told me it was. It isn't love. All you need isn't love. I really wish it was, but love is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways: with it and without it.

Not that I have answers. I'm only eighteen. So, I don't have any words of wisdom. Or any wisdom at all, for that matter.

I got lucky. I found a beautiful boy who loved me for me, and he was a prince in disguise, and we got to go on an adventure. It's easy to see me the same way everyone must've seen Charlie after he got the chocolate factory from Mr. Wonka: the poor and downtrodden kid who got everything in the end. But that's not me, even though it kind of is.

The money was nice, but I didn't earn it. I would tell you I gave it away, but I'm not an idiot, either.

I used as much of it as I could to fund Kathy and her research. The United World Alliance had trillions of dollars to throw at this problem, but, like Jack said, they needed people.

I had people. I had the perfect people. Sure, they were outlaw rocket scientists, but with the right amount of money, they could find more survivors and figure out new ways to save lives.

I might be breaking a few laws (all of them, Kathy tells me), but who cares? There's work to be done.

There were also a few reasons I had to do things this way. A major one was that immediately after I inherited Jack's cube, a massive legal battle was launched over control of EveWorks. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry with a politically appointed position, an official title, or letters in front of their name objected to and filed lawsuits against Jack's last will and testament, which I had no idea he'd really updated back when he was trying to get me on his bike.

I'm not sure how that's all going to play out, but it's annoying, and it's getting in my way, so for now I'm taking my golden ticket, and I'm going around them.

Evelyn (Evie) J. Wood was the first baby born in eight years.

We had a baby girl. I had a baby girl. And if the science is right—don't bet on it; don't bet against it—then she's resistant to IT. She may even be immune, which means I might be immune, too. That would also mean Jack was probably immune.

It's confusing and frustrating to think he could've been immune to something so devastating only to be taken by something so common. But he fought. Until the very end. Through the drugs flowing in his veins that dulled the pain but couldn't take it away, not completely, he fought.

In those last moments, I can't help but see him in the church, standing with his back to me and saying, "It's tough out there but we gotta live." Knowing he could die at any second, knowing he would die regardless, he wanted to live, and he was the brightest light burning in my sky, so I could probably learn a thing or two from that, but I'm working on it.

The fact that he'd brought me back to life and then kept saving me over and over again—hell, even his damn cube saved me at the end—wasn't lost on me, either. I keep that with me, always.

But that's probably not important.

What's important is that Evie's healthy and growing stronger every day, and so am I. A lot of us are.

And, for once I have hope, real hope, at least a glimmer of it, and as long as I can hold on to a piece of that, then maybe, just maybe...

But that's borrowed trouble for tomorrow and a future version of me that doesn't exist yet.

For now, I only want to appreciate what I have in this moment. And at this moment, I hold on, and I hope.

Epilogue: The End

POSTCARD FRONTSIDE: Sunset Beech

POSTCARD BACKSIDE:

Dear Jack,

We wish you were here.

Love,

Evie and K