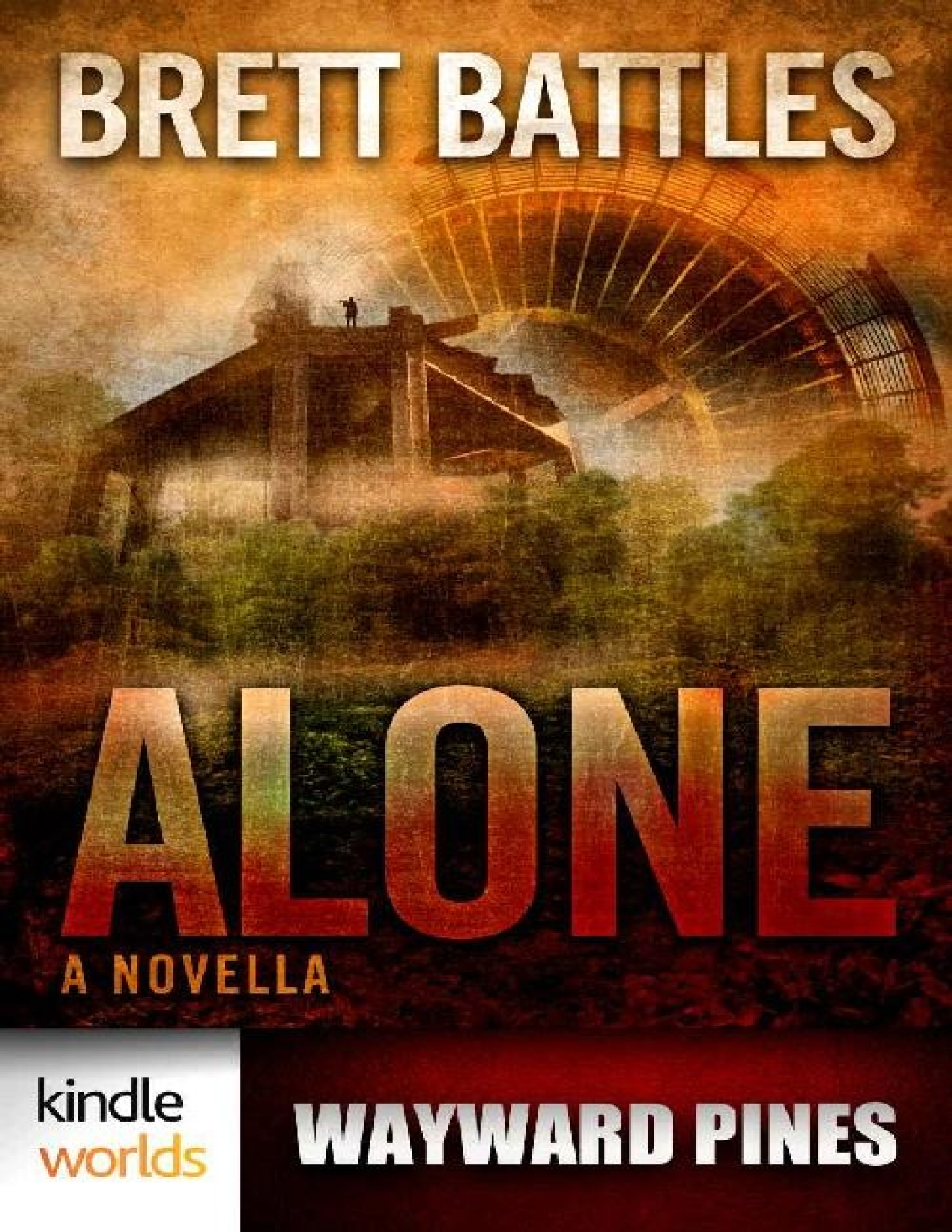

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WAYWARD PINES

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Brett Battles

Kindle Worlds

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CHAPTER ONE

AJ's steps echoed off the corridor's concrete walls as she approached the suite. She'd walked down this very hallway so many times that she barely even registered it, the sound becoming background noise, something she would have only noticed now if it wasn't there.

She checked her watch. A minute late.

Damn. He wouldn't be happy with that.

But there was no reason to pick up her pace. He would know she was close, and had most likely been monitoring her progress since she'd left her job and headed his way.

She thought of their daily meetings as "how you doing" time. Though he would have said differently, they weren't for her benefit. No, the meetings were strictly for her father. She knew they made him feel connected, involved. Like he was fulfilling his obligation. But to her it was like reading from a script. Each day the words might change a little, but the scant information that passed between them was the same. If she had a choice, she'd have just stayed down in the suspended-animation pod bay and swept the floors.

But she didn't.

David Pilcher was the most powerful man in the world. That wasn't bravado—it was fact. Anyone living in the hollowed-out mountain fortress would have said the same. After all, the fate of humanity was in his hands. So for AJ, bowing-out was not an option. There was only showing up and answering his same questions.

When she reached his suite, she knocked like she always did before opening the door.

"Sorry, I'm late," she announced as she stepped inside.

She paused in the entry and saw that her words were wasted. The living

room was empty. She walked over to the door of the master bedroom and tapped on it.

"It's AJ. Are you in there?"

No answer.

She knocked again, then opened the door just enough to see inside. Also unoccupied. She leaned in to check the en suite bathroom, but it was dark. Frowning, she walked back across the living room to the other bedroom, the one that was no longer used. Since the room had once been hers, she saw no reason to knock.

No surprise he wasn't inside, but what was unexpected was that the room was empty. Completely. No bookcases, no bed, no dresser, no pictures on the walls. No signs that she had once called it her own.

She tried to remember the last time she'd been inside. That had been nine months ago? A year? Her things had still been there at that time. How long after that had he ordered the contents of the room boxed up?

AJ knew she should be upset, and she was, but not as much as she would have expected. If she were really honest with herself, she'd known he was going to do something like this. Maybe that was why it wasn't so troubling, or maybe seeing it empty helped reinforce her belief that the choices she had made were the right ones.

There was one other place her father could be. Technically, it wasn't part of the suite, and she'd been conditioned to think twice before heading down the long hallway, but that had been when she was younger. She was seventeen now, and no longer a child who might wander in on something she shouldn't know about.

She headed down the hallway to the closed set of oak doors at the far end. As she approached, she could hear voices leaking out from the other side—her father's, no mistaking his superior tone, and at least two others. One of the voices was female. Pam's, no doubt. The woman seemed to always be hovering around AJ's father, never far from the action. The male could have been one of any number of people.

She slowed before she reached the door, wondering if she should have heeded her old instincts and stayed in the suite. But a part of her wanted to know what was going on, what had kept her father from meeting her like he had every other day that she could remember.

When she reached the door, she knocked.

All conversation on the other side abruptly ceased. Footsteps crossed the room, then she heard a creak as the ancient door opened just enough so that Pam could stick her head out. In another life, the woman might have been a model, a

drop-dead beauty straight off a magazine cover. Not in this life, however. Here, she was something else entirely.

"What?" the woman asked, not hiding her irritation. She had never liked AJ.

"I have an appointment," AJ said.

Pam sneered and started to respond, but AJ's father's voice came from behind her and cut her off. "Who is it?"

Pam turned her head back toward the room. "AJ. Says she has an appointment."

"Yes. Right," he said, as if he'd forgotten. "Let her in."

Pam gave AJ one of her well-practiced lethal stares as she pulled the door out of the way and stepped back. "Come on in, Princess."

AJ entered the office, brushing past the woman without looking at her.

Though she'd been in the room many times, her father's office never ceased to impress her. The dark, shiny, hardwood floors; the original Van Gogh hanging on the wall; the rich leather sofas; the bank of high-definition monitors; the massive desk—all would have been enough to cause most people to pause. But two items in particular were the real breathtakers.

The first was the big table in the center of the room. On top, covered by a glass dome, was a scaled model of the town of Wayward Pines—each building, street, bush accounted for and depicted exactly as its full-size counterpart. The second thing—trumping even the miniature village—was the set of windows along the far wall.

The office was high up the face of a cliff, the windows cut out of the stone, providing a spectacular view of the protected valley below, where, nestled among the trees behind a high electric fence, was the last town on Earth.

Wayward Pines.

It was her father's masterpiece. A small town, where all the residents were kept in the dark about where and, more specifically, *when* they were, and a place where discussions about why there were no roads out of town were lethally discouraged. It may have looked like a late-twentieth, early-twenty-first-century village, but those years were gone. Long, long gone.

Besides AJ's father and Pam, three others were present, all sitting on the sofas in front of the monitors—Arnold Pope, Ted Upshaw, and Roger Davis. As AJ walked toward them, they all stood up. While Pope gave her the same annoyed look that Pam had, Ted and Roger both smiled.

"AJ," her father said as he came around the side of the sofa. "I lost track of time."

AJ had a hard time believing that. More likely he'd decided his daily meeting with her could wait and just hadn't told her. She could have let him off

the hook, could have suggested rescheduling, but instead she remained silent as he approached.

When he reached her, he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead. “Good day today?” he asked, taking a step back.

Right to the script, she thought. Apparently, they were going to have their chat right here in front of everyone.

“Same as always,” she told him.

“No problems? Nothing I should know about?”

She shook her head. “No. All good.”

Two years ago, when she’d turned fifteen and completed her accelerated studies, she’d moved into her own small apartment and begun what her father had called her work-study phase. For segments of three or four months—one session lasted half a year—she reported to a specific department to learn about what they did, and how it pertained to the survival of Wayward Pines. That was the focus of those who resided in the mountain facility no one in the town knew about. Their mission was to protect the citizens of Wayward Pines. Protect the human race’s last chance.

AJ’s current assignment was shadowing the group that maintained and monitored the suspended-animation chambers, the armoire-sized machines that had brought everyone in the mountain and all those in the town below to just shy of two thousand years beyond the twenty-first century, to a world where *h. sapiens* no longer existed. It was mostly a boring job of dusting the chambers and sweeping the floors and checking readouts on those who had yet to be awakened. The only excitement would have been if they’d actually received an order to wake someone up, but so far that hadn’t happened on her watch.

Her father looked her in the eyes as if trying to read her soul. “Are you sure there’s nothing?”

“Of course. Why would I lie?”

He considered her a moment longer before smiling and patting her arm. “Just had to ask.”

There was no reason to reply. It was only a variation on their standard talk. Next would come an offer to sit down for a glass of juice, and maybe even a snack from the cafeteria.

Instead, he said, “AJ, I’m going to have to cut this short today. I apologize, but I’m a little tied up at the moment.”

She stared at him, thinking maybe she hadn’t heard him correctly, but knowing she had. “What? Is something going on?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.” He placed his hand on her back and began a subtle push toward the door.

“So that’s it?” she asked. This was all wrong. This was not how they did it.

“Unless there’s something you need to talk about.”

She shook her head. “No. I … I don’t have anything.”

Pam pulled the door open as they neared it.

“Thank you,” her father said to her. He turned to AJ. “Don’t waste the rest of your afternoon. Remember, wasted time is not something you ever get back.”

It was his usual departing comment, like a quote out of a bad how-to-talk-to-teenagers book.

“I won’t waste it,” she said, her typical response. “See you tomorrow, I guess.”

He hesitated, his smile slipping slightly. “I think we’re going to cancel tomorrow. In fact, cancel the next few days.”

“Cancel?” she asked, her surprise bordering on shock. They’d never missed a day before. Never.

“I’m going to be tied up on this project so I won’t have any time,” he said. “When I free up again, I’ll let you know.”

“How long?”

He shrugged. “Four or five days, I would guess. Not much more than that.”

Four or five days? “Uh, okay,” she said. Despite the near-mechanical nature of their meetings and her self-professed desires to be doing anything else, a part of her secretly looked forward to their time together.

“Everything will be fine,” he said.

Though it wasn’t a question, she said, “Sure.”

He pushed her again, this time through the doorway. “Good-bye, AJ. Have a good day. We’ll speak again after I … after this is all done.”

As he turned away, Pam peered through the opening, a sickly smile planted firmly on her face. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth several times, then whispered, “Poor little girl.”

The door slammed shut.

• • •

“Bring the map back up,” Pilcher said as he walked back over to the others.

Using a wireless keyboard, Ted typed in a command, and the topographic map of what had once been the western United States and Canada reappeared on center screen. The only cities that were marked were Boise, Vancouver, Portland, and Seattle, with lines indicating what had once been their city limits.

Pilcher studied the monitor.

Portland or Seattle.

It had come down to those two choices. He'd already seen Boise with his own eyes. But it had been a relatively small city, so nothing there had survived eighteen hundred years of decay. While Vancouver was larger, it was also the farthest away, each extra mile bringing with it more chance of failure.

Portland and Seattle had maintained roughly the same populations back in the day, with a slight edge to the more northern city. He'd drawn up plans for each, but now was the time for him to decide.

"Seattle," he announced, going with the city he'd visited the most when it had still existed. "We'll take three helicopters. The tanker and two for transport."

"Still going to be kind of tight," Roger said. Though he didn't get much flying in these days, he was the head helicopter pilot. "I'd feel better if we only took one transport."

"You wouldn't if an abby was making a run at you, and there was no one there to shoot it down because we couldn't bring enough people with us," Pam said.

"I'm just saying, to get all three there and back will take every ounce of fuel we'll have."

"Then put a fourth one on standby here," Pilcher said. "It can load up with as much fuel as it can haul and fly out to wherever we are if we need it."

Roger didn't look particularly happy with the idea, but he knew better than to argue with the boss. "Yes, sir."

Pilcher looked at Pam. "You pick the team. I want people who aren't afraid to pull their triggers."

"What about me?" Pope asked. "Shouldn't I have a say in who's on the team?"

"You need to get back to town, and make sure things are nice and quiet, and that your secretary knows what to do if a problem comes up."

"I can do that in ten minutes."

Pilcher glared at him. "Go back to town, *Sheriff*. Walk around with that big gun of yours, so that'll be all people remember when they don't see you around for a few days. Jesus, Pope, do I really have to tell you this shit?"

Pope winced, but kept his mouth shut.

Turning his attention to Pam, Pilcher said, "You'll handle supplies, too. A week's worth, just in case."

"No problem."

"Ted, we'll contact you every day, four times a day. If we miss two in a row, send a rescue team to our last known location."

“Got it,” Ted said.

“And keep an even sharper eye than usual on the town. If anything happens, *anything*, I don’t care how small, you’re to report it to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pam, Ted, and Roger, meet with me here again tonight at nine. I want all details worked out by then.” Pilcher looked at Pope, thinking the sheriff would be annoyed again about being left out, but the man nodded. Pilcher glanced at the map again before turning back to his team. “All right. Any questions?”

There were none.

“Then let’s get moving. I want to be in the air by dawn tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWO

Pam spent the rest of the afternoon arranging provisions and considering whom she should assign to the mission's security team. Six spaces were available. Tompkins was a no-brainer. He was an excellent shot with lightning-quick reflexes, cool under pressure. Exactly the kind of gunman they would need. Reynolds and Boyer were must-haves, too. Neither was quite up to Tompkins's or Pam's level, but that was quibbling.

Three more spots.

Williams? Zurn? Goode?

Zurn, yes. Williams and Goode—out of the two, she'd prefer Goode, but each man had his flaws, and this was one trip where even the smallest of flaws could be lethal.

What about Evans?

She thought about it. Yeah. Evans would be better. Make him number five.

That left a single position, one which neither Williams nor Goode would be filling. She'd known from the beginning who number six would be. For Pilcher, this mission was meant to satisfy lingering questions. For Pope, well, he'd undoubtedly get his kicks from whatever trouble they might run into. And while Pam enjoyed putting down her share of abbies, it was the human population that interested her most. So she thought it only fair to bring along someone who would keep things interesting for her.

• • •

Mitch Keller sat in the sniper's chair located in station number two at the top

of the cliff. There were eight stations in all, each manned by marksmen scanning their specific, preassigned areas.

Mitch slowly panned his rifle right to left, examining his terrain through the high-powered Schmidt & Bender telescopic sight mounted above the gun's barrel. A twitching branch stopped him. He searched the area. The vegetation surrounding the bush was barely moving, so it couldn't have been the wind.

Another twitch.

He removed his finger from the trigger, and bent it back and forth a couple of times to rid it of any lingering stiffness before slipping it back into place. He then toe-tapped the switch on the ground that activated the Talk button on his headset.

"This is Keller. Any alarms in section eleven?"

Rooney's voice came over the radio a moment later. "No. You got something?"

"Not sure yet."

There it was again, a tug, like something was trying to pull the branch backward.

Mitch examined the bushes in the immediate vicinity but saw nothing unusual. The bush itself was large enough to hide an abby, but it was unlikely that one managed to make it this far without being seen or detected. Still, it had happened before.

"I've got movement approximately 350 yards out on the west side of the grid," he said.

"Checking," Rooney told him.

In the security station inside the rocks below, Rooney would be checking the camera feeds.

After several seconds, the man said, "No sign of anything. What exactly did you see?"

"There's something in a—" Mitch stopped abruptly as a squirrel, larger than those back in the twenty-first century, leaped out of the bush and began running across the meadow. A moment later, a second squirrel darted out after it. "Never mind. Wildlife."

He tapped the button again, turned his mic off, and resumed his scan.

"Ah, and here I was hoping maybe I'd get to see you take a shot."

The only reason Mitch didn't accidently pull the rifle's trigger at the sound of the voice behind him was because this wasn't the first time Pam had paid him an unannounced visit. In fact, she had developed a bad habit of it lately.

He released his grip on the gun, and turned to face the woman who was, if not in name but in practice, head of security.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he said.

She shrugged. “I’ll get over it.” She donned a leering smile and stepped from the main trench into the four-by-four niche that served as marksman station number two, moving unnecessarily close to the sniper chair.

Mitch knew a majority of the men assigned to security, and a few of the women, too, would have welcomed the attention. Pam was not just pretty, she was gorgeous, perhaps the most beautiful woman Mitch had ever met in person. But, in his mind, it was as if the old cliché that beauty was only skin deep had been written specifically about her. Inside, she was ugly and unpredictably cruel.

And, for some reason, she had taken a liking to Mitch.

Liking wasn’t exactly the right term, Mitch knew. A more accurate one would be *sexual interest,* something he had no intention of reciprocating. But it wasn’t as if he could simply shut her down. Not Pam. That would be a mistake. So he’d tried a more indirect approach. At first, he feigned ignorance at her advances, playing them off as only gestures of friendship. When she didn’t let up, he would hint that he was in a relationship with someone else on the mountain, but even that hadn’t stopped her from trying.

“Something up?” he asked.

“I was in the area, thought I’d see how things were going.”

She reached over and brushed a strand of hair off his forehead. It was everything he could do not to bat her fingers away.

“Everything’s fine here. Quiet day.”

She leaned toward the break in the rock where his sniper rifle stuck out over the cliff. As she did, she lowered herself enough so that her breasts brushed against his thighs.

“Beautiful evening,” she said.

He squirmed back in his seat, adding a few centimeters of room between her body and his legs. She looked back at him, one eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, a nice one,” he said.

She hung over him for several more seconds before she straightened up. “You know what, Mitch?”

“What?”

“I’d say it’s time for a little excitement in your life.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so he half-smiled and raised his rifle back to his shoulder. “Work’s enough excitement for me, and I probably should get back to it.”

“Absolutely.”

He felt a rush of relief as he heard her take a step back toward the passageway as if she were about to leave.

“By the way,” she said, “I have some new orders for you.”

Before he could stop himself, he glanced back. “What orders?”

“Temporary assignment. Be in the helicopter bay at 0430 tomorrow morning. You’ll be gone four or five days, so bring what you need, but pack light.”

“Where am I going?”

“You’ll find out in the morning. Only it’s not just you, it’s *we*.” She winked, said, “See you then,” and disappeared into the trench.

Mitch groaned and closed his eyes.

Great.

• • •

For AJ, each day in the mountain stronghold was pretty much like the last. She suspected this was also true for almost everyone else who’d volunteered to sleep away two millennium for the sole purpose of protecting the few remaining members of the human race.

Her daily routine was up before dawn, breakfast in the communal cafeteria, and at her internship by seven a.m. After putting in eight hours, it would be time for her daily father–daughter talk. This would be followed by a second, shorter shift of work, dinner, and an hour or two of personal time before she was supposed to go to sleep.

It was like the stars in the sky, the snow in winter, the ignorance of those in Wayward Pines below. Never changing.

But now, with the cancellation of her daily how-you-doing sessions, there *was* a change. The disruption in her routine was profoundly upsetting. She couldn’t imagine what project her father could possibly be working on that would prevent him from squeezing her into his schedule, even if only for five minutes.

She replayed that afternoon’s encounter over and over in her mind as she fulfilled her duties, which today consisted of cleaning the readout screens of each occupied suspension pod. The individuals her father had been talking to said a lot about the importance of the meeting—Arnold Pope, Sheriff of Wayward Pines; Ted Upshaw, head of surveillance; and Pam, head of whatever it was AJ’s father needed her to do. The brain trust. Her father’s closest advisors.

Roger was the wild card in the bunch. She knew he worked in the warehouse, and wondered why her father would be meeting someone from there.

Was there a problem with supplies? Of course, most of the facilities' residents had more than one specialty. Maybe that was why Roger was there, for whatever his second skill might be.

The more AJ thought about everything, the more annoyed she became. Would it have been such a bad thing for her father to tell her why he wouldn't be available? Would that really have been so hard? Did he not trust her? No, it wasn't about trust, she thought. *He thinks I'm too young to understand.*

That would be just like him. On the one hand, he expected her to act like an adult and follow directions, while on the other, he restricted her trips outside the mountain to a few fully escorted journeys behind the safety of the fence into Wayward Pines.

But she wasn't a kid anymore. She was living on her own, working on her own. Even at seventeen, she was as much an adult as anyone else there. He could have trusted her, for God's sake. *Should* have trusted her.

But not her father. Not David Pilcher.

Screw him and his stupid secrets!

As the thought raced through her mind, she banged the bottle of solvent against one of the cabinets. The pod's plaque read:

MORGAN DANIEL LINDEN
SUSPENSION DATE: 08/08/01
MARSHALL, MN

Once her temper was back under control, she whispered, "Sorry, Mr. Linden."

She finished off the remainder of her shift, her anger nearly boiling over as she returned the supplies to the maintenance closet, said her good-byes, and left.

Typically, she would have headed straight for the cafeteria to get dinner, but she was in no mood to eat. So when she entered the elevator, she hit the button that would take her to the security station at the very top of the facility.

The lift raced silently through the shaft and deposited her at her requested destination nearly a minute later. The short corridor that led off from the elevator lobby made an L-turn to the left, right at the door to the stairs. Two sets of doors were at the far end of the new corridor—one on the right where the security station was, and one on the left that opened into the bottom of a stairwell.

When AJ had interned with Security, her time had been spent almost exclusively in the administration office several levels below, helping prepare work schedules and handling the menial tasks no one else wanted to do. Twice

she was officially allowed to come to this floor and take the stairs up to an outside trench that had been blasted into the rock running along the crest of the cliff. That was where the main sniper stations were located. These were the guns that kept Wayward Pines safe from random abbies, the highly aggressive creatures that sometimes worked their way into the valley and headed toward the town. Though there was little chance these aberrations would be able to breach the electric fence surrounding Wayward without frying themselves to a crisp, the marksmen would never let them get that far, routinely taking them out with a single shot from sound-suppressed AWM sniper rifles, a mile or more before the abbies reached the barrier.

When AJ entered the station, she found two people inside, both sitting at desks in front of banks of monitors. On the screens were views of the woods and meadows making up the portion of the valley outside the protection of the fence. Though hundreds of motion sensors were placed throughout the area, watchers served as a literal second set of eyes to make sure nothing was missed. As her father often said, nothing was more important than the protection of what he referred to as “his people.”

“AJ, what are you doing here?” the one named Rooney asked.

She tried to look bored as she said, “Looking for Keller. Thought he might be here.”

“He’s up top,” the other one—Weaver—said.

“Oh.” AJ feigned disappointment, thought in truth it was exactly what she’d hoped. “What time does he get off?”

“He’s on swing,” Weaver said. “Won’t be done until midnight.”

“If it’s important, we can get him on the radio,” Rooney offered.

“Nah. It can wait. Just tell him I was looking for him.”

“You got it.”

She stepped back to the door. “See you guys later.”

They each said good-bye as she exited into the hallway, not an ounce of suspicion in either of their voices. There should have been, because instead of heading back to the elevator, as soon as the door was closed, AJ stepped across to the stairwell entrance and slipped inside.

The stairs were as old as the facility itself, carved from the mountain stone by a construction team before AJ had been put into suspended animation. Since they had remained unused until just a few years earlier, there was little evidence of wear despite the centuries they had been in existence.

As AJ climbed them, her gaze automatically flicked to the camera mounted to the ceiling. From her time in Security, she knew that the stairwell cameras and those covering the sniper trench were seldom checked, so while there was a

chance someone might see her and wonder what she was doing, it was only a small risk.

When she reached the top landing, she stopped inside the doorway. The area where the door let out was completely below the lip of the trench so that those using the exit would not be seen. The problem would be if any of the snipers were taking a break and had exited their cutouts into the trench to stretch their legs. She cracked the door open and listened, but all she could hear was the soft whine of the wind passing over the top of the trench.

A thrill shot through her as she pulled the door open wide enough so she could pass through. While no abby had set foot atop the cliff in the handful of years since they'd all reawakened, her father had explicitly forbidden AJ from setting foot topside unless he cleared it first, something that had happened only two times before. What her father didn't know was that she'd made several unofficial trips with Mitch Keller.

Mitch had been assigned as one of her mentors during her tour with Security, and the two had become fast friends. This would be the first time, though, that she was attempting to pay him a visit without him knowing ahead of time that she was coming.

Keeping the sound of her footsteps as quiet as she could, she hurried down the passageway. Above her was the deep blue of a darkening sky, spotted here and there by a few clouds. She slowed when she neared the cut in the wall leading into rifle station number one, then stopped and peeked around the edge.

She knew it was too much to hope that this was the station Mitch had been assigned. At least the guy who was there, Carl Stevens, was looking into the valley and didn't notice her. She tiptoed past the opening and continued on toward station two.

She hoped Mitch wasn't all the way at the far end, that would be pushing her —

AJ paused, her thoughts interrupted by voices that were coming from inside station two.

"Everything's fine here," a male voice said. She immediately recognized it as Mitch's. "Quiet day."

After a few seconds' delay, a woman said, "Beautiful evening."

Oh, crap. Pam.

AJ almost turned and ran for the stairwell door right then and there, but her curiosity got the best of her and she continued moving forward. Why would Pam be up here talking to Mitch?

When Mitch spoke again, AJ was sure she sensed tension in his voice. It certainly seemed like he was trying to get Pam to leave. Then she heard a

footstep just inside station two, and froze. She was only ten feet from the entrance now. If Pam stepped outside now, there was no chance AJ could get away unseen.

Get out of here!

She turned for the stairs.

"By the way," Pam said, the location of her voice confirming she was right on the other side of the entrance. "I have some new orders for you."

AJ hesitated. *New orders?*

With this information coming so close on the heels of the meeting she'd interrupted earlier, she couldn't help but wonder if these new orders were connected to it. She listened intently.

Temporary assignment. Four thirty a.m. in the helicopter bay. Gone four or five days.

Had to be connected.

Mitch asked, "Where am I going?"

While AJ really wanted to hear the answer, she knew she could stay no longer. As fast as she dared, she headed back toward the stairs. The trench curved between stations one and two, taking AJ out of sight seconds before she heard Pam step into the passage.

I'm never going to make it, she realized. While the bend hid her at the moment, she'd be in plain sight on the straight shot between station one and the stairs.

She really only had one option. The second she reached station one, she slipped inside without hesitating.

It took Carl a moment before he realized he was no longer alone. When he turned and saw her, she jammed a finger against her lips, hoping it would be enough to keep him quiet. His eyebrows scrunched together in confusion.

He mouthed, "What?"

But AJ didn't need to answer him. They could both now clearly hear Pam's footsteps. The look of bewilderment still on his face, Carl shifted his gaze to the station's entrance.

As Pam neared, AJ wished over and over, *Keep going, keep going, keep going.*

She could see in Carl's face the moment Pam came into view. His look of sudden unease was only undercut by a sense of understanding for AJ's request.

Keep going, AJ thought again.

She was sure Pam would stop, sure she heard the woman's steps slow. But she was wrong. Thankfully, wonderfully wrong.

Pam continued down the trench, the sound of her boots fading now as they

neared the stair entrance. Finally, in the distance, there was the distinctive *thunk* of the door closing.

AJ stuck her head into the passageway and checked to make sure her father's pet was truly gone. The rock-walled corridor was empty.

"What the hell was that all about?" Carl asked.

"Please," AJ said. "Don't tell anyone you saw me."

"You shouldn't be up here at all."

"I know. I'm … I'm leaving now." She stepped over to the opening. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

He stared at her for a second before shaking his head. "Just get out of here."

With a "thank you," she ducked into the trench. The moment he looked away, she turned to the right, back toward station two.

• • •

Pam smirked as she left Mitch's station. She had given him a chance, an opening he could have easily stepped through, but once again he had failed to take it.

She didn't believe his ignorance routine for one second. Mitch was not a stupid man. Not in that way, at least. He knew exactly what she was offering him, knew what he was refusing.

He'd responded the way she'd expected, but she had been hoping that he'd see the light and grab on to the brass ring while he still could. She'd given him that chance, offered him a saving hand. And he had blown it.

Well, with every decision came a price, and the price for his refusal was going to be unpleasant for him, but oh so satisfying for her.

As she neared marksman station number one, she considered stopping in and shaking Carl up a bit, but she kept on walking. She still had a lot to do in preparation for the morning's journey, and had already wasted enough time toying with Mitch.

But it had been worth it, she thought, her smirk turning into an outright smile.

This mission was going to be *fun*.

• • •

Pausing at the entrance to Mitch's station, AJ checked to make sure he didn't have any other visitors, and then walked in.

As her shoe scraped the ground, Mitch whirled around, a strained smile on his face. When he saw it was AJ, he relaxed.

"Hey," she said.

"AJ, what are you doing here?" he asked. She knew he was trying to act angry, but he actually sounded happy to see her.

"I, um, I saw Pam."

His face turned serious. "What did she say to you?"

"She didn't see me."

"What do you mean?" It was clear he didn't think that was possible.

"I was hiding. She passed right by me."

"Where could you hide?"

"Doesn't matter," she told him. "I heard what she said to you. That you have to go somewhere tomorrow."

"You shouldn't have been listening."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

Now she was the one who looked confused. "But I heard you ask her."

"Yeah, but she didn't tell me." He paused. "I shouldn't even be talking about this with you. You shouldn't be here."

She hesitated a moment before saying, "I think my father's going with you."

"What?"

"Wherever you're going on this mission, I'm pretty sure he's going, too." Though her father had said nothing about leaving the mountain, she would have been fooling herself if she didn't think this was the reason their daily talks were temporarily canceled. She told Mitch about the meeting between her father, Pam, and the others. "I came up here because I was thinking maybe you knew something about it."

"I didn't even know there was a mission until Pam told me," he said. "And I'm not lying to you. She didn't tell me where we're going."

AJ could see worry in his eyes. As far as anyone knew, here in the fortress and down in the valley behind the electric fence were the only safe havens on the entire planet. Venturing even a half mile beyond their boundaries would be inviting death.

"Do you have to go?" she asked.

He snickered and put on a brave face. "Uh, yeah."

She didn't like this. Mitch was her friend, perhaps her best friend. "You'll be careful, right?"

His expression softened. “Don’t worry.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I’m not planning on it.”

AJ started to turn away, but then spun back around, raced over, and threw her arms around him. She held him for several seconds before she let go, and left without a word.

CHAPTER THREE

A soft *beep-beep-beep* woke David Pilcher from his sleep. He rolled onto his back, the tension he'd begun to feel the night before still heavy in his chest.

Beep-beep-beep.

He let the alarm go for another few seconds, then reached over and turned it off. He lay there, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, the only illumination coming from the clock.

He could still back out of this, send the team on the trip without him. No one would question him. Not openly. But he had to see, had to know for himself what was out there.

With a deep breath, he pulled back his covers, swung his legs off the bed, and headed for the bathroom.

Seven years they'd been awake. Seven years that had seen the reclaiming of the valley and the construction of the new version of Wayward Pines. It had been a rocky start at first, but Pilcher had finally found a method that kept the residents of Wayward focused on building community and propagating. The townspeople were kept ignorant of everything outside the valley, how they got there in the first place, and the fact that it wasn't the year they thought it was. Had there been problems since? Of course, but he and his people had found other ways to deal with those. Some less tasteful than others, but all necessary.

And now that things were settled and a pattern had been established, it was time to finally figure out for sure what kind of world they had truly woken to. He was confident of what they would find, but seeing it would be the confirmation he'd been craving.

The farthest they had ventured out before had been to Boise, Idaho, or more accurately, the place Boise, Idaho, had once been. Nature had long ago taken back the area, leaving only a few broken remnants of buildings and roads all but

hidden by plants and trees. If they hadn't known what to look for, it would have been as if the city had never existed.

Still, Boise was not the world, and Pilcher knew they had to check farther, someplace substantial. Hence this trip to the coast, to Seattle.

It was his ego, really, this desire to see with his own eyes the proof that he alone had been right. That was why he couldn't back out of the trip. He needed to stand there in the ruins of the old world and silently bask in the vindication of his life's work.

After showering, he dressed, pulled on the boots he seldom wore, and headed for the helicopter bay. By the time he got there, his tension had been replaced by excitement for the prospects of the mission ahead.

• • •

The large door of the helicopter bay was already cranked open when Pilcher arrived, and two of the aircraft sat waiting on the landing pad that had been cut into the side of the mountain back in 2009 and resurfaced when they'd woken. The pad was located on the opposite side of the mountain from Wayward Pines so that the town's residents would never see nor hear one of the birds taking off and landing.

Pam was there already, her team members assembled at the side of the room, waiting with their gear. Roger was helping get the final helicopter—the tanker—out onto the pad. There was no sign of Pope.

Pilcher walked over to Pam. "All set?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied.

This trip was perfect for Pam, he knew. She fed off excitement and danger, craved it, even. Both of which were in short supply in their protected lives. The mission would give her a release she hadn't had in a while.

"Have you seen Arnold?" he asked.

"I'm not his keeper."

Pope, unlike the others who all lived in the mountain fortress, would be coming from town through the secret entrance in the rocks, so he could be forgiven if he was running a bit late. Pilcher's generous mood would no longer be in effect, however, if the sheriff's tardiness ended up delaying their departure.

As soon as the tanker cleared the doorway, Roger jogged over and said, "You all can load up now."

Pam turned to her team. "You heard him. Let's go. Mitch, you're with me.

The rest of you in the helicopter on the right."

The security team headed toward its assigned aircraft, leaving Pilcher alone with the pilot.

"How long until we can get in the air?" Pilcher asked.

"Fifteen minutes," Roger replied. "Just need to top off the tanker and warm up the engines."

"Good. Don't let me keep you."

Once Roger was on his way back to the landing pad, Pilcher headed to one of the offices along the wall. Inside, he picked up the phone and dialed the extension for Surveillance.

"Upshaw," Ted said, answering on the first ring.

"It's me," Pilcher said. "Vicinity report."

"Yes, sir. I was just doing a check. There's a swarm of about two hundred abbies southeast, maybe seven miles. They're heading away, though. A few smaller groups here and there, but none poses a problem at this point. I have them all marked."

That was exactly what Pilcher was hoping. It didn't guarantee there wouldn't be any problems while he was gone, but it was a good start.

"Where is Pope?" he asked.

"Hold on."

Pilcher silently waited while Ted pinged Pope's tracking chip. Every resident of Wayward Pines and all the personnel living in the mountain base—Pilcher excluded—had similar chips embedded in the back of their left thigh. This allowed the equipment Ted was in charge of to not only locate everyone, but also to continually track and store each person's movements. It was a necessary step in Pilcher's plan. These were the last people, after all. Every life was critical to the survival of the race.

"He's in the base," Ted said after a couple seconds. "Heading up the elevator right now. Should arrive at the bay in three minutes."

• • •

Mitch cringed inside when Pam singled him out from the others. He leaned down to pick up his pack, hoping his face had not betrayed how he felt. Whether it had or not, a wink from Tompkins and a whispered, "Have a nice *ride*," from Boyer made it clear the other men assumed something was up. Trying to ignore the dread bubbling in his mind, he headed toward his assigned helicopter.

Pam was already inside the BK 117 when Mitch pulled himself through the doorway. The passenger area was configured with six seats—four in a row along the back, and two rear-facing chairs butted up against the pilot and copilot seats. Pam had taken a place in the back row, one chair shy of the far side.

"I want you over here," she said, tapping the seat between her and the sidewall.

This just keeps getting better and better, Mitch thought.

Once he'd sat down and plopped his pack on the floor in front of him, he said, "Can I ask where we're going now?"

"You can ask." There was that smile of hers again, the one that made him think that if he turned his back, she would sink her teeth into his shoulder and start chowing down on his flesh.

He fought the urge to shout, "Just tell me!" and forced his voice to stay neutral as he said, "So where are we going?"

A few seconds of silence, then, "Seattle."

Seattle? He had known they were going out into the wild, but he had assumed they would be traveling somewhere considerably closer. At worst, Boise.

But all the way to the coast? That was a long, long way from the security of home. Any problem, no matter how minor, could mean disaster for all of them.

Pam patted his leg. "Hey, relax," she said. "I've got your back." She let her fingers linger on his thigh, and for the next fifteen seconds, he didn't even breathe.

• • •

Pope ran into the bay within seconds of Ted's estimate, lugging his pack and breathing heavily. When he caught sight of Pilcher, he altered his course.

"Sorry," he said, huffing, once he reached the project's leader. "Had a walker last night."

"Who?" Pilcher asked.

A resident of Wayward Pines who ventured out when he or she wasn't supposed to—a walker—could be a sign of future trouble.

"Cory Stewart."

Stewart was a relatively new arrival in town, having been woken up a little over two months earlier. So far, he had not been a problem.

"What was he doing out?"

“Heard there was a fence. Wanted to see if it was true.”

“You discouraged him, of course.”

“Of course.”

At some point, all new residents heard rumors about the fence, and most would venture out, usually under the cover of night, to see for themselves. Their tracking chips would alert Surveillance, who would in turn call Pope. His task would then be to drive out and turn whoever it was back to town, before the person or persons wandered into the forest.

“Is this going to be an ongoing issue?” Pilcher asked.

“Maybe. If it happens again, I think we should bring him in and try reintegration.”

Pilcher thought for a moment, then nodded. Reintegration would wipe the memory of the subject and allow him or her to be introduced to the town again, hopefully a bit less curious than the last time. “Tell Ted to keep a close eye on him, then get your ass out to the helicopter.”

• • •

Ten minutes later, Pilcher was strapped into the seat directly behind Roger. With him on his aircraft were Pope, Pam, and Mitch Keller. They were all wearing headsets that dampened the noise of the rotors and allowed them to talk to each other via a microphone positioned in front of their mouths.

“Ready when you are, sir,” Roger said.

“Then let’s go,” Pilcher ordered.

• • •

AJ watched from around the corner of one of the storage containers at the back of the bay as the three helicopters rose into the air and disappeared into the tail end of the night.

She’d been there since before anyone else had arrived. When she’d lain down the night before, she hadn’t planned on coming, but her sleep had been fitful at best, her anger at her father’s secrecy eating her up. Hiding out in the bay had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, her thought being that maybe she could find out where they were going.

Unfortunately, the container—the only good place she could find to hide—

was too far away to hear more than just an occasional word, and when the helicopters fired up, forget it. They drowned everything out.

She thought about questioning one of the crew who'd remained behind, but she was worried one of them would report her presence to her father. No telling what he might do then. Perhaps forbid her from even visiting Wayward Pines. That would be death. Wayward was at least outside, and she'd started to make some friends there. Well, more like acquaintances, but no matter, she didn't want to lose all of that.

So she waited until the opportunity presented itself, and snuck out of the bay.

She had hoped that with her father finally gone, her anger at him would fade, but as she made her way down to the cafeteria for breakfast, her feeling showed no signs of going away. In fact, quite the opposite.

What she needed to do was find a way to channel her anger and dissipate it.

The corner of her mouth ticked up. What she really needed to do was something that would *defy* her father. That would even the score. Granted, whatever she ended up doing, it would be best if he never found out about it, but *she* would know, and that would be enough.

The question was—what?

What would make her feel how she wanted to feel?

It took a little while to figure out, but by the time she finished her oatmeal and toast, she knew exactly what she was going to do.

CHAPTER FOUR

As the mission started its journey west, the only difference between the dark ground below and the black of night above was the stars blazing in the sky. The lack of light pollution in this changed world gave the pinpricks of light an intensity that was visible only in the most remote locations of the twenty-first century. Mitch, a city boy from Chicago, had certainly never seen stars like these until after his emergence from suspended animation. Even having lived with them now for several years, he still marveled at their brilliance.

It wasn't long, however, before the sky began to pale with the first hint of the coming sunrise. As the night melded into morning, the view transformed into a vast, tree-covered wilderness that seemed to go on forever. Mitch guessed that for a time after humanity's fall, the cleared spaces through the forests where highways and towns had been would have been slow to disappear, marking the land. But now, so long after the last car had driven across the country and rusted away, the woods had reclaimed what was theirs, leaving little to no evidence behind.

As they flew across the imaginary border between the ancient states of Idaho and Oregon, the terrain underwent a drastic change. The forest shrank into scattered pockets of trees and large areas of scrub-covered dirt.

Mitch's gaze strayed south across the land, toward a handful of distant mountains. Out there, maybe a mile away, a breeze ruffled the tops of the scrub. The plants moved in waves that—

Mitch cupped his hands around his eyes, narrowing his gaze. He was wrong. It wasn't plants moving at all.

"Swarm," he said.

Since his mic wasn't on, he'd thought no one could hear him, but he felt Pam turn in her seat. "Where?" she asked, her voice muffled by his headset as

she leaned past him toward the window.

He pointed in the direction of the movement. “See them?”

Pam looked at the mass of abbies for a moment, then clicked on her radio. “We’ve got ourselves a swarm.”

Seconds later, both Pilcher and Pope were looking out the window.

“Jesus,” Pope said. “Must be five thousand of them at least.”

Mitch thought it might even be double that. It was for sure the largest swarm of the creatures he’d ever seen in person. He knew large groups were out there—they had all heard the reports—but no report could have prepared him for actually seeing a swarm of this size with his own eyes.

They were too far away to make out more than the basic humanoid shapes of the abbies, but even at that distance, it was too close for Mitch.

The abbies scared the shit out of him. They were agile, fast, strong, and lethal. In the early days, while Wayward and the electric fence that would eventually surround it were still being constructed, more than a few of Pilcher’s people had been gutted by the monsters. Hand-to-hand combat was like kneeling down in front of them and saying, “I’m yours.” The only way to defeat one was with a weapon, preferably a rifle at long distance.

Sometimes it was hard to remember that the abbies were descendants of mankind, the misstep in human evolution that Pilcher had predicted. It was the reason he had created the project at Wayward Pines, why he had hundreds of people kidnapped and put into a long sleep, why he, himself, and his dedicated followers had also stepped into the suspension chambers.

They saw two more swarms—one smaller and one about the same size—before they reached the river junction where the Snake poured into the Columbia.

“Roger,” Pilcher said. “The towns of Kennewick and Pasco used to be right up ahead. Let’s circle around, make sure there are no swarms, then see if there’s someplace we can set down.”

“Copy,” Roger said.

Pam clicked over to the channel dedicated to the security team. “Weapons ready, boys. We’re going down.”

Mitch was the only one who didn’t acknowledge. He figured she could see him check his rifle.

They spent ten minutes circling the area. Scrub and dirt and a few wild trees dominated the landscape. North of the river, on the Pasco side, they spotted two small groups of abbies, while on the south they saw none. So the south was the winner.

It was decided that one helicopter would remain in the air at all times, and

they would take turns so that everyone would get a bathroom break. Roger went down first, choosing the relatively flat area on top of a long, snaking mound about a quarter mile from the river, far from any trees that might conceal an abby's approach.

As soon as they touched down, Mitch and Pam disembarked, rifles held high and ready.

"Circle around and check the other side," Pam ordered him.

Keeping his head low, Mitch went around the front of the helicopter and conducted a visual sweep of the terrain.

"All clear," he said.

"Clear over here, too," Pam said.

Roger came on the line. "Marcus, how's it look up there?"

"Quiet," Marcus reported. He was the pilot of the tanker, still hovering a thousand feet above them.

"You guys can come out now," Pam said.

First to exit was Pope, the sheriff gripping tightly to his Desert Eagle pistol. Next came Pilcher.

"Shall we have a look around?" Pilcher asked.

Keeping together, they walked due east along the top of the mound. It was about a hundred feet across and continued out of sight in both directions. They had only gone about a hundred feet down the length of the mound when Mitch spotted an oddly shaped black rock. He picked it up. It was about three inches thick, jagged along the edges, and almost flat on one side. Embedded within it were pieces of lighter-colored material.

This wasn't a rock, he realized. It was a small chunk of asphalt, which must have meant the mound they were walking along had once been the bed of a road. Knowing what to look for now, he glanced ahead and spotted several other small chunks of blacktop.

"Hey, are you paying attention or what?" Pam asked.

He looked over at her. She nodded out to the terrain left of the mound.

"If one of those things sneaks up on our ass," Pope said, sneering, "we're using you as a decoy."

"Don't worry. I'm on it," Mitch said.

Three hundred yards down from the helicopter, Pilcher held up a hand, stopping them. "See that?"

Whatever the man was pointing at, Mitch didn't turn to look. He knew Pam would be all over him if he did.

"I don't see shit," Pope said.

"Right there. On the other side of that bush that's a little higher than the

others.”

No one said anything for several seconds.

“I see it,” Pam said.

“What the hell are you guys talking about? There’s nothing—” Pope paused. “That gray thing?”

“You two check it out,” Pilcher ordered.

“Mitch, you got watch,” Pam said.

“Yeah, don’t slack off, pretty boy,” Pope added. “I want plenty of warning of any trouble.”

Mitch moved closer to the right side of the mound and began scanning in a circle.

“Goddammit,” Pope said, shooting a hand out against the gentle slope to regain his balance after his foot slipped on a bit of loose dirt.

“Why don’t you try making a little bit more noise?” Pam said.

“Fuck off,” Pope told her.

Mitch swung his vision away from them and across the mound. Back where they’d landed, he could see the second helicopter had touched down and was offloading the rest of the security team. He continued his arc, knowing some of the others would be heading their way to see if they could help out.

“It’s funny,” Pilcher said. He was standing a few feet away, not looking at Mitch. “I remember the last time I passed through here. It was on one of my lecture tours.” He paused. “This was before AJ was born. My wife actually would travel with me then. We decided to drive from a talk I’d given at Portland State to one I was scheduled for at Washington State out in Pullman. We stopped here. Had a decent lunch less than a mile from where we are right now, if I’m not mistaken. Baked salmon, nice and fresh.” Mitch continued his circuit as Pilcher fell silent. Finally, the man went on. “Maybe that’s something we can check if we have time on the way back.”

When he didn’t explain further, Mitch said, “Check what, sir?”

“The salmon. We’ve missed the run this year, so I suppose all we’d find would be younger ones. Still, might be worth checking. A salmon dinner would do us all a lot of good.”

“I’m sure it would, sir.”

Mitch had arced around and could see Pam and Pope again. They were about thirty yards out, kneeling next to something gray that was all but covered by brush. After a moment, Pope stood up and trotted back to the mound.

“So?” Pilcher asked when Pope was close enough that he didn’t need to yell.

“I think it was a sewer entrance. The ground’s been eroding away around it. I could see a few metal fragments around the top that I think were probably part of

a lip. No lid, though. Must have rusted enough that it fell through at some point."

"How deep is it?"

"Not very. Dirt washed into the lower pipe. Might be enough space down there to crawl through, but that would be it." Pope considered his boss. "Please tell me you don't want us to try that."

"Of course not. It's simply of interest. Our history." Pilcher's attention suddenly focused beyond Pope. "What's she doing?"

As Pope turned around, Mitch came around again, and noted that Pam was leaning into the open top of the sewer, her head and an arm inside.

"Hell if I know," Pope said.

Mitch was just turning away from her when he saw a bush another twenty-five yards beyond Pam bend slightly before slipping back into place. He brought his rifle around and trained the scope at the point of movement.

"What is it?" Pilcher asked.

While Mitch couldn't see exactly what had caused the bush to shake, he could see something was there, staying low behind the branches.

"You might want to tell her to get back," he said.

Pope raised his Desert Eagle. "You see something?"

"Maybe."

"Get her," Pilcher whispered to Pope.

"Why don't we send him?" Pope asked, tilting his head toward Mitch.

"Go," Pilcher ordered.

Pope cursed under his breath as he headed carefully back down the mound.

The thing Mitch had seen hiding behind the branches wasn't there anymore, so he swept his rifle between where he'd initially seen the movement and Pam at the sewer pipe. For a moment, everything was still and quiet, and then a bush, a lot closer to Pam, shook.

"Sir," he said without moving his eye from the scope. "Maybe you should head back to the helicopter. Keep it nice and steady. Don't run."

"There's one out there, isn't there?" Pilcher said.

"There's *something* out there."

"You'll be all right?" Pilcher asked. While he'd obviously tried to sound concerned, he was already backing eastward.

"Just go, sir. I'll be fine."

Mitch heard Pilcher walking quickly away, but he kept his gaze on the brush.

"Hey, Pam," Pope called out in a faux whisper. He was about halfway between the mound and the pipe. "Pam. Come on. We gotta go."

The concrete tube must have muffled his voice because she didn't move.

"Dammit!" Pope took a few steps closer. No longer trying to disguise his

voice, he said loudly, “Pam! Pull yourself out of there and let’s go!”

In a sudden burst, the bush Mitch had been watching parted in two and an abby leaped out. As soon as its feet and hands hit the ground, it started running toward Pam. The movement had caught Mitch by surprise. He let off a shot, but it missed by a good foot.

“Shit!” Pope said, whipping around and running for the embankment.

He pointed his gun behind him and let off two quick, unaimed shots.

Pam jerked up, looking toward the mound. When she saw Mitch pointing his rifle in her general direction, she immediately pulled out her pistol and twisted the other way to see what he was aiming at.

The abby was a bit larger than average, maybe 150 pounds, but it was all lean muscle. A near-human yell roared out of its gaping mouth, giving voice to the rage that seemed to ooze out of every pore.

The usually cool and calm Pam pulled the trigger of her gun as she stumbled backward and nearly fell to the ground. As she let off another shot, she turned and started running, but it was clear from her expression she knew she wouldn’t make it to safety.

Mitch had yet to fire a second round. The creature was bobbing and weaving between the bushes, never giving him long enough to get a good bead on it.

“Dammit, Mitch! Just shoot the son of a bitch!” Pam yelled.

He moved his gun, anticipating where the abby would be next, and pulled the trigger. The shot cracked across the open space, and smacked into a branch a half-second after the creature got out of the way.

“Mitch, goddammit! Shoot him! Shoot him!”

Pam was desperate now, the abby a mere twenty feet behind her. A few more seconds and that would be it.

Mitch kept the rifle tight to his shoulder, even as he shuffled to his right to get a better angle. The second the abby’s ugly head rose above the branches again, he fired.

The entire top of the abby’s skull exploded upward in a red cloud of liquefied brain matter. The creature’s body continued forward a few more feet before somersaulting to the ground in a lifeless heap. One second, the abby’s screams filled the air, the next there was silence.

Pam kept running for another dozen feet, then finally slowed and looked back. When she saw that the abby was dead, she turned on Mitch, furious.

“You son of a bitch! What took you so long?”

Before he could answer, Pope said, “We’ve got to go!”

He was looking out into the scrub. Mitch followed his gaze. Beyond where he’d first seen the abby’s movement, more bushes were flopping back and forth.

A lot more.

While Pope took off running, Mitch leaned down the slope and held out his hand to Pam. “Come on!”

She grabbed it and he pulled her up, then they both took off for the helicopters.

As soon as they jumped on board, the aircraft took off. Mitch stared out the open doorway and counted over thirty abbies closing in on their former position. He leaned back in his chair, took several relieved breaths, and then looked over at Pam.

He was going to say sorry, and explain that he’d had to wait for a good shot, but the look on her face took his voice away.

Anger and fury.

And pure hatred.

CHAPTER FIVE

Long before they reached what had once been called the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, they could see Mt. Rainier on the horizon, a wisp of clouds hovering beside it, white snow and ice clinging to its side. It looked much as it had the last time Pilcher saw it in 2012.

At least he thought so at first, but as they flew on a northeast diagonal past the mountain, he saw a massive cut in its side, as if millions of tons of dirt had simply disappeared. Sometime in the intervening years, the volcano at its heart had erupted—maybe more than once, maybe a dozen times—cleaving its side and spewing dirt and ash into the sky.

All that power. It must have been an incredible sight, he thought.

Turning his attention ahead, he saw the glimmer of water in the distance. Puget Sound. Seattle had been built on its eastern bank. They were almost there.

As they drew nearer to the site of the old city, shapes began to emerge from the wilderness that had not been created by Mother Nature. Mounds were the first things they saw, odd little humps of green-covered land, side by side in rows too perfect. Then came a run of raised earth, much like the one they'd landed on in Kennewick, only considerably longer.

"Map," Pilcher said into his mic.

Roger pulled a laminated sheet of paper from a bag and passed it back.

The map was of old Seattle and the surrounding area, with roads and ferry routes and attractions all marked. It took Pilcher several moments before he was able to match its geographical boundaries with those he was seeing outside his window, and figure out that they were flying over the former town of Renton.

"Another four miles ahead, veer due north," he said.

"Copy," Roger said.

Another one of the long runs of raised dirt appeared, heading more or less

north and south. If Pilcher was right, it was what was left of Interstate 5, or whatever the later generations of man had called it prior to the whole race devolving. It should take them right into the heart of the city.

He leaned between the front seats and pointed. “See that?”

“That long hill?” Roger asked.

“Yes. Follow that.”

“Okay.”

Roger banked their aircraft to the north.

More of the symmetrical mounds could be seen off to the sides—markers of former buildings and perhaps homes. An archeological treasure chest.

“Abbies,” Mitch said.

He was looking out his window to the west, toward the water. About a half mile from the mound they were following was a swarm of about five hundred abbies.

“Got some over here, too,” Pope said from the other side of the cabin.

His swarm was closer and larger, at least a thousand for sure. Several of the creatures on the fringe had stopped what they were doing and were looking up at the helicopters. Pilcher kept his face neutral, but the sight of them was unnerving. Though he knew it had been a foolish wish, he had hoped that the abbies had left this part of the land, and he and his people could look around at will.

“Holy shit,” Roger said.

Pilcher spun around to look through the front window of the helicopter. He thought the pilot had spotted yet another swarm, but that wasn’t the cause of Roger’s exclamation. Downtown Seattle was coming into view, and unlike Boise or any of the smaller towns they’d passed over, there were buildings here.

Real, honest-to-God, still-standing buildings.

• • •

To all appearances, AJ spent the morning like she always did—get up, shower, have breakfast, and report to internship. But today, her mind barely paid attention to what she was doing, and was focused almost entirely on planning her personal act of rebellion.

Her first problem was disabling the chip in her thigh. Unlike the residents of Wayward Pines, AJ and the others in the mountain were fully aware they’d been implanted with trackers. If she just headed out as is, a warning would eventually

be sent to the surveillance people, alerting them to her whereabouts, and someone would be sent out to bring her back long before she ever reached her goal.

Plenty of talk circulated among the mountain residents about ways to nullify the trackers' effect. AJ, because she was Pilcher's daughter, was seldom a direct participant in these conversations, but that didn't prevent her from overhearing others' idle speculation. Someone had suggested that perhaps wrapping some kind of metal around one's leg could mask the signal, but there was no mention of what metal to use. Even if she knew, AJ thought that option seemed more cumbersome than practical. Other suggestions included using magnets to disrupt the chip, or even self-inflicted mild electroshock. None of these sounded promising, either.

One method she'd heard about sounded foolproof—simply cut the tracker out. If it wasn't on you, they couldn't track you. She might have tried it if the chip had been buried just under the skin instead of deeper in the muscle tissue. Digging in for it sounded painful and difficult and bloody.

Thankfully, she had devised a different method on her own that wouldn't require sticking a knife into her flesh and digging around. Her solution had its own inherent risks, but at worst, someone might spot her and ask what she was doing. She knew she could easily get out of that. This was where being Pilcher's daughter would actually come in handy. Even a lame excuse would be accepted.

Twenty minutes prior to her lunch break, she made her way to her supervisor's office. Before entering, she drooped her eyelids and turned down her mouth in a look she hoped conveyed discomfort.

"Miss Meyers," she said as she shuffled in.

Brigit Meyers looked up from her desk. "AJ, what can I … Honey, are you all right?"

"Well, um, I'm not feeling very well," AJ said, trying to sound suitably sick. "I was thinking that … I mean, if it's all right … that maybe I can go back to my apartment and lie down."

"Sure. Of course." Brigit rose from her chair and moved around to AJ's side. "Perhaps you should go by the infirmary on your way, see what they can give you. Might help you rest better."

"That's a good idea. Thanks." AJ turned for the door, then stopped. "If I don't feel better in the morning, I'll probably stay in bed and sleep."

"Don't worry. Just get better."

"Thanks, Miss Meyers. I will."

AJ could barely keep the smile off her face as she walked out.

• • •

Pam counted over two dozen buildings in her immediate view, and knew more had to be beyond them. Vines and moss covered the sides, weaving in and out of fissures in the façades, and through the spaces that had once held windows.

None of the structures were complete anymore. Whole floors were gone. Roofs were nonexistent. And concrete everywhere, cracked and crumbling. Some buildings had collapsed completely and lay in heaps, while others stood lopsided where a support column at one corner had given way and taken everything above it down. The strangest sight was a single, ten-story structure that lay on the ground sideways, looking as if it had been gently set down so that it could be righted again at some later point.

Between the buildings they saw scattered groups of abbies, but so far no large swarms.

Pam's gaze darted left and right, trying to match what she was seeing with her memory of the city from back in 2010. The tallest building then had been the Columbia Center. If she wasn't mistaken, the building just ahead and to the left was it. But it was now a jagged shell, half the height she remembered. She thought she recognized a few others, but that was about it.

"We're going to need to refuel soon," Roger announced.

Pilcher nodded. "Okay. Then let's head for the island."

In their final meeting the night before, they had identified several islands in the sound where they might be able to set up camp. It was unlikely that an abby would risk the frigid temperatures of the sea to attempt swimming out to them, if abbies even swam at all. The key, then, would be finding an island that was deserted.

To that end, they had ruled out any that once had a bridge to it, or even ferry service. They also crossed off anything too large, as those islands would be difficult to ensure no abbies were hiding out.

No choices stood directly out from downtown Seattle itself, but there were two just south of Bainbridge Island, and another to the north in Port Mason Bay. Going with the better odds, Roger took them out over the water and swung to the south.

The midday sunlight sparkled off the sound. Pam could almost imagine boats speeding across the waves, enjoying a pleasant summer day. That's what normal people did back then, wasn't it? Not something she would have ever wanted to do, of course. Too confining.

Tudor Island was first. While it was the right size and didn't seem to have any abbies roaming around, it was covered with trees, leaving no place for the helicopters to touch down. The next choice, Crabb Island, was only a few minutes away. It was slightly smaller than Tudor, and while the majority of its land was covered with vegetation, one of the beaches was clear, and by the looks of the waterline, offered enough space for the aircraft to land and not be concerned about a rising tide.

"Anyone see anything?" Pilcher asked.

"Nothing yet," Pope said.

"Looks okay over here," Mitch chimed in. "Maybe we should take it around again? Just to be sure?"

Pam leaned across Mitch, rubbing her chest against his arm as she took a look outside. "I don't see anything out there," she said, not using the radio. "No need to go around again."

"We didn't see anything back in Kennewick, either," Mitch countered.

She hadn't forgotten about Kennewick, would never forget. But unlike when they'd made their escape and she'd let her raw emotions show, she smiled and said, "Good point." She lay across him a moment longer, then pulled back, brushing even harder against him as she did.

When he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, she knew she had him. He might be able to talk a good game of "no, no, no," but in the end he was just a man, driven by the same force all men were. She'd known he'd come around eventually. Too bad for him it was too late.

After another circuit of the island revealed no signs of any abbies, the second helicopter landed on the beach. The pilot kept the rotors going while the five security team members he'd been ferrying jumped off and spread out to do a physical search. It took less than ten minutes before the island was declared free of any danger.

The tanker went down next, and then Roger brought their helicopter to rest on the other side of it so that the tanker could fuel either bird without trouble. As he powered down the engine, he said, "We can be back in the air in thirty minutes."

"Good," Pilcher said. "I think we'll only need one helicopter this afternoon." Looking a bit tired, he glanced at Pam. "I want you and one or two of your men to go up with Roger and recon the city. Don't touch down anywhere, just have a look around. The rest of us will set up camp. Then, based on what you find out, we can start fresh tomorrow."

"Whatever you like," she said. She turned to Mitch. "Looks like you and me."

There was no missing Mitch's hesitation. Pam guessed he was going to suggest choosing someone else. She had no doubt some of his fear of her had ebbed. He'd become a bit overconfident after shooting the abby that had been chasing her. That was all right. Let him live in the delusion. But he was *not* getting out of this.

"That wasn't a question," she said.

He looked at her for a second, then nodded. "Let me know when you want to leave."

"Oh, I will."

• • •

A series of rooms made up the surveillance department. One of the two main rooms was the control center, where the person on watch—more times than not it was Ted Upshaw—would sit in a chair and watch a wall of twenty-five monitors that switched through live camera feeds coming in from around Wayward Pines. Street corners and shops and living rooms and even bedrooms—none of it was off limits to Pilcher and his observers. The second main room was where four other surveillance personnel looked at footage that had been called out for additional review.

AJ had spent plenty of time throughout the surveillance suite during her internship, so she knew what she needed to do could be accomplished in either room, but not without the others knowing she was there. She couldn't have that. Fortunately, a third option would allow her to avoid both rooms completely.

She paused outside the door to the surveillance suite. *It's okay. You can do this. Easiest thing ever.* Still, she didn't move. *Come on, AJ. You want this, remember?* Sucking in a lungful of air, she grabbed the handle, opened the door, and stepped inside as if she belonged there.

At the sight of the empty anteroom, she let the air back out in a thankful rush.

To the left was the doorway to the main surveillance room. To the right was the one leading into a corridor where the department's offices and storage were located. It was the storage room she was most interested in. It had served double-duty as her office when she had been in the department. Only three times in her entire stay had anyone else entered that room, and since she was the only person in the history of the facility to have participated in the internship program—mainly because she'd been the only child within the guardian group who had

been suspended—she was confident no one would be using the room now.

She silently moved into the hallway, and tiptoed her way down to storage. The door was, as always, closed but unlocked. She slipped inside, shut the door again, and flicked on the light.

Her one fear had been that the computer they'd set up for her had been removed after she transferred to her next position, but the machine was still there, if a little dusty. She brushed it off and turned it on.

Once, when she'd been observing Mr. Upshaw in the main surveillance room, a death occurred in Wayward Pines. Nothing sordid, just a man who had a heart attack and died before anyone could get to him. She and Mr. Upshaw had watched the feeds as the body was taken to the autopsy room at the hospital. No actual autopsy was performed, but appearances needed to be kept up.

While the body was being placed on one of the steel shelves along the wall, Mr. Upshaw had opened a computer program, brought up the file that matched the dead man, and clicked on a box marked DECEASED. Instantly, the tracking circle on the screen indicating the departed's whereabouts winked out. Like he no longer existed.

The process had fascinated AJ so much that when she went back to her office, she brought up the same program by using Mr. Upshaw's passcode that she'd long ago secretly memorized. For days, she accessed the personnel files and read about the residents of Wayward Pines—the living and the few who had already died—and had even dipped into some files of those living in the mountain. The one she couldn't access was her father's.

Typical, she had thought.

At the time, the program had been a mere amusement, and it hadn't dawned on her how she could use it to her advantage until much later. She signed on to the program again, happy to see that Mr. Upshaw's passcode still worked, and selected her own file from the personnel database.

Along with her name and basic information were three dates: her birthday, the day she entered suspended animation, and the day she came out. The space next to DIED was blank. She moved down to the check boxes she'd seen Mr. Upshaw click, and found the one marked DECEASED. She placed the cursor over it, but didn't click right away. It was kind of weird thinking that in moments, at least to the computer, she would be dead. Would it cause any problems? Wait, what if she couldn't click it back? If that happened, she'd have to let somebody know, and that meant her father would find out. Some serious crap would go down then.

Do you really want to do this? She considered it for several seconds, playing scenarios through her mind, and finally deciding, hell yes, she did. Her father

may have been the supreme ruler around here, but that didn't mean she couldn't exert some independence. And if she got caught? Well, so be it.

She clicked on the box. Suddenly next to DIED appeared the current date. She clicked again, making sure she could undo what she had done. The check mark disappeared, and the date of death blinked off.

She smiled. *Nice.*

She clicked the box a third time, and returned herself to the land of the dead.

CHAPTER SIX

It was closer to forty-five minutes before the helicopter was ready to go again. As they lifted off from the beach, Mitch looked down at the men they'd left behind. The camp was already well on the way to being set up. He wished he was helping the others instead of stuck here with Pam.

At the moment, they were sitting at opposite ends of the back row, each looking out their respective windows. He hoped it would stay that way, but was sure it wouldn't. Earlier she had all but stuck her breasts in his face. She was still toying with him, and he knew if he gave into temptation—and yes, he was tempted, there was no denying that—she would somehow turn it on him and use it against him. So whatever he did, he had to keep his pants zipped tight and his emotions in check.

"Take us straight across," Pam told Roger. "When we get to the shore, head north again, but slower this time." She glanced over at Mitch. "You see anything you think Mr. Pilcher will be interested in, let me know."

"Sure," Mitch said.

An afternoon breeze skimmed the top of the sound, creating whitecaps that appeared and disappeared by the hundreds. About a quarter mile from shore, he saw a flash of movement in the water. He zeroed in on the spot and saw a large school of fish just below the surface. What kind, he had no idea, but he was sure there were enough of them to feed the residents of Wayward Pines and the mountain for months.

He turned his attention to the approaching shallow beach that ran for miles in either direction. He wondered if it had been like that back in the old days, and thought probably not. It was too long and too perfect. The land would have been worth millions. No way anyone would have let that sit unused.

A few seals were lying on the sand, sunning themselves, but otherwise the

beach was empty. Behind the sand was a grass-covered berm that transitioned into a nearly flat stretch of land.

"You see any of our friends?" Pam asked.

Mitch looked around, but didn't see any abbies. "No."

"Clear over here, too." She paused, then said, "Okay, Roger. Head north."

"Copy."

"Mitch," she said.

He glanced over.

"There's some paper and a pen in that bag by the door. I want you to sketch a map of the buildings."

"I'm not the greatest drawer in the world."

"I'm not asking you to draw a picture. It's a map. Circles, squares, lines. Think you can handle that?"

Angry Pam was back, which was fine by him. He preferred her to Sexually Aggressive Pam. "Yeah, I can handle that."

He retrieved the paper and pen, and sat back down. Once they neared the graveyard of buildings, he started creating the map, being sure to include quick notes that helped describe each structure.

When they finished the immediate area, they continued north into new territory. A few more buildings stood here and there, but not in the same quantity and sizes as the group they'd just seen.

Mitch was nose down in his map when Pam said, "Well, shit."

He looked up and saw that she was staring out the window at a forward angle. He looked out his side but couldn't see anything unusual.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Roger," she said. "You see that thing ahead just to the left?"

"Sure do," Roger replied.

"Take us down a bit and circle around it."

Mitch grabbed on to his seat just in time to keep from flying up against the roof as the helicopter dipped to the left and descended a couple hundred feet.

Pam snickered. "You ever hear of a seat belt?"

He'd forgotten to strap back in after he retrieved the paper. Now, with the makeshift map and extra blank sheets tucked under his arm, he hastily snapped the buckle into place.

"Good boy," Pam said.

When the aircraft leveled off, Mitch looked across the cabin and out Pam's window. Shooting up from the ground a hundred feet away was a strange gray structure. Not an office building, at least not like any he'd ever seen before. Two columns with a cross section connecting them stretched upward out of sight. The

part he could see was leaning away from the helicopter at an angle. That's when he noticed the two other sets of similar columns spaced on either side. They were at an angle, too. In fact, all three pairs were leaning toward each other.

Hoping there would be no sudden change in elevation, Mitch released his belt and scooted across the cabin to the rear-facing seat directly across from Pam. Looking out the window now, he could see the whole thing. Between the three angled sections was a central core running straight up. This was what the three sections were actually leaning against, meeting at least three hundred feet above the ground. Whatever had been above the meeting point, though, was gone. The ends of the columns and the central core there were torn and bent.

Mitch searched the ground, looking for whatever had fallen off. On the ground southwest, directly in line with a gap between the columns, was a large dirt mound. Sticking out of the mound was a section of a giant decaying disk that arced out of the dirt and back in again. Man-made, definitely. Judging by its size and location, Mitch was sure it was part of whatever had been atop the columns, but from the amount of dirt that now covered most of it, he guessed it had plummeted to Earth ages ago.

"What is this thing?" he asked.

Without looking over, Pam said, "You ever been to Seattle?"

"Once."

"Then you must have seen it. The Space Needle."

Right. The giant observation tower had been one of the main tourist attractions in the city. A restaurant used to sit at the top, which, he realized, was what they'd find if they dug up the mound he was looking at.

"Did you put it on the map?" she asked.

"Uh, doing it now."

He drew a circle to represent the tower, and then looked out at the broken spires again.

"Let's keep going north," Pam said. "See if there's anything else of interest before we head back."

"Sure thing," Roger said.

After the Space Needle, there turned out to be very little else to see, as the land first returned to the symmetric rows of small dirt hills, then the complete wild of an Earth that had forgotten about people. Several times they saw small packs of abbies. One group had downed a deer and looked up defensively as the helicopter flew by, while the others all but ignored it. Mitch and Pam saw another swarm, too, this one two hundred strong heading north.

When it was clear they would find nothing else, Pam ordered Roger to swing them around and head for the island. Once they were flying south again, she said

to Mitch, “Let me take a look at that map.”

He held it out to her, but she ignored it as she pushed up from her seat and took the chair next to his.

“Now show it to me,” she said.

Again, he held it out, and again, she didn’t take it. Instead, she leaned into his arm and looked at his handiwork. “Not bad. Told you you could do it.”

Apparently done looking at it, she snatched the map from him and set it on the empty seat to the other side of her. When she turned back, she put a hand on Mitch’s thigh, her fingers dangerously close to his groin.

“Having fun, aren’t we?” she asked. “A little exploration. A little discovery. Exciting.”

“Um, yeah. I guess.”

“You know, it’s going to take us a good thirty minutes to get back. How about we have a little more fun?”

Mitch glanced over at Roger’s back.

“Don’t worry about him,” Pam said softly. “He won’t say anything.” She dropped onto the floor, forced his knees apart, and slipped between them. “Hell, he won’t even know.”

With one hand, she began to caress him. “See?” She smiled. “You want to have some fun, too.”

He knew if he didn’t do something now, right this second, he would not be able to do anything at all to stop her. He gritted his teeth as he reached down and grabbed her wrist, pushing her hand away.

“Please,” he said. “I don’t want to.”

She chuckled, an eyebrow raised as she glanced at his crotch. “I beg to differ.”

She touched him with her other hand, so he grabbed that wrist, too, and shoved it back.

“Please,” he repeated. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t you like me, Mitch? I thought you liked me.”

“I like you fine. It’s just … I don’t want to do this.”

She looked at him, pouting playfully. “You mean now? Or ever?”

He licked his lips. *Just say it, just say it.* “Ever.”

She stayed where she was and smiled at him for a moment before rocking back onto her feet and pulling away. “All right. I can take a hint.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, though he wasn’t sure he’d spoken loudly enough for her to hear.

Returning to her chair, she said, “Don’t worry. I’m not mad.” Another smile before she turned to the window and seemed to lose herself in the view.

Mitch eased back against the seat. Though he didn't believe for a moment that she wasn't upset, he was relieved he'd actually been able to stand up to her, and even more so that it had worked. In the future, if she tried again, he thought it would be easier to rebuff her.

Maybe, he thought, his confidence growing, *maybe she'll finally leave me alone.*

• • •

AJ needed to do one other thing before she left. It was something she could have done when she'd been in Surveillance, but it would have definitely meant revealing her presence. So, instead, she took the elevator up to her father's floor, and walked down to the entrance of his suite. Long ago, he had given her a special code that would unlock the door for her, but she knew using it would leave a trail.

Not a problem. It was amazing, really, what adults didn't hide from children. AJ had learned and memorized her father's personal code when she was only fourteen, much in the same way she'd learned Mr. Upshaw's during her internship—by becoming part of the background as she watched and observed.

Once the code was input, the latch released and she went inside.

While this was by no means her first time in the suite alone, there was something eerie about being there now. Growing up, it had been *her* home, too, but now it was just a place, her father's place, not hers. Any sense of home she'd had left for the suite had disappeared on her last visit, when she'd discovered the empty room that used to be hers.

She shook off her apprehension and walked over to the desk her father used when he didn't want to walk down to his office. She woke the computer screen, typed in her father's code, and then clicked on the surveillance icon. Her father was the only person outside those sitting in the surveillance room itself who had full access to all the video feeds.

She scrolled through the list until she found the set of cameras she wanted, and began clicking through them. As she had hoped, she spotted nothing that would cause her to cancel her plans, nor did she see any indications from the sensors that there was anything she needed to worry about.

Her little adventure was on.

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The camp was all set up by the time the scouting mission returned. Since the beach was facing away from the mainland, Pilcher decided there'd be little risk if they constructed a fire ring in the sand. They'd wait until dark to start any fires, though, so smoke wouldn't be seen rising above the trees. The camouflage tents, on the other hand, were erected inside the woods, just to err on the safe side.

To secure the island, he had put three of Pam's men on watch duty, telling them to each take one of the remaining three sides so that nothing could take the group by surprise. Each would be swapped out after four hours, so everyone would be able to get some rest without compromising security. Naturally, Pilcher himself would not take a shift.

As soon as Mitch, Pam, and Roger had exited their helicopter, Pilcher gathered them and Pope together. "So?" he asked.

Mitch handed him a hand-drawn map, and Pam described what they'd seen.

"The Needle's still standing?" Pilcher asked, surprised.

"Part of it," Pam said. "The whole top's gone. It's on the ground nearby, mostly buried."

Pilcher felt an odd sense of nostalgia. He'd taken AJ to the Needle once when she was six. She'd been awed by the views, while he had only been vaguely impressed. "I want to see it."

"Sure thing," Roger said. "I suggest we check out some of the downtown buildings in the morning, then stop at the Needle after."

"Yes," Pilcher said, nodding. "A good plan."

He heard Pope say something under his breath. "Do you have something to add, Arnold?"

Pope squirmed uncomfortably before saying, "Well, it's just, you've seen what you've come to see, haven't you? Hunting around those buildings isn't going to tell us anything new. I kind of think maybe it would be better to head home."

"Your opinion is noted, Sheriff," Pilcher said, not hiding his displeasure. "And don't worry, we'll get you back to keeping the citizens of Wayward Pines in line soon enough." He looked out across the water. "We'll check things out tomorrow, stay here again tomorrow night, then go home. Any objections?"

Naturally, there were none.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As much as AJ wanted to start on her journey right after she'd deactivated her chip and checked the cameras, she knew it was too late in the day, and that it would be better to leave closer to daybreak. The last thing she wanted was to be caught out in the dark. If what she'd heard about her intended destination was correct, even with a safety margin, it should only take a few hours to reach. Get there by midmorning, noon latest, spend an hour or two on site, and then head for home. She figured she'd be back in plenty of time for dinner.

Wanting the morning to come quickly, she went to bed early, hoping to sleep away the hours, but the anticipation of what the next day would bring kept her awake until nearly midnight. When her alarm began buzzing 4½ hours later, her eyes flew open. A second later she was out of bed and hurrying down the hall to the communal showers.

Thankfully, the room was empty, most early birds still an hour away from waking. After a quick wash, she returned to her room, dressed, and grabbed the backpack carrying the water and food she'd put in the night before, supplies that she felt would be more than enough to get her through the day.

She checked the hallway again, and found it as deserted as before. Quietly, she exited her room and padded down the hall, the electricity of breaking the rules tingling under her skin.

Upon reaching the elevator, she moved a finger toward the call button, but stopped herself. The stairs? Yeah, she thought. The stairs would be safer. They were less used, and if someone else did enter the stairwell, she'd hear them and have plenty of time to exit onto one of the floors and hide.

Up she climbed, at first taking the steps two at a time, but then forcing herself to slow down, knowing she should probably conserve her strength. She was two levels from the top when she heard a door open. She paused, worried

that the sound had come from above, but when she heard the clomping echoes of steps, she realized they were several levels below her. She continued upward, doubling her effort to make as little noise as possible.

When she reached the top landing, she inched the door open, peeked outside, and immediately shut it again. Two men were in the corridor, farther down but heading her way. The good news was, they'd been talking to each other and not looking toward the stairwell entrance.

The not-so-good was that she wasn't sure what to do. Would they take the stairs? If so, she should probably go down a level and hide there. But there was also the matter of the person already coming up the stairs. Would the climber see AJ?

She was torn, unsure where she would be safe.

She put her ear against the door, and could just barely hear footsteps on the other side, still heading toward her. The same could be said of the steps belonging to the climber below her. She felt like a vise was tightening in on her.

The steps in the hallway were nearly at the door now. She pulled away, her eyes moving to the door's handle, anticipating movement. She'd have to wing it and make up some kind of story.

Keeping her eye on the handle, she took a step back so that the door wouldn't hit her when it opened, and then frowned. Surely the men had to be at the door on their side by now, but she heard no jiggle, no scrape of the latch pulling out of the way.

She waited another couple of seconds before placing her ear once more against the door.

Steps. Receding.

It was hard to tell direction, but she felt it safe to assume they'd gone to the left toward the elevator. Suddenly the steps ceased, leaving only low mumbles she guessed were voices.

Waiting for the elevator, she thought.

Below her, the climber's steps continued upward. How high was the person going? It sounded like whoever it was had almost reached the level directly under AJ.

"Come on, come on," she said under her breath, her ear still pressed to the door.

A new sound joined that of the footsteps on the stairs. Rhythmic, like … someone blowing out air.

Oh, great, she realized. It was someone heading up to another floor, an exerciser. Which meant there was no question the person would go all the way to the top. And given the fact AJ could hear breathing, the climber was definitely

getting close.

A noise from the other side of the door—distant, muted. She wasn't sure what it was, so she stuck a finger in her exposed ear to dampen the sound of the climber, and focused fully on what was going on beyond the door.

Another sound, similar and short. And then quiet. Not like before—*really* quiet. No-mumble-of-voices quiet.

Had the two sounds been the elevator door opening and closing?

As she removed the finger from her ear, she realized that the climber had reached the landing below and was only seconds away from spotting her. Having no choice, AJ eased open the door to the top level and stepped through.

The corridor and the area in front of the elevator were unoccupied.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she closed the door silently behind her. Those tense seconds had been a little more excitement than she'd been anticipating at this point of her trip. She gave herself a few seconds to settle back down before taking a step toward the corridor.

Whap!

AJ jumped and whipped around to look at the stairwell door, toward where the sound had come from. She expected the door to fly open. Knowing she couldn't possibly get out of sight in time, she remained where she was.

Nothing happened for a moment, then—

Plop-plop-plop. Footsteps on the other side.

Heading … back down, the exerciser marking a lap up before starting the descent.

AJ bent over, hands on her knees as she let the rush of adrenaline subside.

Can't stay here, gotta keep moving, she finally told herself.

She stood back up, gave a cautious look at the stairwell door, and headed down the corridor. Bypassing the security station, she went straight to the door for stairs that went up to the trench at the top of the cliff. She knew she should pause and listen to make sure the stairwell was unoccupied, but her nerves were on edge and she wanted to keep moving.

She opened the door only wide enough to pass inside, and raced up the empty stairs to the trench entrance. She did take the time there to check for sounds, but heard nothing. Seconds later, she was standing outside.

Instead of going down the trench toward the marksmen's stations, like she had when she'd visited Mitch, she followed the small extension that curled around the stairwell shaft and ended in a flat rock wall.

Well, not completely flat. As she'd overheard in a hushed conversation when she'd first learned about her destination, the wall held nooks and footholds, barely noticeable but easy to use.

She cinched up her pack and began to climb. Part of her thought that at any second, someone was going to come rushing around the corner of the trench, yelling at her to get down. But no one did.

The sky was mostly dark as she crested the top, but the stars gave her enough light so that she could make out a path that veered along a narrow crest over to a boulder. On the left edge of the path was a steep drop-off, the scant light not enough for her to see exactly how far down it went.

She glanced back at the trench, telling herself if she was going to chicken out, now was the time.

"No way," she whispered.

A smile creased her cheeks, a smile that said, "I'm doing this," and "this is my rite of passage," and "no one's going to stop me."

She turned for the path, and, for the first time ever, left the protection of her father's carefully constructed world.

• • •

Mitch had the watch from two a.m. to six a.m. His station was on the western end of the island, farthest from the camp. Since the island itself was clear, his job was to watch for any abbies that might swim ashore. Not that he and the others had ever seen any of the creatures swimming in the first place, but humans had known how to swim, so it was a fair bet that abbies, if they really wanted to, would be able to do it, too. But with the exception of a few dolphins cresting the surface as the sun was coming up, the waters under his watch remained calm.

A few minutes before six, he heard the snap of a twig in the woods behind him. When he turned to check it out, he spotted a shadowy figure heading his way. As the person emerged from the darkness, he saw that it was Pam.

He braced himself as she walked up, thinking she was going to try to force the issue again. But instead of leering at him or rubbing up against him or pawing at him, she simply said, "I'm here to relieve you. Go get some breakfast."

Since it wasn't what he expected, it took a second before he could reply. When he did, the only thing he could think to say was, "Thanks."

Pushing himself to his feet, he saw that she was unarmed, so he handed her the rifle.

"Anything I should know about?" she asked.

“Nope. All quiet.”

“That’s good.” She took his place on the rock and focused out on the sea.

Mitch stepped toward the woods, then stopped. “You want me to bring you something back?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said, keeping her eyes on the water. “Thanks, though.”

“No problem.”

She almost sounded human, he thought, as he headed toward camp. Then a breeze blew past him, bringing with it a whiff of frying ham. As his stomach growled, he picked up his pace, all thoughts of Pam fading away.

• • •

Pam rose before five a.m., and made her way carefully across the island until she found a place where she could watch Mitch without him realizing it.

Her feelings toward him were now purely clinical. He was a lab rat to her, an interesting piece of data. Yesterday, in the helicopter when they were on their scout mission, she had at first been surprised by his reaction. She was so sure he was going to give in. All her experiences with others told her he would.

But he’d resisted, even went so far as to push her hands away. That was when the frustration and anger that had been building inside her vanished. She’d never known rejection like that before. It was … interesting, its own kind of excitement, even.

He was a freak of nature. An aberration.

She smiled at the thought. An *abby* himself.

She watched him sitting there and wondered, for purely research purposes, what he was thinking. She didn’t really care what was going through his mind, but the knowledge might help her understand him better, and be something she could use if she ever ran across another like him. Unlikely, but possible.

At ten to six, she decided she’d watched long enough. It was time to put Mitch’s mind at ease so he’d be even more off guard later. She worked her way back toward the camp until she could no longer see him, and then turned back around so she was walking on a direct path toward the rock he had chosen to use for sentry duty.

About twenty yards out, she purposely stepped on a dry branch, breaking it under her foot, and was rewarded with Mitch’s head snapping around to see what had caused the noise. It amused her even more a few minutes later when he offered to bring her back some breakfast.

He was definitely off guard.

Oh, asshole, if you only knew.

• • •

They left the tanker, its pilot, and one of the security team on the island, and took the other two helicopters up. Most everyone was on Roger's aircraft. The passengers on the second helicopter were limited to the pilot and Evans, one of Pam's men. Their job would be to remain in the air and keep a watch over the area any time Roger took his aircraft down.

They flew across the water, and back to old downtown Seattle. In the true heart of where the city had been, several of the dilapidated buildings were grouped together, while to the south and east, the structures still standing were scattered here and there with plenty of open ground between them. The recon team decided to try one of the buildings on the southern end first.

"That one," Pilcher said. He was sitting in the copilot's seat, pointing at a broken building straight ahead.

There was no telling how tall it had once been, but now only three stories were left. Encasing the concrete exterior was a ropy layer of ivy.

"Buzz around it a few times," Pilcher said. "If there's anything inside, that should be enough to draw it out."

While the second helicopter stayed high above, Roger did as instructed. Sure enough, halfway through their second pass, three abbies came rushing out of the building.

"Take them out," Pam ordered the two gunmen poised in the open doorway, their rifles ready.

Shots cracked through the cabin, two from each weapon. The three abbies fell to the ground, dead.

"Go around again a few times," Pilcher said.

Roger complied. No more abbies appeared.

"Thoughts?" Pilcher asked, glancing into the back cabin at Pam and Pope.

"Never seen an abby who didn't react to noise," Pope said.

"We should be okay," Pam agreed.

Pilcher looked back at the building and nodded. "Roger, you can set us down."

Roger chose a flat spot about fifty yards from the building. As soon as the skids hit the ground, Pam and her security team piled out. They did a quick

sweep of the area before motioning that all was clear. That's when Pilcher and Pope climbed out.

The ground was covered with low-lying plants, some with thick stocks that ran horizontally across the ground. This forced everyone to watch each step carefully to avoid falling flat on their faces. Even then, Pilcher caught a toe on a branch and would have taken a bad spill if Pope hadn't reached out and grabbed him.

The building had a slight cant to it, as if one end had sunk a few inches into the earth. God only knew how many earthquakes there'd been over the centuries. The building's condition could have even been caused by a ground shake due to an eruption from Mt. Rainier. No way to know for sure.

The concrete façade was pitted and crumbling. The holes marking former locations of doors and windows had long ago lost their sharp, defining angles and looked more like ovals. Some of the openings had broken through to others, creating wide gaps. A pile of debris that had probably come from one of the missing floors covered what used to be the building's entrance.

"The abbies came out over here," Pam said. "It's plenty big enough for us, too."

She was on the other side of the debris, gesturing at the wall. Pilcher, with Pope still at his side, navigated his way through a particularly dense patch of growth over to her. The entrance she was referring to had not been a doorway or even a window. By the looks of it, it had just been part of the wall that had collapsed inward.

"Is it safe?" Pilcher asked.

"Wait here. We'll check it out," she said, and turned to one of her men. "Mitch, you're with me."

Pam went in first with Mitch only a few steps behind her. They stayed in view for a moment before disappearing behind a portion of the wall. Several minutes passed before they walked back into view.

"Safe enough," Pam said, climbing out. "But there's really nothing to see. Just dirt and pieces of concrete."

Pilcher had expected as much. Few things would have survived this long.

"You want to go in for a look?" Pope asked.

"No. We'll take a look around the outside."

Slowly, they circumnavigated the building, the security team in a loose formation around the older man. As he scanned the walls, Pilcher couldn't help feeling that sense of justification again. He had been right. So very, very right. Here was the proof—these long-abandoned buildings telling of man's success and his ultimate failure.

Ultimate, that was, if not for Pilcher himself, and his ability to see what was coming and do something about it.

When they came back around to where they'd started, they halted, but no one said anything. Pilcher could see in the others' faces that being this close to something from their past had affected them deeply. All except for Pam. She just looked bored. For the others, Pilcher knew this was like visiting a memorial to friends and family they would never see again.

"Let's move on," he said, breaking the silence.

This time they chose a cluster of three buildings closer to the heart of the city. No abbies came running out when they did their flyby, nor did any come screaming at them when they put their boots on the ground.

Above the main entrance of one of the buildings was a stone where a word had been etched. The surface had worn away so much that most of the word was gone, leaving just a faint TAL at the end. The name of the building? Of a business that had been inside?

Pam made forays into all three of the structures, and reported back similar findings to her search at the first stop. The walls were the only things left. After another thirty minutes of looking around, they returned to the helicopter.

"Which one next?" Roger asked as he piloted the bird back into the air.

Pilcher thought for a moment. "Take us to the Space Needle. There's nothing around here worth looking at."

• • •

Pam was surprised by Pilcher's instructions. She had expected to be spending more time downtown, where she hoped to create the right situation to carry out her plans for Mitch. So far, the only time the two of them had been alone had been at the very first building, but the timing and circumstances had not been right.

Now it looked as though her hand was being forced. It would be the Space Needle or nothing. And nothing was not going to happen.

She swung her gaze through the cabin, lingering for a moment on Mitch. He must have sensed her attention, because he cocked his head and looked over. She smiled before moving her eyes away.

Nothing for you to worry about, my friend. Nothing at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Though the air that circulated through the mountain facility her father created was pumped directly from outside, out here, under the wide-open skies, it seemed so much fresher and cleaner to AJ. She sucked in as much as she could, reveling in its morning coolness as it traveled into her lungs.

The sky went blue long before the sun peeked over the ridge. She could hear birds chirping and trees rustling in a soft breeze. For some reason, everything seemed more real, more *alive*. She knew she was probably overreacting, but that didn't take the sensation away, nor did it wipe the smile off her face.

The path down the slope had leveled off a couple hundred feet down, and then had traveled through a meadow before heading up and over a narrow ledge that led across another sheer cliff. That last part had nearly caused her to turn back, but she soldiered on and continued down the path on the other side.

Actually, *path* was probably a generous term, she thought. While the first part had been clear enough, everything from the meadow onward had been more of a suggestion, with a few red cloth markers tied to branches to keep hikers on course. The two people she'd overheard back at the mountain talking about this hike had mentioned the marks, so she was pleased to see that part of the story was correct, and hoped it meant the rest was, too.

It felt so good to be out here. Part of her thought she might not even need to reach her destination to be happy with the outing. Just one part, though. Most of her was not ready to stop.

Ahead, she spotted a tree trunk lying across the ground, and decided it would be a good place to take a break. Sitting on top, she pulled a container of water and a bread roll out of her bag, and had breakfast. She knew she was being completely delusional when she thought the water and food tasted fresher than usual. She laughed at herself and finished the roll, then brushed the crumbs from

her shirt.

As she stood up, she heard something off in the woods to her right. She froze and listened. There it was again. A kind of thud, like something coming into contact with the ground. It seemed far off, but to be safe, she decided to stay where she was for a few more minutes in case it headed in her direction.

Thud.

This time the sound had come from almost directly behind her. She spun around, her adrenaline spiking again, but nothing was there. No animal or human, anyway. What *was* there was a pinecone rolling across the ground a few feet away.

She relaxed and smiled. The breeze was apparently strong enough to knock a few of them out of their trees. There was no danger here. The only thing she needed to worry about was getting conked on the head.

She started down the trail again, certain she would be all right.

• • •

Ted arrived in the surveillance department at ten minutes before seven a.m. His first order of business was a check-in call with Pilcher.

“Nothing to report,” Ted told him. “Town was quiet last night. Everybody’s behaving.”

“All right. See that it stays that way.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We should be back by tomorrow afternoon,” Pilcher said.

“Already? Thought you were going to stay a few more days.”

“We’ll have seen everything we need to by then.”

“So, pretty much what you expected to find?” Ted asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. It just means what we’re doing is all the more important.”

“Of course.”

Once he’d finished with Pilcher, Ted took over in the live monitoring room. Several tasks needed completing at the start of every morning shift—camera checks, microphone checks, maintenance requests, personnel checks.

He worked his way through the first three, noting that two more cameras seemed to be malfunctioning, and that one of the microphones that was supposedly fixed the previous week was not working again. He feared that at

some point in the next few years, repairs would become a real problem. The extensive monitoring they conducted in Wayward Pines was way above and beyond what they had initially planned back before they'd all gone into the sleep chambers, so their supply of parts for the cameras and microphones was less than it should have been. When they ran out, some areas would just have to go unmonitored.

He moved onto the personnel check. This mainly consisted of pinging all tracking chips and making sure a return signal came back. It was a totally automated system. All Ted had to do was look at the results. The 461 tracking chips that corresponded to the current population of Wayward Pines all checked out. As for Pilcher's people in the mountain facility, the computer was showing that eleven chips were not responding. That made sense. The eleven belonged to the people who'd accompanied Pilcher on his trip to Seattle.

Ted was about to close the information screen when something struck him. While eleven was the right amount of chipped personnel not on site, that number, when added to the total number of mountain residents whose chips reported back in good condition, was wrong. It was one fewer than yesterday, but the computer didn't note any missing.

He pulled up the raw number of mountain residents regardless of chip status. There it was again, off by one number.

What the hell?

It wasn't as if the computer would randomly delete someone from the system. *No one* was ever deleted from the system. If they weren't on the resident log, they would be …

He grimaced. Was it possible someone had passed away during the night and he hadn't been informed? Doubtful in the extreme. With Pilcher's absence, Ted was basically in charge. So if someone had died—because that would be the only other list this missing person could be on—he would know about it.

He brought up the list anyway, sorting it by most recent entry first, and then stared at the screen in disbelief. According to the computer, AJ Pilcher was dead.

Maybe, *just* maybe, someone could have died without him being told yet, but not Pilcher's daughter. Besides, according to the entry, her time of death was listed late the previous afternoon when he'd still been awake.

He started to pick up the phone to call the infirmary, when he noted that the entry had not come from the medical facility. The code at the end indicated it had been input in the system right here in *his* department.

He set the phone back down, worried now that this was a bigger problem than just what happened to AJ, and that whatever was going on would blow back right on him.

Though the room was always kept at a nice, cool temperature, he started to sweat.

Take it easy, he told himself. *Get some facts first. Find out what happened.*

He picked up the phone again and called security.

"Murray," the answering voice said.

"Jack, it's Ted."

"Hey, Ted. What's up?"

"Wondering if, um, AJ is interning with you now."

"AJ? Nah, she finished up here three or four months ago."

If security had known AJ was dead, Jack would have certainly said something, but his voice was as light as it always was.

"Do you happen to know what department she moved on to?" Ted asked.

"Hold on a second." When Jack returned, he said, "She's down with the sleepers."

"Thanks."

Ted disconnected the call, and rang the suspended-animation department. Brigit Meyers answered.

"It's Ted. I need to talk to AJ. I understand she's interning for you now."

"She is, but she's not here."

"When is she supposed to be back?"

"Hopefully tomorrow. She went home sick yesterday. Haven't seen her since."

The blood drained from Ted's face. "Thanks," he mumbled and hung up.

Sick? Maybe she is *dead. But why would the entry have occurred right here? I was around then. I would have known.*

There was one easy way to find out. While the mountain wasn't as covered in cameras as Wayward Pines was, plenty were still around, and all, including the ones down in the town, were triggered when a tracking chip came into its field of view. All he had to do was check out the camera feeds from his department at the time the entry was made and he would know who changed AJ's status.

He typed the instructions into the computer, telling it to put the footage in the center monitor on the wall. After a few seconds' delay, a split screen containing six feeds appeared. Four of the feeds were black, indicating they had not been activated by a chip. One of the other two showed Ted himself in the room he was now occupying, while the last showed the four techs in the next room going over suspicious saved footage. Ted certainly hadn't input the information, and the techs were clearly focused on whatever footage they were reviewing.

He adjusted his time request, starting it five minutes earlier. This time a third camera came on. It showed the anteroom and the back of a woman walking toward the office-area corridor. The anteroom camera flicked off and the corridor one came on.

"What?" He stared at the image in utter confusion.

The woman was AJ.

He watched her go all the way down to the storage room at the end of the hall.

Corridor camera off. Storage room camera on.

She sat down at the small desk she'd used when she'd interned there, and started typing on the computer keyboard.

Hold on.

He backed up the footage and zoomed in as best he could without losing too much resolution, and then started it again.

She typed in *his* password. How the hell did she know that?

He pulled the shot back out again, but the position of the camera only allowed him an acute angle on the computer screen. He paused the action so he could take a longer look. Though he couldn't read anything on the monitor she was using, after a moment he did recognize the layout for a personnel page. He hit PLAY again.

He saw her move the cursor, but then she seemed to pause. When she touched the track pad again, the video feed went black.

"Wait a minute. What happened?" He leaned forward, thinking something had gone wrong with the equipment.

Before he could try anything, though, the feed came back on, showing AJ sitting exactly as she had before. She read her screen for a moment, moved her hand, and the feed went dark again. He waited, thinking maybe it'll come back on again, but it stayed off.

Why would she mark herself dead?

When the answer came to him, he blanched and told himself he must be wrong, *had* to be wrong.

He closed out of the video archive, entered the personnel database, and found AJ's file. As he expected, it was marked DECEASED. When he unchecked the box, her date of death disappeared.

"So where the hell are you?" he asked. He moved the cursor to the button at the bottom of the screen marked LOCATE, and clicked.

He figured she probably had taken an unauthorized trip into Wayward Pines. A young woman who just wanted to meet some new people. It would make sense.

But the map the computer brought up was not of Wayward Pines.

Because of occasional excursions in the upper valleys right outside the mountain—usually for firewood or hunting—sensor pickups had been placed around it. They were fewer in number and therefore spread further apart than elsewhere, each covering a wilder area. Due to this, when one was triggered, it would only indicate a general area someone was in, not the person's exact location.

The map Ted was now looking at covered one such area.

"Oh, shit."

• • •

Roger made another of his loud circles around the Space Needle, this time rousting two angry-looking abbies out of the shade provided by an angled column. Though the crew on the helicopter could not hear their voices, they could see from the creatures' gaping mouths and heaving chests that the things were yelling their discontent at the aircraft. One of the abbies was even grabbing at the air as if it could pull down the helicopter.

"Anyone see any others?" Pam asked.

She was answered by, "No," and, "Don't see anything," and, "Think that's it."

She patted the back of the marksman positioned in the doorway. "You're up."

His first shot took out the abby stretching its arms into the sky. Its friend jumped sideways in surprise, and then glared up, clearly understanding that whatever killed its partner had come from the helicopter. It appeared to screech again, and looked like it was about to sprint away.

A second crack of the rifle ended any chance of that happening.

Pilcher had Roger take the helicopter around the Needle again, just in case, before finally giving the pilot the okay to land. Once more, Pam, Mitch, and the other members of the security team were the first ones off. This time Pope came with them, too. Breaking into pairs, they cleared the area surrounding the helicopter, and then did the same around the base of the Needle.

Pam made sure she was the first to reach the abbies in case there was extra work that needed to be done. Her pistol leading the way, she approached them cautiously. Once she got a good look at them, she lowered her weapon.

"Are they dead?"

She glanced back. Pope had finally caught up to her, but still held back a good ten feet.

“Yeah,” she said.

The two abbies had been shot through the chest. Pam used her foot to roll them over. One was male and the other female, but otherwise there was nothing special about them. She shared neither the disgust nor the fascination people back at the mountain had for the creatures. She didn’t care that there might be abbies somewhere who were related to her. They wouldn’t have been direct descendants anyway. Pam had never had a kid.

Pope approached the corpses and kicked the talon of the nearest one, the male. The claw could easily rip a man apart. Similar ones had, in fact, more than once. “Ugly sons of bitches,” he said.

Pam turned on her radio’s mic. “So what do we got?”

“All clear here,” Tompkins reported.

“Same on this side,” Mitch said.

“Mr. Pilcher, it’s safe to come out now.”

She watched their leader as he stepped out of the helicopter, and then walked over with Pope to meet him.

“Looks in even better shape than I expected,” he said, staring up at one of the double-beam columns. “Wonder if there’s anything up there.”

Pam studied the structure for a moment. “Should be able to climb up the central column and check,” she said. It was a latticework of beams with several empty spots where supports were missing, but it had more than enough to get someone up to what was left of a platform a couple hundred feet off the ground.

“Then do it,” Pilcher said.

Pam clicked her mic again. “Mitch, I need you over here.”

• • •

Mitch circled over to where Pam was standing with Pilcher and Pope. As soon as he got there, Pam pointed at the central column.

“You and me are going for a little climb,” she said. “You’re not afraid of heights, are you?”

“Not at all.”

“Grab a coil of rope from the helicopter, and leave your rifle and pack down here. Don’t need ’em getting tangled up. Handgun only.”

Mitch jogged over to the helicopter and exchanged his weapon and pack for

the rope. When he returned, he followed Pam over to the column that had once supported elevators taking tourists to the now missing observation deck. Before grabbing on to one of the beams, Pam pulled a pair of work gloves out of the small pack around her waist.

"You have a pair, don't you?" she asked Mitch.

"Left them back at camp."

"Not doing you much good there." She frowned and looked over her shoulder. "Pope, give him your gloves."

Pope didn't move.

Pam shrugged. "Fine. You can take care of him after he's all cut up."

"For chrisssakes, Arnold," Pilcher said, "give him your damn gloves."

Pope glared at Mitch as he pulled out a pair of gloves and tossed them on the ground. "Don't fuck 'em up," he said.

Over a dozen satisfying comebacks raced through Mitch's head, all of which, he knew, would backfire on him eventually, so he settled for, "Thanks."

As soon as he pulled the gloves on, Pam stepped up to the column, tested a few spots, then started climbing.

"What about the rope?" Mitch said, holding it up.

"That's not for going up," she scoffed.

Duly chastened, he slung the rope bandolier-style across his chest and began his ascent.

Some portions of the metal girders consisted of only a few thin layers that looked as if they'd disintegrate if he brushed against them. Some of the thicker areas were just as dangerous, so brittle the metal would break off in chunks in his hand. The rest was strong enough, though, to support him and Pam as they kept moving upward.

A few minutes into their climb, a bit of rusted metal slipped loose from under Pam's foot and smacked Mitch in the forehead, right at his hairline.

"Hey, careful!" he said.

She made no indication that she'd heard him as she continued up.

He was going to repeat himself when he felt something drip down his forehead toward his eye.

Blood? Did I get cut?

The piece that hit him had been about as rusty as it could get. If he was cut, he'd have to get treated for tetanus, right? Did they have the right drugs with them? He hugged the beam with one arm, and wiped the gloved fingers of his free hand above his eyes.

Not blood, he saw with relief. Sweat.

"What are you doing down there?" Pam called. "Keep moving."

She was almost to the lower platform, a good sixty feet from where Mitch had paused. He began climbing again. When he reached the platform, he had to move ten feet to his right before he came to the hole through which Pam had climbed.

The platform looked like it had once been a room of some kind. A flat surface spread out from the central column to all three of the angled, double-beam supports, but it was far from complete. Small open spots and whole gaping sections appeared where the concrete, or whatever it was made of, had fallen to the ground. Along one end of the platform's outside edge was a wall that went up a few feet before stopping abruptly, looking as if the portion that had been above it had been ripped off. Though this wall didn't continue all the way around the platform, it was easy to see that it once had.

As Mitch pulled his legs up through the hole, he spotted Pam sitting a dozen feet away, her feet dangling through one of the openings in the floor.

"If I'd known you were going to take this long, I'd have brought someone else," she said.

Surprisingly, her tone wasn't condescending, or even outright hostile, but friendly, as if she were just joking.

"I'll, uh, pick up the pace," he said.

She glanced back at him and smiled, then she pushed herself onto her feet. "Let's have a look around."

They quickly learned to stay on the support beams that radiated out from the center after Mitch nearly plunged through the floor, barely jumping to safety as several chunks broke away and fell to the ground.

On the northeast side, right next to the center column, they found a four-foot-square area that was enclosed on two sides and even had a bit of roof overhead.

Mitch spotted something odd on the ground, and knelt down for a closer look. The floor here still had some cement covering, but it was discolored, like a long-ago fire had burned across it. The walls, on the other hand, showed no sign of flame damage.

"What is it?" Pam asked.

He pointed at the blackened surface. "I think someone was living up here once. Probably used to light a fire right here."

She crouched down beside him, and though their bodies were only an inch apart, she didn't touch his like she usually did. "Maybe," she said, reaching out and touching the concrete. "But it was a hell of a long time ago." Her fingers paused, and then retraced their path a few inches. "Feels like there's something …"

“What?” he asked when she didn’t finish.

“Feel this.” She pointed to where she wanted him to touch.

As he moved his finger across the surface, he noticed a series of grooves, not quite evenly spaced apart. He pulled his hand away and leaned in. Yes, something was definitely there. It could have been cracks, but they seemed too regular.

He found the groove furthest to the right and began tracing it with his finger. It only took a second before he realized it formed the letter A. Its shape wasn’t perfect, and it had clearly been scratched or dug into the surface.

“It’s a word, I think,” he said.

He moved to the next groove. This was an L, followed by another L. The next letter was spaced a bit further away, a C or maybe a G; it was impossible to tell. After that came an O. He was sure there had once been more after the O, and likely others before the A, too, but they had been lost to the concrete’s deterioration.

What remained was ALL CO or ALL GO. He wished he could figure out what it meant. His failure almost felt like he was letting down the person who had scratched out the message.

He told Pam what it said.

“I bet it was probably put there by someone on the construction crew,” she suggested. “Maybe one of their kids. I’d also bet it’s a name. Kendall, Randall, something like that.” She stood up. “Come on. We’ve still got a ways to go.”

Mitch wasn’t so sure about what the words had been, but said nothing. Before getting up, he touched the letters again, feeling oddly connected to someone he’d never met, someone who’d been dead for who knew how long.

Up they went, pausing only a minute at the smaller, second platform before ascending all the way to where the top section had ripped off.

If Mitch remembered the Needle correctly, the break appeared to have occurred at the spot where the tower had been narrowest before expanding out again to support the observation deck and restaurant structure. How and why it had fallen off, and why it hadn’t taken the rest of the tower with it, was something he’d probably never know.

But it must have been a hell of a sight when it did go, he thought.

Other than seeing the damage that had occurred when the two sections parted, Mitch thought there really wasn’t much else of interest at the very top. Pam, on the other hand, seemed taken by the view. Finding a ledge she could stand on while holding a beam, she looked out into the land beyond the Needle, and turned slowly until she’d made a complete circuit.

“Should we, um, head back down now?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she told him. She started turning again, this time stopping about a third of the way around. “That looks interesting.”

“What?” He twisted so that he could follow her gaze. The only thing he saw out in the rolling field of green was a riverbed chewed out of the land, the river itself smaller and contained considerably farther away in the middle. “I don’t see anything.”

“You don’t? Look again. About a quarter mile out. That square hill?”

He squinted, his eyes searching the land until he finally spotted it. It wasn’t so much a hill as a bump right at the edge of the embankment leading down to the river plain. But she was right. The top definitely had a square aspect to it. “I see it.”

“I think we should check it out.”

He frowned as he looked again. He didn’t think there was anything special about it. It would just be another building underneath the bushes and dirt, this one even more decayed than those they’d already searched. Why Pam would want to search it, he had no idea, but he saw no need to argue with her so he kept quiet.

She looked out at the square hill for nearly another minute before she turned to Mitch and said, “Let’s hit it.”

CHAPTER NINE

The morning was turning out to be much hotter than AJ had expected. Around eight a.m. she stopped and removed her light jacket, then, thirty minutes later, off went the outer shirt she'd been wearing over a tank top. She made sure to keep herself hydrated, and kept her pace steady but unhurried so she didn't wear herself out. Collapsing from heatstroke with a turned-off tracking chip that was probably out of the sensor range would not be a good thing.

She brushed off the thought. That wasn't going to happen. She was young, strong, and had plenty of water. So instead of focusing on what disasters could occur, she pushed the thoughts from her mind and took pleasure in the spectacular day. This was an adventure, after all, and on an adventure everything should be exciting.

She'd been walking, encased in her bliss, for several minutes before she realized she hadn't seen one of the markers in a while. She paused and looked around. That couldn't be right. She'd been heading directly toward one the last she recalled. Of course, by now, she would have probably passed it, but the markers had been going along on a fairly straight line for a while, and since the terrain hadn't really changed, there was no reason to think the path would have veered off, either.

She continued forward for another twenty feet and scanned the trees as far ahead as she could see. No red pieces of cloth anywhere.

"Nice one, AJ," she muttered.

Turning 180 degrees, she began retracing her steps. In the woods behind her, she heard another couple of pinecones drop to the ground. She noted them without stopping. They'd become background noise, a thing of the woods.

The slope's incline began to increase. That was troubling. She didn't actually remember coming down this steep of a section before, but she continued up

anyway, hoping she just wasn't paying attention earlier.

A few more minutes went by before she spotted a change ahead and to the left. A sunnier spot. Perhaps a meadow. She thought it might help her get her bearings, so she veered her course toward it.

As AJ approached, she could see it was a clearing, but it wasn't really a meadow. Most of the open space was taken up by a formation of rocks jutting out and up. She definitely didn't remember them, but they could give her the help she needed.

She circled the formation, examining the rocks, and saw that if she was careful, she probably could make her way almost to the top. She returned to the point that seemed to provide easiest access, and began to climb. Taking things slowly, she scaled rocks and scooted up cracks until she'd almost reached the top. There, with the summit in view, her foot slipped.

Desperately, she threw out her hands, grabbing for anything she could. Her left hand came up empty, but the fingers of her right hand were able to hook into a fissure and keep her from tumbling all the way down.

Way to go, AJ. It's not heatstroke you need to worry about, but your own stupid rock-climbing skills.

Gingerly, she reestablished her footing and crawled the rest of the way to the top. The rocks didn't clear the tops of the trees, but, with the help of the slope, she still had a pretty good view. With great care, she searched around for landmarks.

There, she thought. *That's home.*

Though she couldn't actually see from this angle the ridge where the marksmen were stationed, she did recognize the silhouette of the mountain. She was surprised by how far she'd already come. For a moment, a hint of fear pulsated in her gut, but she pushed it down with a deep, determined breath. She had nothing to worry about. She was safe here. It was just a reaction to breaking her father's rules, that's all.

So if that's home, then I came down that way, and crossed over … there.

She mentally traced her path across the landscape until she located a place where she knew she could pick up the marked trail again. Relieved, she sat down on the rock and had something to eat.

By the time she was ready to head down, she was excited again about her journey, and didn't even register the sound of a pinecone dropping.

Or at least what she would have assumed was a pinecone.

• • •

Ted had sat motionless at his desk for several minutes, not sure what to do. He knew what he *should* do. That would be to call security right away and have a team sent out to retrieve AJ. But that would have other consequences.

To say Pilcher would not be pleased that his daughter had been able to fool the surveillance system so that she could get around unseen would be a gigantic understatement. He
would be furious. Truth be told, he would be furious no matter who had done it. The fact that it was AJ would likely take Pilcher into a whole new realm altogether.

And where would all that fury be directed?

AJ would get her share, for sure, but the majority of it would come down straight on Ted. No question about it.

He was in charge of surveillance. The system he controlled was the one that had been manipulated. And, to further indict him, the breach had occurred on a computer *in his department*.

The only code of law these days was Pilcher's law, and Pilcher was keen on making examples of people. For an incident like this, Ted had no doubt that the ultimate illustration of punishment would be handed down.

I'm a dead man.

He began hyperventilating.

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

Pushing himself out of his chair, he started pacing the length of the room, his mind bombarded with thoughts and images, making it impossible to think straight.

Get ahold of yourself! Slow it down! You can figure this out.

He forced himself to inhale more deeply and longer, blowing the used air out in loud streams. His movement slowed, too, matching the rhythm of his breathing. With each new rise of his chest, his mind cleared a little.

All right, all right. Now think. Options first.

Just opening his mind up to that threatened to spiral him back out of control, but he forced himself to focus. He already knew what the first option was: Get help no matter the consequences. But while he was as altruistic as the next guy, the level of self-sacrifice this would require was not part of his makeup.

What else?

He thought for a moment. Well, he could always do nothing and hope that she returned on her own. She'd have to get back in without being seen, but she'd somehow left without anyone knowing, so he hoped she could do the reverse. If that happened, he'd arrange for a private chat with her in an area not covered by a surveillance camera. He was sure she would be as nervous as he was about

anyone else knowing what she had done, so he didn't think it would take much convincing to keep her quiet. Once he got that settled, he'd figure out how to eliminate the loophole she'd exploited so no one else could do the same thing.

This option would require the least effort on his part.

But what if she got caught coming back? He could hope to cover up how she'd managed to elude the surveillance alarms, but he was sure the truth would eventually come out.

What if she doesn't come back?

He stopped in his tracks.

What if something happened to her out there? What if one of *them* got her?

He started pacing again.

The first thing Pilcher would demand would be a record of her movements prior to her disappearance. There'd be no hiding the truth then. No explaining why Ted hadn't sounded the alarm and sent people after her.

If that happened, Ted wouldn't just be executed. He'd be pulled apart limb by limb.

So what do I do?

He came to a sudden stop as a third option, the only *real* option, came to him.

Go after her yourself.

He shook his head, knowing there had to be something else. Anything else. Going out into the wild could be as much of a death sentence as admitting to Pilcher what had happened.

But at least you would have a chance. And if you can get her back safely, then no one will ever have to know.

Again, he tried to come up with another solution, but kept coming back to option three.

He had no choice.

It was the only thing he could do.

• • •

AJ never doubted she'd find the trail again, but when she spotted a red square of fabric nailed to a tree, she couldn't help but laugh in relief. Paying closer attention this time, she once more headed toward her goal.

The path took her down into a small, shallow valley. In the center was a dark blue pool of water, more pond than lake. It was set against the trees and

surrounded by a small meadow. She was so taken by how beautiful the scene was that she didn't at first notice the large animal leaning down at the pond's edge, drinking.

As her foot scraped against the ground, the animal snapped its head up, a large set of antlers sticking out of the top. A deer, or perhaps an elk, she thought. She'd seen pictures of each and knew they still lived in the mountains, but she didn't know which this was.

It eyed her warily as she came down the path, as if unsure whether she was a threat or not. Finally, it seemed to decide it would rather be somewhere else and loped off into the woods, out of sight.

When AJ reached the water, she leaned down and touched it. It was so cold she could only leave her fingers submerged for a few seconds before pulling them out. She wondered if there were fish in the pond, but didn't see any. Perhaps they were too small. She stood back up and stretched as she looked around.

This, she decided, would be the perfect place for lunch. She moved several feet up the side of the slope, and sat down on a bed of dead leaves. From her pack, she removed a sandwich and a container of water, then settled in and enjoyed the serenity of the moment.

She was surprised by how quickly she devoured the sandwich, though she supposed she shouldn't be, given how much walking she'd done. Still hungry, she pulled out a second sandwich and started on it.

A few bites in, she heard something in the woods on the other side of the pond. Not pinecones this time, not nearly that loud. Steps, soft against the forest cover.

The deer or elk, she thought. It was probably still thirsty and had returned to see if she had left yet. She peered into the trees, putting a hand over her eyes to block the glare of the sun, but it was too dark for her to see anything under the cover of the branches.

She took another bite, decided she was full, and started to put the sandwich away. But she stopped and looked back at the wood.

Why not?

She pulled the crust off the bread, put the remaining part of the sandwich away, and then deliberately tossed the crust onto the ground by the edge of the water, hoping the animal would see it. Not wanting to interfere with its need to drink any longer, she started off on her trek again, spotting the next marker off to her right where the meadow ended.

• • •

For several minutes, the area around the pond remained still and quiet. Finally, with extreme caution, an animal that was not an elk or a deer exited the trees and walked up to the crust of bread, poked it, smelled it, and finally tasted it, imitating the creature that had left it.

CHAPTER TEN

Mitch and Pam didn’t need the rope until they reached the lower platform. From there, the way down was just too tricky to try to scale freestyle. Since they didn’t have enough line to reach all the way to the ground, they had to descend in stages until they were off the tower.

While Pam filled Pilcher in on what they’d found, Mitch coiled the rope. She returned as he was finishing up.

“Give that to one of the others,” she said, “then grab your rifle and come with me.”

“Sure. Where are we going?”

“Told you already. Want to check out that building.”

Mitch gave the rope to Reynolds and retrieved his weapon. He thought for a moment about grabbing his pack, but they wouldn’t be gone for very long, so he decided there was no need.

Pam had already started out when he returned, and he had to jog to catch up.

“No one else coming with us?” he asked when he reached her.

“The boss doesn’t want to be left short-handed.”

Of course Pilcher would be more concerned with his own safety than anyone else’s.

They walked through the flora that had taken over the land, occasionally having to steer wide of thickets of thorns and bushes that had grown too large to pass over. To Mitch, the trek seemed like a lot of work for something that would most likely turn up nothing of interest. After all, even at the Space Needle, with the exception of a partial message etched in the concrete, they had found pretty much zilch. What could there possibly be at a building mostly covered with earth?

The radio receivers in both of their ears crackled to life. “Got some active

abby," Evans reported from the helicopter still hovering above the Needle.

Mitch and Pam paused as Pilcher's voice came on the radio. "Where?"

"About a mile to the east. I count four."

"Heading this way?"

"Not at the moment."

"Let us know the second that changes," Pilcher said.

"Yes, sir."

"Come on," Pam said to Mitch, and started walking again.

He hesitated before taking a few quick steps to catch up. "Shouldn't we go back?"

"They're on the opposite side of the Needle, even farther from us."

"Yeah, but we'd still have to get back to the helicopter."

"Don't worry so much. We'll be fine."

Mitch didn't like this. Sure, a mile was a long way away, but why take chances? They'd all seen what the creatures could do, and he had no intention of being one of their victims.

The square hill was only a couple hundred feet away now. It was covered with more of the brush that seemed to thrive in this country—green and leafy with thick branches that seemed to intertwine with anything they could. A gentle upward slope led to an almost flat top, and Mitch could see just a bit of the old building itself peeking out between the branches and leaves at the far corner. Concrete—man's most enduring invention, apparently.

Pam led them up the slope to the edge of the structure. Here they could see the top was not quite as flat as it had appeared from the distance. Part of it was collapsed down into the interior, but the vegetation had grown across the opening, creating the illusion that the roof was still there. In front of them, beyond the building, stretched the river plain. It was a mix of open areas of dirt and dense pockets of vegetation. The river itself was a meandering twist of water a good two hundred yards away. Mitch thought the spring runoffs must have been massive to cause this wide a plain.

"Let's walk around," she said.

"Pam, there's nothing here."

"Oh, I'm confident we'll find something."

She walked off the roof and circled the mound, moving down the embankment at the side. Mitch waited a moment before he followed. He was feeling uneasy, like they really needed to get out of there.

The riverbank was sandy, almost like a beach. As he walked down it, he could see that as the river had widened over the years, it had undercut the building, lowering it to the level of the riverbed. Another year or two, as the

waterway continued to spread, the building would probably be washed away into the ocean.

Mildly interesting but, again, not worth the time to check it out. He was going to say that very thing to Pam as he came around the side of the building facing the plain, but she wasn't there.

He was about to circle around the other side to see if she'd gone up when she called out from *behind* the concrete wall, "In here."

• • •

Pam led the way across the field from the Needle, anticipating what was to come. She knew this was her only chance, but that was fine. She just needed the one.

When Evans reported seeing the abbies, all she could think was, *Perfect*.

When she left him on the roof, she hurried down the side and around the corner. As she'd expected, the building now blocked her from Evans's view in the hovering helicopter. She glanced around quickly, looking for the right spot.

That's when she spotted it—a break in the water-stained concrete wall at the other end. She raced over and was giddy when she saw it was just wide enough for a body to squeeze through. So she did exactly that, pulling her arm inside seconds before she heard Mitch turn the corner.

She let him have a moment to wonder what had happened to her, then said, "In here."

She listened as his footsteps neared the crack.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What do you think? Looking around."

"Anything?" His tone indicated he was sure there wouldn't be.

"More than you can imagine. Come and see."

"I think it's better if I wait out here," he said. "Just in case."

"In case of what? Get your ass in here."

She sensed him right outside the opening, sensed him hesitate. It was a delicious moment. Would he or wouldn't he? If the latter, she was ready to squeeze back outside as he started to walk away, so she could reach him before he rounded the corner. But inside would be better. So much better.

Come on, Mitch. Squeeze on through.

• • •

Mitch frowned.

Whatever Pam had found, he didn't like the idea of both of them being inside the ruins. One of them should stand watch outside. Sure, the helicopter was up there, but Evans wouldn't be able to keep an eye on everything.

Maybe Mitch should head back around and go stand on top until Pam was ready to go. She'd be mad, but he knew now he could deal with her no matter what her mood.

He looked out at the wide riverbed, then at the crack. Screw it. A minute or two should be all right, just long enough to see whatever she'd found and come back out.

Holding his rifle to his side, he moved over to the crack and scooted through.

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Pam could barely contain herself when the light streaming through the crack dimmed as Mitch stepped into the opening.

Oh, this was so much better than any sex with him could ever be.

He grunted painfully once, and when he finally extracted himself, he was rubbing his head above his ear and wincing.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine," he said, not looking like it. "So what did you find?"

"It's over here."

The space was perhaps a quarter the size of the building's original footprint. The collapsed roof had taken out a whole section, while another part was full of silt.

Pam moved over to a portion of the wall farthest from the crack, and pointed near the base. "Right down there."

Mitch stepped next to her. "I don't see anything."

"It's too dark. You have to get lower."

He rubbed his head again as he gave her a look that said, "Do I have, too?" But then he started to crouch down.

"Let me hold your gun," she said.

He paused long enough to hand it to her. "Thanks." Kneeling now, he leaned in close to the wall. "What am I looking for?"

Before Pam could respond, Evans's voice came over the radio. "Shit! A whole mess of them. I don't know. Hundreds or more. To the west, and heading this way fast!"

Two things happened at the same time: Pilcher saying, “How close to where Pam went?” and Mitch starting to stand up, saying, “We’ve got to get out of here!”

Pam whacked the butt of Mitch’s rifle into his forehead.

A second later, Evans said, “Beyond where she is, but not too far.”

“Pam, get back here now!” Pilcher ordered.

She clicked on her mic. “On our way.”

She wasn’t quite ready yet, though. At her feet, Mitch rocked back and forth, moaning. She reversed the rifle, pressed the barrel against his chest, and poked his cheek with the toe of her boot.

“Can you hear me, lover boy?” she said.

Mitch groaned again, and mumbled a word she couldn’t make out.

“There’s a lesson here,” she said. “It’s a little late for you to learn, but I’m going to tell you what it is anyway. The lesson is this: No one refuses me. I gave you every chance to realize that. You and me, we could have had some fun, but no. Maybe you thought I wasn’t good enough for you, or maybe I’m too powerful for you, and that scares you. I don’t really care what the reason is. I’m actually glad you said no.”

“Please,” he whispered, more coherent now. “We’ve got to go.”

“Oh, I’ll be going. You, however, will be staying right here.”

His dazed eyes widened. “No!”

She smiled. “I was planning on killing you myself. You know—pop, pop.” As she made the sounds, she shoved the rifle barrel twice into his chest. “But now? I think I’ll just let our descendants out there take care of you.”

It appeared to take him a moment to realize what she meant, and when he did, fear flooded over him. “Please, no! No! For God’s sake.”

“Pam!” Pilcher called. “Where the hell are you?”

Mitch’s hand twitched like he was going for his mic button, so she reached down, ripped the radio from his ear, then crushed it with her foot.

“We’re coming,” she said, adding some desperation to her voice. “Mitch got himself stuck. Just trying to get him free.”

“Well, hurry the fuck up. When those things get close, we will not wait for you.”

“Understood,” she said. “Evans, how far are they from the edge of the riverbed?”

“Not sure. A few minutes at most.”

She clicked off her mic. “I guess that means it’s time to leave.”

“You can’t leave me here!” Mitch shouted.

“Were you not listening when I said I was going to kill you anyway?”

“Please! I won’t say anything to anyone!”

“You’re right. You won’t.” She smiled. “Can’t have you following me, though.” In a single swift motion, she twisted the rifle around and smacked the stock against the side of his head, knocking him out cold.

Knowing it would be odd if she returned with two rifles, but not wanting to leave one for Mitch in case he came to in time to shoot her in the back, she took both with her when she squirmed out the crack, and then tossed his into a patch of brush.

She could hear a strange noise not too far away, like a combination of thunder and a whole bunch of people screaming. She knew right away it was the abbies, running toward her and yelling in disconcertedly human voices.

She looked north, and saw movement coming down the riverbed. Not two minutes away, barely one at best.

She raced around the edge of the building, and up the slope of the gulch. The abbies would have a lot more experience running through the vegetation, so she knew she was going to be cutting it close.

She clicked on her mic again. “I’m coming! I’m coming! Don’t leave without me!”

“I see you,” Evans said. “Where’s Keller?”

Trying to sound appropriately gutted, she said, “I … I couldn’t get him out.”

“Jesus,” Evans said. “They’ll rip him to shreds.”

“I left him with his gun. If they get close …” She didn’t finish the sentence, knowing they would all get what she meant.

After a moment’s pause, Evans said, “You’d better hurry. They’re not far behind you!”

She glanced over her shoulder. The embankment of the riverbed hid the abbies from view, but she could hear them.

Boy, could she hear them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ted was not about to go outside unarmed. Like all personnel at the mountain, he had received firearms training and knew where the weapons lockers were located. The problem was getting a rifle without anyone knowing about it. The lockers, while not heavily guarded, were beyond at least one desk that was occupied 24/7.

A solution came to him as he walked down the corridor toward the elevator, initially intending on heading to the lockers and playing it by ear when he arrived. But what he realized was that he didn't have to go to the lockers at all.

All security personnel were issued several weapons, which then became their responsibility to store and maintain. Right now, unlike a hundred percent of the time otherwise, six security members were off-site with Pilcher. They would have naturally taken several of their weapons with them, but chances were someone would have left something behind. Even Pam might have left weapons in her room, though her quarters were someplace he would only check as a last resort. God help him if the psycho found his fingerprints on any of her stuff.

He raced back to surveillance. One of the techs had taken over for him in the live-feed room, so he went to his office and began fast-forwarding through footage of the security team as they packed up for their trip into the field.

Three of the men—Boyer, Reynolds, and Zurn—had left handguns, while all six had left their M4 rifles. That made sense, because each man had been issued either a heartier M16A2 or an AWM sniper rifle.

He found footage of one of the men locking his cabinet. Ted memorized the code, and then headed down with a duffel bag so he could carry the weapon around without attracting any attention. In addition to the M4, he snagged a few preloaded extra magazines, hoping he wouldn't need to use them, and, if he did, he'd have enough.

Water was another must. That was easy enough. He filled up several reusable bottles he had in his room and stuffed them in the bag. He almost left his jacket behind, telling himself he would be back before dark—*had* to be back. But what if he wasn't?

In the jacket went.

The big mystery now was how AJ had gotten into the woods. As far as he knew, there was no direct access out of the facility to that side of the mountain, but he looked at a map of the base, figuring there must have been some way he wasn't aware of. After several minutes, he decided the only real possibility was via the sniper trench. The route would likely be treacherous, but potentially doable—the only doable route that wouldn't have involved one of the helicopters flying her in. He was sure that hadn't happened.

It had to be the trench. It was the only way. Somewhere along it, AJ had gone over the top and down into the back valley. The particular spot would have to be somewhere that she could have reached without the marksmen on duty knowing she was there. So somewhere between the stairway entrance and the first station?

Must be. He'd just have to hunt for it. And if anyone saw him, he'd have to play it off as work related. Maybe testing a long-range camera system—that should do it. If he threw in a little tech speak, most people would buy whatever he told them.

Okay. That'll work.

He tried to think of anything he might have forgotten or needed to check. There most likely was, but the more time he stayed inside the mountain, the greater the possibility something would happen to AJ.

He hoisted the bag over his shoulder and headed out the door.

• • •

The slope AJ was climbing had already brought her to the highest point of her journey yet, but she could see she still had a ways to go. She kept her pace steady, taking in as much air as she could with each huffing breath. The good thing was, the red markers were coming faster and faster in what she hoped was a sign she was nearing her destination.

Almost there, she told herself. *Just a little farther.*

She kept her eyes focused on the ground a few feet ahead of her, knowing if she kept looking for the top, it would seem to take forever to reach it. The trick

worked. Suddenly the angle of the slope began to ease, and before she knew it, she was standing on nearly flat ground.

She was at the summit.

After a silent, stunned moment, she laughed, and gazed out at the mountains surrounding her. This wasn't the highest peak in the range, but it was high enough to give her one fantastic view. Mountains shot off to her left and right. Summits and valleys and crags and cliffs as far as she could see. It was wide, too, spreading out in front and behind her for miles and miles.

Her breath caught when she spotted the crest that marked her mountain home, and she realized she could actually see beyond it from here, into the valley that contained Wayward Pines. The town itself was out of sight, situated as it was up against the mountain, but she could see the forest that lined the far side of the valley, and a glint from what she thought might be the fence.

The majestic view was more than enough to justify the trip, and yet it wasn't the reason she had snuck away from home and followed the trail to this point. There was something magical here, something that others had come to see, too.

She forced herself to tear her gaze from the other mountains and focus on her peak. It mainly consisted of rocks jutting out here and there, and a few that had broken loose and toppled down. The ground itself was a mix of rock and dirt and a few hearty yet scraggly plants growing out of cracks in the stone.

She slowly walked forward, scanning back and forth, but didn't see what she was looking for. She knew it had to be here. That's why the others had come. But where was it?

She reached the far end and leaned against a large boulder thrusting upward out of somewhere deep in the mountain.

They said it was at the summit, at the very top.

She was desperate to see it and touch it, *needed* to do both.

Still resting against the rock, she looked around again, thinking maybe it had been buried. Her eyes locked onto a spot about five feet away, where a clump of dirt had filled in a low spot.

That must be it.

She knelt down beside it, and jammed her fingers into it. It was tough at first, almost as if all the grains had been cemented in place. Then suddenly she felt it give, and a whole third of the mound broke free. After that, it was merely a shoveling job getting the rest out of the way.

The joy at her success was immediately tempered by the clean, empty stone she'd revealed.

Not here. What the hell?

She rose back to her feet, annoyed. To come all this way and not see it was

depressing.

The view. The view was worth it.

Yeah, it was worth it, but still …

She was looking around the summit again, thinking the trip had already taken her much longer than planned so she should probably start heading back, when she caught sight of the boulder she'd been leaning against.

As she'd noted before, it wasn't just sitting on the ground, but was actually part of the mountain.

Part of the mountain!

She wasn't standing on the summit. The summit was on top of the rock.

With renewed excitement, she ran over to the boulder and searched for the best way to get to the top. It rose about ten feet in the air, the west side only slightly less vertical than the others.

Leaving her bag on the ground, she climbed up the side, not stopping until she pulled herself onto the top of the rock. The area was about five feet in circumference, with a gentle dome shape.

And right there, at the apex of the dome, was what she'd come to see.

She scooted over to it and laid her body across the rock so she could get as close to it as possible. Attached to the rock was a circle of green metal, weathered and worn. A survey marker, placed there centuries before to denote the high point of the mountain.

She reached out a finger and cautiously touched the surface. Written in circles around the disk were words. They were barely visible, some of the letters completely gone, but she could make out a few of them.

C … O … something … S … T.

A blank spot, then a partial, curved line that she couldn't figure out. Another blank, then—

G … E … O … D … E … missing … I … C.

Blank.

S … U … R … V … E … Y.

The remaining letters on the disk were far too small and degraded for her to understand. It didn't matter, though. The words were unimportant. It was the disk itself that meant something. It was the only thing from the old world within a hundred miles, or perhaps even a thousand, that hadn't been safely stored away in the mountain by her father and his people. That's why she wanted to see it so much. She'd been just a kid when she'd gone into the deep sleep. And while she did have memories from when the world was full of people, they were becoming less and less clear with each passing year. She wanted to remember, to hold on to what she still had, wanted to know there really was a *before*.

The disk was a portal, a talisman, a link to that world she'd been born into.

A drop of water landed on the disk, turning the green surface dark. She looked up, thinking maybe it was starting to rain, but no clouds were overhead. That's when she realized the water hadn't come from the sky but from her.

She lay her head back down next to the disk and let her tears pour out. And then, right there on top of the rock, she drifted off to sleep.

• • •

Ted almost missed finding the path out of the parapet altogether. He had thought the short expanse of trench that curved around the stairwell was the way AJ had used to leave, but reaching the end, he'd at first assumed he was wrong. No obvious trail was visible.

Still, to be sure, he hoisted himself up so he could take a look over the edge. Again, he thought there was no way she had gone in this direction. The slope was nearly vertical, and it'd be suicide to even crawl onto the other side of the wall.

Then he noticed a scuff in the dirt right at the top of the wall near his hand. He pulled himself all the way up so he could sit on the stone ledge. Definitely a scuff mark, a few of them, actually. They could have been footprints, but clearly someone had, at the very least, touched the wall there recently.

He looked beyond the marks. If a person was careful, he or she could traverse the narrow ridge that ran out from the trench wall to a boulder on the other side. But then what?

He grimaced, knowing he would have to check.

In a flash of courage between bouts of cowardice, he swung his feet onto the ridge.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit," he repeated as he walked as fast as he dared along the path, his arm sticking out to the sides to maintain his balance. When he finally reached the rock at the other end, he hugged it tight, his eyes squeezed shut.

It took more than a minute for his heart rate to return to an acceptable level. Once it had, he looked back the way he'd come, half expecting to see a member of the security team coming after him. But the ledge—looking even more narrow and deadly than it had before—was empty.

Staying tight to the boulder, he followed a trail to the other side, where it widened and continued across a short, rock-strewn ridge. It was obvious the path

got a lot of use. A spot at the end of a second ridge housed a lower-lying rock that seemed to double as a bench.

An illicit little hideaway? When he returned to Surveillance, he would have to check the archived footage to see if he could figure out who had come out here.

At first it seemed as if the path ended just beyond the bench, but then he spotted a piece of red fabric in the distance, and realized there was another trail, much less worn, heading in that direction.

He followed the marked path as it weaved between several rock formations, before bringing himself to an abrupt halt. In front of him was a near-vertical rock face that must have gone down four or five hundred feet. And there, across the surface at a slightly downward angle, was a small ledge.

That can't be the path, can it?

It did start pretty much where the trail he was on ended. But dear God, it was so narrow. Way too easy to fall off.

He inched his way to where path met ledge, and noticed that chiseled into the rock on a line about five feet above the ledge were four-inch-long, three-inch-deep cutouts. Handholds? They would certainly make the passage easier.

This had to be the way she went.

Just go back. You can deal with whatever happens. Turn around. Now.

But he knew he couldn't turn around. As terrifying as the ledge path was, it would still be better than facing Pilcher's wrath.

One foot at a time, he told himself. *Nice and easy.*

No relief came when he made it to the other side, only the knowledge that when he headed back home, he would have to cross it again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mitch could feel the helicopter shake as he began to regain consciousness, and wished someone would tell the pilot to keep the damn thing steady. The vibrating floor was only intensifying the spikes of pain radiating through his head.

Rolling onto his back, he groaned, and moved his hand to the spot where the pain was greatest. His head was wet and sticky. What the hell happened?

He tried to think, tried to remember.

He'd been in a dark hole or cave. Someone else had been there, too, but he couldn't recall who. He guessed it was probably the same person who got him back to the helicopter after he'd—what?—hit his head?

He tried to open his eyes, but pain shot through him again, forcing his jaw to clamp shut and his face to scrunch together as he rode it out. When it subsided to a bearable level, he tried again. He was able to part his lids enough to see it was dark.

Nighttime? How long had he been out? Or had the blow blinded him?

The last thought forced his eyes to open wider, allowing him to see it wasn't completely dark. Light seeped in from somewhere around his feet—a flickering light, like a motion picture projector, only not quite as rhythmic.

Something was strange about the roof of the helicopter, too. It was too far above him, and looked like …

… concrete.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, gritting his teeth through more pain.

Not the helicopter. The abandoned building he'd been in with … Pam. Pam, who had hit him with his own rifle.

Twice.

He looked around, expecting to see her hovering nearby, but he was the only

one there. He realized how wrong he'd been about her. She hadn't gotten over his rejection. She'd only been waiting for the right time to strike.

She left me here. Oh, God. They've gone without me.

He tried to climb to his feet, but couldn't get off his knees before a wave of nausea swept over him. Quick, deep breaths helped him get past the worst of it, and he was finally able to stand.

Why didn't she kill me? he wondered.

Through the lifting fog in his mind, he realized there was an easy answer to that. Leaving him out here was as good as killing him. Or at least that was probably what she thought. If he could catch up to the mission, he could prove her wrong. The team was supposed to spend another night on the island. He needed to somehow get close to their camp and get their attention so he could be rescued.

Yeah, that's what he needed to do. No way he was going to let Pam win.

He looked around for his gun, but naturally she hadn't left it behind. That was all right, he told himself. He still had his knife. He just needed to get out of there and get moving.

Hey, if I haven't been out too long, the others might still be here!

But as he took a quick step toward the crack in the wall, something else caught his attention. *The vibrations in the ground—they're still there. And what was that noise?*

Until that moment, the noise had blended in with the pain in his head. But he could tell now it was something not connected with his injury. It almost sounded like a crowd at a football game, jeering and yelling. A mass wailing.

He eased toward the crack, knowing what he might see, but hoping he was wrong. He stopped a few feet back, so he'd be hidden by the dark and yet still be able to see outside.

Dear God.

There were hundreds of them, thousands, maybe. Abbies—big and small, male and female—were racing across the riverbed toward the building he was in, then up and over, presumably heading toward the Space Needle.

He took an unconscious step backward, his heel kicking a stone that skittered across the ground. He froze, sure that the noise would draw the abbies' attention, but they kept going up and over.

Evans's voice came back to him, the report coming right before Pam hit Mitch the first time. "A whole mess of them … hundreds … heading this way fast!"

Mitch reached up to his ear for his radio, but it was gone. Pam again. *Son of a bitch.*

The fact that the abbies were still charging meant he probably hadn't been out but for a few minutes. The helicopters had surely been able to get away, but what about Pam? Had she been able to reach them in time?

He sure as hell hoped not.

• • •

"Everybody in!" Roger yelled over the radio. "Come on! Move it!"

Boyer and Zurn were first aboard. Pilcher, though considerably older than the others, ran with surprising speed from the base of the Needle to the helicopter. Reynolds, the ranking security member in lieu of Pam's absence, brought up the rear, his M16 swinging left and right in case any targets popped up.

"Evans," Reynolds said. "ETA on Pam."

"She's about a minute away," Evans reported.

"And the abbies?"

"They're right behind her, maybe thirty seconds further back."

"Too close," Zurn said. "We'll never make it."

"Take us up," Pilcher ordered Roger.

"We should wait," Reynolds said. "She might—"

Pilcher glared at him. "I said up!"

Roger pulled back on the stick, and the helicopter rose into the air.

Reynolds braced himself in the doorway and searched the area to the northwest from where Pam would be coming. He spotted her the moment they cleared the top of the Space Needle. Apparently she saw them, too.

"Where the … fuck are you … going?" she yelled over the radio between breaths.

"We'd have never been able to get up in time," Reynolds said, though he wasn't completely convinced of that.

"Bullshit! Get back down here … and get me!"

Before Reynolds could speak, Pilcher tapped him on the arm. "Tell her you didn't have a choice."

"What?"

"Tell her!"

Reynolds stared at Pilcher for a moment before keying his mic. "I … didn't have a choice. I'm sorry."

"Goddammit! Get down here!"

He could see her now, nearing the Needle, the abbies even closer to her than before. He suddenly whipped his gaze back to the Needle. “I have an idea,” he said.

“Better be … a damn good one!” she yelled.

“We are *not* doing anything that will endanger this craft,” Pilcher whispered through clenched teeth, his face red.

“Don’t worry, sir,” Reynolds said. “We’ll be fine.”

“Don’t even think about going back down.”

“Not down.” Reynolds turned on his mic again. “Pam, get to the Needle and climb. As high as you can go.”

• • •

Climb? Pam thought. Didn’t the son of a bitch know the things chasing her could climb also? She looked at the Needle and then at the swarm racing toward her.

Maybe if she could get to the other side of the Needle, slip around the two-beam column back there, she might be able to start climbing without the abbies seeing her. That should at least buy her a few extra seconds, and more if she was lucky. Could be they’d race by and not know what had happened to her until she was all the way up.

As she ran under the Needle, she angled her path so that each column she passed would block her from the view of the swarm. She circled close around the central column, and sprinted all out for the back. Nearing the column she’d chosen to go up, she threw out a hand, grabbed the beam, and used her momentum to swing her back around so she could hop right onto it and begin to climb. The urge was strong to peek around the beam and see where the creatures were, but she kept her head down and her body focused on moving upward as quickly as possible.

She was nearly two thirds of the way to the first platform when she saw the first wave of abbies race by below. They kept going, none looking back or up, and she thought for a moment that she was in the clear. Then the pace of those at the very front faltered, and several of the creatures began twisting their heads back and forth in a very deliberate manner.

Her scent, she realized. They’d lost it.

She looked up. The first platform was twenty-five feet above her. If she could get there before she was spotted, she might still have a chance. Sure, they

would eventually pick up her scent, but not seeing her might confuse them.

Hand over hand she raced up the slanted surface. The second she reached the opening in the platform, she shoved her arms through and pulled herself up. Only then did she risk a momentary look down and immediately wished she hadn't. Dozens of abbies were gathered at the bottom of the column, several of them with their faces close to the surface. That wasn't the worst part, though.

Two abbies were already climbing up.

• • •

The noise outside quickly grew less intense before dropping off to a few scattered footfalls and then nothing at all. Mitch knew he should stay in the safety of the ancient building, but what if the helicopters were still around? Maybe watching the abbies from above?

If they were, he might be able to flag them down.

He told himself it was worth the chance, and had to say it again, repeatedly, as he walked warily to the crack. Standing in the same place where he'd watched the swarm before, he could see nothing but an empty riverbed. He moved closer, his ears tuned to pick up even the slightest sound. Still no abbies.

He stood for a moment at the periphery of the crack.

It's worth the chance.

Right. Because if the helicopters were there and he blew his chance, the likelihood he'd be alive twenty-four hours from now would be severely diminished. And twenty-four after that? He didn't even want to consider what those odds would be.

He slipped into the opening without allowing himself to think any further, and paused at the outer edge, letting his head drift out a few inches so he could have a look around.

No abbies. Not even any stragglers coming across the river plain.

One step out. Listen. Another step.

He moved over to the edge of the building, and glanced around the corner at the slope he'd come down with Pam. The sandy hillside was covered in small divots caused by the abbies' feet. Just the sight of them was almost enough to get him to crawl back into his hole, but instead, he moved up the slope, staying tight against the building until he was just below ground level. Dropping to his chest, he snaked the rest of the way and peered over the edge.

The helicopters *were* still there, both in the air now, hovering not far from

the Space Needle.

Yes!

He lifted himself enough so that he could see the grounds around the Needle, and the hope he'd just been feeling faded.

The bulk of abby swarm was gathered below the Needle, while several of the creatures were climbing up the sides. From his position, they almost looked like ants going up a hill. If he were to stand up now and wave his arms, or even flap his shirt above him, the odds are fifty-fifty that his team would see him first.

Take the chance anyway? he wondered.

He'd all but convinced himself to do just that when one of the helicopters moved in close to the Needle, almost like it was going to set down on top.

What the hell were they doing?

• • •

Pam didn't need to look down to know that more than two abbies were pursuing her up the Needle now. She could feel the structure shake under their barrage, and could hear the things being yelled up at her.

She knew she couldn't slow down. That would mean death. But the closer she got to the top, the more vertical and challenging the climb became. The original two abby climbers had already passed the second platform and were gaining on her. Pam was sure she would make it to the top first, but knew she wouldn't be there alone for long.

She hoped to hell the helicopter would get her off in time. If not, then she would jump. Better that than letting any of these freaks eat her alive. And maybe if she timed it right, she could even take one of them with her.

A snarled screech drew her attention downward. The nearest abby was thirty feet below her, staring up at Pam with small, dark eyes, its lips curling back from its knifelike teeth. If her rifle hadn't been strapped across her back, she would have shot the son of a bitch, but it would take far too long to twist it around and get her finger on the trigger. By that point, Pam would be dinner. Maybe she'd have time once she got to the top.

She moved as fast as she could up the ripped and twisted beams, until the broken top of the Needle was only a dozen feet above.

Hoping her mic was still on, she yelled, "Get the hell over here and get me!"

Four more upward thrusts brought her to the edge. She flung an arm over it and scrambled onto the top.

Where was the helicopter? Why wasn't it here already?

Her first impulse was to wave her arms angrily in the air to get the damn thing to move faster, but she knew she couldn't waste the seconds. She whipped the rifle off her back and brought the muzzle around just as one abby's hand crested the top.

"Show your fucking face!" she yelled.

She expected it to raise its head enough so it could look around, and that's when she would pop off its skull. But instead of doing a little peekaboo, the creature screamed and leaped over the edge in a high arc, its talons thrust forward, leading the way.

Pam jerked the barrel upward in response and squeezed the trigger, holding it down as bullet after bullet shot out of the muzzle and into the abby.

The monster died before it even knew what was happening, but its trajectory carried it right into Pam, knocking her backward toward a gap in the torn girders. Pam's reaction was purely instinctual. She reached out to grab whatever she could, the rifle slipping out of her grip and falling down the center of the tower. Before she could follow it, her fingers latched onto one of the beams. It cracked loudly under the strain of her weight, and she was sure it would give way any second. Before it could, her other hand found a hold and she was able to pull herself onto her knees.

She could hear the helicopter, close now, and looked up to see Reynolds leaning out the open door, with a rope secured from inside the cabin hanging down twenty feet below the runner. The end of the line was about five yards away from the Needle, which meant it was about seven from her position.

She waved. "Closer!"

Whether she could be heard or not, the helicopter eased toward her until the rope knocked against one of the beams.

She waved again. "More! More!"

It seemed if as they were going to leave it where it was, as if they expected her to come to it. Could they not see the open shaft between her and the rope? Sure, she could make her way around, but they could get to her a hell of a lot faster.

She rose onto her feet. "Over here!" She motioned as emphatically as she could to show them what to do.

Reynolds turned his head, said something into the cabin, and then looked out again. The helicopter pulled back a few feet, moving the rope away from the Needle. It circled until it was closer to Pam's position and moved in again. The rope knocked into the side and bounced once before slipping through a break and swinging closer to her.

As she reached for it, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see what it was, missing the rope in the process.

The second abby. It had already pulled itself over the top and was now standing on the other side of the gap.

Pam looked back for the rope. It had swung away from her and was knocking against a beam near the edge. Up in the helicopter, she could see several people shouting at each other. There was no doubt they'd seen the abby, too, and she knew they were going to fly away at any second.

She leaned as far as she could, reaching for the rope, but it was just out of her range. Instead of yelling up, she motioned for them to come a little closer. Reynolds leaned over the edge of the cabin, grabbed the rope, and started to swing it.

She leaned forward again, and clamped onto her lifeline as it came to her.

"Up!" she shouted, wrapping her other hand around it.

As the helicopter began to pull her away, the rope twisted her around, allowing her to see the abby as it leaped.

Pam knew the kind of strength the animals had, knew how far they could jump, and knew she wasn't out of their range yet. Keeping cool, she pulled her knees to her chest, waited until the abby was nearly at her, and then thrust her legs out, smashing her booted feet into the abby's face and knocking it off course. It flew through the air past the rope before arcing downward. As it plummeted to earth, the abbies directly below it scattered, clearing the way.

Breathing deeply, Pam wrapped her leg around the line.

"Hang on!" Reynolds called out. "When we get to a safe area, we'll set down and get you inside!"

She opened her mouth to yell back, "Okay," but found she had no strength to voice it, so she looked up and nodded, then held on as tightly as possible as they flew over the swarm.

• • •

Mitch watched Pam get hoisted into the sky and the helicopters fly off with her dangling below. Until they were out of sight, he kept repeating one word silently to himself, "Fall." But he knew she wouldn't, not Pam. If there ever was a true survivor, he now knew she was it.

He pulled his gaze from the disappearing aircraft and refocused on the Needle. The abbies were on the move again, slower than before because nothing

new and interesting attracted their curiosity, but they were definitely in motion.

And coming in his direction.

He squirmed back down the slope. He could either run out onto the river plain where the swarm would see him for sure, or crawl back into the remains of the building. It really wasn't a choice.

As he turned around the lower corner of the building, he noticed something in the brush, thirty feet out. It was black and about three feet long, out of place in the otherwise green and brown growth. It took a second before he realized what it was.

His rifle. Pam had dumped it, which made a sick sort of sense. She wouldn't have wanted to bring it back with her because that would have looked strange.

He snatched it up, never happier to see anything in his life, then hightailed it for the crack in the wall. Slipping inside, he had a terrifying thought. Now that the abbies were no longer focused on finding out what was going on at the Space Needle, they might be more apt to look around as they passed by. If one of them noticed the crack, wouldn't it be possible they might check it out?

The question was enough to get him grabbing bits and pieces of broken concrete and piling them in the crack as best he could. There was more than enough to reach all the way to the top. It wasn't perfect, with holes here and there, but he hoped it was enough to dampen any curiosity the abbies might have.

With nothing else to do, he moved to the far corner, sat on the ground, and waited for the sound of footsteps.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AJ sat up with a start. That was almost a mistake. She had forgotten she was on top of a rock and had nearly slipped over the side. Gripping the surface with both hands, she eased herself into a more balanced position. Now that she felt safer, she noticed a difference in the sunlight from before. The shadows were longer, the light no longer shining down from almost directly above her like it had when she'd climbed up there.

She checked her watch. Three thirty.

"Oh, crap!"

She'd fallen asleep, and now would be lucky to get back home before sunset.

She moved to the edge of the rock and climbed down. She had to hurry. Some parts of the path had been difficult enough in the early dawn hours. The last thing she wanted to do was cross them again in the darkening night.

She donned her pack and started back down the peak. The slope tempted her to try to run as fast as she could, but she resisted the urge and kept her pace to a fast walk. Even then, she ended up sliding a few times and once fell on her ass, but when she reached the spot where the trail leveled off, she was thankfully still in one piece.

Jogging now, she focused on keeping her eyes out for the red marks so that she wouldn't take any unnecessary detours, never noticing the subtle sounds that seemed to be paralleling her path.

• • •

Ted couldn't help but wonder again who had put up all the red markers. He

didn’t even want to think about what would happen if Pilcher ever found out.

He knew what he would have to do. Once he used the surveillance footage to find out who all had been using the path, he would have as many pointed conversations as necessary, and shut this whole thing down before it could explode in everyone’s face.

If, that was, he ever got back.

Clutching his rifle like he was afraid someone was going to snatch it from him, he continued to sweep the woods, ready for anything. Logically, there should be nothing of concern up here. Not long after the initial reawakening in the mountains, teams had cleared the area of the few bears that had made it home, and then they’d installed the motion sensors and cameras at all the potential entry points. The most dangerous animals that had been seen since then had been elk. Not once had there been a sighting of an abby in the area. The biologists surmised that the terrain was too high, the air too thin and undesirable. The winters, too, would be far harsher than what the abbies could tolerate.

But knowing that and making his mind believe it were two different things. He was outside the protection of the mountain, which in Ted’s mind meant he was in abby territory. He probably would have turned back several times by now if he hadn’t kept coming across footprints that, to his untrained eye, looked fresh. Their size indicated they belonged to either a small man or a woman. They uniformly headed away from base, none toward it, so it was safe to assume whoever they belonged to hadn’t returned yet. It was also safe to assume, given the general location of her locator chip when Ted had checked it before leaving the base, that the prints belonged to AJ.

But how far out had she gone?

He’d been walking for nearly two hours and had yet to lay eyes on her. She was definitely going to get a piece of his mind when he found her.

Ahead was another red marker, and just beyond it was what looked like the top of a rise. Perhaps it would provide him with a vantage point where he could see into the distance and possibly even spot her.

He hoped so.

• • •

The uneven terrain forced AJ to change from a jog to a fast walk. She still kept her pace brisk, though, acutely aware of the time ticking away. Ahead, the trees parted and she entered the same meadow with the pond where she’d had

lunch.

She still had so far to go, she realized.

Can't think about it. Just have to keep moving.

She retraced her route down by the edge of the water, and then angled along it, heading in the direction of the trees that led up to the next ridge. She was nearing the far side of the pond when a cry stopped her. She looked around, surprised, knowing what she'd heard couldn't possibly have been what she thought it was. It had sounded like a child.

She heard it again, and realized it was coming from a patch of high grass off to her left. She took a hesitant step toward it.

Careful, she told herself. Maybe it was a bear cub, or a fawn. Did they make that kind of noise? She looked around, suddenly sure a large brown bear was already barreling toward her. But there was nothing.

Another cry.

It *really* sounded like a child. But that would be impossible.

Unable to stop herself, she continued forward. The grass where the sound came from moved, not with the wind, but in jerks and twitches. Something was definitely there.

Then, before AJ could take another step, a scream echoed across the pond from behind her.

A scream that sounded nearly as human as the previous cry.

• • •

When Ted reached the crest, he took a moment to drink a little water as he looked around. The view was not as satisfactory as he would have liked. Too many trees blocked his view. He could see between some of them and determine that the forest continued on, but that was about it.

He checked the time. It was getting so late. The last thing he wanted was to search for her in the dark. He could easily miss her then, or perhaps get lost. Of course, that might be preferable to returning home without her.

He took another sip and returned the bottle to his bag. As he was zipping it back up, he froze.

Through the trees he heard a distant scream.

AJ!

He yanked the bag over his shoulder, grabbed the M4, and ran.

• • •

AJ jerked around in surprise.

Out of the woods behind her, loping on all fours, burst an abby.

But that's not possible. You checked the cameras and motion-detector logs. There was no sign of any abbies up here. There are never *any abbies up here!*

And yet here one was, charging toward her.

AJ's breath caught in her throat as she stumbled backward and fell. Scrambling to her feet, she knew she should run, but the abby was already there, circling her, baring its teeth as it screeched at her.

AJ was sure this was her last moment on earth, because the abby was about to rip her apart. But the creature stayed just out of arms' length, positioning itself between AJ and the grass from where the cry came.

The *child's* cry.

"Oh, God," AJ muttered.

The abby was female. AJ could see that now. So here was the mother bear she'd been fearing earlier.

The abby hissed as it moved back and forth a few feet, but never stepped closer.

"I won't hurt your baby," AJ whispered, trying to sound harmless.

She knew it was ridiculous. The abby couldn't understand her, but she couldn't help trying to soothe the creature.

The abby paused its movements, let out a guttural huff, and stared at her for several seconds. Behind it the child cried again. The abby looked back toward the noise and then once more at AJ before spinning around and racing to the patch of grass.

AJ took advantage of the moment to take another step backward, but she paused, fascinated, as the creature picked up its child and held it, very human-like, against its chest. Though the younger abby was small, AJ could see it was at least a year old, maybe two. It looked lethargic in its mother's arms. AJ wondered if maybe it was sick, if perhaps that was why it was so small.

Now that AJ had a moment to study the mother, she noticed it didn't look like other abbies she'd seen. It was thinner, its muscles not as well defined. In fact, it looked almost … emaciated. It had scars on its back, some wide and long, and none looking very old.

As AJ watched, the mother reached down, picked something up from the ground, and raised it to its child's lip. AJ instantly recognized it as the crust from the sandwich she'd left for the elk.

They're starving, she thought. *They must have wandered up here by accident*. She caught sight of the scars again. *Or maybe they ran into a bear or something like that and came here to hide. Whatever the reason, they're just hungry.*

She started to pull the pack off her back. As she did, the abby's head snapped around. It chuffed and took a few threatening steps in her direction, the child still in its arms.

AJ slowed her motions, but didn't stop. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She lowered the pack, brought it around in front of her, and set it on the ground. The abby tensed again at the sound of the zipper as AJ opened the bag, but it didn't yell this time.

Inside was one last sandwich, a bag of cookies, and an apple from a backyard tree down in Wayward. AJ carefully removed the sandwich from the bag, and tossed it on the ground ten feet in front of the abby.

"For you," she said.

The abby sniffed the air but didn't move.

"Maybe you'll like this better." She lobbed the apple out so that it would roll closer to them.

The creature took a few concerned steps backward, then rushed forward when the apple stopped and picked it up. It was clear it had seen similar fruit before. It bit off a chunk, took a few chews, and then spit them out into its hand so it could feed them to the child.

AJ opened the bag of cookies and set them on the ground. She then zipped up her pack and pulled it back on. "I'm going to go, all right?" she said.

She took a step. The abby watched her as the child ate, but didn't otherwise react. That's when AJ knew it was going to be all right, and that the creature would let her leave.

"Good luck," she said, and turned to continue her journey home.

That's when the gunshot rang out.

• • •

Ted thought he heard a few more yells as he weaved through the trees, but he couldn't be sure. For all he knew, he was just hearing his feet pounding against the ground.

The forest floor dipped down before heading back up to another ridge. As he neared it, he distinctly heard something that sounded a bit like a growl.

Whatever it was, it was not a sound he thought AJ would make.

He slowed as he neared the top, and crept the rest of the way up using the trees ahead to conceal his presence. He moved in right behind the largest tree, and leaned against it for a moment, listening again.

A woman's voice. He couldn't make out the words, but knew it could only be AJ. But who would she be talking to? Had she not come out here alone?

He decided to chance a peek.

It was AJ, all right. She was standing in a clearing down near a pond, her back to him. She said something else and threw what looked like a red ball out in front of her. He lost the object in the grass when it hit the ground, but the direction it had traveled brought his gaze directly to the *thing* that was in the clearing with the girl.

An abby.

Holy shit!

It seemed to be holding something in its arms, but he couldn't see what it was from his vantage point.

He brought up his gun, half worried it would slip out of his hands before he could get it to his shoulder.

Relax! he ordered himself.

He sighted down the barrel and saw that his angle on the abby was too tight to AJ's position. That would be perfect. Come all the way out here and shoot the boss's daughter.

Get out of the way, AJ, before that thing makes a run at you!

He could feel sweat gather on his brow and run down his sideburns.

Come on. Come on.

She leaned down and put something on the ground, then fiddled with the backpack sitting at her feet. As she pulled it on, she said something again. She took a backward step in Ted's direction, and was almost out of the way.

Keep coming.

Another few words, and then she turned toward him, giving him the shot.

• • •

AJ saw a puff of smoke where the rifle shot had originated at the top of the ridge. She twisted around and looked back at the abby. The creature was running into the woods the other way, screaming.

"AJ, over here!"

Up the hill, where she'd seen the smoke, a man stepped out from around a tree and waved at her.

"Hurry!"

She looked back to where the abby had been. There was no sign of it now. Had it been hit? She took a few steps toward where it had been holding the child, and saw a dark, glistening spot on the grass.

Blood? Oh, no. It is blood, isn't it?

Before she could take a closer look, the man called out again.

"AJ, come on! We need to get out of here before it comes back!"

Blood or no, the man was probably right. The abby would be upset. There was no telling what it might do. And what if the bullet had hit the child?

AJ turned and ran.

As she neared the ridge, she could see the shooter was Ted Upshaw. He was one of the last people she would have expected to see out here. He turned when she reached him and put a hand on her arm, urging her forward.

"Run, run," he said.

Not letting go, he guided her through the woods. They kept up the pace for several minutes before finally slowing down.

That's when AJ said, "Why did you shoot it?"

"Why? What do you mean why?" he asked. "It was an abby. That thing was going to rip your face off."

"It was hungry and sick, that's all. It was trying to take care of its child."

"Child? There were two of them? My God, AJ, what were you thinking?"

"I was just giving them some food. It was letting me go."

"No! What were you thinking coming out here in the first place?"

She fell silent, knowing any answer to that would be insufficient.

They walked on, neither of them speaking. Upshaw kept his gun ready, as if he expected the abby to come rushing out at them, but AJ was pretty sure if that was going to happen, the creature would have already attacked by now. Its focus would be on the safety of its child, and the further it could get from the two humans, the safer it would feel.

Later, as they neared the treacherous climb across the precipice that would get them almost back home, Upshaw said, "Whatever reason you have for being out here, I guess … I guess that's your business. But you can't tell *anyone* about this. Not that you went. Not that I came after you. And especially not that you ran into an abby. Are you clear on that?"

"Sure. No problem," she said. She'd been positive Upshaw was going to tell her father on her, but apparently that wasn't the case at all. She had never felt so much relief. "I promise. I won't tell anyone."

“And you can never come back.”

“Never.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding to himself. “Then that’s that. Neither of us says another word.”

• • •

Ted was confident AJ would keep the secret. She’d seemed even more scared of someone finding out than he was. Fortunately, she was too young to understand why it would be more his problem than hers.

The first thing he did when he returned to the surveillance room was to call in a report to security that an abby had tripped one of the motion detectors monitoring the neighboring valleys. This would trigger a team of hunters to be sent out. He only hoped his bullet had actually missed the abby. If they found it dead from a gunshot wound, there would be questions. He probably should have thought about that before he called in the report, but it was too late now.

Where abbies were concerned, it was better safe than sorry anyway.

• • •

Back in her room, AJ thought about the abby again. Had it been hit? Was it right now dying out there? She hoped not. What she did hope was that the mother and child would make their way to one of the passes and out of the mountains entirely, where it would be safer for them, with more to eat.

Her last thought, though, before she drifted off to an exhausted sleep, was of the summit and the marker and a past that was all but forgotten by the Earth.

A past she had come from.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Once Pam was safely in the helicopter, the team returned to the island. As much as she would have liked to leave for home as soon as the aircrafts' tanks were all topped off again, they would've probably ended up flying the last part of the trip in the dark, something the pilots had no desire to do. So it was decided: One more night on the island, then up early and out.

Pam's hands were raw from clinging to the rope. She'd had one of the guys wrap her wounds, and now even the simple act of eating or drinking was difficult. But she managed to get her dinner down before heading off to take her shift on watch.

Before she left camp, though, Pilcher found her.

"Your hands?" he asked, nodding at the bandages.

"They'll be fine."

"Good." He smiled. "I'm glad we got you out."

"You're not the only one."

"You understand, it wasn't an easy choice to lift off."

"Sure. I get it." She *did* get it, though it didn't make her particularly happy.

"Reynolds made the only choice he could."

"Reynolds?" she said. She'd assumed Pilcher had given the order.

"With you not there, he was ranking security officer."

"Right. He was, wasn't he? I hadn't thought about it." No wonder Reynolds had tried so hard to save her after that. Guilt was a powerful motivator.

Another Pilcher smile. "Well, I won't keep you. I'll see you in the morning."

"Yeah. In the morning."

As she headed off to her assigned position, she had only one thought on her mind. She now had a new toy to play with. She only hoped Reynolds would prove more pliable than Mitch had been.

• • •

It seemed to take hours for all the abbies to walk by. When the noise outside Mitch's hiding place subsided at last, he moved over to the crack and peered between the pieces of concrete he'd piled inside.

His heart sank.

He knew his best chance at survival would be to head south until he was across from the island where the others were, and then do something like start a fire to draw their attention when they flew over.

But heading south meant crawling through the crack again, something he could only do if the coast was clear. The group of abbies lying on the ground about a dozen yards away meant he wasn't going anywhere.

He was never getting back. And at some point in the not-so-distant future, he was more than likely going to die. His hand touched his rifle, knowing some people would choose to stick the muzzle in their mouths and pull the trigger. He considered it for only a moment. He wasn't that kind of person. Never had been, never would be. He'd do what he needed to survive.

For however long that might be.

• • •

The flight home from Seattle was made mostly in silence. Though they had not expected to find anything that would lead them to believe the rest of the world had not suffered the same fate as the area around Wayward Pines, seeing it confirmed, seeing the massive swarms of abbies as aggressive as the ones back home, was depressing for most of them. Add the loss of Mitch Keller, one of their own, and that just made things worse.

Pilcher did not share in this mood, though. He'd needed to see firsthand what was out there, and now he had. There would be no need for further explorations. The abbies ruled the world. He knew that for sure now. But there was hope.

Someday, the little nucleus of humanity he was nurturing would take over again.

And it would be all because of him.

• • •

AJ received a message that her regular afternoon meetings with her father would start again the following day. That's how she knew he'd arrived back at the mountain.

When she entered his room at their scheduled time, he was standing by his desk, waiting for her.

"AJ," he said. "Good to see you again."

"Good to see you, too."

He gave her a perfunctory hug and kiss on the forehead.

She almost asked, "How was your trip?" but caught herself, remembering she wasn't supposed to know he'd been gone, and said, "How did your project go?"

"Fine, fine," he replied, brushing it off. "And you? What did you do while I was gone?"

Her pause was brief. "Not much. I wasn't feeling good the day before yesterday, so I stayed home and rested."

She knew if Ted had squealed on her, this would be the moment her father would pounce, but he said, "And how are you feeling now?"

"Better."

"That's good. So you're back to work?"

She nodded. "Went back yesterday."

"Excellent. It's almost time for you to move on to your next assignment, isn't it?"

"A few more weeks."

The small talk continued. No deep probing, no heart-to-heart, father–daughter discussion. Just like it always was—fifteen minutes of the all-powerful David Pilcher proving to himself what a great parent he was.

As she headed back for her second shift at the suspension-pod room, a sense of otherness descended on her. Her quest to the disk had changed her, made her truly realize she was no longer a child.

No longer AJ.

She was a woman. A woman who had seen and done things that could never be unseen or undone.

Or forgotten.

AJ was gone. Adults used their real names, didn't they? It was time for her to do the same.

• • •

The hunters found signs of the abby, but never the abby itself. They finally determined that it had made its way west out of the high valleys and down the treacherous slope of the mountains. Chances were it died before it made it all the way to the bottom.

Motion detectors were checked, camera lenses cleaned, and then the hunters returned home.

• • •

The abby was in an extreme state of exhaustion by the time it reached the base of the mountain range, but it knew it couldn't rest yet. It needed to find water and food. The morsels that strange creature near the water had left behind —which the abby had then gone back and collected after dark—had been finished long ago. The abby's child was hanging on, but just barely, and unless it was fed soon, the journey would have been for nothing.

The abby looked back at the mountains, the memory of the odd food still strong in its mind. It had been unlike anything it had ever eaten before—strong, but … good. Thoughts of the taste also brought back memories of the boom from the trees and the stone—for it could have only been a stone, the abby thought—that had dug a groove across its upper arm so fast she'd not seen it happen.

The wound had throbbed all the way down the mountain, sometimes forcing the abby to stop until the pain receded. There were things it could do for the injury, plants it could eat, specific types of mud it could pack on—the same things that had kept it alive after several other abbies had attacked it, forcing it to flee into the mountains in the first place.

It would keep its eye out for the remedies while it hunted for food and water. Someday, perhaps, it could return to the mountains, to see if it could locate some of what the creature had fed it.

Someday, but not now.

The child cried softly in the abby's arms. The abby stroked its head and hummed softly into its ear. Once the child settled down, the abby looked around, picked the most likely direction, and started to walk.

EPILOGUE

Mitch began removing the stones filling the crack in the ancient building two hours after the last of the abbies he could see in his limited field of vision had left. He knew he should give it more time in case others were outside his sight lines, but he'd been in his cave for nearly forty hours already, and he was thirsty and hungry. If he didn't get something into his system soon, he would start to lose focus. That's when real mistakes would be made.

He carefully pulled the pieces out one by one, and set them on the ground as quietly as possible. When they were finally all out, he hesitated, scared now to step through the opening. Dying of thirst and hunger in his own little grave might be better than taking the chance of being feasted upon by any abbies still roaming the area.

That's not going to happen, he told himself. *Play it smart and you'll survive.*

Not one to be ignored, the soft voice of his conscious chimed in, *Yes, but for how long?*

He shoved the last thought down. A day, a week—it didn't matter how long. What he needed to do was focus on the right now. His world, for the time being, needed to be limited to sixty-second spurts. He knew rescue by the others was no longer an option, but he was not just going to give up.

Get through the crack, and then decide what's next.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he grabbed his gun and crawled through to the other side.

A gray wall of clouds hung above him, dulling the morning light. Standing right outside the crack, he scanned the river plain. In the middle, the tantalizing river itself, small and gray in the muted light as it meandered to the sea.

Fresh water.

The thought alone caused him to lick his chapped lips. He could feel his legs

wanting to sprint across the plain, but he kept his feet rooted to the ground, and continued scanning the area for trouble.

No movement that would suggest abbies. No real movement of anything at all. There wasn't even a wind today, only a chill and a dampness that promised rain soon.

Maybe that was a better idea—wait for the clouds to open up. That way, he wouldn't have to expose himself by crossing the open space to the river.

Good. You're thinking right.

He moved over to the embankment and crawled up the slope. For a full ten minutes, he studied the land between the river's edge and the Space Needle. A flock of birds, what looked like a few deer in the distance, but that was it.

As he was thinking about what his next move should be, a drop of water hit his neck and another his ear. He turned over onto his back, and could see several more droplets descending from the sky.

It started as a drizzle, but within moments turned into a steady rain. He lay there, his mouth wide open to catch the water. He quickly realized it wasn't the most effective way to get a drink, so he cupped his hands at the base of his chin to capture more of the moisture and guide it over his lips.

Though he was soaked and even colder than before, he felt stronger. But he knew the water was only a temporary solution. He needed calories, something with substance.

He looked back at the Space Needle. He'd had a pack with him that he'd left by the helicopter. In it had been some snacks he carried with him in case he needed energy. In the race to get away from the swarm, had the others left it behind? Maybe more than just his pack?

It was worth a look.

He took another glance around. The rain had severely cut down visibility, making it nearly impossible to know if there was any danger lurking out there. Not a great situation, but then again, it would also make it hard for anything to see him.

Staying crouched and moving as fast as he could, he made a beeline for the Needle. When he reached it, he stopped against the central column, protected from the rain by the platform above.

He checked to see if anything was pursuing him, but there was only the storm. The thought that he should capture some of the water for later passed through his mind, but he had no container on him, only three spare magazines for his rifle, his knife, a compass, and a small, very basic first-aid kit. That just made finding out if the others left something behind all the more important.

His search turned out to be both fruitful and frustrating.

A pack had been left behind. He was pretty sure it wasn't his, but it was hard to tell. The abbies had gotten ahold of it and torn it apart. The straps were still intact, but only a few pieces of the bag itself were now any larger than an inch across. Scattered all around an area just south of the Needle were the contents: a light, waterproof jacket, shredded and unusable for its intended purpose; two M16 magazine clips, dinged but otherwise looking okay; a ripped cracker box minus the crackers; and an old paperback book, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. It, too, was torn, but only down the spine into chunks of pages for the most part.

He gathered everything, even the scraps. He had no idea what he might use them for, but he couldn't help feeling that any little item he didn't retrieve could at some point be the difference between life and death.

His stomach growled, reminding him that he had promised himself he'd find food. Nothing here, though. That meant it was time to give the local vegetation a try. He had no way of knowing which plant would be edible or which was poisonous, so he picked a few that looked okay and hoped he was right.

The question now was, should he head back to his hideaway at the river, or stay here? He was worried that the rain might cause the river to swell, possibly trapping him or even drowning him inside the old building. But staying here at the base of the Needle was far too exposed. That's when he recalled the sheltered area on top of the first platform, the place where they'd found the words scratched in the floor.

It wasn't exactly abby-safe. He'd seen them crawl up the Needle chasing Pam. But if they didn't realize he was there, then maybe he'd be all right. He'd definitely be out of sight, while at the same time be in a position to see for miles in every direction.

He used his own jacket to hold the gathered items, and then climbed up the leg.

The shelter turned out to be perfect. Just outside of the cover, he was able to rig up the biggest portion of the waterproof jacket into a catch basin for the rain. And while a couple of the plants were far too bitter to eat, three turned out to be at least palatable, if not tasty.

He gathered more of the edible plants for later, and then spent a good part of the day staring at the countryside. Later, as the sun moved down toward the western horizon, he read himself to sleep.

• • •

A week passed with each day like the one before—a foray down into the scrub for food, a search for drinkable water when it wasn't raining, and hours spent scanning the land as Mitch continued to come to grips with his new reality.

On the first day of the second week, he worked up the courage to sneak out toward the woods that were about a mile away, in hopes of finding a deer or some other kind of animal he could kill and eat. He had his rifle, but knew it would be better to use his knife. If there were abbies anywhere nearby, he wasn't sure if the sound of a shot would draw them closer or scare them away. Besides, the only ammunition he had for quite possibly the rest of his life was what was now in his rifle and the five magazines back at the Needle. Best to use when only absolutely necessary.

No deer appeared that day, but he did come across a small, wild pig that he was able to wrestle to the ground and kill without much fuss.

To mark the occasion, when he returned to his Needle home, he used the hilt of his knife to scratch his name into the cement just below the letters that were already there. A mark that maybe in the future somebody would come across and know he'd been there.

All in all, a good day.

• • •

It was day ten when he found it.

He was becoming more comfortable with his living situation. And, except for a group of about twenty abbies who'd wandered through two nights before, he had no close calls with the creatures.

Since he was still working on finishing off the pig, there was no need to go out hunting that day. What he decided to do instead was search the Needle thoroughly. He'd been reading a little bit of the book every afternoon before the sun went down, and had discovered a chunk of about twenty pages was missing. He really wanted to find those, especially before they became completely ruined by the frequent rain.

He figured they could have blown into the brush surrounding the Needle, so, after making sure nothing lurked in the area, he began his search.

He was rewarded almost right away with four of the pages, and almost sat down then and there to read them after he plucked them from under a bush. Sure that the other pages had to be close, he moved on, peering carefully between the branches.

The first thing he noticed was a piece of cracked cement. He then realized that the brush seemed to be covering a walkway. He parted the branches and saw that more chunks of cement seemed to continue out away from the Needle.

Parting the bushes, he followed the hidden path all the way to where it ended at a mound of earth and brush. His curiosity piqued, Mitch pulled at some of the plants, yanking them out of the soil. His intention was to dig a little ways down to see if he could find what was buried underneath. But as he dislodged another plant, all thoughts of digging were forgotten.

At the base of the mound, hidden by the brush, was a one-foot-square stone post. The strange thing was that something was etched into the sides. While his first thought was that it must be part of whatever was buried under the mound, he soon reassessed. Anything under the dirt pile would have been there for well over a thousand years. This post, though well weathered, didn't look anywhere near that old.

It had been standing just under the brush, so about eighteen inches high, but its true height was more than that because it canted at an angle of at least forty-five degrees. He figured something had knocked it nearly all the way to the ground. An earthquake, perhaps. Erosion from the rain. Maybe even a recent blast from Mt. Rainier. Any of those things could have done it.

He moved in for a closer look at the etching. He had originally assumed they were letters, but they weren't like any letters he'd seen before. Symbols? Could be, but he had no idea what they meant. He leaned around the post, and saw that the symbols on each of the three visible sides were different.

He thought the pattern probably continued on the side hidden by the tilt of the post, but he wanted to make sure, so he grabbed it and gave it a test pull to see if it would be possible to move the stone more upright. It rocked a bit, but he knew it wouldn't be easy. Pushing might work better than pulling.

Moving around it, he put his shoulder against the post, set his feet, and then shoved with all his strength. It resisted for a moment before inching upward. When he got it as vertical as he could, he kept it braced against his shoulder and then kicked dirt into the dent in the ground created when it was leaning. After stomping down the soil, he eased back, releasing the post. It tilted away from him an inch, making him worried that it was going to topple over the other way, but it stopped.

Sure enough, symbols were on the fourth side, but fewer than on the other sides. That didn't make them any more understandable, though.

What the hell did they mean? And who—or *what*—had put the post here in the first place?

As he stared at it, he noticed something low on the fourth side that tilting it

up had revealed. Another cut in the stone, but deeper than the symbols, just peeking up out of the dirt near the bottom of the post. He knelt down and began scraping the soil away.

Once the area was cleared, he stared dumbfounded at what he'd uncovered.

Carved into the stone was a life-sized human right hand. The digits were splayed so that each finger had its own, individual indentation. It reminded him of a handprint someone might have made in concrete.

Unable to help himself, he stretched out on the ground and positioned his palm in front of the cutout and compared them. The hole in the stone would accommodate a hand a bit bigger than his, but not much. Feeling a sudden, intense urge to try it out, he placed his hand into it.

The stone was cold and damp from the earth it had been buried in, and felt oddly comfortable.

Kind of like—

Before he could finish the thought, he jerked his hand out of the cutout, grunting in surprise. Shaking it several times, he looked at the pad of his index finger. Something had poked it, even drawn blood. Must have been a chip or the edge of a crack. Whatever it was, it got him good and deep.

He leaned in close to the carved index finger, searching the surface for what had stabbed him, but it looked smooth and unbroken. Slow and careful, he touched the surface with his left index finger. While he found nothing that might have jabbed him, what he did discover was even weirder.

The cold, damp stone was neither cold nor damp anymore. It was warm. Very warm.

He checked higher on the post. It was also warm.

Moving around it, he touched each side and found more heat.

Slowly he backed away, as if going any faster might cause the post to explode.

But it didn't explode.

It hummed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brett Battles is the Barry Award winning author of over eighteen novels. He is one of the founding members of Killer Year, and a member of International Thriller Writers, and Mystery Writers of America. Brett lives and writes in Los Angeles.