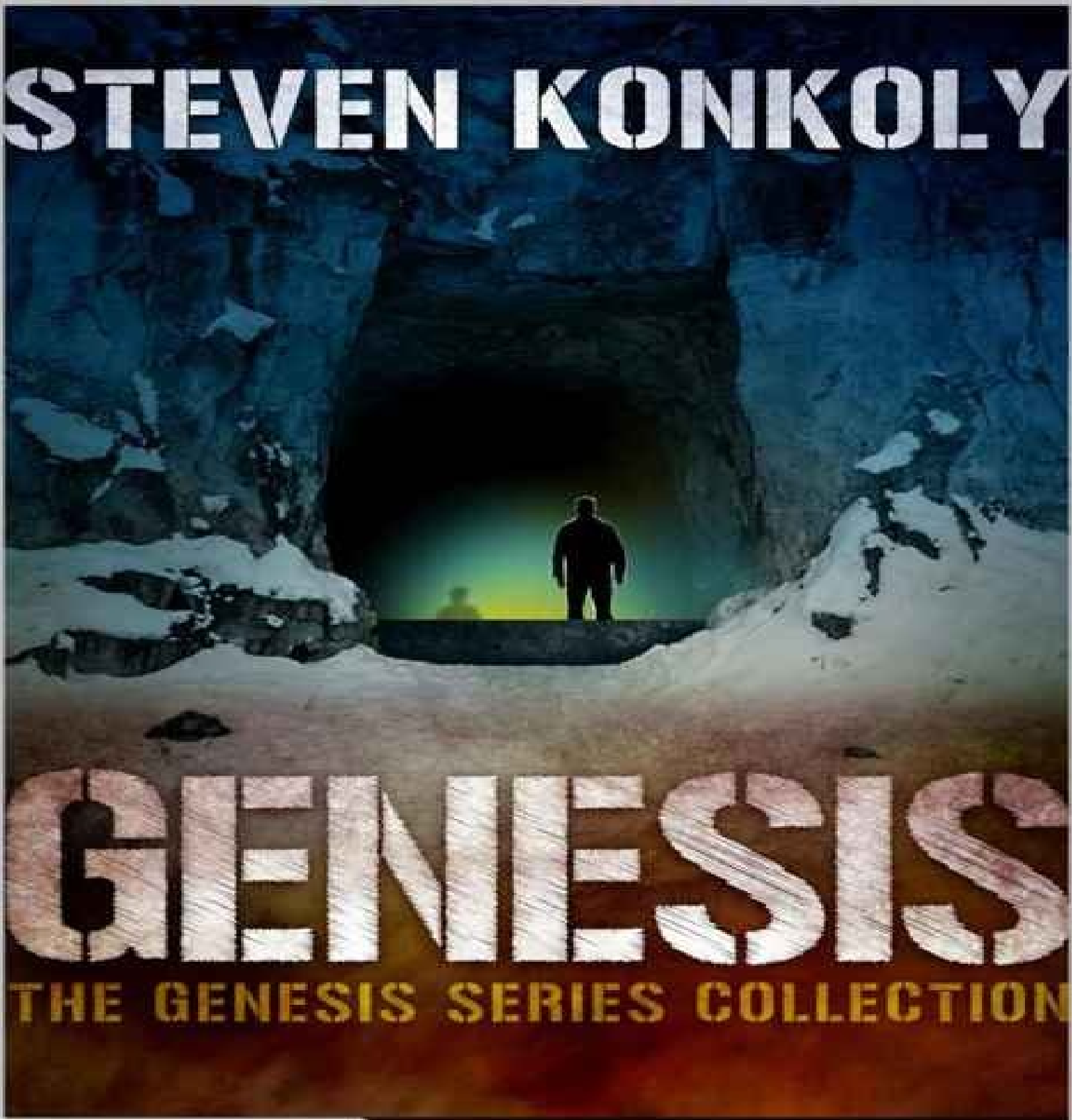
STEVEN KONKOLY



GENESIS

THE GENESIS SERIES COLLECTION

kindle worlds

WAYWARD PINES

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Wayward Pines

GENESIS

Parts I, II, and III of The Genesis Series Collection

by Steven Konkoly

Kindle Worlds

Contents

Foreword by Blake Crouch

Part I “First Contact”

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Part II “Last Betrayal”
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Part III “Sanctuary”
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52

Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62
Chapter 63
About the Author

Foreword by Blake Crouch

Welcome to the world of Wayward Pines. One of the most frequently asked questions I get with regards to my *Wayward Pines* series is, “But how exactly did David Pilcher secure the valley and rebuild the town?” It’s a great question. When Pilcher and his crew emerge from suspended animation after their almost two thousand year sleep, they find a world not only reclaimed by nature, but overrun with aberrations, the horrifying creatures that humanity has evolved into. These things are fast, bloodthirsty, and absolutely lethal. Even worse, they number in the hundreds of millions in what used to be North America, and the valley where Pilcher wants to rebuild the town of Wayward Pines is *crawling* with them.

So…how exactly did David Pilcher secure the valley and rebuild the town?

This question has been on my mind since the inception of the *Wayward Pines* series but I never really addressed it in the trilogy (*Pines, Wayward* and *The Last Town).*

One of the beautiful things about Kindle Worlds is that it allows anyone to come and play in the universe of *Wayward Pines*, and to explore aspects of the story that not only interest them, but which perhaps I never wrote about.

Enter Steve Konkoly and his prequel to Wayward Pines, the *Genesis* series. I was over the moon when I heard that Steve was going to dip a toe into *Wayward*

Pines. I admire his writing very much. No one on the planet writes action with more authority and nobody knows weapons like Steve. Prior to becoming a writer, Steve was in various specialized Navy and Marine Corps units that worked with all manner of regular and elite teams. He *knows his stuff*. So can you imagine how much fun it is to read Steve's take on Adam Hassler, my Wayward Pines Delta Force-trained Nomad trying to help Pilcher on a veritable suicide mission to clear the valley of abbies? I'll answer that for you. You can't imagine it. It's exhilarating. You just have to read this book and trust me—you are going to lose your mind over this story.

I never imagined when I opened *Wayward Pines* to Kindle Worlds that something like *Genesis* would come along. As the creator of this universe it is such a thrill when a work comes along that not only adds to it, but makes it better. Whether you're a fan of the *Wayward* series, or are exploring it for the first time, I can't recommend *Genesis* highly enough.

Blake Crouch

Part I

“First Contact”

Chapter 1

He remembered everything. The broad mosaic of memories crystalized behind stark details of his last sentient moments in the suspension unit: the artificially pleasing lavender rose scent; the soft, monaural broadcast of “Dream Weaver”; the inexplicably thick needle. He squeezed his eyelids tighter. *Had it happened yet? Fuck me if it hasn’t.* He didn’t want to be awake for the needle. The terror accelerated with his first conscious breath, the pleasant floral imprint replaced by a chokingly pungent, sulfuric stench. *I have to get out of here!*

He tried to stand up, but found his body locked in place. It was more than the restraints. His back and abdominal muscles fired, straining to move his torso, but nothing shifted. Full compression. Labored breathing. Cold air flowed over his face. He felt like he had been buried alive with his head above the ground. *Fucking Pilcher.* He should have known better than to trust that lunatic.

He envisioned Pilcher’s little blond sociopath pouring a jar of honey over his head and kicking him in the face before leaving him to be eaten alive in the forest. She was a piece of work. They all were—which is why he had been out of his fucking skull to get in this machine. A hollow, low-grade static sound reached his ears, followed by muffled voices. He kept his head perfectly still, afraid to open his eyes and discover the truth. An intense light penetrated his eyelids, forcing him to turn his head.

“You can open your eyes now, Adam. You’ve made it,” said a synthesized voice.

He turned his head and lifted his eyelids, recognizing Pilcher’s shiny, bald head through the two-inch-wide, vertical window. *Maybe I was wrong.*

Fluorescent lights above his head illuminated the capsule, and he looked down to see the last of a black substance disappear through the sievelike floor. The straps holding his wrists and ankles to the molded chair retracted before he could look up.

“Adam, what is the last thing you remember before falling asleep?” said the voice.

Falling asleep? That’s a nice euphemism for being gassed.

“Flowers and ‘Dream Weaver.’”

The capsule door hissed and retracted several inches, helped the rest of the way by human hands. David Pilcher leaned in and extended a hand. “Welcome to the future.”

Adam Hassler reached for the edges of the hatch. “Can you be a little more specific?”

“As I promised, you are standing on the planet Earth, 1,800 years later,” said Pilcher, hand still pushed into the capsule.

Hassler took his hand and shook it quickly, still wary of a possible trick. Pilcher had every reason to dispose of him in 2013 and little reason to keep him around for 3813. He’d known that showing up at the superstructure on New Year’s Eve, but the reward at the other end had been worth the risk. *Could this all be possible?*

“Do you mind? I need to get the fuck out of this coffin,” said Hassler, pulling his naked body out of the seat.

“Let the reanimation team help you out. Your muscles and senses haven’t degraded in the slightest, but nearly everyone experiences a degree of vertigo during the first several minutes. Blurred vision, disorientation and a general feeling of lightheadedness will continue for several hours, I’m afraid. We’ll keep a good eye on you,” said Pilcher.

Hassler eased himself back into the cold molded seat and shivered. He noticed that the skin on his arms had a sickly, gray pallor.

“Your color will return by tonight. The post-suspension transfusion was done

directly inside the machine," said Pilcher, pricking the thick-gauge needle attached to the wall. "You really should have read the memo."

"I'm not big on reading direction manuals. So, is anyone going to help me out of here, or did I miss the magic word too?"

With both feet planted on the steel floor, he felt stable pulling on the grey, fleece-lined, knee-length robe provided by the reanimation team. Once the robe was in place, the two men flanking him resumed their grip. Almost a little too tight in his opinion.

"Did she make it?" said Hassler.

Pilcher's normally dour expression softened. "She's still in suspension."

"But she's fine?"

"Unfortunately, we never know until the reanimation process starts. We've lost three out of one hundred and twenty-one. Odds are strongly in your—her favor."

"What happened to the others?" said Hassler.

"One never reanimated. As for the other two, there's a reason we ask what you remember before opening the hatch. Recall of the final moments before falling asleep should be crystal clear when you wake. If not— early research indicated irreversible problems."

"What would have happened if I had answered incorrectly?"

"We would have terminated you inside the capsule," said Pilcher.

"Wonderful."

"Cheer up, Adam. You've travelled through time. Statistically, you have a 98.3% chance of spending the rest of your life with the woman of your dreams," said Pilcher, turning for the exit.

Just the thought of it lifted him out of the post-suspension funk momentarily. He wasn't fully convinced that he was alive, but if he could be together with Theresa Burke, it really didn't matter. They walked for several moments before Pilcher stopped and turned.

"You haven't asked."

“Asked what?” said Hassler, wondering if he failed some final bizarre test that determined his mental state.

“Everyone asks about the outside world.”

Hassler shrugged his shoulders. “I didn’t think it mattered, but since you brought it up—were you right?”

“Of course I was. The world as we know it is gone.”

Chapter 2

The promised vertigo struck him a few steps into the vast storage facility, dispelling any notion that his escorts were a specially arranged security detail. Without their firm grip on his arms, he would have tumbled hard to the concrete floor or wandered in front of a speeding forklift. Sounds of heavy industry echoed off the rough-cut stone walls, reaching his ears from multiple directions as they approached the doors leading out of the cavern. He turned his head when the doors slid apart, catching a quick glimpse of the work through the maze of storage cylinders and forty-foot-high industrial shelving units.

He saw a dozen men and women in white hard hats hoist a massive section of metallic fence upright, using a pulley system attached to the ceiling by cables. It looked like something suitable for *Jurassic Park*, with thick concertina wire coiled along the top. Either Pilcher was hell-bent on keeping his subjects inside Wayward Pines, or he was worried about keeping something out. Neither scenario gave him a warm and fuzzy feeling about his upcoming stay.

One level up, Pilcher departed, and Hassler was led to a sterile, surgical room, where he sat on a shiny, metal table waiting for Dr. Miter—another key player in Pilcher's "land of misfit toys." Dr. Eugene Miter's brilliant career as an orthopedic surgeon had been cut short in 2009 by a felony DUI in Denver, involving a mid-day accident that left a thirty-three-year-old mother and her five-year-old son in serious condition. Beyond the .17 blood alcohol concentration suggested by Breathalyzer tests, toxicology reports indicated a therapeutic level of oxycodone in his system at the time of the accident. If this hadn't been enough to end his career, the fact that the accident occurred on the

way back to his office, for a full afternoon of surgery, sealed his fate.

Dr. Miter effectively dropped off the face of the planet in 2010 while awaiting trial. Authorities found his court-ordered GPS ankle monitor on the kitchen counter next to a document bequeathing all of his belongings to the family involved in the accident. Pilcher liked to collect wounded souls, a trend Hassler uncovered long before Pilcher ever approached him about the Secret Service's investigation into the missing agents. At first it raised alarm bells, but the more he learned about Pilcher's plan, the more it made sense. Who the fuck else would volunteer for something like this?

A hunched-over man in a white lab coat entered the room. Dr. Miter.

"How do you feel?" said Miter, walking over to the stainless-steel sink next to the operating table.

"Dizzy. Disoriented. Cold. Can't Pilcher afford to heat this place?"

"It's a comfortable seventy degrees in the superstructure. Perfect humidity. You're going to feel cold for about twenty-four hours until your body adjusts. Do you mind lying back?" he said, still washing his hands.

"Sure. So, there's no muscle degradation?" said Hassler, lowering himself to the table.

The cold steel instantly penetrated his robe. *Seventy degrees, my ass.*

"None, but it will take you about thirty-six hours to regain one hundred percent musculoskeletal balance. You'll stop bumping into walls within twelve," he said, turning around with white rubber gloves.

After a cursory medical exam, Miter walked around the table to a wheeled instrument tray and picked up a small syringe.

"What's that for?"

"Microchipping. Didn't you read the memo?"

"How long was this damn memo?" said Hassler.

One of his escorts shrugged his shoulders while the other circled the table and stood next to his legs.

"Flip over for me?"

“Why am I being microchipped?”

“Safety reasons,” said Miter.

Hassler twisted onto his stomach, straightening the robe underneath him to prevent unnecessary skin on metal contact.

“I’m going to insert the chip in your left gastrocnemius muscle. Left calf. This is going to hurt—a lot,” said Miter.

At least he was an honest doctor.

Chapter 3

Hassler woke to fluorescent lights and a grating voice he had hoped to avoid during his stay in the superstructure.

“Rise and shine, lover boy. Mr. Pilcher would like to see you in the operations center at 1530 hours. Gives you two hours to unfuck yourself.”

“I was really hoping you were one of the three that didn’t wake up, Pam. When I didn’t see you on a leash at David’s side earlier, I got excited.”

“Happy to disappoint you. Level 2. Past the medical labs. Don’t be late,” she said and shut the door before he could respond.

He meant what he said. For a twenty-year-old girl whose life before Pilcher was framed by a long list of foster families and a string of dismissed underage prostitution bookings on Chicago’s north side, she exuded a maddening level of arrogance. He had no idea how their paths had crossed, but he suspected it occurred in October of 2006. Pamela Hanson’s fast-track to turning tricks in a south Chicago crack house ended after a failed attempt to collect blowjob money from a group of drunken students in a Northwestern University fraternity house. After sneaking out of Saint Francis Hospital in Evanston on October 10th, her trail went cold—and nobody appeared to care. Pilcher’s last public appearance was a paid speaking engagement at Northwestern University, on October 12, 2006. Not hard to connect the dots, though he’d always pegged the billionaire scientist as more of an elite-call-girl type than a dumpster diver. It didn’t matter. Pam was here to stay.

Admittedly, she played the role of pit bull like a pro. Stunningly beautiful and physically imposing, she carried herself with a frightening, detached coolness.

She'd undoubtedly seen his file, and he didn't detect the slightest break in her confidence when he was present. Four years with 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment before recruitment into 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta—where he spent the next six years leading some of the most highly trained special operators in existence. He had yet to meet another man that didn't take a few steps back upon learning his background. Pam never demonstrated the slightest bit of caution or interest—only a keen intensity for fucking with him.

Hassler rubbed his eyes and glanced at the digital clock imbedded into the wall. 13:22. He'd been asleep for nearly eighteen hours. It felt ten times longer than the two millennia that had passed in suspension. He glanced at his temporary home, thankful that he had signed on for a different deal. The black and white linoleum tiled floor was by far the most interesting feature in a room that brought pleasure to the drabbest memories of the U.S. Army's sparsest quarters. The prospect of spending the rest of one's life in this fluorescent hell would certainly drive the suicide rate through the roof. He hoped one of those stainless-steel silos was packed with antidepressants. If not, Pilcher would be lucky to have half of his crew alive by the time Wayward Pines was constructed.

He stepped on the cold floor and searched the closet for the clothing he had brought to the superstructure. He didn't recognize any of the items folded neatly on the closet shelves. Khakis, greys…the clothing didn't look any more exciting than the wall color. He checked the waist on one of the pairs of khakis. 34. At least they got the size right. Further inspection yielded underwear, socks, boots, running shoes, shower shoes, and a belt.

He stood back from the closet and took in the entire room. *Wow. He really went all out.* The man *was* worth hundreds of billions of dollars, and this was the best he offered the hundred or so people who volunteered to carry on his crazy vision of perpetuating the human species. He really hoped Pilcher put more effort into recreating Wayward Pines—or it was going to take more than a silo

full of drugs to keep the population from jumping off the cliffs.

Chapter 4

“What do you think?”

Arnold Pope rubbed the blond stubble on his chin and contemplated Pilcher’s question. He studied the live video feed of Hassler eating alone in the cafeteria before responding.

“Hard to say. Frankly, I’m surprised he didn’t have an accident in suspension,” said Pope.

“I suggested an accident before suspension,” said Pam.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” said Pope.

“His presence is going to be a problem,” she said. “Everyone knows he was a last minute addition. Once they figure out he gets to live in town…”

“We don’t really have a choice,” said Pilcher.

“We have people that can make this run,” said Pam.

“Not like him. His background makes him especially valuable given the circumstances.”

“He hasn’t run a Delta team in over sixteen years—”

“Eighteen hundred and sixteen years,” interrupted Pope.

“That’s growing really old, Arnold. Nobody finds it funny anymore,” said Pam.

“I think it’s pretty hilarious,” said the technician seated next to the group.

“Nobody gives a shit what you think, Ted. Watch your screens. Let’s assign Marcus and Mustin to the detail. They have recent combat experience—”

“Marcus and Mustin are needed in the superstructure. Hassler leads the team, and that’s final. Keep a close eye on him, Arnold. Pam, a word, please,” said

Pilcher, marching toward the hallway door.

Pope watched her sulk away with great satisfaction. He loved nothing more than to see the big man pull hard on her leash when she strayed. Behind all of her bravado and arrogance, she was little more than Pilcher's errand girl. Still, he was cautious around the crazy bitch. Pam's fanatical devotion to Pilcher had earned her a seat at the table right next to the big man, and he knew enough about politics not to piss her off. She had David's ear, and if he'd learned one thing about Pilcher over the past eleven years—whoever had his ear exercised an inordinate amount of power.

"Any problems with the microchips?" said Pope.

"Not that I can tell. I'm tracking all eight members of the team. Larsen is in the warehouse again, taking in the sights. The Stewarts are taking a long shower together. The rest of them are in the cafeteria, including Hassler. Signals are strong," said Ted Upshaw.

"What do you think will happen outside?"

"Demos proved we could track the microchips up to four miles using the active pulse arrays. With the sensors installed a few thousand feet above the ground, we'll have clear lines of sight to maximize the range. I don't foresee any difficulty," said Ted.

"No blinds spots in the superstructure?"

Ted shook his head. "Too early to tell, but I don't expect any. Mr. Pilcher paid for the best surveillance equipment on the market in 2033. I was there to ensure it."

He patted Ted Upshaw on the shoulder. "Let me know if you detect any issues with the gear—or the team."

"Should I make the same report to Pam?"

"Anything you report to me should be sent to Pam…and vice versa," said Pope, eliciting a raised eyebrow from Ted.

"I'd rather deal directly with you."

"Unfortunately, that's not an option right now, but if we play this smart and

work together—you never know," said Pope.

Chapter 5

He kept telling himself this had to be a joke—half-expecting Pilcher and a white-hatted chef to appear in the doorway carrying a silver platter containing an exquisitely prepared surf-and-turf dinner. Everyone stands and claps, laughing about the grey plastic tray containing indistinguishable scoops of nutrient slop. Slapping him on the back and congratulating him as he cuts into his juicy, red steak. Instead, he finished the meal in abject silence, questioning his decision to pursue Theresa Burke eighteen hundred years into the future.

His first twenty-four hours in the year 3813 hadn't been impressive. Substandard living quarters, shitty food, microchipping—the list went on. He lifted a clear plastic cup above his head and muttered a toast before downing the metallic-tasting apple juice. *Welcome to the future.* If he was *actually* in the future. Pilcher was a megalomaniac with more power and control issues than ten African dictators combined. Add enough money to recreate the superdome inside of a mountain, and you had an extremely dangerous man. He'd abducted several hundred civilians for the project, on top of kidnapping and murdering federal agents. Contrary to his disarming appearance, David Pilcher sat at the very top of Hassler's twisted sociopath list.

The more he thought about it, the more he wished he had shot Pilcher dead at the Volunteer Park Water Tower. He could have blown the Wayward Pines investigation wide open, simultaneously exposing Pilcher's insane plan and solving hundreds of missing persons cases. The publicity alone would have guaranteed him a fast-track to a director-level position with the Secret Service. He held the winning ticket to a golden life in the twenty-first century, but he

didn’t keep it. Killing Pilcher brought Ethan Burke back from the dead—and the thought of losing a chance to spend the rest of his life with the woman he loved ultimately kept his pistol holstered.

He just prayed this wasn’t a sick hoax, with Pilcher and his band of misfits at the helm. *What if Pilcher had sunk most of his fortune and the better half of his life into the pursuit of this dream, only to discover that it didn’t work? Would he abandon the project? How would he respond to the realization that he would never get to shepherd humanity’s last outpost?* There was no way he could have abandoned his dream. This crazy fantasy had to be more than an altruistic act to preserve the human race. Pilcher had God-complex issues. That was obvious from the start.

Now Hassler was genuinely worried for the first time since “reanimation.” For all he knew, they could have gassed everyone after the New Year’s Eve party and woken them up four hours later. How would anyone know? Pilcher announces that the atmosphere in 3813 is toxic and they have to spend the rest of their lives inside, with him as their camp commandant.

Why didn’t I think of this before stepping into Pilcher’s ridiculous-looking machine? Theresa Burke. His obsession had blinded him to the possibilities, and Pilcher used it against him. Pilcher knew he didn’t come to the water tower to put a bullet in his head. He wouldn’t have allowed him to set foot in the tower with a weapon if there had been any doubt. Every step of the way had been meticulously calculated to coax him into this cave, *and he’d missed every clue*. He could live with that, if the year was 3813. He’d break Pilcher’s fucking neck if they were still in the twenty-first century. The digital clock mounted on the cafeteria wall read 15:11. He decided to take another look around before heading to the operations center. The moment of truth rapidly approached, which might necessitate a better understanding of the superstructure’s layout.

Chapter 6

A quick stroll through the cafeteria level revealed little beyond what he had already seen on his quest to locate the showers. Laundry room with several pairs of front-loading machines. Exercise room with less equipment than your typical chain hotel. Rec area that didn't meet the minimum standards of an army barracks TV room. Library featuring half-filled shelves. Once again, he couldn't shake the feeling that this had to be a joke. *Does Pilcher really expect people to live out the rest of their lives hidden inside this fluorescent tomb—while a picturesque town flourishes below them?* He had to be missing something.

Hassler descended two flights to the first level and turned into a long, black and white tiled hallway directly opposite the cavern entrance vestibule. The hallway extended at least a hundred yards to another stairwell that rose through all four levels of the facility. He walked a quarter of the way down the hallway before deciding he'd seen enough. Evenly spaced doors featuring compact observation windows and keycard slots marked the rest of the hallway. It reminded him of a CIA detainee facility he had utilized on several occasions in Diego Garcia, but on a much larger scale.

He spent a few minutes inside the sliding doors to the cavern, studying the peculiar work project underway several football fields away. Reaching the second level, he passed the surgical room and windowless doors labeled as laboratories. He passed a conspicuously unmarked door with a keycard slot and smirked, wondering if he'd just discovered the entrance to Pilcher's secret lair. A few more steps brought him to another unmarked door, which opened as soon as he arrived. An unfamiliar face greeted him.

“Alan Fletcher. Head of security,” he said, gesturing for Hassler to enter.

Dressed in the same earth-tone outfit worn by the rest of the superstructure’s population, Fletcher sported a few extra items. A thick, rigger’s belt suspended dual radio holsters on his left thigh, opposite a pepper spray pouch, black knife sheath—estimated five- to six-inch blade—and handcuffs. The radios looked smaller than a typical Motorola. Almost futuristic. A wireless earpiece peeked through the thick tuft of brown hair that escaped his olive green ball cap. Hassler nodded and entered, noting that Fletcher didn’t offer a handshake—or the slightest change of expression. If this had been the start of an undercover “meet and greet” in a Lake Oswego apartment block, Hassler would have walked away. He didn’t have that choice here.

The unpleasant vibe continued two doors down in a spacious conference room lined with flat-screen workstations. Pilcher nodded at Fletcher when they entered, silently dismissing him to go wherever the head of security for a self-contained, sealed mountain fortress goes when not playing bouncer at unmarked doors. The door closed, leaving him alone with Pilcher and another utterly baffling recruitment choice. Arnold Pope.

Dismissed with prejudice from the York County Sheriff’s Department in 1999, Pope spent three inglorious years chasing one slippery security job after another across New England, until he filed for and received an Idaho driver’s license in November 2002. By March 2003, he held forty-two concealed-carry firearms permits, covering every state that required one—including Maine, where the state’s attorney general had publically promised that Pope would never carry a weapon in public again.

He broke that promise three years later. Pilcher’s money tended to inflate bank accounts and induce selective amnesia wherever and whenever it appeared. Overnight, Pope went from midnight-shift security guard at a large lumberyard outside of Hartford, Connecticut, to one of Pilcher’s henchmen. The trend was disturbing, and no doubt extended to everyone that had volunteered for duty in the superstructure. Everyone here left unwanted baggage behind—including

himself.

“Adam, you’re looking much better. Please, take a seat,” said Pilcher, indicating a chair next to Pope.

“You remember Arnold?”

“Of course,” said Hassler, noting Pope’s forced smile.

Pope wore the same gear as Fletcher, minus the pepper spray and handcuffs. Hassler added a knife to the mental inventory of gear he would possess within three seconds of discovering that he was a prisoner in Pilcher’s mountain gulag.

“I assume you’ve noticed that most of the crew is awake and hard at work on Wayward Pines,” started Pilcher.

“I had hoped they might be finished, but the warehouse looked untouched,” said Hassler.

“Wishful thinking, Adam. I woke you twenty-five days past the first reanimation wave, roughly thirty-five days earlier than scheduled. Rebuilding Wayward Pines will be an all-hands effort, and I can’t spare a single hand. I don’t blame you one bit for hoping, though. We have a long two years ahead of us.”

“Two years?”

“At least. It’s April 25th, which is right around the first day Wayward Pines sees an average daily temperature above freezing.”

“You woke the first wave on April Fool’s day?” said Hassler.

“Ninety-nine percent of the decision was practical,” he said, cracking a smile. “We can’t start excavating until the ground is more pliable. As you can imagine, there’s more to recreating Wayward Pines than building houses and planting flowers. It has to feel authentic on every level, from the creek running through the middle of town to the hill beyond the playground—”

“Most of the people in deep freeze never saw Wayward Pines,” said Hassler.

“But many of them have seen it. Some were residents—”

“You took residents? What was the total population of Wayward Pines?”

“1,132.”

“Jesus. It’s a fucking miracle your operation didn’t attract more attention than it did.”

“I have you to thank for that,” said Pilcher, eliciting a grin from Pope.

“Back to the two years?”

“Right. I figure it will take us all of the spring and most of the summer to prepare the site for heavy construction. After that, we have an extensive network of roads to build. Sewer and water infrastructure. Electrical. All before we dig the first foundation. This work has to be finished by late October. We can frame houses in the winter, but we can’t dig without risking damage to the equipment. The temperatures range well below freezing in November.”

“Well, I’m humbled that you think I’ll make that big of a difference, but I’ve never operated heavy machinery or designed towns,” said Hassler.

“Nice try, Adam. You’re not going back into suspension. I didn’t wake you up early to learn how to drive a bulldozer. I need you to lead the first site survey.”

“Into Wayward Pines?”

“Into what used to be Wayward Pines,” said Pilcher. “The town is buried, based on our calculations.”

Hassler raised an eyebrow.

“Eighteen hundred years of sediment buildup, rock slides, decomposed pine needles, fallen trees. Probably a forest fire or two. Nature carried on while we slept. We built the superstructure’s second exit fifty feet above the 2013 surface. I was off by ten feet. The original Wayward Pines sits under forty feet of packed soil and rock.”

“Good God,” said Hassler.

“I’ve put together a team for the job. Land surveyor for basic calculations. Biologist familiar with most forms of flora and fauna found in mountain habitats. Tracker with expedition and military experience. Trail guides familiar with the Idaho mountains. I want a quick assessment of the site, extending out of the canyon. I foresee a twenty-four to forty-eight hour operation.”

“Will I be doing this in a bulky orange suit?” said Hassler.

“Is that your weak attempt to avoid asking me about the conditions on the outside?” said Pilcher.

Hassler shrugged.

“The air tested clean. Pristine, actually. Better than what we regularly inhaled in 2013. We took samples for two weeks straight, looking for spores, airborne viruses, and any biological adaptations that could prove deadly,” he said, shaking his head.

“We found nothing unusual. UV radiation levels are within the normal range, indicating a healthy ozone layer, so you won’t have to wear 1,000 SPF like most scientists predicted. Without humans, the earth seems to have recovered.”

“We’re gone?” he said, leaning forward.

“As far as we can tell. I acquired two AN/PRD-13 signals intelligence systems for the project. I believe you’ve personally used this system before?”

Hassler nodded.

“Twenty-two days of recorded digital feed shows no emissions in any of the previously used radio-wave spectrums. No satellites in the night sky. No airplanes. The earth is once again quiet.”

“You sound happy about that,” said Hassler.

“To be perfectly honest, I wish I had been wrong about our species—but I wasn’t. I’m happy I pursued this project. Humanity gets a second chance.”

He doubted the sincerity of the first part of Pilcher’s statement.

“So, I lead a team in, make sure the bears haven’t mutated into twenty-foot-tall, two-headed killing machines and report back to the superstructure?”

“Are you sure he’s the right person to lead the team?” said Pope.

“He talks!” said Hassler. “I thought you went deaf and dumb in suspension. It would have been an improvement.”

Pope barely restrained himself.

“Adam, please. There’s no need to be uncivil,” said Pilcher, turning to Pope. “And yes, an ex-Delta Force officer is exactly who we need in charge of this

operation. I don’t expect fire-breathing dragons, but there’s no reason to throw caution to the wind. The greater Sawtooth area hosted an abundant mountain lion and wolf population in 2013. The expedition will be armed.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. What’s up with the fence?”

He registered a look of passing surprise on Pilcher’s face. Pope didn’t respond.

“It’s a basic precaution. Part of your job will be to scout two proposed fence sites south of Wayward Pines. I have enough fencing to span the distance between the cliffs, effectively sealing out predators.”

Or sealing in his captives. He still wasn’t convinced this wasn’t bullshit.

“Does it look the same down there—aside from forty feet of dirt covering the town?”

“Let’s take a look,” said Pilcher, and Hassler started to get out of his seat.

Pilcher cast him a puzzled glance as he grabbed a remote control from the conference table. A single button press activated the eighty-inch flat-screen monitor behind Pope. A high-definition image of a fog-obscured forest materialized, panning outward until the bottom of the eastern cliff wall appeared, framing the former location of Wayward Pines. This could be footage from anywhere.

“I was hoping to see it for myself. Breathe in some of that fresh air,” said Hassler.

Pope glanced at Pilcher, who broke out laughing. Even Pope joined in for a few muffled expressions of amusement.

“No wonder you’re not the least bit interested in learning about the outside! You’re not convinced any of this is real!”

“The thought crossed my mind,” said Hassler, balancing his muscles for the quick series of movements required to disable Pope.

“Ha! I underestimated you, Adam. You’re far more intelligent than any of your test scores indicate. Everybody asked about the outside, but nobody demanded to see it with their own eyes.”

“I think Mr. Hassler’s circumstances—”

“Take it easy, Arnold. I’m not impugning your intelligence. You, of all people, had no reason to doubt my word.”

Pope didn’t catch the insult buried in Pilcher’s words.

“I’d like to see it,” said Hassler.

“Of course. We can take a trip right now,” he said, turning to Pope. “Inform Alan that we are headed topside.”

“Right away,” said Pope.

Chapter 7

A freight elevator in the warehouse took them to an interior hangar, where two men in grey coveralls worked on a partially dismantled, bronze-painted utility helicopter. He had no idea what type, but it looked familiar. Definitely not a military bird, but big enough to fly his proposed team around. *Why the fuck was he conducting ground reconnaissance if they had a helicopter?* Pilcher must have read the question on his face.

“The entire superstructure was kept in as close to a vacuum state as possible for most of the eighteen hundred years, but certain materials still degraded. Petroleum-based products like rubber and plastic suffered some brittleness, which isn’t a big deal on something like a television set or handheld radio. A helicopter is a different story altogether. The failure of any single component in flight could spell disaster. I kept duplicate parts for the helicopter under a separate vacuum-seal system, to ensure we’d have backups. It could take a month or more to inspect the entire helicopter and make the necessary replacements.”

“No hurry on that one,” said Hassler.

“Precisely,” said Pilcher.

He led them up a metallic stairway to a platform near the roof. A keycard-operated door stood in the corner of the platform. Once through, they climbed a short ladder to a circular hatch with a wheel. Pope spun the wheel several turns until the hatch hissed, and the green light next to the ladder turned yellow. He pushed the metal hatch open, bathing them in sunlight. Cold air rushed inside, and Hassler found himself instinctively hesitant to breathe. Releasing his

paranoia, he took several deep breaths. *Incredible.*

"A little windy and brisk, but otherwise a gorgeous day. Welcome to the year 3813."

They climbed into the open, buffeted by the wind. He'd never experienced acrophobia, but the combination of heights and a stiff wind caused him to tense. After a few moments, he realized there was no chance of the breeze carrying him over the side. He followed Pope and Pilcher until a sea of fog opened in front of them. Most of the Wayward Pines site was blocked from their view, with patches of dark green opening and closing randomly.

"I'm afraid it might not be the conclusive proof you're seeking, but I assure you that Wayward Pines is not down there. Unfortunately, we're plagued by fog this time of the year. Warmer, spring air starts to push down the canyon," he said, pointing southwest, "and hits the cold air pocket trapped in Wayward Pines. It typically clears up by early May, give or take a week."

"I believed you as soon as Pope opened the hatch. The air is different."

"It most certainly is."

"Will the surveyor be able to take line of sight measurements?" said Hassler.

"Most of the fog occurs at treetop level. At least that's what it was like before the final crew went into suspension."

"How much time do I have to train the team?"

"The team has all the training they need. They were handpicked for this job. I need you on the ground tomorrow morning. We don't have another day to spare," said Pilcher.

Of course. He didn't like the idea of infiltrating an unfamiliar environment with an unproven team, but what choice did he have?

"Was I handpicked too?"

"You sort of fell in my lap. Let's just say that I was pleased when you asked to come along."

I bet you were. It saved you from having to kill another federal agent.

Chapter 8

Hassler met his team an hour later in a vacant conference room within the operation section. Their guarded postures, reinforced by his observations in the cafeteria, gave Hassler the distinct impression that they were mostly strangers. Like him, they had all eaten alone, except for the middle-aged couple holding hands. Pilcher may have handpicked this crew for the initial site survey, but they weren't a team. The word clusterfuck came to mind. Maybe he was letting too much of his military rigor bleed into the equation. All they had to do was hike around for a day or two and avoid being eaten by mountain lions. Not exactly a difficult task.

Pilcher led him to the back of the room and asked everyone to take their seats. Pam and Pope, ever present whenever their master appeared, slithered into place next to the door. He surveyed the group and made some guesses.

—Dark-haired, crew-cut guy with thick musculature is ex-military. Something on the fringes of Special Operations. Too many muscles for a Tier One operator. Possibly Tier Two. Security.

—Shoulder-length, sandy-haired guy with angular face looks ex-military. Lean, muscular physique. Something about the intensity of his blue eyes confirms this assumption. Security.

—Female. Late twenties with blond dreadlocks. Tanned, weathered skin. Thousand-yard stare. Climber.

—Male. Hispanic, close-cropped black hair. Tall, thin frame. Technical support. Surveyor or biologist.

—Male. Soft Asian features. Slightly overweight. Brown, thick-rimmed

glasses strapped to head. Bored look. Biologist. Other guy is surveyor.

—Male and female couple. Rings. Married. Late thirties with basic haircuts. Premature wrinkles. Worked outdoors. Sad, intelligent eyes.

They had carried some serious baggage across two millennia. He didn't like the idea of a damaged, married couple on the team, no matter how simple the operation sounded. Whatever they had done to wind up on Pilcher's recruitment list would surface between them at some point—with devastating consequences. Pilcher kicked off the introductions.

"Team, I'd like to introduce you to the team leader, Adam Hassler. Mr. Hassler spent ten years on active duty, split between the 75th Ranger Regiment and Delta Force. He might be slightly overqualified for the survey team," he said, drawing out a few laughs from the group.

"Everyone here received three weeks of tactical training before suspension, qualifying in small arms marksmanship, small unit tactics, cover and concealment—the basics. I don't anticipate anyone will have to put those skills to use, but I feel more comfortable with enough ex-military to tip the balance in case the local fauna has taken on a more capable and hostile face over the past eighteen hundred years. Anything you bump into out there likely hasn't come across a humanoid form in a thousand years. Their instinctual fear of humans may have long ago devolved, which is why I'm putting a former Delta Force officer, Marine Special Operations sergeant and a Green Beret into the woods with the rest of you."

"That's an impressive lineup," said the Hispanic man.

"The entire team is impressive. Let me make the introductions. Raymond Diaz is our land surveyor. He has extensive experience laying out master-planned communities in southern California. Once you get to the former Wayward Pines site, Raymond will go to work on a rough orientation of the town. Five to six hours of work, you estimate?"

"At the most. If we have more time at the site, I'll keep measuring," said

Diaz.

Pilcher nodded. “Perfect. You’ll work with Victor Nguyen, our resident geologist, to find the survey markers buried under the school and determine the suitability of the various major building sites. Victor will utilize a modified Betsy Seisgun to map the subsurface. We can’t afford to drop a bulldozer through the roof of an intact, hollow structure from the past.

“Dean and Kris Stewart will analyze the flora and fauna, passing on their observations. Kris has a Master’s Degree in Biology from Boise State, with an emphasis in botany. Dean has a biology degree from Washington State, focusing on zoology. The Stewarts have studied Idaho mountain biomes together for a decade. They’ll be your go-to source if you find any abnormally large footprints in the snow.”

The room stayed quiet for a second before Dean Stewart chuckled.

“I know. I have an extremely dry sense of humor. That was a Sasquatch joke. At least someone got it,” said Pilcher.

“Next is Courtney Graves. She’s your climber. If you need to examine something in a hard-to-reach spot on the cliffs, I think you’ll find her skills infinitely useful.”

Graves just nodded, seemingly uncommitted to her place on the team.

“That leaves your security crew. Seth King, Marine Special Operation,” he said, pointing to the muscle guy, “and Erik Larsen. Army Special Forces.”

Both ex-military guys stared him down, as expected. He didn’t have time to earn their respect, so he would resort to rank if tested.

“Thank you, David. You’ve handed me an extremely capable group,” he said, hoping everyone had caught the subtleties of this statement.

“I’ll leave you to outfit the team. Plan for forty-eight hours out of the superstructure. The Stewarts can help you select weather-appropriate gear. They ran a mountain expedition guide operation up near Nez Perce. My assistants, Pam and Arnold, can fill in the gaps. Once you’ve selected and assembled your gear, stage everything in the bins near the entrance. Arnold will then escort you

to the armory, which is at the far end of the storage room. You'll select load-outs to be issued tomorrow morning. Final briefing is at 0630, at the entrance to the tunnel. Cafeteria opens at 0600. They're all yours," said Pilcher, abruptly walking toward the door.

He stared at the faces boring into him and wondered how each of them had been "saved" by their new Messiah. Oddly enough, this crew didn't look like they were ready to throw themselves at Pilcher's feet. He detected something different. Sadness.

"Lead the way," said Hassler, nodding at Pope, who visibly bristled and glared at him.

"To the equipment room. Please."

Chapter 9

An unmarked door across from the Operations Center led to a sizable room. By Hassler's calculation, the secondary storeroom occupied at least half of the length of the corridor. A rough pacing count along the dormitory and cafeteria levels indicated that each hallway measured a hundred yards.

The ceilings matched the rest of the facility and featured the same unappealing fluorescent lights. Ten yards deep, the space held at least a dozen rows of warehouse-quality, floor-to-ceiling shelving units, each packed with neatly stenciled, clear plastic bins. Hooks affixed to the walls displayed an endless array of personal gear for any climate and condition—tents, backpacks, jackets, climbing gear, tools.

"Why don't we split into two groups? Arnold and Kris can take the military crew. Pam and Dean have the rest. Grab non-job-specific items first and dump them in your bin. Then go back for the tools of your trade. I assume everyone has a list of specific gear required for their jobs?"

"My list is pretty extensive," said Nguyen, exacting a nod of agreement from Diaz.

"We'll distribute your gear to even out the load," said Hassler. "Everyone good?"

Everyone looked agreeable, except Pilcher's lackeys. Hassler saw a storm brewing between these two. One of them would have to play second fiddle to the other—eventually. He didn't see either of them giving up the number one slot without a fight.

An hour later, they gathered outside the armory. Pope eyed him warily and

inserted his keycard, opening the door and activating the lights. King and Larsen crowded behind Hassler to get the first look at the superstructure's arsenal.

"Jesus Christ," said King.

"Whoa," uttered Larsen.

"Is Mr. Pilcher expecting an invasion?" said Hassler, stepping by Pope to investigate the arsenal.

Steel racks mounted to the floor in the middle of the armory held a familiar array of assault rifles, divided evenly between .223 and .308 variants. Whoever selected the final weapons load-out had stuck to models readily available on the civilian market, though he suspected all of these had been converted to fully automatic. A quick examination of selector switches on the nearest rifles confirmed it. Without conducting a detailed inventory, he counted more than a hundred rifles nestled into place on the racks. A few were missing. King and Larsen slipped into the room and started inspecting the hardware while the others hung back in the storage area. The civilian types didn't look comfortable crossing the armory threshold.

"Everyone is trained in the use of these weapons?" said Hassler.

"You heard Mr. Pilcher," said Pope.

"I was looking for more of a conversation. Courtney?" he said, sticking his head through the door.

"What?" she said.

"Which of these have you qualified to shoot?" he said, inviting her into the room.

"All of them. It was a requirement."

"Even the .308s?" said Hassler.

"I don't think you'll need the .308s," said Pam.

"Really? I didn't realize you were a weapons specialist in a former life, Pam. I thought you were a college student. Northwestern?" he said, watching her confidence falter for a second.

".308 seems like overkill," she insisted.

“For what? A rabid fox? How about a bear? Ever see a bear up close? Tell her about it, Dean.”

“A .223 would just piss it off,” said Dean Stewart.

“Grizzlies were extinct in this mountain range,” countered Pam.

“I wonder why?” said Hassler, turning to Dean.

“They were hunted into extinction in the Sawtooth Ranges. A small population existed in northern Idaho in 2013.”

“Guess who hasn’t been around to fuck with the bears for a couple thousand years. I thought they taught analytical thinking in college?” said Hassler.

Pam was close to exploding. No twitchy eyes, clenched fists or murderous stare—just a palpable tension he’d learned to read after hundreds of military field interrogations and law enforcement interviews. He’d found her Achilles’ heel, which he’d use to unbalance her if they ever squared off.

“I’m taking one of the MK12s chambered in .308. I’ll defer to Larsen and King for their own load-outs. Graves should take a short-barreled .223 for climbing. Diaz and Nguyen, I recommend a SCAR with folding stock.”

“What about one of those?” he said, pointing to a wall holding a few dozen submachine guns. The rifles kicked the shit out of my shoulder,” said Diaz.

“Me too,” added Nguyen.

“They’re supposed to hurt. Imagine what it feels like on the other end. Submachine guns are for personal defense in my book,” said Hassler.

“Tell that to a 9mm round hitting your head,” said Pam.

“Try hitting me in the head with that 9mm round at 500 feet. Everyone but Graves goes .308. I suspect many of you couldn’t hit the broadside of Pope’s ass at 100 feet, so you’ll need to pack as much punch as possible into that one lucky shot.”

Pam smirked in front of Pope, which reddened his mottled face under the harsh industrial lighting. Those two are going to kill each other before they get the fucking town built. He’d make sure of it.

“Larsen. King. Full tactical rig with pistol. Max ammo. Medium-range optics.

NVGs.”

“Got it,” they responded.

“The rest of you will carry four magazines in an easily accessible pouch. We’ll help you get that squared away. Pistols are optional. If you need a quick refresher on how to work the action on any of this gear, please ask. A few days at Pilcher’s shoot ’em up gallery aren’t enough to create proficiency.”

“We had professionals train everyone,” said Pope. “I was one of them.”

“How many days did you spend on firearms, Dean?” said Hassler.

The husband and wife duo stepped through the doorway like they expected to catch fire upon entering.

“Four days.”

“Uh-huh. I don’t expect trouble out there, but you might want to ask your questions now. Raising your hand in the middle of a grizzly attack isn’t likely to accomplish anything beyond getting your hand torn off.”

He got a few nervous laughs from the group.

“Ammo?” he said, directing the question at Pope.

“Tell us how many mags you need, and we’ll provide them tomorrow morning at the exit hatch,” said Pope.

Interesting. Pilcher doesn’t fully trust this group. He didn’t like the implications.

“Wrong answer,” said Larsen.

“Excuse me?” said Pope, taking a step toward the ex-Green Beret.

Larsen cocked his head slowly, examining Pope with the kind of interest one devotes to a collection of shitty paintings at a local outdoor craft fair.

“He’s one hundred percent right, Arnold. We load our own mags. End of discussion. If Pilcher doesn’t like it, he can survey the fucking site himself,” said Hassler.

“I don’t see why this is a big deal?”

“Ever pack your own parachute?” said Hassler.

“No. I’m not into extreme sports.”

“Neither am I. I did it for Uncle Sam. Once you pack your own chute, you never let anyone else pack it. Too much at stake. Am I right?” he said.

Larsen, King and Graves nodded, smiling.

“You don’t trust us to load your magazines?” said Pam.

“It’s not a matter of trust. It’s a matter of assurance and confidence. Big difference.”

“I’ll need to talk to Pilcher,” said Pope.

“Do whatever you need to do. Shouldn’t be a big deal since nothing leaves the armory, right?”

“Pain in the fucking ass,” mumbled Pope, stepping out of sight to make the radio call.

Forty minutes later, they staged the weapons and loaded magazine rigs in ready racks next to the door leading into the main hallway. He had been right about a secondary access point. He stared at the rifles and ammunition carriers. It had seemed like an inordinate amount of firepower to bring outside until he noticed one of the sniper rifles missing from the far wall. Someone deemed it necessary to watch over the valley with one of the armory’s .50-caliber Barrett M107 rifles.

Chapter 10

A convoy of Jeep Wranglers delivered the survey team to the exit hatch. The ride lasted eight minutes, driven in low gear at twenty miles per hour. The trip felt infinitely more harrowing on the way down than the way up. The grade was reasonable, maybe fifteen percent, but one mistake could send them on an uncontrolled, two-mile descent into a solid wall of steel. Just the thought of it turned his stomach. He cast a look at his grizzled driver. With Pilcher's affinity for recruiting misfits, he was probably staring at a man who had killed his family in a drunk driving accident.

The tightness in his chest eased as the Jeep slowed. Pilcher and his two monkeys stood behind a row of Jersey barricades located twenty feet from the steel door. Pam and Pope carried assault rifles slung over their shoulders. They stood in front of the team's weapons, which Pilcher had insisted on delivering to the door. Hassler hit the pavement as soon as the Jeep lurched to a stop.

"Adam! I can't tell you how excited I am. We've attached two forty-foot climbing lines to the barriers. More than enough to get you to the forest floor. It's only a ten-foot drop from the hatch, so nobody should have a problem getting down."

"Sounds good. We have solid comms with Operations. Wireless camera feeds are functional," said Hassler, tapping the headband-mounted miniature camera protruding under the left side of his grey ski hat.

"Excellent. It's imperative that this gear remains functional at all times. We need to record everything. If the communications gear fails for any reason, you are to fire one or more of the star cluster flares and report immediately to the

hatch. We'll be waiting for you. If you can't move the group, for whatever reason, mark your position with one of the smoke grenades, and we'll send someone out to get you."

The communications equipment was voice activated, apparently sourced after 2013. No buttons to press, which also meant they were under constant audio surveillance. He suspected the same with the cameras. He'd been told that they were motion activated, which meant they would constantly feed data to the mountain. Microchipped and under constant scrutiny, a new thought crossed his mind. Maybe the .50-caliber sniper rifle served a different purpose.

"Got it," said Hassler, watching his team gather in front of the Jeeps.

"I don't anticipate any trouble, but I'm unexpectedly nervous about this. I've tasted the air and stood on the cliffs, but strangely enough—I still feel like I haven't left 2013. Dropping you into Wayward Pines is our first real step into the future. I think I might be jealous. Ha! Can you imagine that? If only I was twenty years younger."

Pilcher put a hand on Hassler's shoulder. "This puts you in league with Neil Armstrong. Ahead of him, in my humble opinion. Think about that!"

"I guess I never thought of it that way."

"Of course you didn't. Up until about two weeks ago, this was all theory—which makes your leap of faith all the more impressive. Get the team fully geared up and assembled. No big speech today. Just out the door into our future."

Several minutes later, they stepped in front of the barriers with four heavily armed members of the superstructure security team. Just a precaution, he had been assured by Pilcher. Right along with the .50-caliber sniper rifle watching over them. Everyone played it cool, but he sensed more tension than excitement. Larsen and King picked up on the same vibe, glancing at him as they approached the twenty-foot-tall by fifteen-foot-wide hatch. The Stewarts followed closely behind, carrying the coils of rope they would throw over the edge.

"Let's form a line here. All the way across," said one of the security officers,

stopping them several feet back from the door. “Security, ready your weapons.”

Larsen and King flipped their rifles’ selector switches off safe. He’d already discussed weapons protocol with the team. The three ex-military types would constantly assess the situation and exercise their best judgment about weapons posture. The rest would follow directions given by Hassler. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Pam and Pope had taken cover behind the concrete barriers, rifles pointed in their direction. *So much for muzzle discipline.*

The lead security officer gave a thumbs-up and crouched. A few seconds later, the enormous door started to rise like a garage door, filling the entrance with moist, cold air. Hassler crouched to see beyond it. Misty forest. The door stopped about four feet off the ground. Pilcher was worried about something out there. After scanning left and right with their rifles, the security team moved forward and ducked under the door.

“Clear. Bring your team forward. Hurry up!” said one of the voices from the other side.

“Let’s go,” said Hassler.

“I’ll be waiting with an expensive bottle of scotch!” said Pilcher.

“Better make that two,” Hassler yelled back before scooting under the door.

They emerged on a ledge suspended over the snow-covered forest floor, weapons sweeping the shadowy world of Wayward Pines. Massive chunks of granite littered the dense pine forest beyond the exit, gradually tapering off until the trees and snow. He held his breath and listened. Silence on a scale he couldn’t recall. Only the low rustle of the nearest spruce boughs.

“Throw the lines,” he said, stepping aside to make room for the Stewarts.

They easily descended into the slushy snow, fanning out from the ledge to form a hasty perimeter. Nguyen was the last down, requiring the security guards to tie one of the ropes to his harness and lower him. The instant Hassler released the knot attached to Nguyen, the lines and the guards disappeared. Moments later, the door descended, locking them into Wayward Pines.

“Ops, this is Hassler. Radio check.”

“This is Ops. Solid copy.”

“Same here. Out.”

He turned to the team, which faced outward, staring into the murky forest.

“Comms are good. Let’s take a bearing and head to the primary survey site. Seth, take us out when you’re ready.”

King nodded and went to work with his compass. All of the bearing lines they would use had been calculated by Operations and double-checked by Hassler. The first bearing, zero-three-five, took them 1.2 miles northeast to the former site of Wayward Pines Consolidated School.

A generous donation to the town in 2008, by Pilcher of course, paid for the construction of a cutting-edge school. Construction crews, once again hand-selected by Pilcher, buried a total of four equidistant stainless-steel rods underneath the structure. Two feet in diameter and thirty feet tall, the rods should theoretically be visible to Nguyen’s seismic readout. Diaz would start his survey from the center point created by the rods, assuming they hadn’t been pilfered or significantly displaced. If that turned out to be the case, they would attempt to triangulate the location using markers cut into the surrounding cliff walls prior to the final wave of deamination.

“Anyone see anything out of place for 2013?” said Hassler.

Dean and Kris Stewart had started to examine the low branches, studying the pine needles. They didn’t have a lot of flora to work with at this point, since most of the underbrush wouldn’t start to grow for another month or two when the snow was gone and temperatures regularly hit fifty degrees. From what he could tell, the snow had a few more weeks until it completely disappeared, unless they had an unexpected mountain storm, which wasn’t out of the question in Idaho.

“Looks like a Douglas fir to me,” said Kris Stewart, holding a small sprig of pine. “Do you want me to take samples now?”

“Not yet. You’ll have all the time in the world over at the school site.”

King turned around. “Ready to roll.”

Chapter 11

The short hike to the estimated school site yielded no surprises on the ground. Spruce and lodgepole pines dominated the trip, with the occasional intrusion by a native aspen. The Stewarts lost interest in the trees halfway to their destination, focusing more on the birds than the relatively uniform forest. Everyone appeared to be encouraged by the sight of birds. Despite the familiarity offered by the pine forest, seeing another living creature delivered the next level of comfort and normalcy. He needed to see something bigger, even if they had to kill it. Birds were one thing, mammals were another. Peering through the endless sea of quiet pines, he wasn't optimistic. The birds would suffice—for now.

They arrived at the calculated location, which looked no different than the rest of the forest they had traversed. Now he truly understood why it would take so long to rebuild Wayward Pines. Just clearing the forest was a monumental task. Never mind building an entire town from scratch. Two years sounded like a conservative estimate. There was no way he could wait that long to be with Theresa. Every delay would be torturous, knowing what waited for him at the finish line—and he'd suffer alone. Nobody had the same reward on the other side of that line. All they had was a long, fruitless life in Pilcher's superstructure, watching people like him live normal lives. *Sucks to be them.*

"I hope the markers are still in place," said Hassler, staring skyward.

The fog continued to obscure their view of the cliffs through the pine branches.

"We'll soon find out," said Nguyen, dropping his oversized pack on the snow.

"Courtney, do you mind helping Raymond and Victor set up their gear?"

“Sure. You can call me Court,” she said, keeping her stoic expression intact.

“Thanks, Court. Once we get up into the canyon, I’ll turn you loose to have some fun in the rocks. Until then, I don’t have much to offer.”

She must have fucked up big time to end up on this dream team. This was the last place he would expect to find a Bohemian extreme adventurer type. Pilcher didn’t strike him as the kind to start a medical marijuana dispensary, especially under the living conditions he witnessed in the superstructure. No. “Court” was doomed to spend the rest of her days in a sober, unaltered hell. No wonder she always looked like she just swallowed a turd.

“Erik, would you mind escorting the Stewarts on a nature hike to gather specimens and make observations? We’re going to be here for a while. Comms check every ten minutes if you’re out of sight.”

“How close do you want us?” said Larsen.

“Once Diaz takes his initial sightings here, we’ll move north to the top of Main Street. You could range north and meet us when we arrive. As long as we have good comms, I’m not worried.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“If anything doesn’t add up out there, head back immediately,” said Hassler.

Larsen patted his rifle. “I don’t anticipate anything I can’t handle.”

“Watch out for poisonous squirrels.”

“Right. I almost forgot about those,” said the ex-soldier.

“Seth, you and I get the exciting job of watching over these three.”

“Easy enough. If you don’t mind, I’ll patrol out a hundred yards and circle the site. Look for tracks. Listen for anything bigger than a finch.”

“Keep yourself from slowly going crazy out here?” said Hassler.

“Something like that.”

“You know where to find us,” said Hassler.

Nguyen and Diaz spent the next thirty minutes preparing the Betsy gun for the seismic survey. Their biggest challenge was boring a twenty-four-inch hole in the ground to accommodate their modified version. Unlike most applications

of the Betsy gun, which fired an eight-gauge, 90-gram slug directly into the ground, the barrel of this particular gun would penetrate twelve of the twenty-four inches bored into the ground. Someone long ago had determined that firing a solid slug at frozen ground was a bad idea.

The Betsy gun was a simple device, resembling a stainless-steel section of pipe with a cross handle near the top. A basic loading chamber held the eight-gauge, 90-gram slug; the percussion cap screwed into place once the shell was loaded. Nguyen would strike the cap with a mallet, detonating the round. The slug's impact sent a seismic shockwave downward, which was reflected back and recorded by ground probes connected to a wireless seismometer. A few minutes later, Ops would tell them what to do. "Monkey see, monkey do." Sort of.

"Victor, have you done this type of firing before," said Hassler.

"All the time. It's completely safe."

"Even through frozen ground?"

"No, but the concept is the same."

"Do me a huge favor. Attach the mallet to a long, flexible branch. I think that thing's going to take off like a rocket. It won't go far, but it could fuck up your hand."

"I've never seen one come out of the ground."

"It's your show."

Several minutes later, Nguyen finally hit the percussion cap with the wobbly mallet. Hassler had almost given up watching Nguyen swing the branch when the Betsy gun detonated, launching several feet into the air. He guessed broken wrists were common in Diaz's line of work. While they waited for the results, King returned from his patrol with a neutral stare that seemed off-kilter.

"See anything?"

"Pine trees. Snow. A few birds," he said, stopping next to Hassler.

"Any tracks?"

"Nothing, but with this kind of melt rate, something would have to cross the

snow within the last day or so to show up. Even if it was big," he said.

Hassler detected an object near the right side of his face, followed by a quick tap on his right shoulder. The object continued a few more inches, moving further across his peripheral vision. He understood what King was doing and didn't turn his head. The item moved in front of his right eye and stopped. *Motherfucker if I'm not staring at the same shit-brown spoon found in every military-issued MRE.*

"Not mine," said King.

"Not mine, either."

"Interesting."

"That's one way to look at it."

If they were the B-team, what happened to the A-team? He waited a few seconds before turning. The spoon was gone, and the former Special Operations Marine's face betrayed no knowledge of their secret. King had already run the scenarios, understood the stakes. If Hassler's team didn't return, Pilcher wakes the C-team. Rinse and repeat. They were expendable.

Chapter 12

King’s navigation turned out to be flawless. Operations moved Nguyen and Diaz thirteen feet north and called it good. They shared a look of relief when the radio transmission broadcast over their headsets. He’d saved them from having to repeat the Betsy gun process and invite every animal in Wayward Pines to join them. The first shot undoubtedly announced their presence. The second would have given their position away. Animals, especially predators, had surprisingly acute and accurate auditory processing capabilities. He just hoped that the future Betsy shots were well spaced along the east-west axis. Predators drawn into the valley would approach from the south. If two shots lined up on the north-south axis, they could end up walking into an ambush later in the day as they travelled out of Wayward Pines.

Diaz spent the next hour and a half taking measurements with his tripod-mounted Total Station, which transmitted all of the data back to the superstructure. *In case we don’t return.* The discovery of the spoon put everything into perspective. Their survival was an ancillary consideration. Pilcher wanted data. Geologic data. Survey data. Threat data. The Stewarts hadn’t discovered any ground tracks on their trek with Larsen, so Hassler guessed that the threat data would be collected last, as Pilcher likely intended. *Why waste your assets?*

They finished the job at ground zero and travelled north, following the directions provided by their “eye in the mountain.” With the initial survey stake transmitting remotely, Operations could track their microchips and guide them to the next point, where Diaz would set up his gear and confirm the measurements.

They had just taken “monkey see, monkey do” to the next level, which was fine with Hassler. Without worrying about navigation, his security team could worry about more important things— like keeping an eye out for whatever necessitated a twenty-foot-tall, electrified fence around Wayward Pines.

The rest of the morning was spent hiking from one proposed building site to the next. Nguyen would fire a Betsy slug into the ground, causing King and Hassler to cringe, while Diaz set up his equipment to take more measurements. Courtney Graves napped against a tree most of the time while the Stewarts made the same observations over and over again, to nobody’s surprise. Same trees. Same birds. Nothing had changed from 2013, except one thing. No signs of the human race. During a short lunch break, King showed Larsen the mystery spoon, bringing him into the inner circle.

They changed tactics as the group moved further south. King walked point, and Larsen brought up the rear. Hassler stayed with the main group. He wondered if Operations had noticed the shift in their defensive posture. It probably didn’t matter. As long as they continued on schedule, Pilcher wasn’t likely to interfere. He peered through the trees, catching a glimpse of the western cliffs through a break in the persistent fog. The superstructure was buried somewhere in that rock. A flash near the southernmost peaks caught his eye. He’d just been glassed. *4,000 feet is one hell of a shot, even for a .50-caliber rifle.* The mountains faded as the fog quickly repaired the small window out of Wayward Pines.

They reached the last site at 2:06 PM, leaving them about two hours of direct sunlight. The imposing cliff walls limited the sun’s hang-time over Wayward Pines, resulting in wild temperature swings, especially during the summer months. A high seventy-degree afternoon in July could dip into the mid-thirties twelve hours later, catching ill-prepared overnight hikers unprepared. The Stewarts ensured that the team packed cold weather gear and tents. They expected temperatures in the low twenties tonight.

Crack! Hassler closed his eyes and imperceptibly shook his head. Nguyen

had fired the second Betsy gun slug at the hospital site, trying to determine if any of the ancient structure remained intact deep below the rocks and soil. The four-story, brick hospital had been the largest, most durable structure in Wayward Pines, representing the biggest cave-in risk during the rebuild. Constructing the hospital another hundred and fifty feet down Main Street wasn't an option. Authenticity. *Who the fuck cares? How many of the future citizens had even seen the hospital?* Most of them had been kidnapped from locations around the country, and the ones taken in Wayward Pines were mostly victims of "accidents" that earned them a one-way trip into the mountain.

"Survey team, this is Ops. Readings indicate that the hospital is completely collapsed. Once Diaz places his stakes, request that you head southeast on bearing one-three-zero. This should put you in the vicinity of the first proposed fencing anchor site along the eastern cliff wall. If time permits, we'll move you further south to the second site."

If time permits, or we're still alive? Larsen read his thoughts and turned his head far enough to make eye contact, but not far enough to bring Hassler into camera view. He could feel King's eyes burning into the back of his head. Pilcher was moving the team into position to record the final data set, which had nothing to do with the fence. They left the hospital site with an hour of direct sunlight left in Wayward Pines. One mile into the two-mile trek, Dean Stewart and Seth King stopped to examine a thick patch of snow in their path.

"Adam, you need to take a look at this. We're not alone out here," said King.

The cat is out of the bag.

Chapter 13

Pilcher barged into the Operations Center, shoving empty chairs out of the way to reach the wall of computer stations and widescreen monitors assigned to Hassler's survey team. Pam stood behind the crew of technicians, studying the feeds on various screens. She turned her head and raised an eyebrow. He couldn't read the rest of her face. Never could. She displayed such a limited range of facial expressions; he found it nearly impossible to classify her emotional state. When she *did* crack a thin smile or widen her eyes, it was usually inappropriate for the moment at hand. In the six and a half years he had known Pam, he was only sure of one thing. She was a ruthlessly loyal sociopath —and that was all that mattered.

"What are we looking at?" said Pilcher.

"Humanoid tracks," she said, now smiling.

"Humanoid?"

"In a way," said one of the technicians, "I'm putting the tracks on the big screen for comparison."

Pilcher watched the images appear on the screen built into the wall above the computer stations. The left side represented human foot and hand imprints. The right displayed what Hassler's team had found in the snow. Five digits. *Bear?* No. Sleeker. Almost catlike, but elongated like a hominid. *Good heavens.*

"Are those talon marks?" he said, fairly certain they were.

The technician magnified the top of one of the mystery tracks, filling most of the screen.

"Mr. Stewart certainly thinks so."

“So do I. Do the tracks match anything in the database?” said Pilcher.

“We’re on our third run through the database. Spatial separation between digits and the footpad straddles the line between feline and humanoid. If I had to pick one, I’d go with humanoid based on the elongation. Then you throw in the talons.”

“Definitely talons and not claws?” said Pilcher, squinting at the image.

“It’s a good print. Based on snowmelt calculations, it was made a few hours ago. The two rightmost digits are conclusive,” he said, shrinking the image and matching them to images of avian tracks. “Nearly identical to a large bird of prey.”

“Can you determine if the animal can walk upright?”

“Computer simulations indicate that this one moves on all fours, with a feline gait.”

A panoramic view of the pine forest floor appeared on the screen, highlighted by a string of tracks across the snow. A digital simulation of a mountain lion moved across the screen, leaving ghost tracks. The technician adjusted the lion’s tracks over the snow impressions, yielding a near perfect match.

“Almost a direct register gait, where the hind feet are placed directly in the impressions made by the front. This one is slightly indirect, falling a few inches behind.”

Pilcher felt simultaneously exhilarated and nervous. They had stumbled on some kind of adaptation, possibly an aberration of the human species. It was far too early to draw any conclusions. He needed more data.

“Estimated weight?”

“That’s a tough one. One to two hundred pounds. It’s nearly impossible to tell without seeing the animal. The weight distribution indicates a reliance on its rear legs, which is pretty typical for most quadrupeds.”

“Nothing on infrared?”

“Forty-eight hours of infrared imagery at this same location showed nothing. Mr. Hassler is requesting instructions.”

“Right. Any indication beyond the tracks that they know about the other team?” he said, directing the question at Pam.

“None. We’ve scoured the video feed and listened to every second of conversation. This is the first sign of animal life besides the birds.”

“Very well. Patch me through,” he said, picking up a headset.

“Adam, it seems that you’ve found something of interest,” he said, followed by an intolerable pause.

“I’d say so. Our resident zoology expert says we’re looking at a new species. Something large with talons. Walks like a cat—but I assume you already knew that.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean,” said Pilcher.

Hassler’s next response determined whether they lived or died.

“Don’t tell me your computer wizards haven’t analyzed the prints,” said Hassler, buying himself more time.

“Of course. We estimate the weight to be anywhere between one to two hundred pounds, so yes, you could be looking at a formidable catlike animal. Nothing a few .308s can’t handle.”

“During the day, yes. At night, I’m not so sure. Night vision equipment has its limitations. We’re less than a mile from the superstructure entrance. I’d like to bring the team in for the night and resume our survey tomorrow.”

“I’m not worried about a curious mountain lion, Mr. Hassler. Even if it has talons.”

“Easy for you to say. You won’t be sleeping with one eye open all night. We’ll leave at first light and be back by noon.”

“I’m not changing the plan based on one mountain lion, or one bear, or anything that you can adequately dispatch with the vast arsenal at your disposal. We’re working around the clock in here to get the fence ready. I want to start construction on the eastern side tomorrow. I need Diaz and Nguyen to assess the preselected locations so we can adjust the fittings as needed.”

“Diaz and Nguyen look like they’ve seen a ghost. This cat thing weighs more

than the two of them combined."

"Then do your best to convince them they are safe. That's why I put you in charge of the expedition," said Pilcher.

"Just man up and do your fucking job!" yelled Pam.

"Is that my favorite college student? Most kids don't enter college when they're fourteen, but Pammy must have been a child prodigy. Emphasis on the prodding," said Hassler.

Pilcher held a hand out to Pam before she could react. Blank faced, she visibly shook in place. Given what he knew about Pam's early teenage years, he could see this instantly spiraling out of control. Hassler had evidently done some research into Pam's background and knew exactly how to short-circuit her ice-cold exterior. *What else does Hassler know about my crew?* It didn't matter. He'd most likely be dead before sunrise.

"Adam, she's right. I think your team's combined combat skills are more than sufficient to handle the threat. Proceed to the next set of coordinates. Out," he said and removed the headset.

"Get a second shooter up on the ridge with Mustin. Thermal scopes," he said, "and Pam?"

She stopped in mid-stride, avoiding his eyes.

He approached close enough to whisper, "Your old life ended in Chicago nearly two thousand years ago. Here, you're better than all of them. Don't ever forget that. I won't."

She barely nodded, which was more than he typically elicited from her. She'd come a long way. One of his most prized possessions.

Chapter 14

Hassler shrugged his shoulders. There wasn't much he could say without tipping his hand, and that didn't seem like a wise idea. He got the distinct impression from Pilcher's tone that the wrong words might result in a game of dodge the .50-caliber projectile. They'd have to play along and hope for the best. Maybe Dean was right, and they had nothing to worry about. Large predatory cats were solo creatures, often ranging vast, established territories. They rarely attacked humans—in 2013. Pilcher had no idea when humans "vanished." Thirteen hundred years ago was his best guess. Hassler wasn't a world-renowned scientist, but he was willing to venture a guess that it wouldn't take more than a three hundred year human absence for most animals to shuck their "scared of people" programming. After a thousand years? He didn't plan on wandering off without his rifle.

"You heard the man. Off we go. The sooner we get this done, the better. Seth?"

"Roger that," said King, taking a quick bearing with his compass.

They reached the first of two proposed cliff sites at 4:08 PM, a few minutes after the last of the valley's direct sunlight vanished behind the mountains. He didn't see the pale yellow orb disappear, but the forest suddenly dimmed, and the blanket of fog above them darkened. Astronomical sunset for Wayward Pines was 8:14 PM, but he suspected they would run out of useful light within the next ninety minutes. Depending on how quickly Nguyen and Diaz worked their magic, the group might have a chance to reach the other side of the canyon by dark. If not, he'd keep them as close to the eastern cliffs as possible. Better to be

on the edges of the valley if the cat thing wasn't alone.

"Hassler, this is operations. The primary site isn't suitable for anchoring the fence. Too many easy holds and ledges on either side. Proceed to the secondary."

Easy holds? Maybe the fence is for keeping people in.

"Copy. Moving a few hundred feet to the secondary."

They clambered over boulders and granite chunks to reach a flat, forty-foot cliff face. Nguyen panned his head-mounted camera past the trees at the shadowy granite sheet.

"Ops, do you need us to use our flashlights on the cliff?"

"Negative. The cameras use gen-six low-light technology. The site looks good. Give us another minute or two to run some scenarios."

"Roger." *Scenarios?*

"Court?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you climb this wall without gear and reach that ledge?"

"Easily," she said, stepping next to him.

"How about your average Joe?"

"Not a chance."

"There's your analysis, gentlemen. Mind if we get this show on the road? It's getting dark."

"Stand by," said Operations.

Five minutes later, his earpiece crackled.

"The site has been approved for survey."

Diaz set up his equipment while Nguyen examined the cliff face. Hassler leaned against the cliff and stared into the rapidly disappearing forest. They planned on starting the fence tomorrow? *Who is Pilcher trying to kid?* They'd have to raze hundreds of trees just to create a clear path to get the trucks across the valley, let alone hundreds more to form the fence line itself. They were bait at this point.

He sat on one of the rounded boulders, trading a furtive glance with Larsen.

He understood the deal, along with King. The spoon said it all. He wondered if anyone else had started to suspect that his or her time in the valley had been extended on purpose. Doubtful. If King hadn't discovered the spoon, he wasn't sure *any* of them would have figured it out. Pilcher's methods had been subtle. Short delays in processing their data. The Betsy gun redos. The corrupted survey data from Diaz's equipment that had to be taken again. Walking them slightly off course. Operations constantly shaved time off their day, so they couldn't make it back by dark. He wanted them out here at night.

Of course. The low-light cameras. He suspected that the technician had screwed up sharing that information. He hadn't been told by Pope that the microcameras could see in the dark. Gen six? Looks like the human race made a few technological strides before sliding into oblivion. He'd disable the camera later. Pilcher wouldn't get any useful data at his expense.

Watching the light drain out of the landscape, he thought about Theresa and how his obsession for her had sealed his fate. He'd become addicted to seeing her after Ethan's disappearance, making up any reason to call her into the office or bump into her on the weekends. He convinced himself that he had always hated Ethan for cheating on her, but that wasn't true. He'd known about Ethan's affair with Special Agent Hewson from the start. Everybody knew, and nobody said a word. They just whispered, and he whispered with them. His feelings changed during in an informal interview at the Seattle field office. He remembered it well. She'd come in for follow-up questions, one of which was extremely delicate. Painful, actually.

As weeks bled into months, with no forward progress in the criminal investigation, different theories started to emerge. Harsh theories requiring blunt questions. The intimate connection between Kate Hewson and Ethan Burke led to implications. Only the simultaneous disappearance of Kate's partner, Bill Evans, kept internal affairs from coming right out and accusing them of orchestrating Ethan's accident and vanishing together.

At the end of the interview, he no longer saw her as Ethan Burke's wife.

Burke had destroyed that bond. Shattered that trust. Theresa Burke deserved better. He resolved to be there when she finally understood this. Pilcher's plan to grab Theresa and her son threatened to ruin everything, so he sold his soul to the devil in the mountain. He should have known better. Pilcher had no intention of separating the Burkes. Hassler had been played from day one.

A screech echoed through the valley, turning their heads. Echoes from the rock walls reached them a few seconds later, sounding oddly human. A second shriek followed immediately, emanating from the same direction. North.

"Operations, did you copy that sound?"

"Affirmative. Sounded like a bird of prey. We're analyzing for a match."

Awfully big bird. There was no point engaging Pilcher's lackeys at this point.

"Court, would you mind joining Seth and Erik on the perimeter?"

She unslung her rifle and walked toward Larsen, who was closest.

"Dean?"

"Uh-huh?" he said, holding his wife's hand and staring into the forest.

"What did that sound like to you?"

"I have no idea."

"Did it sound human?"

Dean nodded. "Somehow."

A more distant screech penetrated the silence. Hassler turned his head south. *So much for the lone cat theory.*

"Dean, why don't you check in with Seth and see if he could use a hand filling in the gaps in our defensive posture."

The Stewarts exchanged a brief kiss, and Dean left for King's position south of the survey site.

"This is Operations. Analysis confirms that you heard a bird of prey. High probability match to a golden eagle."

Now they were just fucking with him.

"The sound came from two directions. Don't tell me it was an echo."

"Eagles fly, Mr. Hassler."

“So they do. We’ll be finished in about twenty minutes. I plan to make camp here against the cliff wall.”

“Stand by.”

Stand by for what?

Chapter 15

Pilcher leaned back in his desk chair and stared at one of the screens on the wall next to him. The image showed the projected locations of the screeches detected by their directional-finding equipment. Three passive sensors installed in the peaks overlooking the valley had collected sound-wave data, allowing his technicians to triangulate the sources. The first two “sound anomalies” originated from the hospital site. The third about two miles southwest of the survey team’s location. Connecting the two locations yielded a north/south line. If Hassler kept the team in place along the eastern cliff wall, they might avoid contact with the valley’s guests—and that would put Wayward Pines even further behind schedule.

“Infrared sensors?”

“Nothing at either location,” said Pope.

He didn’t understand. They should be able to detect something using infrared.

“Tell Hassler to move across the valley to the western anchor sites. I want them in position to finish the work first thing in the morning.”

“He’s going to fight against that,” said Pope.

“If he resists, threaten the entire group with indefinite suspension upon return to the superstructure tomorrow. Lean hard on the Stewarts. Tell them they will be put back in their capsules and never see each other again if they do not follow orders. I’m done playing games with this group. Just get some of them moving into the open. Mustin can mop up whoever stays behind, once we get what we want.”

“Understood. And if they all refuse?”

“Have the snipers target Hassler, Larsen and King. Once body parts start flying, the rest will fall in line.”

He removed his headset and pressed a button that put all of Operation’s transmissions on speaker. Targeting the team with snipers was Pilcher’s last option; one he hoped to avoid. He didn’t relish wasting lives like this, but it was necessary. He couldn’t afford to wait weeks for the fog to lift. Construction on Wayward Pines needed to start immediately if they were to have any hope of beating the next deep freeze—and construction couldn’t start until they understood why the first team disappeared after a few garbled radio transmissions.

Chapter 16

The temperature continued to plummet as Diaz finished his work. Once he transmitted the final measurements and broke down his equipment, they would move back along the rock wall to a more defensible location near the first cliff site. The boulders and trees formed a tight, natural perimeter against the mountain, leaving ample space for the tents. With the cliff wall behind them, they only had to defend a 180-degree arc. Of course, it literally put their back up against a wall, which could become a problem if they had to retreat. He didn't need to weigh the pros and cons in this case. Anything was better than crossing between two predators in the middle the valley. *If two was the final tally.* He suspected it wasn't.

"Hassler, this is Pope."

"Great to hear your voice again," he said, winking at Nguyen.

"I saw that," he said.

"You were supposed to."

A few seconds elapsed before Pope spoke again.

"Here's the deal. Mr. Pilcher, your boss, wants you in place to finish the survey at first light. Move the team across the valley to the western fence site."

"We'll leave this site an hour and half before sunrise tomorrow morning. That will give us plenty of time to cross the valley and arrive at the site before first light."

More silence as Pope's brain tried to process the irrefutable logic.

"Mr. Pilcher would feel more comfortable if you arrived on location tonight."

"I'd feel more comfortable with a different jacket, but I'm not going to ask

someone to cross the valley to deliver it."

"You'll move the team if I give you a new jacket?" he said.

"Only if you and Pam deliver it."

"Fuck you, Hassler."

"Mr. Hassler?" said Pilcher.

"I was wondering how long it might take you to intervene. You need someone a little more qualified in Pope's position."

"Pope follows orders, which is more than I can say for you. Will you move the group?"

"I can move everyone in the morning and still meet your deadline."

"Everybody listen very carefully, as I will not repeat myself. Each of you agreed, verbally and in writing, to abide by my decisions upon exiting suspension. This has never been a democracy. That was part of the deal, and you all understood that going in," said Pilcher, pausing.

"Effective immediately, Adam Hassler no longer has authority over the team. Anyone who does not arrive at the next assigned point within three hours will be returned to suspension for an indefinite period of time. I may or may not decide to bring you out again. Is that understood?"

Everyone responded, except for Hassler.

"Good. I look forward to seeing everyone in the morning. Three hours."

The team's silence was broken by Kris Stewart.

"We're going," she said, pulling on her husband's jacket sleeve.

Dean didn't look convinced. He turned to Hassler. "You know more than you're telling us."

Hassler pointed at the camera attached to his head mount. "They can hear and see everything. You have to trust me on this. It's a bad idea."

"I have to take the chance. For us," said Dean, pulling his wife close. "I don't expect you or anyone else to understand that."

He understood completely. He'd stepped into Pilcher's nightmare for the woman he loved.

“Pilcher, you still listening?”

“Of course I am.”

“I need your word.”

“My word?”

“About Theresa.”

“What about her?”

“If I follow your orders, I get her back.”

“You never lost her.”

“That’s an interesting way of interpreting the situation.”

“It’s the only way of interpreting the situation. Complete the survey and return to the superstructure. Nothing has changed.”

“Fair enough,” said Hassler. “We’ll arrive at the anchor site within the hour.”

“Thank you, Adam. I look forward to opening that bottle of scotch.”

I bet you do.

“You sure about this, boss?” said King.

Hassler ran the scenarios. Best case, they crossed the valley without making contact. The thought of Pilcher pounding a table like a baby made him grin. Worst case, they faced a pack of lethal, catlike creatures. Multiple KIAs in the group. Possibly a clean sweep of his team. Most likely case based on known data? They faced two predators working together. Result? One KIA, most likely the first or last in formation. He could live with that.

“No, but I don’t see any other way. Gather up while Diaz packs up. We need to make a few modifications before the trip.”

He had an idea that should increase their odds of survival.

Chapter 17

“What the hell is he doing now?”

Pope shook his head, annoyed. Pilcher was watching the same screens in his lavish office suite. *What does it look like Hassler is doing?*

“He’s lining them up for some kind of equipment modification. They’ll probably break out the night vision and some of the cold weather stuff.”

He watched Hassler’s camera feed and listened. It looked like he was conducting a uniform inspection, stopping in front of each team member long enough to say, “Trust me,” before moving down the line. Pilcher had been right. This Hassler character was a cold son of a bitch. He was leading them into a slaughter.

“We have a problem here,” said one of the technicians.

“What?” he said, examining the screens. “Holy shit.”

One by one, the team’s camera feeds disappeared.

“What the fuck is happening down there!” boomed Pilcher through his headset.

“I don’t know. We’re losing camera feeds,” said Pope.

“I’m not talking to you!”

“We’re working on it. I don’t have an answer,” said the lead technician.

Hassler’s feed settled on the last person in the line, King, who smiled. A spoon appeared in front of the greenish image, followed by a hand that reached out and yanked King’s camera off his head mount, killing the signal.

“They know about the other team. He’s removing the cameras,” said Pope.

“What? No! Patch me through to him immediately!”

This should be interesting.

“You’re live, sir.”

“Hassler! What the fuck do you think you’re doing with my equipment?”

“Just setting up a little insurance policy.”

“Reinstall the cameras immediately,” ordered Pilcher.

“I’ll reinstall them in the morning.”

“You’ll do it now!”

“Negative. The way I see it, you now have a vested interest in seeing that we get across safely.”

“Don’t play games with me, Adam. I will—”

“You’ll what? I’m keeping my word. Let me know when you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Ready for us to move out. There’s a lot riding on this crossing. You better hope it’s manageable.”

Pope waited for Pilcher’s response. Part of him hoped he gave the order to open fire on the team. He’d love to watch the thermal playbacks of the slaughter. Pam would probably enjoy it too. It could be a bonding moment. Maybe even worth a hand job from the useless whore.

“We’ve swept the valley for infrared signatures. If something is out there, it’s not showing up. Audio analysis indicates the sounds came from two locations, one north and one south of your position,” said Pilcher.

So much for the hand job.

“Nothing? That doesn’t make sense,” said Hassler.

“It could be a cold-blooded adaptation,” said Dean. “Cold-blooded creatures assume the temperature of their surroundings.”

“I don’t think we’re talking about a reptile,” said Pilcher.

“It could be some kind of adaptation.”

“The environment is the same. A mountain lion wouldn’t need to adapt,” said Pilcher.

“What if this isn’t an adaptation of a predatory cat? What if this is something

altogether different.”

Pope was ready to tune this out. Just get on with the trek already.

“Adam, I really need to see what we’re up against. The future of Wayward Pines may very well depend on it.”

“I’ll give you the details in person. Five minutes until we step off,” he said, and the last camera feed went dead.

“Proceed directly to the hatch. Out,” said Pilcher.

“Arnold?”

“Yes, sir?” He’d keep it formal until Pilcher cooled off.

“Contact Alan. I want him to assemble the primary assault team in the armory immediately. Full body armor and weapon load-outs. I’ll be down to brief the team in twenty minutes.”

Chapter 18

Hassler tightened the chinstrap to Diaz's head mount and tested the stability of the night vision goggles suspended above his forehead. Tight enough. Larsen and King were repeating this same process with the others.

"Did Pilcher's training include any night firing with NVGs?"

"No. This is the first time I've ever seen a pair of these outside of the movies."

"All right. You just pull the unit down over your eyes when you want to see in the dark."

"How do I turn them on?"

"They activate and deactivate automatically depending on their position. Try it," said Hassler.

Diaz flipped the goggles over his eyes. "Awesome. Just like daylight," he said, scanning the forest.

"You remember how to use your pistol?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty good with it."

"Stick to your pistol."

"What about the rifle?" said Diaz.

"Probably not a good idea," said Hassler, turning to address the group. "Let me grab everyone really quick."

The group huddled around Hassler, who stood with his back to a large boulder.

"This is how it's going to work. Court, Nguyen, Diaz and the Stewarts will form the nucleus of the group. Stay tight, but don't knock each other over. We

won’t be on a convenient walking path. I’ll walk several feet in front of the group, scanning the sides. Keep pace with me. Seth will take point. Erik will trail. The pace will be brisk, which won’t be easy in the dark—even with the goggles. Focus on the person in front of you and keep moving.”

“Can someone show me how to work this rifle again?” said Diaz.

“Rifles will not be deployed by the main group unless specifically directed by me.”

“Wait a minute. If my wife’s in danger, I’m using the rifle,” said Dean Stewart.

“Close-quarters combat with NVGs can get really messy, really quick. One spin and you’re almost guaranteed to pin the tail on the wrong donkey. We can’t afford any blue on blue casualties. Use your pistols for immediate self-defense.”

“Adam, if I see something coming at the group—toward my wife, I’m unloading my rifle at it.”

“Do me a favor, Dean. Position yourself at the very back of the group. You’ll have better situational awareness. The rest of you stick to pistols. Any questions?”

“What was the spoon for?” said Kris.

“King found it at the school site. We’re not the first team to leave the superstructure.”

“You had no right to hide that from us,” said Dean.

“Keep your voice down, please,” said Larsen.

Dean walked up to Hassler and hissed, “I would have put an end to this expedition right then and there. You put us all at risk.”

“And you can thank me for that later.”

“Thank you?” he said incredulously.

“You were as good as dead when you stepped out of your suspension capsule. We all were. We just didn’t know it. You think Pilcher would have let you resign from the team and walk back to that hatch with your wife? All good? We’re out here for one purpose and one purpose only. To help him figure out what killed

the first expedition. I gave each of you a golden ticket to get back inside the mountain. All you have to do is survive long enough to cash it in. Let's get this over with."

King checked his compass and stepped off at a brisk pace, scanning the forest with his rifle. Hassler followed, urging the group forward. Seven minutes into the crossing, they heard a single screech from the southwest. Closer this time. He flipped his night vision goggles down and examined the image, immediately returning them to the standby position on his forehead. They had at least thirty minutes before reaching the "break even" point, when using night vision beat relying on the naked eye. He considered stopping here and waiting for the creature to pass. Maybe Pilcher could help them out a little.

"Operations. Can you plot the course of the southern hostile?"

"Stand by."

They continued for a full minute before operations responded.

"Rough estimate, northeast trajectory."

King glanced back at him and shook his head. *Rough estimate, my dick.*

"Will our paths intersect?"

"Stand by."

Of course. He had to run this through Pilcher's filter. A second scream pierced the trees to the north. He shifted the rifle to a left-hand grip and crouched, staring past the optics.

"Switch to night vision and IR laser at first sign of contact," he reminded King and Larsen.

A screech to the south brought the group to a halt.

"We should go back," said Nguyen.

"This is our only way out of the valley," responded Hassler. "Keep moving."

"No fucking way," replied Nguyen.

"This is suicide," added Kris Stewart.

"Stay off the net, unless you have something to report. What are we looking at, Pilcher?"

No response.

“Pilcher, you can’t even *begin* to comprehend the measures I’m willing to take to ensure none of this information gets to you,” he said, softly flipping his selector switch to semi-automatic.

“I’m with you, boss,” said King.

“Same here,” said Larsen.

Fuck, I should just do it now and get it over with. They stood a better chance of surviving without the civilians. Pilcher might even sanction the decision.

“The southern hostile has altered course. It’s heading directly for you. Fifteen hundred meters bearing one-nine-seven. Good luck.”

“King, Larsen, Graves, Dean and Kris. Form a skirmish line oriented one-niner-seven. Use the trees. Rifles condition one. Victor and Raymond stack up behind the skirmish line, facing the opposite direction.”

As the group scrambled to form a hasty defensive position, he grabbed Raymond and Victor.

“Give me your rifles.”

“What?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Victor. Your rifle!”

He readied their rifles and handed them back.

“These are ready to fire on semi-automatic. Safeties are off. Place the red dot on your target and press the trigger. One press equals one bullet. You have twenty.”

“What if I run out?” said Diaz.

“Then you switch to your pistol. I don’t have time to teach you the rest,” he said, pulling them toward the battle line.

He arranged them behind Dean and Kris, near the middle, facing northeast.

“My best guess is one hostile from the north. I’ll take care of it. If I’m right, and that’s all we’re dealing with from this direction, the two of you will guard the rear. You call out anything you see. Understand?”

“Yes,” they said in unison.

Hassler studied the line King and Larsen had established. It was the best they could do. Larsen anchored the left flank, using a thick pine trunk for cover. Several feet to his right, Graves shared a tree with Kris Stewart. They were opposite handed, which worked out perfectly. Dean kneeled in the open next to his wife, holding her hand. King secured the right side of the line, staggered slightly forward of the group to make best use of the trees. He settled in next to Dean, fully exposed to the threat in each direction. The zoologist started to lower his NVGs.

“You’re better off without them.”

“What do you think we’re up against?” said Dean.

“Whatever it is, I’m hoping it’s just a pair hunting together. Maybe a small group of cooperative predators. We can handle that.”

“The last group couldn’t.”

“We have a distinct advantage. We know they’re coming.”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he said.

“Honey, stop that. We’ll be fine.”

“No. This is our final judgment. I knew Pilcher’s offer was too good to be true. We made a deal with the devil.”

“That’s enough,” hissed his wife.

“Contact. One o’clock. Three hundred meters. Moving fast. Switching to NVGs,” said King.

“Weapons free.”

Eighteen hundred meters, my ass.

Chapter 19

Hassler strained against the temptation to look over his shoulder as the first rounds left the line. Hot brass from one of the Stewarts' rifles struck the side of his face. Movement. Shit! He shifted his rifle right, rapidly lining up the green infrared laser with the fast-moving target. The rifle bucked twice, and the creature tumbled, kicking up snow all the way to Larsen's tree. It came at them from an oblique angle. *Not good.* He scanned the green image for more threats. The shooting intensified.

"All guns forward," yelled King.

He spun to face their primary threat axis, expecting to see several creatures two hundred meters out.

"Holy shit," he muttered.

He engaged the lead creatures fifty meters away, methodically firing two rounds at each target before shifting the green laser to the next. They fell in droves as three lasers worked back and forth, guiding a lethal wall of .308 projectiles downrange. By the time Hassler expended his second magazine, he knew they couldn't hold the line. Gunfire erupted behind him, followed by a human scream. He whirled in time to see one of the creatures barrel into Diaz, pinning him against the tree. The oddly humanoid beast slashed wildly at the surveyor's stomach while biting his face. A single .308 bullet removed the top of the frantic creature's head. Diaz slid down the tree, clutching his throat—oblivious to the fact that he had just sat in a pile of his own intestines.

The next one leapt out of the right flank, headed directly for Hassler. A hastily fired bullet caught it in the shoulder, spinning it ninety degrees and slowing its

momentum. The next projectile passed through its neck with little effect. It slammed into him, slashing and biting at his face. Talons tore through his ski hat and night vision mount, slicing to the bone above his right ear. Rows of pointed teeth snapped against the polymer hand guards of his MK12 rifle. Without thinking, he drew the rifle back and pounded its face with the buttstock, showering the ground with dark fluid. The creature dropped to both knees, giving him enough time to turn the rifle and fire point blank through its forehead.

He lifted his night vision goggles while it wavered upright. It had to be the most disgustingly warped thing he had ever seen. A hairless, sinewy, translucent humanoid. He could see the thing's heart pumping through its fucking skin! Within the span of a few visibly weakening heartbeats, he knew exactly what they were up against. Themselves—after eighteen hundred years of DNA corruption. Pilcher's prediction had come true, but not in any way he could have possibly anticipated.

When the pale creature toppled forward and hit the ground at Nguyen's feet, the geologist took one look and bolted. He passed Larsen and sprinted toward the cliff wall, firing his rifle wildly into the forest ahead. Earsplitting screeches ripped through the forest as most of the attacking group diverted to chase Nguyen. The unplanned diversion evened the odds and bought them some time.

"Time to move," said Hassler.

"Me, Larsen, King and Graves form a line and bring up the rear. Stewarts navigate to the hatch. Bearing two-eight-niner. Shoot and scoot," he said, killing two creatures that had lowered their heads to ram King.

They travelled fifty feet before having to stop and deal with the next wave. The thunderous roar of gunfire momentarily drowned out the hideous shrieks, grinding the suicidal onslaught of monsters to a halt.

"Sprint! We'll move between waves!"

Hassler dodged trees and fought to keep his footing in slushy snow as they scrambled across the valley. The Stewarts fell behind almost immediately,

forcing them to slow down. Dozens of screeches filled the woods behind them. He did the math. The next wave of monstrosities would catch up to them in thirty seconds. They had over a mile to travel. The strategy had zero chance of succeeding.

“This isn’t going to work,” he said.

“Every man for himself?” said Larsen.

“There’s no other way,” said Hassler.

“See you on the other side,” said King, sprinting southwest and disappearing below the tree line.

“Not if I see you first,” said Larsen, already headed northeast.

Hassler ran northwest, dropping into the same creek bed that had swallowed King. He followed the shallow stream north, chased by the sounds of a frenzied massacre. High above, the distant boom of a .50-caliber sniper rifle carried through the valley.

Chapter 20

Pilcher appeared in the doorway with Pam. He looked out of breath compared to his twenty-year-old protégé. Good. Maybe he'll have a heart attack. Speed up his eventual promotion to king of the mountain. Until then, endless questions.

"How many escaped?"

"Four. Hassler, Larsen, Graves and—shit. Make that three. They just caught up with King."

"That quickly?"

"He took the creek bed south, trying to break through their lines. Made it nine hundred and seventy feet. Further than I expected."

"How did Graves survive?" said Pilcher.

"She chased Larsen. The pack converging on the Stewarts missed her."

"Hassler?"

"Took the creek bed north, which turned out to be a better choice."

"Patch me through to Hassler," said Pilcher, stepping into the Operations Center.

"He's not responding."

"What do you mean he's not responding? He better fucking respond, or I'll leave his ass out there!"

"Sir, we're reviewing his audio. We picked up some cues indicating a close-quarters scuffle. His unit might be damaged."

"Well, tough luck for Hassler. Get the other two on the line for a conference call. Patch me through."

"Sir, you're on with Larsen and Graves."

“Erik. Courtney.”

Silence.

“I know you’re listening. In ten minutes, I will send a heavily armed assault team to rescue the survivors.”

Pam looked at Pilcher quizzically. He shook his head vigorously and mouthed, “No I’m not.”

“Twelve men. Full weapon load-outs and body armor. I can only send this team to one location. Hassler has refused to communicate, so he’s off the list. That leaves the two of you.”

“Send the team. You know where to find us.”

“Deploying the team represents a substantial risk to the personnel involved. I need to know what they’re up against.”

“I bet. Let me make this easy for you, David. Twelve men will not be enough.”

“I’ll send more.”

“Same result.”

“What in God’s name is out there?” he hissed.

“Let’s just say that your prediction about the fate of humanity took an unexpected turn.”

“Damn it, Erik. This isn’t a joke! The fate of humanity is at stake!”

Pilcher’s face and shiny bald scalp had turned dark red.

A few more minutes of this, and I might get a promotion well ahead of schedule, thought Pope.

“If you want to know what’s out here, I suggest you suit up and take a look for yourself. Larsen and Graves. Out.”

Larsen is a dead man, if Pilcher doesn’t drop first.

“Erik? Courtney? Answer immediately!”

Nothing.

“He’s protecting Graves. Pope, order Mustin to target Graves. I want her out of the equation.”

He hesitated. Pilcher tended to make rash decisions when he was angry, often requiring significant cleanup on his part. Abducting Secret Service agents was one of Pilcher's worst calls, jeopardizing the entire operation and delaying Pope's suspension for several years. Was there a downside to killing Graves, other than lowering the odds that they would collect valuable information?

"Pope! This is not the time for internal debate. Target Graves. Once it's done, give Larsen until 9 AM to return to the hatch, or his golden ticket will be permanently revoked. Where is Hassler?"

"Still moving north," said the technician.

"Any hostiles blocking his path home?"

"Impossible to say, sir. IR signatures have faded into the background."

"Fucking Hassler!" he said, storming out of the room.

Pam hovered in the doorway, grinning at him like a mental patient. "Watch your shit," she said and closed the door.

Watch yours, you stupid bitch. Pope sat on the edge of the table behind the technicians.

"Let's see it from start to finish again."

"The whole thing?"

"No. Start it when they get to Nguyen."

A time-stamped, IR camera feed appeared on the seventy-inch flat-screen. Transposed against a grey background, a white figure pitched sideways like the victim of an invisible hit and run accident. *He should have stayed with the team.* The figure thrashed on the ground, kicking and punching. He struggled for a few more seconds before giving up completely. Then it happened. Specks of white started to move away from Nguyen, in the direction of the Stewarts. Dozens of creatures taking a warm chunk of Nguyen's flesh with them. Heat signatures. He'd ordered Mustin's team to engage any small IR signatures in the vicinity of a confirmed team casualty. *The Stewarts kept Mustin's snipers busy for more than fifteen minutes.*

Chapter 21

The back of Hassler's head snapped against the tree trunk, jolting him awake. *Shit. How long have I been out?* He didn't dare move his hand to check his watch, not that it mattered. Based on the light filtering through the trees, he knew the answer to the question. Too fucking long. The last time he'd checked had been 3:44 AM.

He pressed his throbbing skull against the bark and listened. Pine boughs softly rustled from a crisp breeze. Birds chirped. The stream rippled. *So far, so good.* Moving slowly, he leaned his head over each shoulder, scanning the snow for footprints. *Clear.* He couldn't see behind the tree.

A bright light hit his face, forcing him to squint. He fought the urge to cover his eyes with one of his hands. The flash persisted. Peering through the branches at the western mountain peaks, he located the source of the light. It had to be a signal mirror. He crept his right hand up to his cheek and gave them the middle finger.

A quick flash, long flash and a quick flash hit his face. *I'm awake, assholes!* The series of flashes repeated—twice. They were trying to communicate with him. Two thousand years in the future and they were using one of the oldest methods of communication in the book. He debated what to do next. The fact that they had a clear line of sight to him didn't bode well for his survival prospects. Without the fog, his information about the creatures lost significant value. The longer they spent watching the valley, the less they needed him. He needed to get to the hatch as soon as possible. He stared into the mountains and nodded. The flashes continued.

Radio?

He blinked *broken.*

Hatch by 9.

AM?

Yes.

Bearing?

Two. One. Eight. Point nine miles.

Roger. Survivors?

Larsen. Enroute to you. Link up.

Hostiles?

Unknown. Quiet since one.

Roger. Scotch?

Waiting.

Apparently, Pilcher still needed him. *Time to get moving—before that changed*. He loosened the quick release knots holding his legs to the thick branch, careful not to let the lengths of line fall to the forest floor. After securing the lines to his vest, he eased his stiff legs out of the camouflage bivvy bag and straddled the limb, lowering his legs in slow motion. He stopped and listened for several seconds before continuing. After tying the insulated, waterproof bag to the tree, he released one of the hitches holding his torso against the mature spruce, leaving the second in place for stability.

Something splashed in the creek behind the tree, freezing him in place. *Larsen?* He had no intention of leaning over to check. Larsen knew where to find him. A distinctly human voice whispered his first name. *Definitely Larsen.* He twisted far enough to see around the tree. Larsen kneeled in the snow on the near side of the creek bed, examining the tracks leading to Hassler's hide site. He stared into the spruce boughs.

"Adam," he whispered forcefully. "Get your ass down. We have to get moving."

Hassler reached for the last hitch pinning him to the tree, his hands dropping to the rifle instead. The birds had gone silent. Searching through the pine spurs, he spotted two pale creatures darting through the trees “on all fours,” headed toward Larsen. He shifted the MK12 rifle across his chest and pressed the magazine into the crook of his left elbow, steadying the rifle. Leaning as far as possible around the tree, he placed the ACOG scope’s green reticle center mass on the closest aberration. His face came out of the scope. *Sorry, brother.*

Larsen detected them at the last possible moment, managing to duck and fire two bullets into the first beast. Already in midair, the thing crashed into him at an incredible rate of speed. Knocked senseless, Larsen had no chance against the second creature. Talons and teeth slashed furiously, spraying the pristine snow with crimson ribbons. The former Green Beret struggled against the weight of the gruesome beast, gurgling for breath. Hassler closed his eyes, unable to watch. *What have I done?* A dozen nearby screeches answered his question. He’d kept himself alive—for now.

Chapter 22

“Impressive. The man has a survival instinct like no other,” said Pilcher, watching the video screen.

The vast flat-screen monitor displayed two feeds side by side, each showing the same scene from a different camera lens. The first showed Hassler superimposed over Larsen in grayscale. Small white heat signatures moved in every direction, evidence of the feeding frenzy. He hoped they didn’t look up, imagining Hassler was thinking the same thing. The right half of the screen featured a full color view of the nearly impenetrable treetop layer common to most of the Wayward Pines site. Fast-moving patches of thin fog passed through the image, adding to his misery. They’d caught glimpses of the creatures below, but nothing detailed enough to study. They needed to retrieve Hassler alive.

“Sir, I have some wild movement on Larsen’s microchip,” said one of the technicians.

“No way he’s still alive,” said Pope.

“Put it up on the screen,” ordered Pilcher.

A digitized map of Wayward Pines appeared, centered on Larsen’s tag. Pilcher read the data. *Thirty-three miles per hour?* That wasn’t Larsen.

“This is all being recorded, right?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

The tag moved north, increasing its speed to forty-one miles per hour. *Incredible.* He made a mental note to change the microchipping procedure. Bury the tag deeper—maybe in the thigh.

“Are they all headed north?” said Pilcher.

“The ones that dined on Larsen appear to be headed in that direction,” said Pope.

“We need to ensure a clear path for Hassler. What is the range of the grenade launcher?”

Pope continued to stare at the screen.

“Sorry to interrupt your personal entertainment, Arnold—but if Hassler doesn’t make it back alive, guess who’s leading the next expedition?”

“Uhhhh. I think they can go out to, like…”

“Four hundred meters. Maximum range,” said Pam, feigning a smile at Pope.

“We’re roughly 1,300 meters up, which means…we should be able to double that range.”

“That’s a long time of flight, David. Impossible to hit a moving target,” said Pope, gesturing toward the screen.

“I’m thinking more along the lines of a diversion. If we can land grenades a half mile out in any direction, we should be able to draw them far enough away to give Hassler a chance.”

“He’s too far away to make that work,” said Pam.

“Then he’ll have to close some of the distance without our help.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” said Pope, staring at the screen.

The live image minimized in the right corner of the screen was completely white.

“Put the bottom right image back up and pan out,” said Pilcher.

The entire screen turned greyish-white, unchanging until the eastern cliff walls appeared. Fog had reclaimed the valley.

“I guess it’s all up to Hassler,” said Pilcher.

“Start picking your team, Arnold,” said Pam.

Pope stared at her with the kind of murderous look that Pilcher knew would become a problem if left unaddressed. He filed the thought away for later.

“I don’t know. He’s proven deviously resourceful so far. We need to make every effort to get him back alive. I want Alan’s people ready at a moment’s

notice.”

Chapter 23

Thirty minutes had passed since the last creature scrambled north. The birds had returned, twittering and flitting between branches. Hassler relaxed his left arm, lowering the rifle. He trusted the birds. A few minutes later, his feet gently touched the snow beneath the tree. Scanning the trees with his rifle, he visually cleared 360 degrees before proceeding to Larsen's body.

They had literally torn him to shreds, taking most of his flesh and internal organs with them. He'd been reduced to a gore-encrusted skeleton, bones picked clean along the arms and legs. He'd never seen a body destroyed so completely —and he'd seen his fair share of broken bodies. A wide patch of blood-soaked snow surrounded Larsen's body. His equipment lay scattered next to him. Loose rifle magazines. Backpack. Shredded boots. Rifle. Anything they couldn't eat. He circled the blood, looking for Larsen's radio headset, but he didn't see it.

He glanced up at the mountain, finding his view of the peaks obscured by fog. *Good.* His watch read 8:12. Forty-eight minutes to reach the hatch, though he suspected Pilcher would make an exception in his case, unless the fog broke. He kneeled next to a tree and set his course with the compass. Two-one-eight. Just under a mile. He could do this, as long as the birds kept singing.

Thirty minutes later, he had covered half of the distance, stopping several times to listen and scan the forest after hearing a distant screech. He glanced nervously skyward. The landscape was considerably brighter than yesterday. If the fog lifted for good, he was in trouble from above. A chilly breeze revealed a sickly sweet smell, sending a wave of adrenaline through his system. He recognized the scent. He'd found what was left of Pilcher's A-team.

Hassler followed a trail of brass cartridges to four savaged corpses arranged in a tight formation. The brass pattern in and around the brownish red pile suggested they had fired in every direction. He picked up one of the rifle cartridges. .308. At least one of them had the sense to bring an appropriate weapon. Pistol cartridges outnumbered rifle cartridges three to one at his feet. A few feet outside of the carnage, he hit the jackpot. A perfectly intact head mount lay in the snow, tucked next to a bullet-riddled tree trunk. He inserted the earpiece, leaving the mount hanging by the wire. A few button pushes later, he heard background static in his earpiece.

“Pilcher, this is Hassler. Radio check.”

“Stand by.”

No more standing by. He strapped the mount over his bloodied head and raised his rifle skyward. Boom. Boom. Boom.

“I’m coming in hot, motherfuckers. You better be ready,” he said and took off running.

Chapter 24

“He did what?” said Pilcher into his radio.

“Your boy just compromised his position—on purpose.”

“He’s not *my* boy, Arnold, and you better watch your tone. Patch him through, and get down to the armory. We’re opening the hatch.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, sir. At this point we know everything we need to know about these things. They’re fast, lethal and they hunt in packs. We have to gas the valley. End of story.”

“Pope, when I want your opinion about the greater mechanics of running the project—I’ll ask! Just do what I say, and that’s it. Why am I not talking to Hassler?”

He turned around to see Pam standing in the armory door with that unnerving smile. God, he hated that look. It made her look psychotic.

“The grenade launcher has been delivered,” she said with the look still plastered on her face.

“Mustin understands what to do?”

“He just needs a launch bearing,” she said.

His radio crackled.

“Pilcher, this is Hassler.”

He stepped past Pam, entering the hallway outside the armory. He didn’t need Alan’s security crew overhearing another heated exchange with someone that didn’t appear to respect his authority.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Ensuring my survival.”

He sounded out of breath, like he was running.

“All you had to do was arrive at the hatch. Now things are complicated.”

“I work better under complicated conditions,” said Hassler.

“You’re sounding less like Special Agent Hassler every time I hear your voice.”

“What can I say? The experience has been cathartic.”

A screech registered in the speaker.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” said Pilcher.

“I think I have this under control. Out.”

Pilcher rushed back to the armory.

“Alan! Get your men down to the hatch!”

“Same deal with Hassler?” said Alan.

“Same deal, but make sure he’s close enough. I want good video. Lots of specimens too.”

***

Mustin followed Hassler through the AN/PAS-13D thermal scope attached to his rifle. The scope was essentially useless for shooting a moving target at this range. At 10X magnification, Hassler was little more than a white speck, and he was moving too fast. They’d been lucky with Graves. Calculations had put her range at 4,793 feet when Pilcher ordered her death. The three of them had fired simultaneously at her heat signature, hoping for the best. One or more of them hit the mark during the first volley.

“Overwatch, this is operations. Fire three rounds from the MGL along bearing zero-nine-zero. Over.”

“Overwatch copies. Three rounds bearing zero-niner-zero,” he said, pushing himself onto his knees.

He leaned over and grabbed the M32 Multiple Grenade Launcher laying on the rock next to him. Pointing it directly across the valley at a thirty-degree

elevation angle, he fired three 40mm grenades in rapid succession. The grey projectiles arched high and dropped, disappearing from Mustin’s view long before they penetrated the fog layer. They hadn’t sailed as far away from the western mountain peak as he’d expected. He hoped Pilcher’s math was right, because he’d just fired the grenades near Hassler’s approach bearing.

Chapter 25

A single creature loped through the trees on a perfect intercept course. *Let's see if you've learned anything.* Hassler slid to a stop and braced his rifle against a tree, observing the beast's reaction. *Purely instinctual.* The pale thing skittered through the snow on all fours, quickly adjusting its trajectory. This was a single-minded, predatory animal. Its primal instinct to feed superseded any basic survival instinct. The rifle kicked into his shoulder, leaving a reddish-pink mist beyond the thing's head. More screeches to the north—a little closer than he had hoped.

He took off running, seriously wondering if he could span the remaining five hundred yards before the rest of the pack caught up with him. His plan at the hatch had a lot of moving parts, and it wouldn't work if they attacked before he reached the hatch. Three deep crunches sounded due east. Familiar sounds from a different life. He knew what had happened before Pilcher's voice filled his earpiece.

"That's your only diversion. I suggest you refrain from firing your rifle unless you have a personal emergency. We'll be waiting."

His lungs burned as he scrambled through the trees, passing medicine-ball-sized chunks of granite. He searched every direction for the creatures, hoping they had taken Pilcher's bait—for now. Dark grey rock peeked through the dense stand of trees ahead. Maybe three hundred yards.

"Operations. Hassler. How do I look?" he said, out of breath.

"Looking good. You're on course for the hatch."

"Is the security team in place?"

“Stand by.”

They’re up to something. Stand by had become synonymous with “let me clear this information with Pilcher.” Several seconds later, the sanitized version of the real answer arrived.

“They’ve just arrived. Continue on your present course.”

“How far do I have to go? I need a break.”

He didn’t plan on stopping, but thought it might scare Pilcher enough to get him a quicker answer.

“Three hundred yards.”

“See you in a few minutes,” he said, picking up the pace.

Hassler stopped at what he estimated to be one hundred fifty yards and leaned against a tree, facing east. He shouldered his rifle and scanned for hostiles. Nothing. The diversion had worked.

“Why have you stopped?” demanded Pilcher.

“Just needed to make sure I didn’t have a surprise following me. These things are sneaky and lethal. I’ve never seen anything like it, besides humans,” he said, wondering if Pilcher caught the hidden message.

“Hurry up, we can’t risk a second pack arriving from the south.”

“On my way.”

Instead of heading in a straight line for the hatch, Hassler ran ten yards at a time, stopping briefly to check the eastern approach for hostiles. He caught clear glimpses of the hatch while running. They had opened it a little further than before. Figures in camouflage lined the ledge, superimposed against the shadowy depths of the superstructure. He didn’t see a rope waiting for him. Twenty yards closer to the hatch, he spotted a car-sized boulder next to a thick tree trunk. *Perfect.*

“Adam, we can cover you from here. Please proceed directly to the hatch.”

“Copy,” he said and took off sprinting.

He ducked behind the boulder and pressed his back into the rough stone.

“Dammit, Hassler, you’re only fifty yards away! I have more than enough

guns up here to protect you!”

Fifty yards? He peeked over the boulder. *Looks about right.* A few deep breaths later, Hassler shouldered his rifle and pointed the barrel east. He fired the rest of his magazine into the forest and reloaded the rifle. A cacophony of screeches erupted in the distance.

“Hassler! I’m fucking done with this game! Get to the hatch right now! Last chance before I close the door on you for good!”

He removed two olive green cylindrical canisters from the drop bag attached to his tactical vest, setting one on the ground next to him.

“You want to know what’s out here? I’m about to show you.”

Silence followed by inhuman screeching.

“You still there, David?”

“I don’t need you anymore, Adam.”

“Is that so?”

“I can draw them to the hatch with gunfire after they dispose of you. We’ll shoot a few and close the hatch. Collect the bodies later. Video cameras hidden in the cliff wall will record everything I need to see. With any luck, we’ll get to watch a feeding frenzy first hand.”

“Here they come,” said Hassler, spotting the lead aberration.

Three more appeared between the trees, followed immediately by dozens. Hassler pulled the pin on one of the cylinders and stood, heaving the object toward the open ground beneath the ledge. He quickly ducked and shuffled to the other side of the boulder, reappearing long enough to throw the second canister. The metallic object bounced off one of the boulders below the hatch and rolled in the snow. He crouched and waited, nervously watching the oncoming swell of pale, semi-translucent monstrosities.

“You son of a bitch,” said Pilcher.

“Told you I was coming in hot,” he said and charged the hatch.

A thick, brilliant red cloud of smoke had completely obscured the hatch, rendering his approach unseen. Hassler entered the haze as the first creatures

bounded over the boulder he had used seconds ago. Automatic gunfire exploded above him, followed by intensified shrieking. He kept running until the smoke suddenly darkened, and he slammed into the cliff wall.

The mistake inadvertently saved his life. Dazed, he looked up from the ground in time to see one of the creatures charge headfirst through the smoke. It rammed into the stone two feet above him, spraying cold, dark chunks across his face. Wet thuds echoed through the cloud as skulls struck the immovable wall of granite at forty miles per hour and exploded. The suicidal onslaught stopped momentarily, giving him time to sit up and shoulder his rifle. *Now what?* His organized plan more or less ended with the smoke grenades. A knotted rope landed between his feet, answering his question.

He hauled himself onto the stone ledge as the monstrosities started to blindly leap through the smoke screen. Most of them collided violently with the half-closed hatch, falling onto the ledge in bloody piles. A few landed perfectly, wasting no time before slashing away at the frantic security crew. One sailed right into the superstructure. *Beautiful!* Ignoring the desperate human screams around him, Hassler ducked under the door and pounded the fist-sized red button imbedded in the stone to his immediate right. The steel wall started to descend as the next wave of creatures hit the ledge.

Three creatures darted into the tunnel, dragging tendrils of red smoke under the hatch. Automatic gunfire erupted from the security team crouched behind the concrete barrier, slowing the beasts' momentum, but ultimately failing to prevent one of them from jumping onto the nearest Jeep. It hit the vehicle's hood with a heavy thud, immediately vaulting the rest of the vehicle. The thing bolted up the tunnel, chasing down Pilcher's entourage, which had taken off for the last Jeep in the column. The creature barreled through Pam, slamming her headfirst into the rough-cut stone wall. Pope's AK-47 chattered from the opposite side of the vehicle column, its 7.62mm bullets tearing through glass, fabric and sheet metal in a futile attempt to hit the creature headed directly for Pilcher.

Without hesitating, Hassler raised his rifle and fired, hitting the monster as it

leapt skyward. The thing knocked Pilcher to the blacktop and rolled past, quickly righting itself for another attack. A torrent of fire from Pope's AK-47 knocked it against the side of the tunnel, killing it instantly. With his rifle pointed in Pam and Pope's direction, he considered firing two more bullets. *Not today. Wayward Pines needs everyone. Even them.*

He shifted his attention to the hatch and witnessed the last of Pilcher's assault team squeeze underneath. The final man made it halfway through before he was yanked halfway back onto the ledge. A vicious tug of war ensued, with the surviving members of the assault team pulling desperately to save the screaming guard from a horrifying death. Alan Fletcher released the man's arm and jammed his submachine gun under the door, breaking the stalemate by firing the entire forty-round magazine in one sustained burst. The team stumbled into the tunnel as the heavyweight door locked into place.

Through the diffuse red smoke, he could tell they should have put a bullet in his head and let the creatures have the rest. He was stripped clean of flesh from the waist down. Most of Fletcher's men vomited. Strangely, it didn't faze him at all. He walked down the row of vehicles, looking to have a friendly chat with Pilcher. Pope emerged between the last two Jeeps, blocking his path.

"That's far enough!"

He kept walking.

"I'll drop you right there!"

"You haven't reloaded. The bolt doesn't lock back on an AK."

"Bullshit," he said.

"Did *you* stop shooting, or did the rifle stop shooting? Big difference," he said, continuing to approach.

"Fuck you," he said, tightening his grip on the rifle.

"Because if the rifle stopped shooting, the next trigger pull will sound like a click, and if I hear a click—you're a dead man."

Pope's face tightened.

"All I want to do is talk to Pilcher. If I wanted to kill him, I would have let the

abbie do it."

"It's fine, Arnold. Mr. Hassler has more than earned his place among us. He's earned my respect," said Pilcher, standing and brushing his khaki pants.

Pope lowered the rifle and let it hang by its sling.

"Pam?" he said, looking past him.

"That thing knocked her out of the way to get at you. Ironic, wouldn't you say? Almost like it knew who was in charge."

"What did you call it?"

"Thing."

"No. Before that."

"Abbie. Aberration."

"Why do you call it that?"

"Take a look for yourself," he said, pointing at the creature with his rifle.

"I made sure it's dead, sir," said Pope.

Pilcher put on a pair of laboratory gloves and kneeled next to it, examining its head. He turned to Hassler with a grim look.

"This might be the first time I ever wished that I had been completely wrong."

"I'd like that bottle of scotch delivered to my room with a glass."

"I'll deliver it myself, with two glasses. I'd like to hear more about these—abbies."

"That'll cost you two bottles."

"It wouldn't hurt to show a little respect once in—" uttered Pope.

"Let me see your rifle," interrupted Hassler.

Pope looked to Pilcher, who nodded. He unslung the rifle and handed it to Hassler, who removed the AK-47's magazine and thumbed two rounds onto the pavement. Pope's face turned red.

"Do you have an armorer?" said Hassler.

"We have two," said Pope.

"Any with practical experience. Combat? SWAT? Tinkering with weapons is

one thing. Employing them properly under stress is another."

Pilcher answered the question. "We're set for armorers, but we could use someone to run the gun range and supervise the armory. Interested?"

"That's my job, sir," said Pope.

"Not anymore. As Wayward Pines' future sheriff, I think your time will be better spent getting familiar with town—starting with the fence project."

"I don't think it's a smart idea to put him—"

"Are you questioning my authority again?"

Pope glared at Hassler before answering. "No, sir. I'll have a full casualty report in a few minutes."

"Thank you, Arnold."

Pilcher extended his hand. "Can we work together?"

"Is the original deal still intact?"

"Theresa Burke? Of course."

"How do I know I can trust you?" said Hassler.

"I'm giving you unrestricted access to the superstructure's armory. Isn't that enough?"

"It'll have to do," he said, shaking Pilcher's hand.

Part II

“Last Betrayal”

Chapter 26

Marcus lay still in a patch of slushy, maroon-stained snow; his left shoulder nestled against the trunk of a thick pine. His eyes flitted left and right, scanning the dense forest for movement. It was no longer a question of *if* they would come, but *when*, and most insidiously, *how*. His boundary team had played this game for four days while Elliot Black's construction crew cleared the forest around the superstructure's exit. The abbies no longer threw themselves at the interlocking fields of fire established by the security team's M240 machine guns. They cautiously tested Marcus's defenses, sacrificing a few here and there, before committing larger numbers in coordinated, multidirectional attacks. The boundary perimeter team was due for another high-volume assault—he could feel it.

"Squad leaders, report," he whispered.

"This is Bravo One. Three o'clock is quiet."

"Bravo Two is clear."

"Bravo Three reports all clear."

"This is four. Nothing."

"Copy all sectors quiet. Operations, this is Bravo Lead. Fire the diversions and get the construction crew moving," said Marcus.

"Roger. Immediately advise any change to your status."

No shit, he desperately wanted to say. Instead, he settled for, "We'll be sure to advise. Out."

His opinion of Operations had steadily declined over the past few days. Tucked away safely in their mountain fortress, Ted Upshaw and the rest of

Pilcher's inner circle had become disconnected from the life-and-death struggles on the forest floor. Requests to "hold the line," so the construction could clear one more tree or dig one more fence post, had taken on an impersonal, costly edge—like they were playing a video game. People had been torn to pieces down here—eaten alive.

Even Pope was on Marcus's shortlist. The "sheriff" of Wayward Pines hadn't ventured beyond the mouth of the hatch since the first attack on the construction crew—but he had no problem "armchair quarterbacking" Marcus's job to maintain Pilcher's precious schedule. What schedule? It had taken them nearly four days of intense combat, scurrying in and out of the hatch several times per day, to secure an area the size of two basketball courts. At that rate, it might take a year to build the fence needed to keep the abbies out of the valley, if they could finish it. They'd lost eleven people already—five security officers and six construction personnel. The first day saw most of those casualties.

With little progress made on day one, Marcus convinced Alan to mount the M230LF chain gun systems on two of their armored Humvees and line the vehicles along the hatch's ledge. Firing 30mm projectiles at a rate of three rounds per second, the camera-operated cannons kept the abbies at bay while Marcus's team deployed a tight, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree perimeter to keep the threat at bay.

Despite the devastating effect of the chain guns on the abbies, multiple groups approaching from different directions quickly overwhelmed the weapons' system operators. Marcus's boundary security team provided a layered defensive approach that complimented the heavy firepower and, most importantly, kept the construction crew working.

Several distant percussions echoed through the trees, followed by sliding sounds a few hundred yards directly in front of him. He didn't see any movement, but knew from experience that the abbies observing him had taken off in pursuit of the acoustic signatures created by several 40mm grenade impacts.

“Movement at three o’clock, tracking east,” announced Bravo One, the squad leader positioned to cover the southern approach to the perimeter.

Marcus turned his head right and squinted. Shadows raced through the trees, away from his teams. They couldn’t resist. No matter how many times Mustin deployed the same diversion, the abbies took off running. It was the only way Black’s crew managed to make any progress at all. He checked his watch and raised his rifle, searching through the scope for any obvious lingerers. Nothing. A sharp, metallic clanging sound bounced between the trees, signifying the start of the construction crew’s work. *Could they be any fucking louder?*

Several minutes passed before the first shriek pierced the valley, drifting through his perimeter from the north. Checking his watch, he noted that they were early. Good thing this was the last section of fencing—for now.

“Bravo units, this is Bravo Lead. Stay sharp. Abbies inbound ahead of schedule,” he said.

Once all of the units had responded, Pope’s voice broke onto the tactical frequency.

“Marcus, keep the perimeter intact until Black is ready for your retreat. We only have one more fencing section to complete, plus the electrical hookup. They’re estimating thirty minutes.”

“I can’t guarantee thirty minutes,” said Marcus, rising to one knee to get a better view of the forest in front of him.

“Pilcher wants to wrap this up,” insisted Pope.

“I don’t control our friends out there.”

“Just do your best. We’re running out of diversionary grenades,” said Pope.

Marcus shook his head and let Pope’s comment go, rolling his eyes at a bearded man squatting next to a tree several feet to the right. Murray Wagner, Bravo Two’s squad leader, smirked—never taking his eyes off the forest in front of them. Spread among the trees, in a fifty-yard line to Marcus’s left and right, the rest of Wagner’s squad peered over their rifles. They formed the vanguard of Marcus’s boundary perimeter team, fully expecting to take the brunt of the

abbies' fury. Twelve men and women, supported by two belt-fed M240 machine guns, would fire as rapidly and accurately as possible—until the abbies stopped or it became clear that the line would fail.

"Overwatch reports significant movement a few thousand yards south of Bravo One's position," said Mustin from his perch in the rocks high above the valley.

Chapter 27

South? He'd just watched several abbies sprint away from Bravo One's sector. Shit. They might have attracted a new herd.

"Wagner, redeploy your squad one hundred yards behind Bravo One's current position, facing south. Prep the Claymores!" he yelled, rising to a crouch.

"Marcus, this is Pope. What are you doing? We need one-hundred-and-eighty-degree protection," he heard over the frequency.

"We might have a herd inbound from the south. I don't have time to explain the rest. Clear the frequency," he said, scanning the forest due east of them before turning to catch up with the rest of Bravo Two.

A new herd was bad news. No way Black would get his thirty minutes. These things moved too damn fast for his team to fire accurately against large numbers. Each twelve-member team had three or four former military or law enforcement types. The rest were drafted from a very limited pool of "noncritical" job sets. They'd trained nonstop for several days at the superstructure's sophisticated firing range, which improved accuracy but did little to prepare them for what waited outside of the hatch.

After three days of repetitious combat, each squad's performance had drastically improved—but they still had a tipping point. His most important job was to read the signs and predict when the line was about to collapse. With the exception of the disastrous first day, he'd managed to successfully pull the boundary team into the protective envelope of the chain guns, preventing a massacre. Today was different. With most of the twenty-foot-tall fence in place, the chain guns would remain silent. The ledge outside of the hatch was only ten

feet off the ground, and the guns couldn't engage targets without shooting through the steel grated fence. One badly placed 30mm steel projectile could destroy it.

"Bravo One, hold your position until Bravo Two is in place. I want the rest of Bravo to collapse the perimeter to the one-hundred-yard point. Bravo Three, you have Two's sector," said Marcus.

He'd just caught up with Wagner's squad when the first string of bad news hit.

"Marcus, this is Ken," he heard, Bravo Four's voice barely a whisper through his headset.

"Give me some good news, buddy."

"Negative. I have movement to the north. Moving fast in my direction," he said, pausing before sharing the worst part. "We haven't repositioned yet."

"How far have you moved?"

"We haven't moved. I saw the movement and stopped the group."

What? Shit. Now they had a real problem. With Ken's squad a hundred yards further away than the rest of the squads, one of their three sides was extremely vulnerable. He needed to make a quick decision about the overall formation. They were less than a minute away from making contact, possibly seconds.

"Bravo Three, form up one hundred yards behind Bravo Four. Ken, get your people out of there!" he said.

"Marcus, you're collapsing the perimeter too tightly around the construction site. One hundred yards doesn't give us a lot of breathing room!" yelled Pope.

"Stay off the frequency," he said, watching the men and women of Bravo Three make a run for their new position.

A series of staccato shrieks pierced the trees from the east, stopping several members of Bravo Three in their tracks.

"Keep them moving, Dana! I need you behind the iron curtain," he ordered.

"We'll make it!" she replied.

Marcus heard her scream at the squad, urging them to keep running—a tall

order given the pack of translucent beasts pouring through the trees less than two hundred yards away. Spotting Bravo Three's movement, the abbies frenzied—closing the distance with frightening speed. Marcus did a quick mental calculation, not sure if he had given the withdrawal order in time to save Dana's squad.

"Give me a hand with the Claymores!" he yelled, grabbing one of Wagner's men from the line.

They scrambled to a small, waist-high foxhole and jumped inside, quickly grabbing the "clackers" sitting on a pine plank along the eastern side of the hole. The M57 Firing Devices, or "clackers," were attached by insulated wire to a series of outward-facing, daisy-chained Claymore mines at the one hundred and fifty yard point.

"Reach out and take one in each hand. Follow my orders," said Marcus, gripping the clackers in front of him.

To keep things simple in the heat of battle, Marcus arranged the Claymore firing devices for quick, "fuck up" proof deployment—or so he hoped. Glancing up from his occupied hands, he saw the lead abbies pass a string of trees marked by yellow reflective tape. The monsters were now within the effective range of the directional mines—along with half of Dana's squad. Gunfire erupted from all sides as Marcus focused on the life-and-death race less than a hundred yards away.

With the deadly creatures screaming in close pursuit, most of Dana's team turned in place and opened fire, regardless of their positions relative to the Claymores. The abject fear of being eviscerated and shredded from limb to limb forced them to abandon logic. When the abbies tore into the first member of Bravo Three, Marcus screamed, "Right hand!" and rapidly squeezed the clacker, generating an electrical charge that detonated half of the antipersonnel mines. The other security officer replicated his action, exploding the rest of the devices a fraction of a second later.

The simultaneous firing of six M18 Claymore mines obliterated a swath of

forest two hundred yards long by fifty yards deep in front of Bravo Three, saturating the air with four thousand steel balls—Marcus's "iron curtain." The scene beyond the line of trees marked by green reflective tape disappeared in a blast of fire, smoke and debris—instantly halting the abbies' eastern attack and unceremoniously erasing four of Dana's security officers. Marcus peered through the smoke, searching for a second wave of abbies. Mercifully, none appeared, or he would have been forced to detonate the second string of Claymores, killing the rest of Bravo Three.

"Bravo Three, this is Bravo Lead. Fall back to the hatch. I say again. Bravo Three, fall back to the hatch."

He heard a muffled response over the tactical frequency before automatic gunfire crescendoed on both sides.

"Dana, get everybody on their feet and moving!" he yelled.

"Trying to—" she responded, her transmission cut off.

"Bravo One withdrawing. I've got a shit ton of inbounds. Definitely gonna need both lines of Claymores. I'll call it out."

Marcus turned to the man next to him in the foxhole. "Can you handle both sets of Claymores for Bravo One?"

"Got it," he said, turning to the firing devices.

Marcus patted him on the shoulder, shifting his attention to the north. Ken's squad was on the run, well ahead of a gray pack of hunters, but distances could be deceiving—particularly with abbies in pursuit.

"Ken, let me know when you're behind the curtain," said Marcus, organizing the clackers on the northern side of the foxhole.

"Almost to the first safe zone," said Ken, Bravo Four's leader.

"Push all the way through both blast zones. Don't stop for any reason. I can't let any of those things through."

"Moving as fast as we can," said Ken.

Several tense seconds passed before simultaneous detonation requests hit the tactical frequency, garbling the transmissions long enough to delay Marcus's

order. By the time Marcus yelled, “Right hand, detonate!” the lead abbies had crossed safely through the first blast zones on the north and south sides of the perimeter.

The near simultaneous blasts expunged the last of Marcus’s situational awareness, leaving him unprepared for the radio reports trying desperately to punch through his muffled hearing. He pushed his right earpiece deeper into the ear canal until he could clearly hear a desperate plea over the dampened gunfire.

“Hit blast zone two! Hit blast zone two!”

Unsure which squad leader had screamed the request, and knowing that he didn’t have time to figure it out before the surviving abbies sailed through the “iron curtain,” Marcus squeezed the firing device in his left hand and yelled to his partner.

“Left hand! Left hand!”

The second set of closer detonations shook the ground and trees, loosening a shower of pine needles that blanketed Marcus and the dirty slush surrounding the foxhole.

“Squad leaders, report!” said Marcus.

“Close fucking call, Marcus. Bravo One intact, but I hear a lot of abbie chatter further out. Recommend immediate withdrawal to the hatch,” he heard, the words slightly distorted over the ringing in his ears.

“Roger. Move your team to the construction site. We’ll bring up the rear. Dana?”

“Moving between you and Bravo Four. Headed to the hatch with eight.”

Marcus raised his rifle and scanned the north, spotting Dana’s squad sprinting through the trees. The smoke created by the Claymore explosions had drifted south, obscuring his view of Ken’s squad. A few strips of green reflective tape fluttered from the trees in his magnified view, disappearing just as quickly in the haze.

“Dana, can you see Bravo Four?”

“Negative. Were they in the first or second safe zone?” she said.

Marcus shook his head slowly, an unthinkable realization sliding into focus.

“I don’t know. Can you see any of the safe zone markers?” he replied.

“I have one set of green markers clearly in sight. No sign of Ken’s squad. I can divert a fire team to check on him. Did you set off both sets of Claymores on his side?”

Both. Jesus. He’d killed Ken’s squad. Or had they been as good as dead anyway? He’d heard gunfire from both directions, and if Ken’s squad had been firing from a position short of the safe zone, it meant the abbies had almost overtaken them. Unless the first set of Claymores killed most of the abbies, leaving a few for Ken to mop up. There was no point in trying to figure it out. If Ken’s squad wasn’t on this side of the green markers when the second set of antipersonnel mines exploded, they were dead. Simple as that.

“Go directly to the hatch. Ken is gone,” he said, climbing out of the foxhole to rejoin Wagner.

Wagner met him halfway, putting a hand on Marcus’s shoulder and staring him in the eyes.

“Not your fault, brother. Ken should have been well clear of the blast zone. We all know the deal. These things cannot be allowed through.”

Urgent screeches punctuated Wagner’s statement, followed by the last voice on the planet he wanted to hear after losing an entire squad.

“We still have an entire section of fencing down. I need you to regroup and hold the line,” said Pope.

Marcus motioned for Wagner to move his squad back to the hatch, following closely behind.

“I think it’s time to move the construction team back inside,” he said. “I’m hearing a lot of unfriendly noises from the south.”

“Pilcher wants you to hold the line. That’s why you’re here.”

“I know exactly why I’m here. We’re en route. I’ll reassess when we reach the fence.”

Marcus was forced to make his assessment on the way to the hatch. The

number of abbies emerging from the smoke along the southern side of the perimeter was pushing the combined firepower of Bravo One and Bravo Two to the tipping point. In less than a minute, they would have no choice but to withdraw into the mountain…sooner if a large herd materialized.

“Dana, what’s your status?” he said, firing his suppressed .308 rifle at an abbie that appeared less than a hundred yards behind them.

“I’m outside of the fence, covering the northern approach to the hatch and your right flank. Looks clear.”

“Roger, we’re about thirty seconds out. Bravo One should be there already,” said Marcus, huffing from the pace.

“They just arrived. Setting up to cover the south,” she said.

“We’ll cover the east until it’s time to withdraw,” said Marcus.

Chapter 28

He slogged across the muddy, blood-soaked ground, navigating around clusters of abbie carcasses and occasionally stopping to take out a stray monster dashing toward Wagner's squad from the left flank. The four M240 machine guns working the southern perimeter fired sustained bursts of tracer-linked ammunition at the abbies. Red streaks cut through the monstrosities, ejecting bright crimson sprays across the creatures that followed. They showed no fear. No hesitation. This had to be a new herd with no experience facing human weapons. This represented a worst-case scenario, which threatened to undermine the entire construction effort. Was he the only one that could see this?

"Marcus, this is Pilcher. If this is a new herd, they'll destroy the fence pursuing us into the mountain. We're working on something, but it'll take a few minutes. I need every second I can squeeze out of you. It's a matter of life and death for all of us."

Pursuing us? Who the fuck is us? He's transmitting from the Operations Center. Pope is probably standing next to the hatch with his sweaty palm pressing against the emergency override button as we speak.

"Sir, we're about to be overrun. I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation on the ground. Bravo Four is gone. Bravo Three is mangled. We don't have a strong enough force to hold the line. Not against a herd."

He watched an abbie break through the tracer fire and race toward one of the security officers. Wagner stood and leveled his rifle, tracking the movement through his scope. Three shots from his suppressed rifle dropped the abbie a few feet from the man. Another creature broke through the maelstrom of bullets and

piled into a woman on the left flank, knocking her down before sliding into a tree behind the firing line. Marcus crouched, centering the glowing green reticle of his ACOG scope on the abby's thrashing body. The rifle kicked twice, spinning it against the tree. A third bullet from Wagner's rifle exploded its head.

"Withdraw immediately," Marcus yelled. "Bravo One and Three provide cover fire. Mr. Pilcher, we've lost this one. Evacuate the construction crew."

The crackling, uneven sound of gunfire increased as Wagner's line bolted for the fence line less than fifty yards away, heading uphill through a bloodied, boulder-strewn stretch of bullet-riddled pines.

"Marcus, I can see you approaching. Move your teams inside the fence line. I repeat, inside the fence line," said Pilcher.

"The fence won't hold!" said Marcus, even more pissed thinking about Pilcher sipping tea in the superstructure.

"We're working on that. In the meantime, I brought you some reinforcements," said Pilcher. "I'll meet you just inside the fence."

When Marcus broke through the trees, he nearly stopped. The rocky, tree-stump-covered expanse of land inside the fence line was crowded with men and women holding automatic rifles, shotguns and pistols. Pilcher stood in the opening of the unfinished section, directing Marcus's boundary teams to positions along the fence. Alan, the superstructure's head of security, stood in front of the armed crowd with Pope, sending small groups to different sections of the barrier to reinforce the trained shooters. He reached Pilcher, too stunned to speak. A few awkward seconds passed while he stared beyond the scientist at the nearly implausible scene.

"I rallied the troops and emptied the armory when Mustin reported a possible herd. We don't have enough diversionary grenades to restart this effort. Without the fence, we can't build the ramp. Without the ramp, we can't bring out the heavy equipment needed to build the containment fence. This is our last stand."

"It still might not be enough," said Marcus, following Pilcher around a group of construction engineers dragging a thick electrical cable across the opening.

“Black is trying to energize the fence without the final section. With this much firepower, we should be able to keep the abbies off the fence long enough for him to finish the job,” said Pilcher.

“Who has control of the Claymores?”

“Pam.”

“Pam? Where is she?”

“Just wave your hands over your head when you want them detonated.”

“Got it. What about the opening? They’ll pour through.”

Pilcher grinned and pointed toward the hatch. Both of the Humvees had returned, their M230 chain guns pointed at the twenty-five-foot gap. *Jesus, this just might work.* His confidence in that thought waned a few seconds later when the ground started to rumble. Murray Wagner pointed southeast and screamed at the men and women standing behind Pope and Alan

“Abbies inbound! Find an open space on the fence and ready your weapons!”

Marcus sprang into action, climbing the nearest portable generator. He cupped his hands and yelled at the crowd.

“Pick your targets, and don’t waste ammunition!”

The perimeter grew quiet as everyone settled into position along the reinforced steel barrier. He still couldn’t believe this. Pilcher must have brought forty people down with him. Including the construction crew and Marcus’s security team, more than half of the superstructure’s crew was here. Pilcher hadn’t exaggerated. The fate of Wayward Pines would be decided right here, right now.

“Stick your weapons through the fence!” yelled Marcus, watching the line of shooters adjust their positions to accommodate his order.

Rifle bolts clunked and magazines slammed into place as the ground rumbled beneath them. Marcus crouched, leveling his rifle at the trees. Through his 4X-magnified sight, he quickly gauged the time it would take for the gray tsunami to emerge from the trees.

“Stand by…fire!” he yelled as the first monsters burst into the open.

The synchronized explosion of gunfire tore into the oncoming abbies, dropping the front ranks in a crimson shower of carnage. The solid wave of beasts pressed forward without pausing, most of them falling to the solid wall of projectiles fired by the defenders of Wayward Pines. A few broke through, hitting the fence with a sickening thud before they were killed at point-blank range. The volume of gunfire held steady, keeping the bulk of the creatures from gaining ground—momentarily.

The abbies started to fan outward as they approached, dispersing the perimeter's concentrated gunfire. Compounding the problem, shooters up and down the line paused to reload their weapons after the initial volley of automatic fire, giving up valuable ground to the fast-moving herd. The situation was rapidly deteriorating.

The concussive force of several 30mm projectiles drew his attention to the exposed section of fence line, where several abbies exploded from direct impacts. A lone machine-gun team situated several yards back from the opening instinctively fired a short burst into the bloodied corpses before they fell.

The construction engineers huddled along the sides of the opening kept their heads down, feverishly working on what Marcus assumed was a power bypass to energize the fence. Watching the abbies spread along the perimeter's northern flank, he hoped they solved the problem quickly. The 30mm chain guns had a limited supply of ammunition.

"Marcus, the abbies are scaling the southern cliff face," announced Wagner.

"Copy," he said, turning to face south.

Bullets chipped the rock around the pale climbers, knocking several to the boulder-covered ground next to the fence. More took their place. He needed to even the odds a little. Marcus waved his hands over his head and braced himself. The Claymore mines planted fifteen yards beyond the fence detonated, clearing a deep ring of abbies around the construction site. The stunned creatures faltered briefly, giving the defenders time to reload and dispatch any remaining monsters on the fence. Marcus studied the pale throng as it regrouped and pressed its

seemingly single-minded attack on the fence. They were at the mercy of Black's engineers from this point forward. Without an electrified fence, the abbies would break through within minutes.

"Mr. Pilcher, we have a minute before this falls apart! Maybe less!" said Marcus.

"Faith, Marcus. Mr. Black assures me they will have the fence energized shortly," said Pilcher.

Shortly? Shortly didn't sound very definitive. Not with hundreds of abbies swarming them. The 30mm cannons boomed, sending a steady stream of steel into the pack trying to reach the engineers. The gun system was incredibly effective, each three-quarter-pound projectile passing through its initial target and continuing into the tree line—dropping creatures in its path. A steady cascade of blood and body parts rained down on the engineers as the flow of abbies intensified. They never looked up from their work.

Shooters along the fence frantically pumped bullets into a cluster of creatures approaching from the chain guns' blind spot, killing all but one before it slammed into the fence post. Before the men could react, the abby's hands penetrated the fence, its longest talon puncturing the closest electrician's neck. Arterial spray pumped skyward as he tumbled forward into the opening, attracting the frenzied screeches of the herd.

"Problem at the gate!" said Marcus, quickly realizing his request would fall on deaf ears.

The southeastern sections of the fence bowed inward from the abbies piling up against its base. Most of the men and women on the ground had backed away from the fence, concentrating their gunfire on the monsters trying to climb the thick, reinforced steel. It was only a matter of time before one of those things made it over, jumping down into the crowd of people. Once that happened—game over.

More abbies sailed onto the upper half of the fence, clambering over each other to reach the top. Red tracers from the boundary perimeter teams' M240s

stitched back and forth across the fence in a futile attempt to stop the inevitable. Marcus loaded another twenty-five-round magazine and settled in for the end. By the time he finished firing the bulk of the magazine, they'd be over the fence or through the open section. He glanced one last time at Pilcher. The visionary who had brought them eighteen hundred years into the future spoke into a handheld radio while firing his pistol at the creatures on the fence, his unassuming features betraying no acknowledgement of the dire circumstances.

A surge of hope flickered in Marcus as he released the bolt on his rifle and centered the sight's reticle on an abby high on the fence in front of him. The rifle cracked and the beast fell clear, replaced immediately by another creature reaching for the razor coil at the top of the fence. Human screams pierced the chaos as a lifeless abby plummeted to the ground inside the perimeter. A quick scan of the entire fence line confirmed that they were seconds away from a catastrophic breach.

"Clear the fence! Away from the fence!" he heard over the gunfire.

The crowd scurried back while dozens of abbies thrashed the thick razor coil twenty feet above them, moments from jumping onto their heads.

"Live wire! Live wire!" yelled Black from the opening, followed by a cascade of sparks along the entire length of the fence.

The abbies clinging to the fence thrashed and shrieked. Most remained affixed to the steel structure, the muscles in their hands and feet locked into position holding the charged metal. Those ejected from the fence landed in confused heaps behind the main throng—immediately set upon by the nearest abbies. Unaware of the danger ahead, waves of abbies crashed into their fried brethren, fighting for room to die along the electric barrier.

"Black, deactivate the fence!" yelled Pilcher over the tactical frequency. "Marcus, assemble your people at the opening to ensure we don't have a breach. This might take a while."

Marcus jumped down from the generator, issuing orders to Bravo One and Bravo Two. By the time he redirected his Bravo units to the opening, Pilcher

ordered Black to activate the fence—frying another wave of abbies that had nearly reached the razor coils. With the 30mm cannons firing overhead, Marcus personally arranged the squads where they could best defend the missing section of fence when the cannons stopped to reload.

Pilcher cycled the fence on and off several times over the next twenty minutes until the bulk of the herd lay in a five-foot-high ring of pale, smoking flesh along the perimeter. The abbies kept charging the opening, but between Marcus's machine-gun teams and the 30mm cannons, nothing came close to breaching the site. Pilcher appeared on his right, followed by Pope, who fired his AK-47 on full automatic into an abby that charged over the pile of bodies.

"Fuckers keep on coming!" said Pope, shaking his head.

"Indeed they do," said Pilcher, watching the creature cascade down the slope of dead bodies and strike the fence, where it sizzled.

"Marcus, thank you for holding the line today. Your effort outside of the fence made all of the difference. I'm sorry about your casualties today, and the other days. We'll hold a ceremony in their honor when all of this settles."

"Thank you, sir, but I think everyone deserves recognition," said Marcus, nodding at the men and women scattered throughout the construction site.

"Everyone played their part brilliantly. I couldn't be prouder of what we've accomplished. Wayward Pines will succeed. I'm more sure of it today than ever before," said Pilcher.

"Me too, sir—but," he said, hesitating to complete his thought.

"But what?"

"Protecting a compact, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree arc proved difficult enough against these things. How are we going to protect the crews building the containment fence?"

The percussive effects of several 30mm projectiles passing overhead reinforced his point.

"I have something in mind," said Pilcher. "Someone in mind."

Chapter 29

Adam Hassler nestled the last of the returned rifles into the rack and locked the bracket, noting the empty rack space in the armory. His latest inventory showed one hundred and ten weapons in circulation. Forty-eight pairs of rifles and pistols had been assigned to the boundary security teams. Apparently, sixteen of these pairs couldn't be returned until they could secure a larger area outside of the hatch.

Beyond that, Mustin's snipers had taken all four of the arsenal's .50-caliber sniper rifles to the mountaintop, along with the grenade launcher. Nine pistols were issued to Alan's internal security team, Hassler included, along with Pilcher's "inner circle." The latter category made him nervous. The thought of Pope and Pam with access to firearms was a disturbing thought; just another glaring example of a not-so-subtle disparity between classes in the superstructure.

The distinction came into sharpest focus during "Pilcher's last stand." While issuing weapons to the group hastily assembled to defend the construction site, Hassler noticed an interesting trend: Nobody critical to the continued operation of the superstructure made the trip. Sure, Pilcher had stood with his people as the abbies scaled the fence, supposedly remaining steadfast in the face of certain annihilation—but Hassler didn't buy it. He suspected Pilcher would have been ushered to safety at the last moment, leaving the cooks, custodial staff, warehouse crew and the rest of the manual laborers to fend for themselves as the hatch lowered behind them.

Maybe he was wrong. Doubtful. Despite Pilcher's visionary rescue of

humanity, the man was a cold-hearted pragmatist. He had no intention of giving up his obsession to raise Wayward Pines from the dirt, which meant he had zero inclination toward dying on the forest floor before that dream was realized. Pilcher had taken a calculated risk mobilizing the superstructure's "unwashed," and it had paid off brilliantly. Any doubt that he could restore humanity had been erased during those tense moments. Pilcher was their messiah, and he delivered another miracle. Hallelujah!

"Beware of false prophets," he mumbled, inserting his keycard and punching an eight-digit code into the keypad next to the door.

He stepped into the black and white checkered hallway, once again marveling at the lack of expense spared for Pilcher's masterpiece. Linoleum tile. Fluorescent lighting. Institutionally neutral colors covering every surface. Even after ten days of acclimation, the place left Hassler yearning for the comfort of the Seattle city morgue.

Ten days. What he wouldn't give to go back into suspension and wake up with Theresa. Based on the progress Pilcher's crew had made so far, he suspected it would take far longer than two years to build Wayward Pines. Hassler pushed the thought out of his head and verified that the armory door had closed securely behind him. He turned begrudgingly toward the nearest staircase, mentally preparing to eat a few piles of nutrient-dense slop before turning in for the evening. The rest of his night would be spent staring at the quarter-empty bottle of Johnny Walker Blue on his desk—his prize for outwitting Pilcher. Only ten fucking days.

He took a few steps, stopping to look over his shoulder at the opposite end of the hallway. Beyond that door, Pilcher's people were preparing for something far bigger than the project at the hatch. Something epic. He'd seen monstrous, bright yellow vehicles with tires as tall as the men climbing into them. Large green tractors with massive augers attached to articulated crane arms. Unfamiliar, military-style armored transport vehicles fitted with shielded gun turrets. Up-armored Humvees with fully protected gunner kits. Welders working day and

night to fashion solid steel cages to the construction vehicles. *Screw that.*

Hassler was perfectly content in the armory. He'd seen exactly what they were facing on the outside and had no interest in leaving the superstructure until they'd figured out a way to remove their genetically lethal ancestors from the valley—permanently. Until then, he'd suffer the people and the food, sipping his Scotch until the work was done. Life could be worse.

Pam stood a few feet in front of him when he turned his head.

"Shit, Pam! You need to stop doing that. One of these days I'm going to punch you in the throat."

"Not with reflexes like that," she said, spinning to deliver a near-miss kick to his head.

He kept an impassive look.

"You're pretty slow for a Delta Force guy."

"I'll take your appraisal under advisement," he said, stepping into her personal space. "Do you mind? I don't want to miss out on dinner."

"Better eat up fast. Pilcher wants you in Operations at nineteen hundred hours. That's 7 PM in case your memory faded along with your reaction time," she said, smiling perversely as Hassler walked past.

When he reached the door, he paused to look back. She continued to stare at him with the same disturbed look. He was beginning to understand why her biological parents had dumped her into the foster care system when she was four.

"Some memories never fade, Pam. You should know that," he said, watching her strange glare flatline into something dead and hateful.

"Now there's a glimpse of the real Pam. Frankly, this look suits you better. It's much harder to imagine you sucking off an entire college fraternity with that look on your face," he said, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 30

Arnold Pope leaned back in the conference room chair, debating whether to put his feet up on the table in front of Pilcher. He felt pretty damn good about the past few days. His role as sheriff was taking shape, formally defining his relationship with the rest of the superstructure crew and solidifying his rank within Pilcher's inner circle. His real authority hadn't changed since they went into suspension; only the perception of his authority had shifted—which meant everything. In their eyes, he'd gone from Pilcher's strong-arm to the sheriff of Wayward Pines, a job critical to the future of mankind's survival. He relished the newly appointed position, envisioning a day when Pilcher relinquished the helm and let Pope steer humanity's course for the future. Until then, he'd keep his feet off the table. No sense in pissing off the boss.

"Earth to Pope. What does the sheriff have to say about Mr. Leven's proposal?" said Pilcher.

Shit. His mind had drifted again. What did that slovenly looking freak propose? Oh yeah. He knew the right answer to this question before Leven had finished reviewing the data.

"I think shutting down the present operation and fast-forwarding several thousand years will be perceived as giving up, especially after fighting so hard to secure the landing."

Pilcher turned his attention to Francis Leven, the superstructure's mysterious steward. The unkempt, longhaired man squinted, pushing his thick-framed glasses toward the bridge of his nose.

"Mr. Pope, have you actually spoken with any of the construction crew?" said

Leven.

“I talk to them every day,” said Pope, feigning an incredulous look.

“I mean with them. Not *to* them. Big difference,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “David, I don’t think you’ll find a single person unwilling to reenter suspension and set the clock forward ten thousand years—to see if *those* things go away.”

They all looked up at one of the flat-screen monitors. A three-dimensional, full-color model of Wayward Pines’ dominant species spun slowly on a horizontal axis.

“That’s your solution?” said Pope. “Jump into our time machine and hope for the best? We need to take a more proactive approach to the future of Wayward Pines. I say we implement the plan created by Operations.”

“David, it doesn’t cost us anything to pack up and start again later. Pushing our luck in this overtly hostile world could cost us everything,” said Leven.

Pilcher furrowed his brow, appearing painfully conflicted about the decision. After several moments, a thin grin washed over his face.

“I learned something three days ago. Something I could never have gleaned from a textbook or a laboratory. It hit me while I fired a pistol into a seemingly unstoppable wall of abbies. For the first time ever, I felt a visceral connection to the survival of Wayward Pines. All of the spreadsheets, data sets and projection models vanished; replaced by the raw excitement of defending this vision—one bullet at a time. That same energy radiated from the entire group, feeding itself and growing more powerful. It is for that reason alone that I must disagree with your proposal. For Wayward Pines to truly succeed, we have to cultivate a genuine feeling of investment. Of sacrifice.”

Pope fought to keep his mouth under control. He had so many things to say, none of which would endear him to either man. Gloating over Francis Leven would only serve to undermine Pope’s authority in the future. Leven looked like a petty man, accustomed to manipulating lives through script commands and computer viruses. He didn’t need to make enemies with the guy running the day-to-day workings of the superstructure. As a matter of fact, from this point

forward he'd strive hard to avoid rubbing anyone the wrong way. That's where Pam went wrong on a daily basis. She unapologetically pissed everyone off, and they hated her.

Then there was Pilcher's bullshit speech about feeling personally vested. He'd conveniently forgotten to mention the fact that a hand-selected group of Alan's security team, including Pope, stood by to evacuate him if the abbies broke through. Maybe Pilcher experienced an existential moment out there. Who gives a shit? As long as they weren't going back into suspension, Pope didn't care what reason the big man claimed was the catalyst.

"The option remains if you change your mind. You have my unwavering commitment to Operations' plan," said Leven.

"Thank you, Francis. I guess we should review your projections for Operation Drum Solo."

"I like the name. Very appropriate," said Pope, drawing an impatient look from Leven.

"Before we dig into my data, we need to evaluate the least quantifiable—yet most critical aspect of the operation."

"Hassler," said Pope.

"Hassler," repeated Leven, turning to Pilcher. "Can he pull this off?"

"His dossier, reinforced by his recent performance in the forest, suggests he's the most qualified person on our team to undertake the mission," said Pilcher.

"What about Marcus or one of the squad leaders assigned to the boundary team? Murray Wagner is former Special Air Service, right?"

"I want to keep the boundary teams intact," stated Pilcher. "Hassler is perfect for the job."

"I suggest picking someone else. Someone who won't fuck us over and make a run for it," said Pope.

"And who might you suggest," said Pilcher.

"Pam's a survivor."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

“Had to try,” said Pope.

“Mr. Pope brings up a good point. Hassler’s loyalty to Wayward Pines may be lacking,” said Leven.

“That’s exactly why he’s perfect,” said Pilcher. “Loyalty to a concept or idea ebbs and flows with the tides of circumstance. Hassler started with zero loyalty to the idea of Wayward Pines, so he has no reason to betray it. He did, however, sacrifice everything for the chance of spending the rest of his life with Theresa Burke. And I’m willing to stake the entire future of Wayward Pines on his loyalty to that idea.”

Chapter 31

Hassler was met at the entrance to Operations by one of Alan's permanent security officers, a stick-thin, middle-aged man called Leo. Featuring pale skin, brown eyes and dark, shoulder-length hair, he looked like he might be more comfortable serving up a decaf caramel iced latte than guarding the door to the superstructure's nerve center. There had to be more to this fellow than met the eye.

"Mr. Hassler," the man said, holding the door open for him.

"Leo," he responded, studying the man for a second before taking a guess. "Martial arts expert?"

The man smiled and closed the door behind him. "Edged weapons, particularly anything that you can throw. Axes, tomahawks, throwing knives, screwdrivers. Been playing with stuff like that since middle school."

"Sounds a little more serious than playing," said Hassler.

Leo's smile waned. "Got me in a little bit of trouble later in life."

"Got you the winning lottery ticket, if you consider this a prize," said Hassler, looking around the hallway.

"One hell of a ride either way. They're waiting for you in the main briefing room," he said, folding his arms.

"Who do I have the honor of entertaining tonight?"

"All of them," said Leo.

Hassler nodded and walked toward the closed door, pausing before opening it. Something told him not to open it. Shit. If he listened to that voice every time he heard it, he'd never leave his dormitory room. He twisted the lever and

pushed the door open, surprised to see that Leo hadn't been kidding. Everyone important was here, which told him everything he needed to know about what was about to happen.

"Adam, sorry about the short notice. Please take a seat," said Pilcher, motioning for him to sit in the only available seat at the table, near the door.

He strolled cautiously to the faux leather executive chair, painfully aware that all eyes followed him. Even the mysterious Francis Leven was in attendance, which tipped Pilcher's hand.

"I'm not going back out there," said Hassler. "If that's what this is all about, you can dispense with the sales pitch. I'm late for my date with Mr. Walker."

"Mr. Walker?" said Pam, turning to Pilcher. "We don't have a Walker, right?"

"Johnny Walker Blue. Not something you drink on the streets," he said, eliciting a few stifled laughs from the table.

Pam stiffened. He wondered how many of them knew her real backstory, that a runaway turned prostitute single-handedly ran Pilcher's behind-the-scenes show. Probably none of them.

"Be civil, Adam, and please take a seat," said Pilcher, displaying an unusually authoritative tone. "I'm not going to bullshit you. We need you to go outside of the superstructure."

"Not going to happen," said Hassler, standing behind the chair.

"The survival of Wayward Pines depends on this mission. The reason you took this leap of faith in the first place depends on it. We can't rebuild the town if we don't lure the abbies out of the valley."

"Bait? Uhhh…I appreciate the transparency, but maybe we should restart the meeting. I'll step outside for a few minutes while you come up with a better way to convince me to hang my ass out for the abbies."

"We're using explosives to lure them out of the valley. Not your hindquarters," said Pilcher. "Please take a seat."

Hassler reluctantly settled into the chair, curious to hear the rest. He still had no intention of leaving the superstructure, regardless of what Pilcher threatened.

“May I continue?” said Pilcher.

“Be my guest.”

“We need to lure the bulk of the abbies far enough away from the valley to construct the containment fence,” said Pilcher.

“I thought you started construction on the fence already,” said Hassler.

“We built a smaller perimeter around the hatch so we could construct a ramp sturdy enough to move our heavy machinery out of the superstructure.”

“It took you four days to do that? Jesus. We’ll never see Wayward Pines,” said Hassler.

“If we can lure the abbies outside of their acoustic detection range, we can finish the containment fence within two weeks. We’ve created reinforced steel enclosures for the heavy machinery cabins to protect the operators against random, unpreventable attacks. Plus, we’ll have enough firepower on scene to handle moderately sized groups if they surface. Mr. Black’s crew will erect the fence as the forest is cleared.”

“How do I fit into this?” said Hassler.

“We need you to plant the explosives in a specific pattern leading out of the valley,” said Pilcher, pointing at the large flat-screen monitor behind him. “First a test string to determine their acoustical capabilities, then a medium-range series to effectively lure them away from Wayward Pines. They can’t seem to resist explosions. Finally, you’ll plant a containment series that we’ll use to keep them out of the valley until the fence is finished.”

Hassler stared at the schematic for a moment.

“Two thirty-mile hiking trips through abbie-infested territory? Let’s reconvene this meeting tomorrow when everyone is thinking straight. I’m not traversing sixty miles with water, food, radios, explosives, weapons, ammunition—and God knows what else you want me to carry.”

“Seventeen miles total, with minimal abbie contact. No more than fifty pounds of explosives on your back at any time, that weight decreasing every mile,” said Leven.

Hassler sat down. “Now you have my attention, because your math doesn’t work—and I know you’re Pilcher’s top number cruncher. What am I missing?”

“You’ll use a hang glider to reach a predetermined position ten miles from the proposed fence line. The glider is designed for tandem carry, up to four hundred pounds, but you’ll be travelling alone. We’ve fashioned a sling system to carry everything you’ll need to execute the mission. The landing site will serve as your resupply point. When you’ve placed all of the explosives, we’ll deploy an ultralight to retrieve you from one of several possible landing zones within a five-mile radius,” said Pilcher.

“I haven’t flown a hang glider in over four years. Even then it was more of a midlife thrill-seeker thing than a serious pursuit.”

“You’re the only person we have that has ever piloted one,” said Pilcher.

“Who’s flying the ultralight?”

“One of our helicopter pilots.”

“Why don’t you wait and use the helicopter? You could lure the abbies out like the pied piper.”

“We’re three to four weeks away from a test flight. Wayward Pines doesn’t have that kind of time.”

“We have nothing but time,” protested Hassler.

“We can’t risk the possibility of another herd entering the valley. The previous herd left significant pockets of creatures everywhere. The fence around the ramp is under constant attack by groups as large as ten, and that’s after we initiated a small war outside of the hatch. Then there’s the timeline. If construction of the town doesn’t begin within the month, we’ll never enclose the structures in time for the heavy snow. We may as well not start.”

“Nobody in suspension will notice the delay,” said Hassler.

“But I will, and if Wayward Pines fails, nobody in suspension will ever see the light of day again!” sputtered Pilcher.

Hassler received the message loud and clear. He’d never see Theresa Burke again if he didn’t do Pilcher’s bidding. He also confirmed the thinly veiled,

underlying theme surrounding his presence in Wayward Pines. Expendable. He desperately wanted to believe that Pilcher intended to honor their agreement, but two separate experiences suggested otherwise. He'd accept the mission, fully accepting the fact that Pilcher would screw him over.

"Let's go over the details," he said, fully intent on building a small insurance policy into the plan.

Chapter 32

The armory door thunked, drawing Hassler's attention away from the pile of gear assembled on the linoleum floor. Access to the weapons was strictly controlled, requiring one of five known keycards for entry. He held one of the cards. Nobody he fully trusted held the others. His right hand drifted to the concealed holster hidden in the small of his back, a precaution Pilcher insisted upon for anyone given an access card to the armory. Trust was scarce in the superstructure.

Easing the pistol out of the holster, he waited for the door to open. A few seconds later, Pilcher's shiny, bald head poked through the opening.

"Just me. Sorry, I should have called," he said, stepping into the bright light.

Hassler stood up, nestling the compact pistol into the leather holster. Pilcher's eyes caught the movement, eliciting a grin.

"Glad to see you're taking my suggestions about security seriously," said Pilcher. "One can never be too cautious in a closed system like this."

"On that note, you should probably shut the door," commented Hassler.

"Actually, I was hoping to drag you upstairs for dinner."

"I grabbed some food during the first seating. Wanted to finish packing early so I could study the maps and recheck the glider rig."

"I mean a real dinner. Filet mignon drizzled with herbed butter. Fingerling potatoes and asparagus."

"You put cows into suspension?" said Hassler, raising an eyebrow.

"No, but we did manage to preserve some specialty items," said Pilcher.

"For eighteen hundred years?"

“It’s not the same as a fresh cut, but I guarantee you won’t complain. Shall we?”

“Is this my last supper?” said Hassler.

Pilcher laughed. “I knew you’d draw the comparison. Let’s hope not.”

Hassler followed him into the hallway, stopping at a featureless door halfway down the long corridor Pilcher inserted his keycard, and the door slid to the right, exposing a closet-sized, stainless steel room. The elevator travelled smoothly for several seconds before opening to a world Hassler never expected to see again. Modernistic yet comfortable by design, the warmly lit interior carried the scents of cooked garlic and steak.

“Welcome to my residence,” said Pilcher, nodding at a man dressed in chef whites.

Fully emerging from the hallway behind a richly appointed, Shaker-style dining room table, the impeccably dressed, plump man carried a covered silver tray in their direction.

“Can I pour you a Scotch?” said Pilcher, motioning toward a wet bar behind them.

“I shouldn’t drink and fly,” said Hassler, eyeing the inbound silver tray.

“Nonsense. You’re not scheduled to leave until zero-one-hundred. Five hours. Your usual?”

“Sure,” he said, focused on the silver dome hovering just out of reach. “Thank you.”

“Chef Tim likes to surprise me during cocktail hour. He’s really outdone himself with the limited resources on hand.”

I bet. One slip up here might get you assigned to guard duty outside of the hatch.

“Thank you, Mr. Pilcher. Always a pleasure. Tonight, we have delicately toasted crostini with roasted tomato and goat cheese spread,” he said, lifting the cover.

Waiting impatiently while Pilcher tipped a generous pour of amber liquid

from a crystal decanter into each tumbler, Hassler strained to keep his hand from snatching one of the appetizers off the tray. Either purposely ignoring the situation or sinfully oblivious to the quality of food served in the cafeteria, Pilcher rambled about the superstructure's extensive liquor stores while Hassler's mouth watered. With tumblers in hand, and Hassler's eyes fixated on the food, Pilcher finally offered a toast.

"To Wayward Pines."

"Hear, hear," he responded as Pilcher's stubby fingers grabbed a piece of toast.

"You have to try one of these. Fresh bread baked from the wheat stores," he said.

Hassler obliged, somehow remaining composed while alternating between crostini bites and sips of Scotch. Johnny Walker Blue. Pilcher had rolled out the red carpet for him tonight.

"Why don't we take a seat and let this digest before the main course," said Pilcher. "Tim, you can set the tray down on the coffee table. Will ten minutes give you enough time to put the final touches on dinner?"

"Ten minutes gives me ample time, sir," he said, gracefully depositing the platter on a glass table in front of two coffee-colored leather club chairs.

Seated comfortably in the chair, the novelty of fresh bread and freeze-dried goat cheese started to fade, replaced by Johnny Walker Blue's cynical edge. He took in his surroundings with this new pair of lenses, imperceptibly shaking his head at the steaming pile of stark hypocrisy Pilcher had served everyone who followed him on this journey. Even Pam ate the dog shit served in the cafeteria. He shouldn't have been the least bit surprised to find Pilcher living in opulence. This is how it always played out. The script never changed.

"So, what do you think of this, Adam?" said Pilcher.

"It looks a little different than my quarters," he replied, taking a healthy sip of his drink.

"Not the residence." Pilcher chuckled. "The whole thing. You were more or

less thrust into this world. You're perspective is different than the rest of my people."

Hassler contemplated Pilcher's use of the words "my people." The whole dinner setup was creepy. He should have known better than to accept the invitation. He needed this like a hole in the head before tonight's glider flight.

"I wake up every morning wondering if any of this is real," said Hassler. "Then I remember what I saw in the forest. What I felt. And I know it's real enough. I think we should all take another two-thousand-year nap and see what nature has to say about mankind."

"You're not the first person to suggest this. Francis Leven made a strong case for reentering suspension. Francis came to me as soon as he examined the initial DNA tests. He predicts failure under the current conditions, or at least that's what his computers say. Numbers aren't everything," said Pilcher, draining half of his glass. "You can't program the human spirit into a computer simulation."

"Do you believe we'll succeed?" said Hassler, slightly disturbed that Pilcher didn't sound convinced.

"I believe we have one hell of a fighting chance," he said. "Nature threw us one hell of a curveball with the abbies. I calculated that we'd evolve into something warped and lethal. That we'd extinguish ourselves. I never thought we'd survive. Especially like this. I figured we might uncover a few hidden enclaves of DNA-corrupted brutes. That's why I insisted that we bring military-grade weapons and hardware. Finding the abbies was a game changer, but not a game ender."

"Do you think they're everywhere?" said Hassler.

"It's impossible to say until we conduct long reconnaissance missions. The helicopter has a one hundred and fifty mile round-trip range. Enough to get us to Boise and back with plenty of reserve fuel. A trip to Idaho Falls would be pushing it. The only way to go further is to stage fuel."

"Finding several hundred of these things this far in the wild is a bad sign. I can't imagine you'd need to go any further than Boise," said Hassler, taking the

last crostini. “Do you mind?”

“No, go right ahead. Tim can make more.”

Of course he can.

With a full mouth, Hassler continued. “And I’m not an animal biologist, but I’d be willing to bet my next paycheck that this is the dominant species out there.”

Pilcher nodded. “Let’s hope so. I’d hate to imagine something more lethal than an abby.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Hassler, finishing his glass.

“Can I get you a refresh?”

“I’ll take a rain check. I need to be firing on all cylinders tonight,” said Hassler.

“Indeed,” said Pilcher, tilting his head slightly and grimacing. “What do you want me to do about Theresa if you don’t return?”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easy.”

“Seriously, we both know this isn’t a walk in the park, or forest, so to speak. I promised not to bring Ethan out of suspension, but…” He let the words linger.

Hassler hated hearing the name. The thought of Ethan sailing into the sunset with Theresa onboard the SS Wayward Pines turned his stomach. Not after what he put her through. Still, he had to face reality.

“If I don’t come back, you should bring him out of suspension. Ben needs a father, and as much as I hate to say it, Theresa will need someone familiar—even if he is a cheating piece of shit. I might take another nip,” he said, tilting his glass.

“I’m impressed, Adam. A lesser man would have condemned Mr. Burke to an eternal state of purgatory,” said Pilcher.

“I figured my answer wasn’t relevant to your ultimate decision regarding his fate, so I took the high road,” he said, catching movement in his peripheral vision.

“Chef Tim indicates that dinner is ready. Wait until you taste the filet!

Impossible to tell that it’s nearly two thousand years old!” said Pilcher.

I’m in crazy town.

Chapter 33

Hassler jogged toward the black abyss ahead of him. Buffeted by wind sweeping over the top of the mountain, he held the crossbar steady, leaning the glider's nose down to keep from being yanked off the stone and dashed into the crags to the west. He knew the effort was wishful thinking. If the winds decided to sweep him off the mountain, there was little he could do about it. Launching was a hang glider's most vulnerable moment, the danger compounded by the presence of moderate to heavy winds. He'd feel better once he was in the air, a thought that had never entered his mind prior to strapping into the glider rig.

His legs swung under him, and the glider dropped precipitously. He felt the wings catch the air current, tugging him upward several feet before the glider steadied on a smooth course toward the middle of the valley. Risking a glance over his shoulder, the green chemlights marking the launch point rapidly shrank, disappearing completely as the glider descended below the cliff.

Satisfied with the stability of the glider's frame, Hassler tucked his legs into the pod-like bag behind him and pulled his weight along the crossbar to the right. The glider responded, turning him south. He glanced at the digital display in front of him, watching the magnetic course reading pass one hundred and eighty degrees—due south. His goal was southwest—another forty-five degrees. When the orange LED read two hundred and twenty, he shifted left along the bar, slowing the turn until he steadied on a course that should take him to the proposed landing point.

He took a moment to relax and enjoy the glide; not an easy feat with near-freezing temperatures slicing through his rig. Operations informed him that he

faced a wind chill index of twenty-two degrees at his proposed flight speed, so he had opted to add an additional layer of full-body thermals to his already bulky outfit. Now he wished he had selected a heavier layer. Fifteen minutes and he'd be on the ground. Then he got to sit in a cold tree all night while Pilcher sipped hot cocoa in front of a gas fireplace.

Pushing aside these self-pitying thoughts, Hassler focused on the task at hand. The next fifteen minutes would be anything but an easy glide out of the valley. Without GPS, he'd have to rely on the "old school" method of navigation—calculating distance travelled using time and speed in flight. Tracking the microchip planted in his leg, Operations would plot his precise location within the valley, giving him course corrections until the signal faded. He'd be on his own after that, in a constant struggle to maintain the same speed and course against shifting winds, thermal layers and the natural tendency of hang gliders to drift.

"Hassler, this is Operations. Radio check," he heard through the helmet communications set.

"This is Hassler, over."

"We'll start your track in one minute. Recommend you establish and maintain airspeed. Looking good so far. Only a minor adjustment to course required."

"Copy. Settling in at thirty-five miles per hour," he said, pushing his weight back from the control bar to bring the nose up gently.

As the airspeed indicator approached thirty-five, he eased into the control bar.

"Airspeed thirty-five. Altitude thirty-six hundred. Heading two-two-five," said Hassler.

"Perfect. That gives you a range of 10.3 miles. We hold you 9.1 from the target. Thirty seconds until final course correction."

"Copy," said Hassler.

He was relieved to learn that the glide ratio estimate hadn't drastically changed. With an additional mile of horizontal travel predicted on his current glide path, he would arrive at the target with more than enough altitude to circle

and find a suitable landing zone. A strong crosswind pitched the glider to the right, taking him several degrees off course. He immediately countered the move, bringing the nose around. The chances of landing precisely where Pilcher wanted him was next to zero without GPS.

“This is Operations. Stand by to turn left and steady on two-one-eight magnetic. Stand by. Stand by. Execute.”

Hassler adjusted the glider’s heading and transmitted his first data set. A few minutes later, Operations announced that he had exceeded their microchip tracking range, passing a new heading of two-one-seven. He had drifted one degree west in two minutes, with light crosswind interference. With eight miles to go, a one-degree drift could make a big difference in his final destination.

“Ops, this is Hassler. Did your heading calculation take into account drift?”

“Affirmative.”

For the next ten minutes, he sent the glider’s instrument data to Operations in thirty-second intervals, fighting constantly to maintain his speed and heading. One mile from the landing zone, Operations adjusted his course again, pointing him a few degrees east. He made the adjustment and lowered his night vision goggles, taking in the scene below him. He had a problem. Hassler checked his altitude. Six hundred and eighty feet. He had a big problem.

“Ops, this is Hassler. I can’t see the ground. I’m seeing fog or a low cloud layer.”

He prayed for clouds. Even an insanely low cloud ceiling would give him several seconds to figure out a landing. Fog meant he would have to plow ahead blindly and hope for the best.

“Copy. If visibility doesn’t improve by one hundred feet, we recommend you flare at tree-top level and nestle in between trees.”

Nestle in? How about plummet fifty to sixty feet with a few hundred pounds of gear lashed above me? Fuck that.

“I’m thinking about deploying my reserve parachute over the target. With the forward speed of the glider, the chute will engage. I should be roughly three

hundred feet above the ground at that point," said Hassler.

"Stand by."

Of course. Run it by the head-shed. A few seconds later, Pilcher's voice sounded in his ears.

"Adam, the parachute is not attached to the glider, it's attached to you."

"I'm well aware of that. I'll bring my speed down prior to deployment. The harness will hold. It won't be pretty, but it's better than dropping through the trees at full speed," said Hassler.

"It's your call. Watch yourself on the ground. This is bound to make a lot of noise," said Pilcher.

"I'll try to remember that. Ops, I'm going to sign off and watch my altitude. I'll reestablish comms when I'm secure on the ground."

"Copy. Operations standing by."

Hassler scanned the layer below him, looking for a break. Nothing. He drifted into the fog bank, a cold mist striking the exposed skin on his face. Within seconds, the crisp green image displayed by his night vision goggles blurred as the suspended droplets of moisture adhered to the outer lens. He took a hand off the control bar and wiped the dual lenses, barely improving his view. Flying in near green-out conditions, he reduced his speed to twenty-five miles per hour, a few notches above stall speed, and stared at the altimeter readings. The moment of truth rapidly approached.

At three hundred and ten feet, Hassler felt for the nylon handle protruding from the pouch on his chest, gripping the loop and pulling the reserve parachute a few inches forward. At three hundred and five feet, he slipped his legs out of the pod harness and let them dangle freely. Depending on how the glider responded to the sudden loss of lift, he might not have the benefit of gravity to help him untangle his legs from the harness.

At three hundred feet, Hassler pulled the parachute clear of the pouch and tossed it behind and below him, squeezing the control bar and bracing for the shock of deployment. A few seconds passed before he felt the first tugs of the

chute spreading. Before he could flare the nose to reduce his speed, the parachute fully deployed, yanking him backward into the harness.

With his body pulled as far back as possible from the control bar, the nose angled upward, flaring the hang glider at the worst possible moment. Hassler experienced a moment of weightlessness as the airframe swung downward through the thick fog. Completely disoriented, he did the only thing he could do in the situation—hold on to the crossbar. A sudden tug jolted him upward, loosening his left hand's grip on the bar. The helpless feeling of free fall was replaced by a steady, controlled descent. He tucked his legs into his chest, knowing that the peaceful fall would be short lived. Something brushed against his right foot. Here we go!

Rushing through the treetops at twelve miles per hour, one of the glider's wings hit something solid and spun, slamming Hassler into an unmoving pine obstacle. The blow slammed him against the frame, scraping him along a wall of sharp branches before the glider frame swung free. Still strapped to the harness, he continued to descend through the thick canopy with the glider, bending his knees for the inevitable crash into the forest floor. He sensed another dark object emerging through the fog, his senses rewarded by a head-on collision with an impenetrable pine barricade. Branches and pine needles lashed his face, causing him to let go of the frame. Buried deep in the tree, the shredded glider continued downward with Hassler, snapping several branches before coming to a sudden halt.

He took a deep breath and felt for the missing night vision goggles. "Shit," he muttered, digging through his tactical vest for a flashlight. Hassler was snagged in a tree, but had no concept of the distance to ground. The space below him was pitch black. A shriek pierced the night, giving him second thoughts about the flashlight. Fuck it, he had to take the risk. If he was thirty or forty feet in the air, he might be able to hang out in the harness until first light, when Pilcher's crew started to draw the abbies away. If he sat ten feet above the ground, he'd more than likely turn into a midnight snack. He needed to assess, decide and act—just

like he had been trained.

A quick scan with the flashlight indicated he was suspended at a safe height above the forest floor. A second check skyward left him reasonably confident that the glider was secure, and he wouldn't tumble unexpectedly to the ground during the early morning hours. His arms and legs worked. All of his gear was intact, with the exception of the night vision goggles, which wasn't a problem. He had packed a more sophisticated pair in his rucksack. Beyond a few bruises, scrapes—and the inevitable full-body ache that would plague his body in the morning—Hassler couldn't complain.

"Ops, this is Hassler, over," he whispered.

"Read you loud and clear. What is your status?"

"The landing wasn't pretty, but everything is intact—including me. I'm stuck in a tree, where I think I'll stay until I'm convinced the area is clear."

"That's great news, Adam. Hang tight until the morning," said Pilcher. "We're counting on you."

"I hope you have something big planned to draw the abbies out of here. I might have woken a few up from their beauty sleep."

"Don't worry. We have something special planned. By nine in the morning, every abby for miles will be headed in our direction."

Chapter 34

Hassler’s eyes fluttered, letting in some of the light. He closed them tightly, trying to delay the inevitable. A distant, hollow report echoed through the trees, and his eyes snapped open. He’d overslept. Not in the lazy Sunday morning sense of the word, but more in the “only recently fell asleep after hours of shivering and worrying about being eaten alive” kind of way. A second crack filled the air, signaling the start of Pilcher’s diversions.

“Hassler, this is Operations. We’ve detonated two sizable charges outside of the perimeter fence. Report any hostile movement in your area when detected.”

Several shrieks pierced the post-explosion silence, followed by the sounds of twigs snapping to the south.

“This is Hassler. I think you have their attention. Standby for confirmation,” he whispered, scanning the forest.

“Standing by.”

He twisted slowly in the pod harness, trying to extend his view toward the south, but the glider’s wings blocked his line of sight. He’d have to wait until they ran by his tree to verify that they were indeed responding to the explosions, which shouldn’t be very long given their speed over the ground. Hassler had witnessed their swiftness firsthand; a spectacle he had hoped to never see again. Movement to the right drew his attention—just in time to see a pack of several abbies streak north through the trees. If he had blinked, he might have missed them.

A swishing sound directly below him was followed by two abbies leaping gracefully between trees, heading in the same direction as the smaller pack.

Sounds erupted from the left as a steady stream of abbies poured through the pines in blind pursuit of Pilcher's acoustic show.

Hassler shifted his rifle and flipped the selector switch to semiautomatic, hoping to test the rifle's suppressor and subsonic ammunition in a non-life-threatening situation. He centered the reticle on the pack's general path and waited for one of the pale creatures to appear in the far left side of the rifle sight's field of view. Squeezing the trigger slightly, he breathed lightly until he detected movement. The rifle bit into his shoulder, the sound no louder than a finger snap. The abby slowed, its head shifting from side to side for a moment, before picking up speed again. It heard the bullet buzz past, but didn't perceive a threat or detect the source. He tried again, still failing to connect with one of the monsters. The pack continued filtering through the forest, oblivious to the gunfire. Perfect. He could fire without attracting attention, a distinct advantage if he ran across a small group of abbies during his trek.

He engaged the safety and reported the abby migration, periodically sending updates until the forest settled into its natural routine.

"Ops, this is Hassler. No abbie movement detected since zero-nine hundred."

"Copy. Twenty minutes meets the threshold. Stand by for the second string of explosions. Report all abby movement."

"Yep," he said, closing his eyes for a few minutes.

He'd started to doze off before the sound of the first explosion rippled through the air, followed shortly by the second. The forest remained silent for a few minutes before the next wave of monstrosities scampered through, chasing the sound. He noted fewer abbies this time. Far fewer.

Chapter 35

Ted Upshaw typed a string of commands on his keyboard and turned in his chair to face Pilcher, who stood with Pam a few feet away in the Operations Center's control room. He hated when they crowded him like this, especially Pam. He still didn't know what to make of her. Young, attractive and fit, he shouldn't mind having her hover over him, but something about her was *off*. Way off. One minute she appeared normal, almost pleasantly flirtatious; the next she grinned like a deranged clown. Even worse—her dead look. She didn't flash that one very often, but the few times he'd seen it convinced him she was psychotic. No amount of flirtation could erase that look. He steered clear of her outside of Operations.

"Hassler hasn't reported any hostile activity for two hours. If Hassler could hear the explosions at ten miles, the abbies could hear and detect them at twice that distance. Assuming the theories are correct."

"They're correct. Lab dissections verify advanced sensory structures. Keen hearing and sight. We have to assume they can detect seismic waves far more proficiently than most ground animals."

Upshaw nodded, noting Pam's strange smile. He couldn't wait until she left the room.

"Then I think the area is safe for him to proceed," said Upshaw.

"I agree. Let's get Hassler moving. Also, pass word to Marcus. I want him to start tagging abbies. If Hassler makes good progress, we'll detonate the test charges in two days. I want a good data set for Mr. Leven's calculations. We can't afford to underestimate the abbies' acoustic and seismic detection

capabilities.”

“Understood, Mr. Pilcher. I’ll notify Marcus immediately.”

When Pilcher turned to leave, Upshaw swiveled his chair and continued typing. He heard the door close, but sensed that he wasn’t alone. A quick glance backward confirmed that Pam had stayed behind.

“I thought I’d keep you company for a while,” she said, standing next to him. “It must get lonely in here all by yourself. Watching the world through a screen.”

“From what I’ve seen so far, I’d much rather experience that world from here. If you don’t mind, I have a lot of work to do.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, squeezing his shoulder before leaving.

What was that supposed to mean? Was that a proposition? Oh man, she was fucking creepy. Never in a million years would he consider what he thought she might be suggesting. Not with the possibility of her clown face appearing out of nowhere. Just the thought of it trampled his libido. Upshaw watched her leave, his eyes drawn to her streamlined figure and provocative walk. Then again, life in the superstructure didn’t leave him with many options.

Chapter 36

Marcus climbed into the passenger seat of the Mark23 MTVR and shut the door, nodding to the driver. The seven-ton, armored transport lurched forward, barely squeezing through the partially opened gate. One of the superstructure's up-armored Humvees followed closely behind. Checking his side mirror through the thick ballistic glass, he watched the security team slide the deactivated fencing section along sturdy rollers to its locked position against the fence post. Back in hostile territory for the second time today.

His earpiece crackled. "Marcus, this is Wagner. We have inbound from the south."

"Copy," he said, turning to the driver. "Blake, whatever you do, don't get us stuck. Stay on the path we det-corded this morning. There's room for a tight three-point turn at the end, but not much more."

"Got it," said the middle-aged, goateed driver.

"Drive slowly no matter what you see. This glass will stop an AK-47 round. Nothing can get in here," he said, knocking on the windshield and hoping he was right.

Marcus slid through the hatch connecting the cabin to the armored troop compartment. Inside the olive green box, eight nervous men watched him.

"Abbies inbound. Take your stations and fire at will. We keep shooting until the tracking darts are gone. Make each shot count," he said.

The men split into two groups of four, each group taking positions on one side of the compartment. The armor kit resembled the same system he'd used with the marines in Afghanistan, with a few changes made by the

superstructure’s welding team. The ballistic windows had been removed and replaced with reinforced metal bars spaced three inches apart.

The four windows represented the only breaches in the truck’s hull. Unlike this morning’s run, the turret hatch above the driver’s cabin would remain closed and locked. Their mission was to tag the abbies with transmitter darts, not gun them down en masse. Without the gun turrets thinning the herd, he expected this to be a wild ride.

“Here they come!” yelled one of the men on the starboard side of the truck.

The two starboard-side guns hissed repeatedly as the teams fired into the oncoming pack, chambering darts as rapidly as possible. A few seconds after the shooting started, the abbies struck the armor, slightly rocking the seven-ton vehicle on its chassis. A gray, black-taloned hand gripped the steel bars, immediately followed by the razor-teeth-infested face of a snarling abby. The shooter stepped back while the second man jammed a long-handled stun gun through the bars and shocked the creature until it fell from the vehicle.

Thumps against the sides of the armored vehicle grew louder and more persistent as the creatures frenzied against the impenetrable hull. He knew they couldn’t break into the vehicle, but the sheer volume of abbies striking the sides made him nervous. Marcus’s primary concern was the tires. The MK23 was equipped with a Central Tire Inflation System, providing continuous air to the thick tires in the event of a puncture, but he wasn’t sure if that system could overcome multiple punctures and slashes.

“Jesus!” he heard from the operator’s cabin.

Marcus looked over his shoulder to check the driver’s view. Creatures bounded onto the hood, pounding on the windows to get at Blake.

“How we doing up there?” he said.

“Fine, as long as you’re sure these things can’t break through. They’re hitting the windows really fucking hard.”

“Any signs of cracking?” said Marcus.

“Negative. I’m coming up on the turn.”

“Already? Shit. Looks like we might be making two trips. Take your time with the turn.”

“Got it,” said Blake.

Marcus turned his attention back to the troop compartment.

“Give me a count of estimated rounds fired!”

Each team reported between twenty and thirty darts fired, which should be enough to make an initial assessment of the operation. He switched channels on his radio and contacted Operations.

“Ops, this is Marcus. We’ve fired roughly one hundred darts, what are you seeing?”

“This is Operations. We’re picking up good returns on eighty-one transmitters. Looks like they’re starting to drop from the tranquilizer. I have thirty-three stationary or slow-moving tags. Can you tell if they’re cannibalizing?”

“Stand by,” he said, switching back to the convoy frequency. “Wagner, how are you guys doing?”

“Doing all right for now. These fuckers are strong, and they don’t seem to give a shit. They’re hitting the sides of the Humvee like battering rams.”

“Do you see any tranquilized abbies? Operations said we have thirty-three stationary,” said Marcus.

“Affirmative. They seem to fade from the MTVR and wander around a bit before falling.”

“Are the other abbies leaving them alone?” said Marcus.

“As far as I can tell, but the abbies are way more preoccupied with the vehicles right now.”

“Copy. We’re coming up on the turn. Wait in the turnoff until we pass you. Don’t try to squeeze by. I don’t want to get stuck out here in an armored coffin.”

“None of us do,” said Wagner.

Chapter 37

Hassler crouched low, letting his ears take over for a moment. The forest had been mercifully devoid of abbies so far, but he wasn't about to stake his life on Pilcher's diversions. A cautious, measured approach to the mission represented his best chance of survival. Murray Wagner, the only security officer on Marcus's team that didn't blatantly ignore him, shared what he had learned about the abbies from his four-day struggle outside of the hatch. The information had proven invaluable during his first two hours trekking through hostile territory.

Like animals, the abbies behaved instinctually, which made them easier to predict. They generally moved in packs, always preceded by scouts. Similar to the point-man concept used by military units, the scouts travelled alone and were typically the smaller, more agile members of the pack. They ranged ahead of the main group by a few hundred yards, which made the sight of a lone abby even more terrifying. The presence of a single creature could signify the immediate, unannounced arrival of a hundred abbies. A veritable death sentence for Hassler. Even a mini-pack of ten was nearly unsurvivable. The things moved too damned fast.

If he spotted a lone abby, his best strategy was to immediately seek concealment and determine the pack's travel path. A scout moving perpendicularly across his route was the best-case scenario. The packs traveled in relatively tight formations, unlikely to stumble across his position if they were far enough away. If Hassler calculated an intersection with the pack, he'd have to kill the scout and swiftly clear the area.

Killing the scout was necessary, because he wouldn't have time to escape

without attracting the scout's attention. Fortunately, the abbies didn't seem to investigate the sudden death of their own beyond a few quick sniffs and a glance around the forest. As long as he remained out of sight and downwind, he should be fine.

The basic tenets of human survival in the year 3813 AD had drastically changed. Life was different when you had natural predators in nature. Staying alive relied on stealth and avoidance, reserving the application of force for well-defined circumstances—exactly how he had operated for several years in 1st Special Forces Operational Group-Delta. Always outnumbered. Always outgunned. Always defying the odds and coming out on top. His margin of error was smaller in this hostile world, but the abbies appeared to be a manageable threat if he paid attention and played it safe.

Satisfied that he was alone, Hassler lowered his rifle and removed a laminated topographic map from a zippered pouch on the side of his vest. Using a black grease pencil from the pouch, he marked his estimated location. His pace count from the previous stop suggested he had arrived at the eight-mile point, which required him to plant twelve one-pound explosive charges, fifty yards apart on an east-west axis. The entire line would run nearly a third of a mile.

Two of the charges were part of the acoustics test. The remaining ten would play an important role in Pilcher's plan to keep the abbies away long enough for the construction crew to build the primary containment fence. He carried enough explosives on his back to plant a similar string of ten charges at the four- and six-mile points.

The overall concept involved drawing the bulk of the abbies south with the charges buried at miles four, six and eight. Once the forest near the fence construction site was clear, the abbies would be pulled further away by the sequential detonation of fifty charges planted between miles ten and fifteen.

Setting this final series would take the better part of an entire day, possibly longer if he opted for more than one resupply trip. Hiking under the constant

threat of attack, with more than a hundred pounds of gear, had taken its toll. He'd already fallen one mile behind the projection he had given Pilcher. Three hours to walk three miles and dig four holes—not exactly a record pace. At some point Pilcher would do the math and figure out that this wouldn't be a two-day mission. More like three and a half.

"Hassler, this is Operations. Mr. Pilcher needs to speak with you."

Speak of the devil.

"Standing by," said Hassler, sliding his backpack onto a bed of pine needles.

"Adam, your last position report puts you at least a mile behind schedule. At this rate—"

"Good afternoon to you too," he said, transmitting over Pilcher's voice. "I'm moving as fast as possible without turning into a late afternoon snack. I just reached mile eight."

"Mile eight?" said Pilcher.

"If you think someone else can do this faster, feel free to launch hang glider number two."

"Is there any way you can pick up the pace? You haven't reported any hostile contact, so I assume our diversions cleared the valley," said Pilcher.

"I haven't stopped to work on my tan, if that's what you think. All it takes is one mistake, and you won't have any choice but to launch another glider. I should be able to make up some lost time between here and the mile-four point. I'm still working out the bugs with the long-distance radio transceivers. How are the signals looking, by the way?"

"We're seeing strong signals on mile ten and nine transceivers."

"I'm about to plant twelve more. I should be an expert at this within ninety minutes."

"That long?" said Pilcher.

"That's a conservative estimate. I have to look over my shoulder every ten fucking seconds, or risk being eaten. Three days max and I'll have this all wrapped up for you."

Pilcher remained silent for several seconds. Hassler envisioned his cheeks turning a bright red as he stifled a scream.

“Operations, this is Hassler. Radio check,” he said, forming a thin grin.

“I’m still here,” barked Pilcher. “You have three days, including today.”

“Or what?” said Hassler. “Don’t answer that. I’ll have this done in three days. Out.”

He deactivated the radio, cutting off Pilcher’s reply, and turned his attention back to the forest. Ten seconds hadn’t been an exaggeration. He’d have to remain constantly vigilant to prevent an undetected attack. Racing at speeds in excess of thirty miles per hour, an abby stumbling across his scent at a distance of two hundred yards could be on him in less than fifteen seconds. After scanning the shadows under the trees for threats, he opened his pack and extracted one of forty olive green bricks stuffed in his pack.

In one of the larger external pouches, he removed a hard plastic case containing the long-range transceivers. Little more than the size of his thumb, a five-inch-long, fishing-wire-thin antenna protruded from its gray synthetic shell. He’d been skeptical about the devices’ maximum range, but Upshaw assured him they generated enough power to transmit a detectable signal. Another hi-tech marvel acquired after most of them had entered suspension, by the team Pilcher kept around to tie up loose ends and troll the markets for technology upgrades.

Hassler’s load out for the mission consisted of six boxes, each containing twenty-five transceivers. He’d seen hundreds of similar boxes in the technology storage pod. He had no idea why Pilcher would need thousands of these things, but he wasn’t complaining. They worked. After one of the superstructure’s electricians engineered a quick internal modification turning each transceiver into a remote detonator, all he had to do was connect a few wires and test the signal before attaching the modified device to a block of explosives. Once Operations confirmed that the charge was live, he buried the improvised explosive device in a sealed Ziploc bag, leaving the antennae exposed above the

ground.

The whole process was relatively painless, except for the digging. The noise created by scraping a one-foot hole in the frozen ground seemed to amplify through the forest. Every time his hollow folding shovel thunked into the ground, he glanced around nervously. With ninety more holes to dig over the next few days, he felt certain the odds were stacked against him.

Chapter 38

Pilcher stepped out of his private elevator and walked toward Operations. The hippie-looking guard nicknamed Leo opened the door for him. Leo, formally known as Leonard Jones, had been one of the more eclectic additions to the superstructure staff. A washed-up forty-one-year-old musician in Portland, Oregon, Leonard had responded to one of Pilcher's "End of the Line" employment ads. Created by a team of psychologists and behavioral specialists, the "End of the Line" series represented one of several highly targeted advertising campaigns designed to attract candidates with a high potential to pass the rigorous mental indoctrination process and ultimately join the Wayward Pines program.

The "End of the Line" ads served to identify candidates motivated by the chance to start over. People who would give anything or, more importantly, pledge anything for a meaningful life—unhindered by the black marks of past mistakes and the daily reminders of their failings. Leonard fell squarely into this category. With two jail stints on his record, one for impaling a man's hand to a dartboard with a throwing knife while intoxicated and another for a parole violation, Mr. Jones's future in the music world had dimmed to the point of collapse when he placed a call to Pilcher's recruitment team.

Pope conducted a face-to-face interview with Leonard in 2009, more or less dismissing the pale, Goth-looking guitarist until the very end of the interview. With little to offer Wayward Pines in terms of a technical skill set, and all of the superstructure's basic labor jobs filled, Pope jokingly said, "Impress me. Give me a reason to hire you." At this point, most applicants stared blankly at Pope,

shrugging their shoulders in defeat. Leonard stood up from the desk and walked toward the door. While Pope closed his file, figuring Leonard was finished, he wheeled around and released a hidden throwing knife, uttering, “Miami.” When Pope examined the map, he saw that the knife protruded from the bottom half of Florida’s peninsula. He promptly stamped Leonard’s file “SECURITY.” Leo sailed through indoctrination, proving to be an invaluable, levelheaded member of Alan’s internal security force.

“Good evening, Leo. Pulling a double shift?” said Pilcher.

“We have three officers on loan to Marcus’s team. I’d much rather pull a double than take my chances on the outside. Too old for that shit.”

Pilcher laughed, disarmed by Leo’s candor.

“How do you think I feel? I’m nearly twenty years older than you,” he said, changing to a more serious tone. “Once we get the fence up, we won’t have to worry about those things. I promise you that.”

“I’m happy right here, sir. Someone has to hold down the fort,” said Leo.

“Indeed. Keep up the good work, Leo,” said Pilcher, patting his shoulder before walking into Operations.

Upshaw stood in front of the largest flat-screen monitor, pointing at a pack of icons superimposed on a map of the valley. Marcus, Elliot Black and Pope stood behind him.

“Starting without me?” said Pope, watching the four men scramble to offer an explanation.

Disappointingly, Pope was the slowest to show any form of regret or contrition. His smug look barely changed as he stepped away from the monitor. Not good. Pope seemed different after emerging from suspension. Maybe Pam was right. He’d have to keep a close eye on the sheriff of Wayward Pines. The last thing he needed was Arnold Pope challenging his authority.

“Just kidding. What are we looking at?”

“Sir, I was just showing them our active signals. Two hundred and forty-eight, divided into nine distinct packs, ranging in size from six to fifty-two.”

“I thought we had ten groups?”

“We did, until about forty minutes ago. Groups six and seven merged. They’ve been travelling together ever since.”

“Incredible. I wonder if the rest will do the same thing given their close proximity, possibly forming one super-pack, or a new herd. Do we still have a few blind spots?”

“The transmitter signals fade out when the abbies range toward the far northern end of the valley, but our software is keeping track of each transmitter. If any of the tagged abbies enter the blackout zone, we can account for them,” said Upshaw.

“And the explosives?”

“Thirty charges active. Hassler detected some movement on the way to mile five and decided to hole up for the night.”

“Fucking Hassler,” muttered Pilcher.

He didn’t understand why an ex-Delta Force operator couldn’t “push the envelope” a little. Maybe make up some lost time by planting a few charges at night? Didn’t Delta Force “rule the night” or something like that? The guy was traipsing around the forest with generation-six night vision equipment—gear that didn’t even exist before Hassler went into suspension—and he was treating the mission like a union job! Can’t move after dark. Have to take breaks to observe the forest. Every time Hassler called over the radio, he reported another delay. At this rate, the helicopter would be ready by the time he planted all of the explosives.

“Is there any point trying to convince him to climb down and finish the next string of charges?” said Pilcher.

“To be completely honest, sir, it didn’t sound like a committee decision. Light had already faded nearly sixty percent at that point, and he heard suspected abby activity due west of his position—moving out of the valley.”

“Have any of the abbies drifted south?” said Pilcher.

“Negative,” said Upshaw.

Pilcher looked at Pope and shook his head. “I don’t see any reason for them to leave the valley. Not while we’re setting off diversionary charges. Hassler is doing this to annoy me. To exert a little control over the situation.”

“We need to be careful with him,” said Pope. “We can’t afford to have any authority challenges, especially now. The people are nervous, still unsure about our new reality.”

Pilcher wondered if Pope was speaking for the people or himself. Maybe the sheriff thought their path might be clearer with new leadership. Pope had summarily rejected Leven’s proposal to reenter suspension, and he’d never wavered in his support of Pilcher’s decision to press onward with Wayward Pines. Now he wondered if Pope’s public support was a calculated act to undermine his authority. If personnel losses continued during the next phase of construction, Pope would be in a good position to lead a coup d’etat against him. Or was Pam’s childish jealousy tainting his assessment of Pope’s behavior?

“Gentlemen, I want each of your teams ready to start work at first light, precisely sixty-two hours from now. That means all equipment fully functional. All safety cages fully installed. Security teams ready to roll. Everyone knows the plan cold. When the first rays of light fill the valley, I want to see trees falling and a path opening to the fence site. Arnold, you’re in charge of this operation. Report any and all possible issues directly to me. I expect the rest of you to keep Mr. Pope fully apprised of your progress. No excuses. No delays—”

“What about Hassler? There’s no guarantee he’ll finish on time,” said Pope.

“He either finishes by the end of the third day, or we’ll send someone else out to complete his work. Contact the hangar and tell them to assemble and test one of the ultralights.”

Upshaw started to open his mouth to say something, but stopped. Pilcher suspected that he had pieced together Hassler’s predetermined fate.

“Yes, Ted?”

“Nothing, sir,” he said, avoiding eye contact. “Just thinking out loud.”

“Very well. Mr. Black?” said Pilcher.

“Sir?”

“How are your people feeling about the security precautions taken to protect them from the abbies?” said Pilcher.

“Better. Marcus brought one of my more skeptical equipment operators on the tagging expedition this morning. He got to see the welded protective bars in action. Still scared the hell out of him, but he came back and confirmed that the cages attached to the forestry equipment will keep them safe. Nobody’s happy about being locked into their machines.”

“There’s no other way, Elliot. The engineers couldn’t create locking mechanisms that would hold up under a sustained attack,” said Pilcher.

“I know, but sitting in a welded-shut cage for ten hours will take a toll,” said Black.

“Better than being eaten alive,” said Pope.

With that statement, he felt pretty confident that Pope wasn’t about to outmaneuver him in a popularity contest at any point in the near future.

“Marcus?” said Pilcher, hoping for something a little more sophisticated than a playground-level comment.

“The situation outside will be vastly different than this morning. With most of the abbies drawn out of the valley, we expect isolated, easily manageable attacks from small groups. My team will immediately clear any threats posed to your crew. We’ll rehearse the procedures exhaustively with your people,” said Marcus.

Black forced a smile and nodded. “That’ll help assure the equipment operators.”

“Sounds like we’re on the right path. Two weeks from now, we’ll have a four-thousand-volt, five-hundred-amp barrier standing between Wayward Pines and the outside world. Then the real work begins,” said Pilcher.

Chapter 39

A persistent chirping sound drew Hassler out of a shallow nap. Struggling to break through his sleep inertia, a strong survival imperative told him to remain still. *Perfectly still.* A few seconds later, he recognized the sound in his ears. Something had triggered the motion sensor array attached to the tree trunk below him, sending a wireless alarm signal through his radio earpiece. He opened his eyes slowly and stared at a single, dark point in the distance, a trick he had learned in another life. The rod cells, which are concentrated away from the center of the eye, function better in low light, making the peripheral vision better for detecting movement in the dark.

He spotted the abby immediately, creeping east to west a few hundred feet northeast of his tree. It had barely come within range of the motion sensors. The branches gently rustled and swayed around him as a frigid breeze sifted through the pines—pushing his scent toward the nearby abby. Shit. Hassler lowered the night vision goggles mounted to his helmet, activating the green image. Instead of a single abby near the periphery of the motions sensor's detection range, he saw a staggered column of six creatures moving cautiously on all fours. Six was too many if they discovered him. He couldn't afford to watch and wait.

The breeze strengthened momentarily, creating enough background noise for him to silently shift into a more stable fighting position. Still connected to the tree by a climbing harness, he stood on the sturdy branch beneath him and wrapped his arm through the sling attached to his rifle. Pulling the hefty rifle tightly into his shoulder, he flipped the lens covers and searched for the lead abby.

Hassler’s instincts proved correct. The abby stopped next to a young pine tree and stood on its hind legs to sniff the air. He placed the tip of the reticle’s green arrow in the center of the abby’s head and pressed the trigger. The rifle coughed, and the creature dropped without making a sound—he hoped. When he shifted the rifle to the next creature in the line, he saw that it had frozen in place, its head slowly scanning the forest. Hassler started to apply pressure to the trigger when the remaining abbies suddenly bolted north, moving away from him at full speed. A faint, distant crack echoed through the forest several seconds later, followed by a voice in his earpiece.

“We picked up your motion sensor signal. Figured you could use a little help,” said Ted Upshaw.

“I owe you one. I had six abbies sniffing me out. Managed to drop the first one quietly, but I think the rest were on to me.”

“We’ll set off another string of explosives two hours prior to first light. We want to draw these stray groups deeper into the valley before you start.”

“I appreciate that. Tell Pilcher I’ll be back at the resupply point by noon. If I don’t run into any major problems, I should be able to make up some lost time,” said Hassler.

“He’ll be happy to hear that. Let us know if you need any more help,” said Upshaw.

“Copy. Hassler out,” he said, easing himself into a seated position on the thick branch.

The discovery of a small pack quietly patrolling the forest nagged at him. He couldn’t shake the awful feeling that they were alerted to his general presence. Their quiet incursion through his territory seemed deliberate. Maybe there’s more to their future descendants than Pilcher thinks—or is willing to admit.

Chapter 40

Hassler pounded his foot into the shoulder of the compact shovel, loosening a few inches of pine-needle-covered soil. Even after a full day of sun and warmer temperatures, the ground barely yielded to his effort. Thirty-three more holes, including this one, and he was home free. Movement in his far right peripheral field drew his attention to a fast-moving, grayish form several feet away. His mind didn't have time to process the specifics and initiate a complex response. Instead, he lurched forward and swung the shovel backward, striking the grotesque beast in midair as it sailed behind him.

The abby lashed out with its talons, slicing through Hassler's backpack and ripping the shovel out of his grip. Landing to his left, the monster skidded a few feet before regaining traction and reversing course. Still in emergency survival mode, he drew his pistol and rapid-fired at the onrushing abby until the semiautomatic's slide locked back, the barrel smoking. The creature's broken, bloodied skull crashed to the ground at his feet as screeches filled the forest. In one fluid motion, he holstered the empty weapon and raised his rifle.

"Ops, this is Hassler. Possible heavy contact at mile thirteen. Any and all help is appreciated."

"Copy. Stand by."

He scanned the forest, unable to determine the direction of the pack. He knew they were coming. Twelve unsuppressed .45 caliber pistol shots guaranteed it. A quick assessment of the terrain didn't hold much promise. Mostly flat ground interrupted by the occasional boulder. He'd crossed a three-foot-wide stream a few hundred yards back, which formed a shallow gully. At this point, a few

hundred yards might as well be ten miles. He had seconds to execute a plan.

Glancing upward, he dismissed the trees. Climbing wasn't an option. The abbies would be on him before he could climb out of reach. Even if he managed to escape their talons, his journey would more than likely end in the tree. Fuck that. If his luck had truly expired, he'd die on the ground—not holed up in a tree like an animal. The shrieks suddenly stopped. *Lucky mile thirteen*, he thought, before the first creature bolted into sight to his left.

Before he could shift his rifle to fire at the target, two more beasts appeared in his peripheral vision, attacking at a ninety-degree angle from the first. *Classic moving ambush*. He resisted the temptation to engage the larger group and concentrated on the lone abby. The key to surviving a multiple-direction attack was to minimize the number of threat directions. He centered the reticle on the inbound creature and pressed the trigger twice, spinning the abby into a tree.

Before engaging the second group of abbies, Hassler scrambled a few feet to the left and nestled against a thick, immovable tree trunk, giving his flank some natural protection. His first bullets closed the twenty-foot gap at 1,050 feet per second, instantly ejecting the contents of the closest abby's chest onto the second creature. Hassler fired the next burst while shifting his body behind the tree, barely avoiding a thirty-mile-per-hour collision with the two-hundred-and-fifty-pound mass of muscle and sinew. The abby brushed against his right shoulder and slid along the ground, the top half of its grotesque head missing.

Without hesitating, he swung his rifle to the other side of the tree, crashing into an abby that had approached in his blind spot. Talons slashed into his left forearm, slicing through his camouflage jacket as they tumbled. His first priority was to get out of the thing's immediate slashing range.

Hassler rolled several feet to the left, stopping on his back to aim the rifle. The monster had already leapt when he fired, partially impaling itself on the suppressor. Panicked by the creature's frenzied scream, he repeatedly pressed the trigger, showering them in a geyser of blood and gore until the lifeless thing slid down the rifle and pinned him to the ground. Desperate to stay alive, Hassler

launched his knees upward and wrenched the rifle left, swinging the dead carcass off him. He tugged the gore-coated rifle through the abby's chest, spinning to face the general direction of the pack's attack. Miraculously, he was alone.

He reloaded the rifle, dropping the empty, blood-soaked magazine to the forest floor. A quick check of his ACOG sight showed that it would be useless until he could take a few minutes to wipe it clean. Minutes he didn't have at the moment. Distant shrieks prodded Hassler to start moving. He needed to put as much distance between ground zero and himself as possible in the next ten minutes.

First, he needed to cover his scent. While walking briskly, he unbuttoned the jacket sleeve on his left arm and pulled it up to his elbow, followed by the moist under layers covering his torn forearm. Hassler grimaced as the tight fabric chafed against the cut. With the forearm exposed, he dug through the spare pockets on his vest for immediate medical care items. He opened a small tube of antibiotic cream and poured the contents onto the wound, rubbing the translucent salve into the cut. Next, he tore open a wide field dressing, wrapping it around the forearm. He didn't bother to tighten it. The final step would take care of that.

After replacing the spent items, he removed a compact roll of green duct tape and pulled a six-inch strip, biting off the end. He wrapped the tape around the dressing, making sure to extend the adhesive an inch beyond the dressing on each side. Three pieces of tape later, he'd effectively treated and sealed the bleeding wound, preventing it from leaving a trail. Hassler wasn't worried about the blood that had already seeped onto his clothing. He was soaked in enough of the abby's blood to cover the scent.

"Ops, this is Hassler. Survived contact with five hostiles. Moving south to clear the area. I'll plant the rest of mile thirteen's explosives somewhere else."

"Adam, I'm a little concerned that you only planted seven of the twelve charges assigned to this distance," said Pilcher.

"And I'm a little concerned about making it back to the superstructure alive. I

don’t have time for this, David,” he said, searching for his shovel. “You’ll get the rest of your diversions when I get the fuck out of here.”

“We’ve decided to expand the test pattern to mile fifteen,” started Pilcher.

“I’m not planting additional explosives.”

“There’s no change to the number of charges to be used. We plan to use one of the diversionary charges at each distance increment beyond mile ten. Unfortunately, that only leaves us with six diversionary devices at mile thirteen. Can you plant a few more if nothing shows up in the next few minutes?” finished Pilcher.

“You really don’t give a shit if I’m eaten, do you?” he said, picking up his pace.

“Adam, the success of Wayward Pines depends on your mission. Nobody has *more* vested in your survival than I do. I’m just being practical,” said Pilcher.

“Then let me restate my position in a language you might understand. I just fired twelve unsuppressed pistol rounds into an abby. Sticking around would be very bad for my health and the mission,” he said, spotting the dark green shovel next to a pine sapling.

“I’ll defer to your judgment on this one,” said Pilcher.

About fucking time. “Look on the bright side, David. I’m hauling ass to mile fourteen. With any luck, I might be back in the cafeteria for lunch tomorrow. I’m a solid half-day ahead of schedule.”

“That’s great news, Adam. I’ll have the chefs prepare something special,” said Pilcher.

“Can’t wait…and David?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t underestimate the abbies’ intelligence. I just witnessed a highly coordinated, multidirectional attack by five of these things. One of them intentionally took advantage of a blind spot in my defense.”

“Their hunting skills have been honed to perfection over the past eighteen hundred years, Adam. There’s a big difference between instinctual evolution and

intelligence. An intelligent predator wouldn't approach a man armed with a rifle," said Pilcher.

"I'm not saying they could outscore any of us on the SATs. I think there's more rattling around these ugly heads than meets the eye," said Hassler, dumbfounded by Pilcher's position on the matter.

"Maybe you're right. We'll be sure to record your observations during the debriefing. Until then, stay safe. We're counting on you," said Pilcher.

"Staying safe is my middle name," he said, turning off the radio.

"Not believing a fucking word you just said is my game."

Chapter 41

Pilcher pressed the “Send Elevator” button, releasing his private elevator car to retrieve Pam from the first floor. He needed to revisit a sensitive topic with her. A distasteful subject he’d hoped to avoid altogether during their tenure in Wayward Pines. When the monitor next to the door showed her enter the car, he walked briskly to his living room, situating himself in one of the leather club chairs facing the entryway. Before the elevator door chimed, he slipped a small, semiautomatic pistol out of his pocket and tucked it between the cushions next to his right thigh.

Pilcher suspected she would respond with little or no emotion to his request, but he wasn’t ready to bet his life on it. He’d played a bizarre surrogate father role in her life for seven years, guiding her through an intense transformation. Psychiatric tests unanimously assessed her loyalty as fierce—nearly unbreakable. Nearly. A few of the specialists warned that the strong father-daughter bond could backfire if she perceived a critical betrayal, resulting in a mental breakdown. This presented a risk, since none of his experts could accurately determine what might initiate a collapse.

They proposed theories and attempted to instigate an emotional response during follow-on tests, but Pam showed them nothing. Nothing beyond an unnerving wide-eyed grin, which waxed and waned apropos of nothing. He touched the polymer pistol grip for comfort. Better safe than sorry. He didn’t want to lose Pam, but life in Wayward Pines would proceed without her if she posed a threat.

“Pam, thank you for seeing me on such short notice. Please take a seat. Can I

get you something to drink? Water with lime?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” she replied, her face remaining neutral.

When she was seated, Pilcher proceeded.

“I’m worried about Upshaw and how he will react tomorrow.”

“I have him under control,” she said, the start of her grin appearing.

“Upshaw has proven to be invaluable,” he said, meeting her eyes. “I need to be sure about this.”

“I’ll take care of it tonight,” she whispered, her eyes fixated on the ground for an uncomfortably long pause.

“I’m sorry about this,” he said.

His right hand drifted imperceptibly toward the pistol as he searched Pam’s face for the remotest sign that she might jump out of her chair. Instead of attacking Pilcher, her creepy grin surfaced.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. Wayward Pines is too important,” she said.

“Thank you, Pam. You’re the only one I can trust in here,” he said, moving his hand away from the gun.

Chapter 42

Upshaw linked the signal from the transceiver to the system, displaying the location of the ninety-third explosive charge on the digital map. Hassler was one charge away from completing his mission and accomplishing the impossible. Time to notify Pilcher and the hangar—though he suspected something amiss there. He dialed Pilcher's residence, surprised when Pam answered the phone.

"We're on our way down," she said and disconnected the call.

"Of course," he mumbled, having momentarily forgotten that Pilcher could see all of his screens.

He really didn't want to see Pam again. Not after last night's visit to his quarters. He enjoyed the surprise indulgence on a primal level, but knew logically that the ten minutes of passion would cost him. Upshaw didn't believe her "no strings attached" story any more than he bought her awkwardly delivered sexual compliments. She said the right words, but like everything else with her, something was off.

Her performance felt as convincing as a prostitute's. Upshaw wouldn't taste that forbidden fruit again, if he could help it. Then again, that's what he said the last time. At least she was hot, he thought, watching Leo open the external door to Operations. When the motion-activated camera in the hallway changed the image, he saw Pilcher talking to Leo—Pam was missing. Shit.

She stepped inside the room and winked at him, heading directly for his station. Now he understood why Pilcher wanted the rest of Upshaw's team out of Operations after Hassler planted the ninetieth charge. Conveniently chatting up a storm with Leo, he'd given Pam some alone time to work her twisted charm. He

knew there was a reason for her sudden interest in him.

“Miss me?” she said, nestling her firm breasts against the back of his head.

“I don’t think this is a good time,” he said, feeling flush.

Her hand slid down his chest, stopping a few inches short of his khaki pants. She bit his ear lightly and whispered, “I can’t wait to stop by tonight.”

Despite every natural alarm and survival instinct screaming “NO,” he offered a trembling, “Sounds good.” Her hand brushed against his growing bulge and stopped.

“Just be a good boy, and I’ll take good care of you tonight,” she whispered, quickly stepping away from the chair.

Ted glanced at the monitor, noticing that Pilcher was gone.

“How are we doing in here?” said his boss, standing in the doorway.

“What?” he said, his mind scrambling to make sense of the encounter.

“How far are we from celebrating?” he said, holding out a sweating bottle of champagne and three crystal flutes.

“Uhhhh. I think…” he said, stalling to recover his focus.

“How long until Hassler plants the final charge?” said Pilcher, setting the glasses and bottle on one of the desks behind him.

“Less than ten minutes. He’s extremely proficient with the electronics at this point. Most of his time is spent digging. Might be sooner if he finds a soft spot,” said Upshaw.

“And all of the charges are transmitting and receiving?”

“That’s correct. I have ninety-three strong signals. No failures,” said Upshaw, hearing the door close.

“You made a solid choice with the gear selection,” said Pilcher.

“The best money could buy in 2033,” replied Upshaw, pretending to focus on the screens so he didn’t have to look at Pam.

“And the addition of transmitter darts to the inventory was an exceptional call on your part—we should be able to develop an accurate model of the abbies’ acoustic and seismic capabilities. We might need to increase the range of the

charges, based on the abbies' initial reaction to the mile-fifteen test charge, but that shouldn't present much of a challenge."

"What do you mean?" said Upshaw, knowing exactly where Pilcher was taking this.

"If the abbies react to our furthest charge, we can't create a model. We'd have no idea if they'd still react at mile sixteen or seventeen. We have to find the point between reaction and no reaction—obviously starting as far out as possible."

Upshaw decided to take Pilcher's bait. He could read between the lines. Pilcher was about to ask him to do something far more deplorable than order his "golden child" to perform sexual favors on a hairy, out-of-shape man old enough to be her father.

"I don't think Mr. Hassler will be happy with that suggestion," stated Upshaw.

"Mr. Hassler doesn't have any explosives left to be of any use," said Pilcher.

Upshaw paused before responding. "Then I hope the current test pattern does the job."

"Mr. Hassler won't be returning to the superstructure," responded Pilcher.

"No ultralight," muttered Upshaw, confirming the implications of Pilcher's statement.

"I can't have someone like Hassler subverting our efforts. He's proven to be pathologically selfish."

"And useful," interrupted Upshaw.

"He sent agents under his charge to their deaths to secure a place in this world. I had no intention of waking him—until we discovered the abbies. As far as I'm concerned, he's not here," said Pilcher.

Upshaw nodded slowly, unsure if he should respond.

"Can I count on you to keep this a secret, Ted?"

"Of course," said Upshaw, staring at the screen in front of him.

Pilcher put his hand on the same shoulder Pam had touched, sickening his stomach.

“I need you to detonate the last charge as soon as Hassler activates the transceiver.”

“Sometimes he activates the transceiver before attaching it to the explosives,” he said blankly.

“I trust you can figure this out,” said Pilcher.

“Yes, sir,” he said, hearing the champagne glasses rattle in the background.

He opened the “Transceiver” window and migrated it to one of the unused monitors in his personal array of screens, selecting “Charge Nine-Four.” A mini-window appeared, with several on-screen buttons. The button labeled “Detonate” was grayed-out, waiting for a transceiver signal. Several minutes later, after an interminable period of silence, the ninety-fourth transceiver went live, and the “Detonate” button appeared solid green. He moved the wireless mouse icon to the Communications window on the center screen, selecting “Field Tactical 1.” Upshaw’s finger hovered over the mouse.

“Ops, this is Hassler. Last charge is set. How is my signal?”

He clicked the mouse, enabling a two-way conversation. “I was just about to contact you. Looks good on my end.”

“Roger that. Once I bury the charge, I’ll head to the primary LZ. Should take me about twenty minutes. Have the glider pilot contact me on this frequency. I’ll pop red smoke when the glider is thirty seconds out.”

“Sorry, brother,” said Upshaw, clicking the green “Detonate” button icon.

A loud popping sound caused him to jump in his seat. He swiveled the chair to see Pilcher pouring a glass of champagne.

“Will you ping Hassler’s radio? I’m not sure that Mustin’s team will see the ground effects of the explosion from this distance. I want to be sure.”

Upshaw turned and activated the emergency beacon system on Hassler’s radio, watching the screen closely for a return signal. What had he done? The beacon cycled through several frequency signals, yielding no return.

“Nothing. The radio is either destroyed or significantly disabled,” said Upshaw.

“Thank you, Ted. I’m sorry you had to be involved in this, but it was for the greater good of Wayward Pines. Everything we do is for the greater good,” he said, nodding at the large monitor on the wall.

The pattern of transmitter dart icons hadn’t changed, indicating that the abbies hadn’t detected the seismic signature created by the explosive charge. Seismic waves travelled nearly twenty times faster than sound waves through the air, attenuating far less than sound. If they hadn’t sensed a seismic disturbance, there was no chance that the sound waves could reach them.

“Looks like we don’t need to launch another glider,” said Upshaw, standing up from his station.

“No, we don’t,” said Pilcher, handing him a half-filled champagne flute. “I’m afraid this has lost most of its carbonation.”

“That’s fine. I was never a big champagne drinker,” he said, raising the flute. “To Hassler.”

Pilcher stared at him quizzically while Pam’s face lit up with a perverse grin.

“I was thinking more along the lines of Wayward Pines,” said Pilcher.

“Hassler played his part, just like the rest of us,” said Upshaw. “Too bad he got sloppy with the explosives at the very end.”

“A tragedy. To Hassler, then,” said Pilcher, clinking his glass. “And Wayward Pines.”

“To Wayward Pines,” said Upshaw, wishing he had never answered Pilcher’s advertisement five years ago.

Chapter 43

A column of dirty white smoke rose between the trees at the edge of the clearing, catching the wind and swirling toward the light blue sky. Standing on a partially buried boulder at the far end of the flattened field, Hassler shattered the radio and the “ninety-fourth” transceiver with the butt of his rifle. He detached the thin wire from the M57 firing device he had used to detonate the explosive charge and pulled the rest of the wire hand over hand through the clearing. With the “clacker” and the hastily wound ball of insulated wire stuffed in his drop bag, he walked north.

The quarter-pound charge was bound to attract attention, but it had been necessary to complete the illusion. Mustin and his team of observers two thousand feet above the ground would see the smoke and report it, confirming his death. Fucking Pilcher. Hassler should have known better than to trust that bald-headed, pinch-nosed shit on any level. He did know better, but Pilcher had leveraged Theresa against him. The veiled threat in Operations was only part of the elaborate setup. The dinner had been a staged affair designed to lower his guard. Pilcher had given him a sliver of hope, and that had been enough for Hassler. Now that hope was gone. Pilcher never had any intention of letting him be a part of Wayward Pines.

A faraway screech resonated through the trees, confirming the arrival of a curious pack. He picked up the pace, fanning his rifle in a continuous one-hundred-and-eighty-degree arc as he moved. His pack still tugged at him, lighter than before, but still loaded with gear—and several blocks of C4 he’d neglected to attach to their transceivers.

If Hassler didn’t get to live happily ever after in Wayward Pines—nobody did. He’d make sure of that.

Part III

“Sanctuary”

Chapter 44

Adam Hassler slithered through a wet layer of pine needles, coming to rest against a half-rotted, moss-infested log. The wind rustled through the trees, disturbing the branches above him. He was downwind, less than a hundred and fifty feet away from his target—about as close as he could get without risking detection. Raising his rifle slowly, he rested the hand guard on the log and quietly lifted his body into a seated position. *Easy shot.* He checked his surroundings for grey-skinned prowlers before nestling his cheek into the rifle's butt stock. *Snap*—the four-point buck collapsed on its front legs and toppled headfirst into a shallow stream.

He waited several moments, listening and scanning the forest. Nothing responded to the suppressed bullet. Hassler didn't anticipate anything would, but if his limited time in the year 3818 had taught him anything, it was to expect the worst—from abbies and humans alike. Eager to get this over with, he sprinted through the trees to reach the deer, pulling it clear of the scarlet-stained water.

Killing the deer was risky this close to the center of the valley, but well worth the gamble. He had a foolproof plan to convince Pilcher that he was dead—a necessary deception to pull off his *magnum opus.* If the smashed communications equipment and staged explosion hadn't been enough to keep Mustin's snipers off his back, feeding his microchip to one of the abbies should cancel any lingering doubt. The problem was luring the abbies close enough to eat the deer without becoming the second course.

To improve his odds, he'd moved precariously close to the series of explosives planted over the previous days. Hassler heard three sequential

explosions immediately following his “death,” which meant that the creatures had responded to the test charge set at mile twelve. This bit of knowledge prompted him to cover as much ground as possible before dark. He’d been smart to move up-valley. Additional charges rattled the ground at thirty-minute intervals throughout the night, drawing most of the abbies away from Wayward Pines and depositing them nearby.

Hassler drew a serrated blade from a small sheath on his belt and stabbed the deer’s exposed shoulder, opening a deep, three-inch hole. Pushing his fingers into the gushing wound, he worked his microchip deep into the muscle tissue. *Good enough for government work.* Within seconds, he had rinsed his knife and hands, setting a course for the eastern side of the valley. He needed to be as far away from the middle as possible when the sun peaked over the cliffs and the abbies became more active. When he could no longer see the stream, Hassler drew his pistol and fired six evenly spaced shots at a distant tree. The gunshots were answered by distant shrieks. *Breakfast is served.*

Chapter 45

Pope squirmed in the front passenger seat of his command vehicle, a heavily armored Humvee parked next to the superstructure's reinforced-steel exit ramp. He glanced nervously at the legs dangling into the rear compartment, not sure it was a good idea to have someone in the gun turret. The turret protection kit fitted to the vehicle provided three-hundred-and-sixty-degree ballistic protection for the gunner, including partial overhead shielding, but it wasn't abby-proof. If one of those things climbed onto the vehicle, it could easily kill the gunner—and drop into the Humvee.

He'd protested against manning the security vehicles' turrets, but Marcus and Black convinced Pilcher otherwise. Marcus didn't think the security team could protect the construction crews without readily available firepower, and Black felt certain the equipment operators would refuse to climb into their vehicles without the added protection of the machine guns. Pope couldn't push the issue—not without sounding scared. He switched his headset to the intravehicle radio net.

"Ragan, if one of those things gets to our vehicle, you climb down and close that fucking hatch. Copy?"

"Roger that," answered the gunner.

"Everyone in the vehicle keeps an eye on the situation. If you see something Ragan doesn't see, call it out. I don't want an abbie tearing his head off," said Pope, pretending to be concerned about the gunner.

A digitized voiced squawked through the radio set attached to the dashboard.

"Get them moving, Mr. Pope," said Pilcher. "The future of Wayward Pines is in your hands."

Pope grabbed the black radio handset labeled *Operations*. “Solid copy, Mr. Pilcher. The security vehicles are in position.”

With his other hand, he swiped the handset labeled *Tactical* and issued his orders. Within moments, a behemoth yellow machine appeared in the hatch, belching dark clouds of diesel exhaust into the pristine air. Called a “feller-buncher,” it was one of three similar vehicles that would clear the forest ahead of the forestry mulchers. The fence-building machinery would emerge later, when the path to the proposed line had been cleared. Black expected to be at the fence site in two days. Pope had his doubts.

Two of the feller-bunchers rumbled on their tracks to the southern edge of the clearing and waited for the equally massive mulchers to line up behind them. The third feller-buncher backed into a holding position on the other side of the ramp, where it would serve as a backup in case of an equipment failure. Pilcher was serious about maintaining the schedule. He wanted a quarter of a mile cleared per day, minimum, which was a tall order given the thick forest surrounding them.

Lined up side by side, the feller-bunchers would open the road. Each machine carried a hydraulic tree-grabbing device—furnished with an integral chainsaw. Attached to an articulated, overhead crane, the device grasped the base of the tree and cut the trunk low to the ground. With the tree firmly clamped, the operator swung the crane arm outward and dropped the tree out of the way. The bright green forestry mulchers performed exactly as advertised, pushing their steel-teeth-equipped, rotary drums along the forest floor, shredding anything in their path—massive tree trunks included.

The process would be slow and noisy, a dangerous combination in this forest. Even with most of the abbies located far out of acoustic or seismic detection range, Pope preferred to keep the vehicle hatch shut. Most of the tracking devices had exceeded their seventy-two-hour battery limit, leaving them exposed to a surprise attack. To make matters worse, not all of the abbies had taken the bait and left the valley. They would undoubtedly be attacked.

“Pope, this is Black. All equipment is in position. We’re ready to start cutting.”

“Roger. Proceed,” he said, pausing for a second. “All security vehicles take station behind the mulchers.”

His driver gunned the engine, speeding them past two MTVRs, which carried the bulk of Marcus’s security team. Marcus was in one of the armored transports, which resembled a squat, green dump truck. Pope had joked about Marcus driving around in a trash dumpster, but on closer examination, the thing looked a shit-ton more secure than his Humvee.

High off the ground, with thick, treaded tires, the MTVR looked like a tank compared to his vehicle. No wonder Marcus had insisted on riding with his team. He was snug as a bug in that thing. At least Black was in the same boat. He’d chosen one of the Humvee’s for better maneuverability—whatever good that would do him. Black anticipated occasionally squeezing through the trees to survey the forest ahead of them. That sounded like a recipe for getting stranded to Pope. No thanks. Especially out here. He checked his door again, making sure it was locked. He’d seen those things yanking on the door handles in a few of the surveillance feeds. Fuck that.

Ten uneventful minutes later, they had advanced twenty-one feet according to Black’s less than enthusiastic report. Pope felt like he was sitting in the world’s slowest traffic jam. The feller-bunchers pressed forward methodically, their cranes swinging back and forth, stuffing whole pine trees through the line of forest next to the thirty-foot-wide path. Every ten feet or so, the two forestry mulchers lumbered ahead, showering the ground ahead of them with wood chips.

Thirty minutes into the operation, Pope wanted to scream. He couldn’t believe he was sitting out here with nothing to do but stare out of the windows. There was absolutely no reason for him to be here. Nothing to coordinate. No decisions to make. Marcus and Black had it covered. Shit. He could repeat Pilcher’s orders over the tactical net from Operations. That was all he had done

so far.

Why the hell did Pilcher want him out here? The answer hit him before he finished the thought. Pam. That sneaky bitch must have convinced Pilcher that he needed to be in the field so she could undermine his role as sheriff. He'd fix the situation. Tomorrow, he'd be sitting in operations with a hot cup of coffee, watching the same scene through a monitor. Until then—he'd make the best of his time out here.

"Wake me up if anything happens or anyone calls," said Pope, trying to get comfortable in his seat.

"Copy that," said the driver.

He started to drift off, the growl of the Humvee's diesel engine lulling him asleep.

"Jesus! Did you see that?" someone yelled over the tactical net, followed by a prodding hand against his shoulder.

"Pope, we got a problem. Something jumped onto that mulcher," said the driver, pointing at the leftmost machine.

"What? Fuck!" he said, grabbing the handset. "Marcus, what's going on out there?"

"Stand by. We're assessing the situation."

A pale grey creature darted out of the forest and sprang like a cat onto the side of the mulcher's cabin, pounding at the steel cage.

"Ragan, get down and close the hatch!" he yelled, turning in his seat and grabbing the gunner's leg.

"Engaging!" replied the gunner, followed by a short burst of automatic fire.

Hot brass dropped through the open hatch onto his arm, singeing his jacket and forcing him to let go. He peered through the windshield in time to see the abby hit the ground. A second burst from Ragan's machine gun stitched across the creature's back, spraying the wood chips with blood.

"Pope, this is Marcus. We still have one abby on the front of that mulcher. None of my gunners have a shot. I'm heading outside to clear it," he heard over

the radio.

“Uhhh, right. All security units will cover you. Good luck,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

The rear compartment door to one of the MTVRs opened, disgorging two men in full tactical gear. They ran in a staggered formation between the two mulchers and fired quick bursts at an unseen threat.

“Target neutralized. Heading back,” said Marcus.

He watched them sprint to the armored vehicle, expecting abbies to swarm them at any moment, but they arrived safely and disappeared inside the truck. Cheers sounded over the tactical net, making Pope feel like an ass for trying to pull Ragan down from the turret.

He needed to be more like Marcus if he hoped to garner any real respect around here. He had no immediate plans to jump out of his armored haven, but he’d have to abandon his obsession with closing the turret hatch—and his dream of sitting this one out in Operations.

Chapter 46

Pam stomped up the stairwell, infuriated by the interruption to her cross-fit routine. What the fuck was wrong with these men? Pilcher's recruitment team should have screened them better for signs of chicken-shit syndrome. She'd never seen anything like it. The first sign of trouble out there, and they all scampered inside with post-traumatic stress disorder or some bullshit excuse why they couldn't go back out. She kicked open the door to the fourth floor and stormed toward Tim Barry's residence.

She had no tolerance for this kind of shit. Nobody had ever heard her grumble about hardship. A string of abusive foster homes and two years on the mean streets of Chicago had taught her everything she needed to know about complaining. Lesson one: Nobody cared. Lesson two: Complaining got you nowhere. Lesson three: See lesson one. She intended to distill these lessons in Mr. Barry with a short, hopefully violent session in his dorm room.

Pilcher had authorized her to use any and all methods to convince the heavy machinery operator to return to duty, including the *unthinkable*. Pam shuddered at the thought of it. She'd rather beat this man to death and learn how to operate the machine than turn another trick for Pilcher. One time was the limit for the man who gave her a second chance.

Pam arrived at room 438 and stood in front of the door, gathering her composure. After several deep breaths, she swiped her key card and opened the door after the lock disengaged.

"Hey! You can't do that. This is private!" yelled a broad-shouldered, dark-haired man in grey coveralls.

Pam pulled the door shut. “What the fuck is going on, Mr. Barry? We’re ten minutes from showtime, and I get a call that you never showed up? You need to get your ass down to your machine.”

“No way. We were told the valley was clear of those things. Bullshit. They’re all over the place,” said Barry.

“You’re in a steel cage! They can’t break in,” she said, pointing to the door. “Man up and get out there before Pilcher throws a fit.”

“They broke the goddamn glass on Harry’s rig. How the fuck did they break the glass?”

“So what if they broke the glass? They can’t get through the steel bars. What part of that are you having trouble understanding,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

“I don’t see your ass out there,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

Tim took a step forward and pushed out his chest. “I said, I don’t see your ass out there. Must be nice sitting in here all day.”

Pam’s eye twitched. “Mr. Pilcher ordered me to remain in the superstructure. I follow orders. I suggest you do the same and get to your station.”

“I wonder what you did to win the *do nothing* lottery?” he said, muttering something else under his breath.

“What did you just say?” she said, feeling the urge to pound Tim Barry’s head into the desk until his useless brains spilled onto the linoleum.

“Nothing,” he said, smirking—with a faint look of fear hidden behind the grin.

She heard the word “suck,” and that’s all she needed to hear to understand exactly where she stood in his estimation. Time to make an attitude adjustment. Without warning, she crossed the room and punched him in the solar plexus before he could raise a hand. He stood there with a dumb look on his face, unable to draw a breath. She wanted to do so much more to him, but Pilcher insisted that he be able to operate his machine when she was finished. Barry

staggered forward a few moments later, feebly swinging one of his arms at her head. She grabbed the arm and twisted it behind his back, applying pressure to the elbow joint.

“You and I are going to take a walk. Nod if you understand.”

He tried to shake free, but she placed her left forearm under his neck and pressed the elbow even further. Barry nodded.

“If you won’t do your duty, then you can’t be part of the team. We’ll put you in a holding cell until you change your mind.”

Barry squeezed a few raspy words out of his mouth. “Better than out there.”

“We’ll see,” she said and ushered him to a private service elevator.

They emerged on the first floor, across from the laboratories.

“Over there,” she said, pushing him to a door with a darkened window.

“You’re really going to put me in a jail cell?” He coughed.

“Unless you’re willing to turn around and take one of the jeeps down to the hatch,” she said, pushing him against the door.

“People are going to hear about this. They won’t like it,” he said.

She spun him around and considered kneeing him in the groin. Instead, she backed off and shook her head. “You better hope not, because anybody worth a shit around here has done their time outside. I don’t see anyone taking your side—especially the guys that will be pulling back-to-back shifts while you sit in a jail cell. What’ll it be?”

“I’m not going back out there until the valley is clear,” he said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. I don’t give a shit,” she said, swiping the key card over the reader next to the door.

The door hissed, its internal mechanisms clacking.

“Get inside,” she said.

He looked at the dark window. “No lights?”

“You afraid of the dark too? I’ll turn the lights on when the door is secure. If you change your mind, dial 773 on the intercom system and ask Operations to contact me.”

Barry opened the door and stepped slowly into the darkness. Once the door mechanisms locked into place, she activated the lights. The room was stark white and featureless—except for the grey monster huddled in the far right corner. The equipment operator froze. She imagined he was weighing his options. Run and pound on the door or stay perfectly still and hope the abby didn't see him. If only she could see his face right now. It had to be the perfect combination of terror and resignation—her favorite look. What's it going to be, Tim? Run or piss your pants where you stand?

The abby charged out of the corner, clearing the distance to Barry in a fraction of a second. The man stumbled backward, crashing to the floor as the abby slammed into the clear, shatterproof barrier several feet in front of him. The thing shrieked loud enough to be heard in the hallway, spurring Barry to his feet. The equipment driver's desperate face filled the glass viewport, followed by the sounds of rapid pounding on the metal door. Pam pressed a button on the flat, digital panel above the key-card reader.

"Let me know if you get lonely," she said over his screams.

"All right! All right! I'll go back to work. Get me out of here!" he said, looking over his shoulder.

The abby punched the glass behind him, visibly shaking the barrier. "What the fuck is wrong with you! I told you. I'll go back to work!"

"He doesn't believe you," she said, wondering what it would be like to see him torn to shreds.

"What? Who doesn't believe me? Pilcher? Tell him I won't fuck up again. I promise!" he said, hitting the door repeatedly.

"No. He doesn't believe you," she said, staring at the abby.

"Pam. Pam. Whatever you're thinking, it's not a good idea. The team needs me. Mr. Pilcher said so. He wants me back out there. That's where I'll go. Why don't you open the door and let's call it good. All right?"

"I don't think he's buying it. I think you need to explain it in person," she said.

“No! Pam! Please! Don’t open the barrier. Don’t do that! Look, I’m sorry about what I said to you. I was pissed. I wasn’t thinking clearly. Please, Pam. You’ve proven your point. I’m sorry.”

The door clicked, and she yanked it open, spilling Barry into the hallway. She braced him against the opposite wall, forearm against his neck.

“You pull this shit again, and I promise you a face-to-face meeting with that thing. You understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, without hesitation.

She stepped back and crossed her arms, letting him catch his breath.

“And Tim?” she said, glaring at him. “If you ever say something like that again, to me or anyone else, I’ll kill you. Are we clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, with a complete look of obedience—her second favorite look.

Chapter 47

Pilcher stepped into the Operations conference room, immediately taken by the smell of diesel fumes and sweat. Marcus, Pope and Black had reported directly from the warehouse after securing their respective teams for the evening. They looked exhausted, the products of a day spent cramped into a small space—anticipating the worst. The chairs started to squeak as the group, including Pope, made the motions to stand.

“Gentlemen, please. Stay seated. It’s been a long day. I know none of you have eaten, so I won’t keep you long,” he said, taking his seat at the head of the table.

He stared at them for a moment, searching their faces for signs of contempt or resignation. Anything that might indicate a problem. That’s why he assembled them before they could eat and shed the day’s filth. Before they could reset their emotions.

“So, it sounds like we’ve made incredible progress. We’re a few hours from clearing the western anchor site?” he said, looking at Elliot Black.

“Correct, sir. Two to three hours max to work the areas next to the cliff. It’s difficult terrain due to the boulders and incline. We’ll have to use one of the crane-lifted mulcher heads to grind the stumps…the bigger mulchers can’t maneuver there. I might have to deploy some ground teams to chainsaw several trees close to the rocks. We’ll need some serious protection for that.”

“We can handle it,” said Marcus. “Attacks have been persistent, but light. The vehicle-mounted two-forties can handle most of the action. I’ll add some snipers and personal escorts for any teams you put on the ground.”

“Sounds good,” said Black.

“Perfect,” added Pilcher. “Two days and zero casualties. I want to carry this trend through the completion of the fence. Pope, have you and Marcus decided when to deploy the sensor array?”

Pope shifted in his seat and stifled a yawn. “The teams will deploy and test a four-hundred-yard stretch of sensors at first light tomorrow. This will give us motion detection capability for the first few days of construction. We’ll assess the effectiveness of the sensors and weigh that against the risk of sending teams deeper east.”

“Ideally, we would have a sensor array stretching from one side of the valley to the other, but I understand the restrictions. How far away from the construction line will you plant the sensors?”

Marcus answered for Pope, which didn’t seem to bother the disinterested sheriff at all.

“One hundred and fifty yards. At thirty miles per hour, it will take a frenzied abby about ten seconds to reach the construction line. That gives us enough time to move exposed personnel into an armored vehicle. At least one MTVR will be in close proximity to the ground crew at all times.”

“Define close proximity again,” said Black.

Marcus smiled. “As close as we can park one of those things without running over any of your people. I’ll provide small teams to accompany your folks—to help them *react.*”

“Ten seconds goes pretty damn fast,” said the engineer.

“The guns will buy us more time,” said Marcus, earning a skeptical nod from Black.

“I have no doubt Mr. Marcus will take good care of your crew,” said Pilcher. “Have you assessed the possibility of energizing completed sections of the fence—to keep the abbies from slipping in behind us?”

“We can’t energize during construction. It’s too risky for the crews. I suggest added sniper support to keep the abbies off the fence,” said Black.

“Very well. Mr. Upshaw will coordinate this with Mustin’s overwatch team,” said Pilcher.

“Right away, sir,” answered Upshaw.

Pilcher nodded at the group and stood up. “I won’t hold you any longer. Stay focused tomorrow. We have a mile of fence to construct. Based on the past two days’ progress, I expect us to clear an eighth of a mile per day. Eight days from tomorrow, I want to energize that fence. Focus. Right, Sheriff?” he said, purposely drawing attention to Pope.

Pope jerked his head in Pilcher’s direction and nodded, clearly drawn away from something far more interesting. Had he underestimated Pope’s stamina for this project? It seemed like the perfect job for him. Little decision-making responsibility in a cushy, respected position of authority.

He was in the field with the “troops,” a concept he’d need to embrace when the first wave of citizens were placed in Wayward Pines. Pope would be one of the few superstructure people living in the town. Putting him in overall command of the operations seemed like a logical choice, but Pope acted like he wasn’t interested. Pilcher had no doubt he would serve the town well as sheriff, but wondered if the best post for Arnold might be a suspension pod—until he was truly needed. *Too late for that*.

“All right. Thank you for another successful day. I’ll see everyone in the morning,” he said.

“Mr. Pilcher?” said Upshaw, above the din of sliding chairs and small talk.

He waited for the group to disappear through the door and approached Upshaw.

“Yes?”

Upshaw glanced furtively at the door and whispered, “I didn’t mention this earlier, more or less writing it off to expected equipment failure—but I just hit a string of two back-to-back explosives failures. One charge at miles eleven and twelve.”

“You’re sure?” said Pilcher, examining the screen beyond Upshaw.

“Mustin’s spotters didn’t see either explosion. They’ve seen every other explosion, day and night. Especially at night. They’re impossible to miss using thermal imaging gear.”

“How many have failed?”

“Five.”

“Five?” said Pilcher. “And the transceivers?”

“Transmitting full signals as far as we could tell,” said Upshaw.

Pilcher considered the implications of Upshaw’s report. It wasn’t entirely impossible for five pieces of sensitive electronics gear to fail after sitting in storage for nearly two millennia, even under near perfect preservation conditions. Still, something didn’t feel right.

“Are all five from the outer field?” said Pilcher.

Upshaw nodded.

“Hassler?” stated Pilcher, seeing the doubt planted on Upshaw’s face.

“I don’t see how, but we need to consider the possibility,” said Upshaw.

“Damn it! How could he have survived?” said Pilcher, wincing at his own volume.

Upshaw shook his head. “I doubt he survived the blast, but maybe he stole some of the C4. Hassler is a crafty guy. He might have taken it as an insurance policy against—anyway.”

“Well, we can’t have any surprises. We’ll have to rig the ultralight with one of the microchip signal repeaters. Rig a car battery to it—whatever it takes to transmit a signal back to us. Use it to sweep the valley.”

Upshaw squinted, deep in thought, before nodding slowly. “The repeaters are wireless. If they can fix one to the ultralight, we could theoretically double the detection range and pick up a signal seven to eight miles away.”

“That’s all we need. I’ll make the arrangements to get one of the pilots airborne tomorrow,” said Pilcher, pausing for a moment. “It goes without saying, Ted, that you don’t speak with anyone about this. Just me.”

“Of course, Mr. Pilcher. You can count on me,” said Upshaw.

Pilcher nodded. *I sure as hell hope so.*

Chapter 48

The incessant buzzing sound returned, drawing Hassler's attention to the mouth of the tight hollow. He'd found the rocky enclosure while seeking higher ground well outside of regular abby traffic patterns. Most of the abbies ranged the central valley in small packs, so Hassler kept to the eastern slopes, until the distance between the looming east and west rock faces pushed him closer to the screeches. He needed a place to rest and tend to his wounds—possibly make a fire and sleep outside of a tree harness. Most of all, he craved a break from the constant, three-hundred-and-sixty-degree paranoia. Putting a rock wall or two around him had sounded like heaven. Actually closing his eyes and resting against a flat, angled rock felt even better—if that was possible.

The noise grew louder until a shadow passed overhead, and the sound started to fade. One of Pilcher's drones? Shit. If Pilcher managed to ready one of his drones, he'd have to keep the camouflaged thermal blanket on him at all times to mask his heat signature. He was worried enough about Mustin's snipers. Even during the day, a thermal imaging scope could pick out a target invisible to the human eye. Mustin's rifles had the range to reach out and touch him on the other side of the valley, though he doubted very much any of them had the skill to match.

Regardless, he feared detection more than death. If Pilcher discovered that he was alive and well, moving closer to Wayward Pines, his plan for revenge stood little chance of success. For Hassler, the possibility of destroying Pilcher's life's work was all that sustained him. He held on to the thought of Theresa, but that dream faded a little more each day. He couldn't envision a scenario resurrecting

that dream. It was as good as dead to him.

Hassler took a deep breath and pushed off the boulder, resigned to seeing what Pilcher had launched into the early morning sky. He pulled the thermal blanket over him and grabbed his rifle. Crouching low when he reached the opening, he leaned between two sharp granite chunks and slowly raised his head —keenly aware that he would be exposed to the western bluff. Nothing felt more counterintuitive than purposely exposing your head to a known sniper threat.

The fog had lifted early, leaving a partially cloudy sky over the valley. From his position roughly thirty feet above the tree line, he had a clear view of the valley in every direction. To the northwest, a narrow band of trees had disappeared against the backdrop of the towering cliffs, presumably the path cut from the hatch to the proposed fence site. Hassler planned to keep a close eye on their progress, moving closer as they neared completion. He had a vague plan in mind, which would crystallize as the time arrived.

Scanning south, he quickly spotted the source of his morning wake-up. A grey ultralight circled several hundred feet above the trees. Hassler removed the caps from a small spotting scope and tracked the glider. The pilot sat in the rig, searching the ground with binoculars, which gave him the impression that the ultralight had been launched for general surveillance. The glider carried more than the pilot, but at this range, he couldn’t identify the package attached to its underside. Fuel bladder? He had no idea.

No longer interested in the glider, Hassler shifted positions, ducking behind one of the rocks and peering around its side. He trained the handheld scope on the band of missing trees, and followed it south to the edge of Pilcher’s deforestation efforts. In the wide field of vision, the top of a pine tree shook, suddenly sliding laterally and disappearing into the sea of dark green outside of the band. He watched one tree after another do a similar dance, amused by how little forward progress the effort commanded. No wonder it had taken them two days to move less than half a mile.

Hassler grimaced, rubbing his eyes. At this rate he would run out of food long

before they reached his side of the valley. He'd packed enough to sparsely ration over eight days. The load out ensured he could hike back to the hatch if the recovery plan fell through. Little did he know that a recovery plan never existed in the first place.

He'd hang out in the rocks for another day, assessing the situation. If building a low-intensity fire proved to be a possibility deep in the recesses of the hollow, he might descend into the forest to hunt for small game and place some snares. A faint buzzing echoed off the rocks. Hassler moved to the other side of the boulder and searched for the ultralight. He found it skimming the treetops, headed in his general direction.

Hassler grabbed his rifle and started mentally calculating the lead required to hit a fast-moving target at multiple ranges. He'd replaced the ACOG sight on his rifle with a Leopold Mark 4 scope that he was itching to use.

Chapter 49

Upshaw stared at the screen in disbelief. *M/C#214-Hassler, David T.* sat motionless on the eastern side of the valley, deep in the trees.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, dialing Pilcher’s residence through the computer.

“I’m in the middle of breakfast, Ted. Can this wait?”

“Negative, sir. I have a confirmed location for Hassler’s microchip,” said Upshaw.

“Where?”

“About four hundred yards from the eastern side of the valley, approximately three miles out.”

“Any movement?”

“Negative.”

“I’ll be right down. Make sure the ultralight stays on top of that signal,” said Pilcher.

“I have him circling above.”

A few minutes later, Pilcher entered and locked the door behind him.

“Where is he?”

Upshaw hooked Hassler’s microchip icon, zooming in over the sector of forest surrounding the signal.

“Right there.”

“Damn it, I wish there was a way to finish him off. He’s keeping his distance—probably waiting to sabotage the machinery. So much for leaving the equipment on station overnight. Now we’ll have to bring everything back to the

hatch and post a twenty-four-hour guard. Moving the equipment back and forth will cut into the workday," said Pilcher, pounding his fists on the computer station.

"There's not much we can do, sir. It's too far to send an armed team. They'd have to proceed on foot or ATV," said Upshaw.

"Patch me through to the pilot—on an unmonitored frequency," said Pilcher.

"Hold on," he said, activating the pilot's primary channel. "Recon One, this is Operations. Bump to your emergency frequency."

"Copy," said the pilot, over considerable noise from the ultralight engine.

"Do you want this on speaker or a headset, sir?" said Upshaw.

Pilcher glanced at the door. "Headset. Nobody else can monitor this?"

"The hangar has the primary channel, but I set the emergency frequency once the ultralight was airborne. All the pilot does is press the red distress button and his radio does the rest. Nobody knows the frequency, including the pilot."

"Perfect," said Pilcher, accepting Upshaw's wireless headset.

"Recon One, this is David Pilcher. What I'm about to tell you cannot be repeated, ever. Do you understand?"

Upshaw couldn't hear the pilot's response, which suited him fine. He wished he could leave the room entirely. Pilcher's betrayal made him sick.

"The surveillance equipment detected a microchip from the superstructure. Mr. Hassler's. We strongly suspect he faked his own death a few days ago, for reasons still unknown to us. We also suspect that he retained several pounds of explosives, which poses a serious threat to our construction efforts."

Pilcher stopped and listened to the pilot's response before continuing.

"I understand your options are limited, but I need you to try. You have two high-explosive grenades in your kit, along with an M4 carbine. I'm not asking you to land. I just need you to deliver that ordnance. Even if you don't manage to hit the target, the noise should attract some deadly attention to Mr. Hassler's position."

Another pause.

“Yes. I am authorizing you to use lethal force against Mr. Hassler. The sooner the better. Mr. Upshaw’s calculations indicate you need to turn back in seven minutes.”

“Five minutes. He’ll burn more fuel climbing out of the valley,” interrupted Upshaw.

“I’m now being told five minutes by Operations. I’ll turn you over to Mr. Upshaw so he can guide you directly over the target. Good luck,” said Pilcher, handing over the headset. “Mr. Upshaw.”

Wonderful. He got to kill Hassler twice. Watching the pilot’s microchip transmission on the digital map display, Upshaw directed the pilot directly over Hassler’s signal.

“Negative visual on the target. The forest canopy is too thick. Recommend follow-on run, using grenades. I think that’s the best I can do up here,” said the pilot.

“Roger. Make a wide circle, and I’ll guide you over the mark,” he said, turning to Pilcher. “He’s going to drop the grenades. The trees are too thick to make a positive ID.”

“Can he get any closer?” said Pilcher.

Upshaw deactivated the voice-activated transmit button. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, sir. Hassler’s armed with a rifle.”

“Just get him as close as possible. The tree canopy works both ways,” hissed Pilcher.

“Recon One, steady on course two-two-five and stand by for minor course adjustments. Request you decrease altitude for the grenade drop.”

“Any lower and my wheels will start scraping,” said the pilot.

“Understood, but we need to get some kind of verification. Decrease to treetop level,” said Pilcher.

“Roger. Steady on two-two-five. Descending.”

He glanced at Pilcher, who smiled and nodded in return. Smug bastard.

“Turn left and maintain two-two-zero. Thirteen seconds until drop,” said

Upshaw.

“Copy. Readying grenade. What is the time on the fuse?” said the pilot.

Upshaw turned to Pilcher and mouthed, “I have no idea.”

“Didn’t everyone train how to use these?” said Pilcher.

He shrugged and turned back to the screen. Five seconds out.

“Just pull the pin and throw it. Three seconds. Two—”

“Motherfucker!” the pilot yelled over the radio. “Mayday. May—”

The transmission cut off. He studied the screen, noting that the pilot’s microchip had stopped tracking across the screen. An alert on his screen indicated the detection of a sharp acoustic signature along the same bearing as the ultralight’s last known position. *Grenade malfunction?*

“Shit,” he muttered, turning to Pilcher. “The pilot passed ‘Mayday’ before his signal stopped.”

Pilcher pointed at the screen. “Looks like he’s fine.”

Upshaw stared quizzically at the map for a second. “I could have sworn that his signal read zero miles per hour—that’s not the pilot’s microchip.”

“Well, it can’t be Hassler,” said Pilcher.

The vector tag attached to *M/C#214-Hassler, David T.* read “22.1/35.5 MPH/KPH; Heading 348.”

“No,” said Upshaw. “It has to be an abby.”

“Well, at least we know Hassler is no longer a threat,” stated Pilcher.

Upshaw resisted the urge to shake his head at Pilcher’s statement. Underneath the thin façade of a warm and caring leader, humanity’s shepherd was a cold, calculating sociopath. There was no point to pissing him off, even in the slightest degree. If Upshaw’s perceived value ever plummeted, keeping himself in good standing with Pilcher could spell the difference between a life of misery or melancholy. Shades of grey inside the superstructure, but distinct shades nonetheless. He’d play along—for now.

“That’s a fair assumption, sir,” said Upshaw, interrupted by Mustin’s voice over one of the radio speakers.

“Operations, this is Overwatch. Recon One crashed into the trees, followed by an explosion. He was there one second—gone the next. No sign of wreckage in the trees.”

“Copy all. We lost communications with Recon One a few seconds ago,” said Upshaw.

Mustin responded immediately. “We’ll keep an eye out for a distress flare. Is there any possibility of a rescue mission—since this is one of the helicopter pilots?”

Pilcher quickly shook his head, staying silent in the background.

“Not at this time. Too many hostiles in the area to risk sending ATVs or ground teams,” said Upshaw, who received an approving nod from Pilcher.

The gesture validated Upshaw’s assessment of the man’s pathological pragmatism. They still had two pilots capable of flying the helicopter, and a third in suspension. Ethan Burke. Given what he had just witnessed, Upshaw was slightly relieved to be the only member of the IT group with a working knowledge of the surveillance equipment purchased long after the rest of his team had gone into suspension. Job security.

Chapter 50

Marcus walked carefully through the dense forest, taking small steps and peering over his rifle sight. He raised his right hand and closed his fist, ordering the security team to halt. He kneeled between two pine trunks and listened, only hearing the high-pitched buzz of an electric drill over the gently rustling branches. All good.

The three-person team tasked with placing the motion sensors had begun their work. Selecting a sturdy, immovable tree roughly thirty feet from the last sensor, they affixed one of the sensor mounts to its trunk and attached the sensor. Capable of detecting movement along a seventy-five-foot front, out to a distance of one hundred feet, the sensor behind him represented one of seventy-two devices they would place on the southern side of the construction zone.

He was skeptical about completing the task in a single day—as requested. Each stop required Marcus to redeploy his security team in a two-hundred-and-seventy-degree arc around the team of technicians deploying the sensor. Even if they managed to set one sensor every fifteen minutes, the job would exhaust all available daylight, sending them far from the safety of their armored vehicles.

They tried to push one of the Humvees into the forest, but quickly scrapped the idea. The driver managed to maneuver the wide-bodied truck halfway to the sensor deployment point before reaching an impasse. Backing the vehicle out of the tight stand of trees took twice as long, sealing Marcus’s decision. They would have to rely on ATVs to carry the team. Hardly an ideal security situation when your adversary was faster and more mobile than your primary mode of transportation. At the first sign of trouble, Marcus planned an immediate retreat.

They could handle a few abbies—a few dozen was an entirely different situation.

The security team consisted of five officers. Four equipped with suppressed assault rifles, one armed with the team's heavy firepower—a bipod-fitted, M240 machine gun. Marcus would only employ the "two-forty" as a last resort against a numerically superior group of abbies. Unsuppressed, the two-forty would attract every creature in the upper valley. Four tandem-ride ATVs sat a few feet away from the technicians, ready to ferry them back to the construction site.

Crick. Marcus squinted, staring at a fixed point deep in the trees directly ahead of him.

"Possible contact. Twelve o'clock," he whispered into his headset.

Another snap drew his attention to the right. A shadow moved through the trees—followed by a second.

"Two hostiles moving left to right across my twelve. Engage with suppressed weapons," said Marcus.

"I see them," replied one of the officers.

Marcus noticed that the mechanical screwdriver had stopped, the technicians no doubt sitting on the ATVs, waiting to be dragged away to safety. He took his eyes off the movement and continued scanning. A second group moved right to left. One of the officers on his left flank caught the activity.

"I have a group approaching on our ten. Moving pretty—fuck—engaging!"

The whump, whump of subsonic bullets peppered the air, instantly answered by inhuman screeches. A pale mass of muscle and sinew burst through the trees in front of Marcus, dodging the trunks between them. The erratic movement hampered his aim, many of his bullets splintering trees or sailing harmlessly past the creature. Instinctively, Marcus shifted to a nearby pine, keeping his holographic sight centered on the creature's line of approach. His .308 bullets started to connect several feet out, knocking the abby off balance. The beast hit the tree with a sickening crunch, sliding motionless to the ground next to him while he reloaded.

"Marcus, I have more movement out there," he heard.

“Copy. Load up the ATVs and head back to the construction site,” he said. “I’ll bring up the rear with Dana. Move! Wagner, we’re coming in hot. Make sure your gunners identify their targets.”

“I just moved my picket line into the trees. Don’t run them over,” said Wagner.

Marcus reached his ATV and slapped Dana on the shoulder before climbing into the passenger seat.

“Get us out of here!” he said, as the rest of the 4X4 ATVs sped away.

He twisted in the seat, pushing his rifle’s vertical fore grip into the top of the seat. Two abbies raced toward them from different directions, forcing Marcus to make a split-second decision. He centered the green reticle on the creature loping toward Dana’s side and rapidly pressed the trigger. When a bright red spray covered one of the trees next to the abby, he turned his attention to the monster approaching the ATV from the rear passenger side.

Before he could move the rifle, a taloned hand swept through the air, tearing the headrest from the seat. The abby leapt onto the back of the ATV, simultaneously slashing with the other claw. A warm splash of blood hit his face, followed by a distinctly human cry. Marcus drew the semiautomatic pistol from the holster attached to his chest rig and fired without extending his hand. Bullets tore through the abby as it drew its arm back for a razor-sharp swing likely to decapitate one of them. Before it could lash out at either of them, the .45 slugs pushed the monster off the careening vehicle, dropping it into the forest behind them.

He turned in his seat moments before the ATV struck a short section of rotting log, burying the fifteen-hundred-pound vehicle’s nose and catapulting them out of the front seats. Marcus was thrown clear of the wreck, piling through a rough patch of low-lying evergreen bushes.

His first reaction was to raise his rifle in the perceived direction of the abby threat. Disoriented and lying supine, he wasn’t sure which way to aim, so he covered a wide field of fire, expecting one of the creatures to leap over the

bushes at any second. When nothing immediately materialized, he turned over and crawled to the closest tree, sliding behind it. A quick body scan told him nothing was broken. He wouldn't know for sure until he got out of the forest. If he got out of the forest.

"Dana, you there?" he whispered, realizing his headset was missing.

Shit. He didn't want to call out with those things swarming around. If they stayed quiet, the next wave of abbies might miss them and go straight for the rest of the ATVs—like lambs to the slaughter. He rose to a crouch and searched for Dana.

The forest was still, except for the buzzing sounds of the ATVs. He didn't like it. The abbies had demonstrated an unsettling amount of patience compared to earlier days. They still chased larger sounds, at least most of them did, but showed a deviously intelligent approach to smaller groups of humans. Attacks against the heavy machinery and the security vehicles had slowed to a trickle, but the few attacks perpetrated had been incredibly opportunistic. Marcus didn't buy Pilcher's speech about their intelligence. Not after what he had seen.

Something moved in the bushes near the ATV, causing him to raise his rifle and apply pressure to the trigger. A low moaning sound followed.

"Dana?" he hissed.

A bloody thumb rose over the scrub. He crawled to Dana, finding her prone behind a partially buried boulder, her right shinbone protruding through her camouflage trousers. She swept the threat axis with her rifle, seemingly oblivious to the injury.

"I think that was all of them," she said, without looking back.

"Don't count on it. Do you have the rest of the team on your headset?"

"Yeah. I passed our status. They're loading the ATVs with more security. Should be here in a minute or two."

"Tell them to bring a stretcher. You're not going anywhere on the back of an ATV," he said, kneeling next to her leg.

"How bad is it? I didn't want to look."

“Clean break. You’re going to miss all of the fun.”

“I can sit in one of the turrets with a cast,” she said.

“We’ll see,” he said, noticing the four-inch, bone-deep gash in her right shoulder.

We’ll see about this whole fucking plan.

Chapter 51

Pilcher clenched his fists. There would be no more delays. He took a deep breath and thought about how he would reply. He didn't want to come across as heartless, but the list of excuses was growing at an exponential rate. If they stopped construction every time an abby jumped out of the trees, they'd never finish the fence. They were testing what little patience he had brought from the year 2013.

"Marcus, I appreciate your concerns, but we can't hold up the construction effort for three days. The attacks are sporadic. You said it yourself. At this point, your team can handle a dozen abbies. I need you to continue placing the sensors."

"Mr. Pilcher, I agree we can handle a dozen, but any more than that becomes a serious problem—especially in the deep woods. We have a hard time maneuvering the ATVs, and there's a lot of wood between our bullets and their intended targets. I'm not saying we can't do this. Just that it's going to take a lot longer than one day, especially if you want us to protect the construction effort at the same time."

Pilcher wanted to slam his headphones down on the table and scream. What part of occupational hazard didn't these people understand! More deep breaths before responding. "Construction moves forward. What if we put two teams on the job? The teams could leapfrog each other."

Marcus responded in a hushed voice. "Like I said, sir, we're stretched pretty thin as it is at the fence site. I don't think Black's crew will respond well to a further reduction in security. Abby attacks are rare, but devilishly opportunistic.

We've had some really close calls."

"I wasn't talking about security personnel," stated Pilcher.

"Two teams of technicians?" said Marcus. "Mr. Pilcher, I can't guarantee their safety That's too big a perimeter for five security officers. And the deeper we go into the forest—the higher the stakes. A medium-sized pack could finish off the entire group. I don't think you want to risk most of our technicians."

"Dammit, Marcus! There has to be a way to keep the construction moving," he said.

"Sir, I don't see any other way. Give me two days and I'll have a full string of sensors spanning the valley. I'll need everyone on my team for that, including the vehicles."

"That leaves the construction crews unprotected," said Pilcher.

"They'll have to wait in the superstructure," said Marcus.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Two days? Make that three, or four, once the next "obstacle" surfaced. Hell, why not make it five days for good measure! No. Wayward Pines would march forward. He wasn't going to let a broken leg here or a *close call* there bring progress to a grinding halt. He'd take a different approach, but keep things moving all the same.

"Then we'll establish a sensor perimeter around the immediate work zone. Say seven hundred and fifty feet along the proposed line. That's roughly five hours of deforestation progress. We'll set more sensors as the day unfolds. Does this sound like a workable solution for your team?"

"As long as Mr. Black is onboard, I don't have a problem with your idea," said Marcus.

"Don't worry about Mr. Black. He'll be onboard," said Pilcher, disconnecting the circuit.

"Or I'll find someone who is to replace him, and you," he muttered, realizing he just spoke in front of Upshaw.

"You didn't hear that," said Pilcher.

Upshaw nodded, returning his attention to the display of icons representing

the movement of microchips outside of the superstructure. The senior technician would play an important role in Wayward Pines once the town was populated. Pilcher had decided to put him in charge of surveillance. Upshaw seemed to appreciate the importance of their undertaking and the occasional sacrifices required to preserve the greater good. More importantly, he appeared to understand the need to keep these things private. Two important characteristics required to run Wayward Pines's equivalent to the National Security Agency (NSA). With a little more grooming, Ted would be ready.

Chapter 52

He heard the whistles first.

“Multiple contacts! Southwest. Two hundred feet ahead of the construction line!” blared the dashboard speaker.

Pope fumbled with the lid to his thermos, dousing his lap with coffee before giving up and tossing the container into the foot well. He slammed his door shut and turned in his seat.

“Make sure your doors are—what the fuck?” he yelled at the empty seats—and open doors.

He glanced through the front passenger window, seeing both of the security officers sprinting diagonally away from the Humvee to join the team assigned to the tree line.

“Ragan, shut and lock the rear compartment doors,” he yelled through the turret hatch, extending his right hand to thumb the lock on his own door.

“Negative. I’m the only gun covering the northern trees.”

Pope put his hand on the door handle, hesitating to open it. He’d seen one too many close calls out here.

“Mr. Pope, you still have plenty of time to close the door and get back in the vehicle,” stated the driver.

He peered through the front window, watching members of Marcus’s team help the construction crew through the rear hatch of the nearest armored vehicle. Better now than later, when there were fewer dining options to choose. Pope hopped out of the vehicle, pushing the rear passenger door shut. He preferred to keep the doors locked, but knew that wouldn’t sit well with the returning

officers. Tensions ran high enough between Marcus's security team and "management." If one of them were killed pulling on a locked door handle, he'd have more than just the abbies to worry about.

When he reached the back of the Humvee, he froze. Staring at him from the edge of the forest, two abbies slowly bent their back legs, preparing to pounce.

"Ragan. Contact. Seven o'clock," he said, tightening his grip on the AK-47.

He fired from the hip, the rifle's selector switch on full automatic. His bullets exploded across woodchips, stitching a line of dark red holes up the first abby's torso. With his finger locked against the trigger, the rest of his thirty-round magazine emptied into pine branches above the mangled creature. The second abby charged, forcing Pope to scramble behind the Humvee.

Sprinting toward the open front door, he fumbled for the pistol in his drop holster, clawing at the nylon contraption with no success. A scream inside the Humvee froze him in place. The ballistic window next to him turned bright red, immediately followed by the sound of rapid gunfire inside the vehicle. Two more gunshots exploded inside the Humvee, spraying the armrest and window of his door with a thick, crimson jet. He yanked his pistol out of the holster, tearing one of the straps, and aimed it at the opening. Pope advanced slowly, his hands trembling.

"Ragan. Wallace!"

"All clear," replied Ragan through his headset. "Better get inside, Mr. Pope."

Gunfire from the nearest MTVR reinforced the driver's point. He jumped into the front passenger seat and pulled the door shut, taking a warm gush of blood across the right side of his face. When he turned to search for the source of the spray, he found himself staring into the lifeless eyes of an abby. Pope recoiled, lashing out with both hands at the creature.

"It's dead," said the driver, tapping the steering wheel with the barrel of a smoking-hot pistol. "Finally."

Pope couldn't tell if Wallace was injured. His arms and head were covered in blood and gore.

“You all right?” said Pope.

“I’m fine,” he said, sounding distant. “Somehow I’m fine.”

Over his headset, Marcus reported that the threat had been neutralized. Was he even aware of the sneak attack against Pope’s vehicle? Something hit the rear driver’s side door, casting a shadow through the crimson-stained window. The door flew open, and Pope jammed his pistol between the front seats, aiming at the opening.

“Jesus. Are you kidding me?” said a security officer, sticking his head through the door.

The door behind Pope swung open. “Motherfuh—what the hell happened?”

“Don’t ask. Just get this thing out of here.”

While one of the officers pulled the dead creature across the back seat, Pope examined his surroundings. Generous streaks of blood covered the dashboard and center console. The metal roof dripped like a moist cave, occasionally releasing a small lump of flesh. To top it all off, the compartment smelled like shit. Literally. And they still had five hours of daylight. He wiped the windshield in front of him with his sleeve, managing to make it worse. Wonderful.

After the rear doors slammed shut, Pope stuck his head between the seats.

“Can the two of you do me a big favor?” he said, continuing before they had a chance to respond.

“Please keep the fucking doors shut.”

Chapter 53

Pilcher cut into the flaky pastry layer surrounding the tenderized filet, marveling at Chef Tim's brilliance. He had found a way to cook the rehydrated steaks without saturating them in wine, butter or another flavor-masking ingredient. The thin pastry shell trapped the juices, keeping the ancient meat somewhat moist. He lifted the fork to his mouth, closing his eyes to picture better days. Tim's choice of simple seasonings delivered, and for several seconds, Pilcher imagined dinner with his wife and daughter. Both lost to him now. Better days indeed. He almost frowned when he opened his eyes. Pam blankly stared across the table.

"Pam, are you certain I can't interest you in lunch? Chef Tim has created a masterpiece with the supplies on hand. Beef en croûte. A little thinner than I prefer, but sacrifices were made to preserve the original taste," he said, feigning a smile.

"I'm fine with water, Mr. Pilcher," she replied, taking an obligatory sip of her mostly full glass.

"Suit yourself, young lady, but you don't know what you're missing. It'll be a few years before we can grow livestock from embryos. Fresh beef in its real form won't be on the menu for a long time."

She sat there, staring at him like a young child might observe an amusing puppet. This would have to be the last time he invited her to lunch. Life was too short to ruin something enjoyable like an exquisitely prepared French meat pastry. He thought the idea of a shared meal might surface the surrogate father-daughter bond they had developed during her early years under his tutelage, but

he hadn’t sensed any change to her cold façade. Oh well, he gave it a try. Pam was incapable of sharing affection, which came as no surprise. No point continuing to make things uncomfortable for either of them.

Pilcher was relieved. He preferred to operate on her level. Cold, detached, analytical—all traits he treasured in himself, knowing that none of this could have been achieved without strict adherence to the precise, pragmatic approach. Pam’s emotionless state was the result of a different set of circumstances, but the frequency was the same. He’d get their relationship back on track, on a different path. One he suspected she would enjoy.

Chef Tim appeared, holding a phone.

“Pardon the interruption, sir. You have an urgent call from Operations.”

“Urgent enough to interrupt lunch?” he said, without looking up from the table.

“They’ve had another attack, sir.”

“Another delay, I’m sure,” he muttered to Pam. “Tell Mr. Upshaw I’ll see him when I’m finished with lunch.”

“He’s really insistent, sir. Apparently one of the abbies got into Mr. Pope’s vehicle,” said Chef Tim.

Pam’s face flashed into a warped grin at the mention of Pope’s misfortune. She no doubt hoped he’d been torn to pieces. He felt ambivalent about the phone call. Part of him felt that the untimely loss of the sheriff might be better for him in the long run; the other part didn’t want to deal with finding another sheriff.

“Very well,” he said, accepting the phone. “What happened?”

“They had a perimeter breach. Nobody was injured, but one of the things actually climbed into Pope’s vehicle,” said Upshaw.

“While he was in it?” said Pilcher.

He tried not to imagine the sheer terror and panic induced coming face to face with one of those creatures in a cramped space.

“No. Apparently he was outside of the Humvee—firing at the abbies.”

“Really?” he said, quickly adding. “That doesn’t sound like him.”

“A small group managed to slip past the sensors on the northern side. Mr. Pope spotted them first and opened fire.”

“How did they get rid of the abby?” said Pilcher.

“They shot the thing a few dozen times inside the Humvee. I guess they had pieces of brain on the roof and blood everywhere. We had to run some cleaning supplies out so they could see through the windows,” said Upshaw.

“Thank you for the colorful description during my lunch,” said Pilcher.

“Sorry, sir. I just wanted to make you aware of the situation. Marcus says Mr. Pope prevented a serious disaster. They were still loading up the construction team when the abbies hit.”

“Then we’ll have to congratulate Pope on a job well done when he returns today,” said Pilcher, pausing. “And, Ted, can you make sure that Pope is assigned to a different vehicle. I had planned to spend a few hours in the field tomorrow, and Pope will be my escort. I’d rather not spend the day in a hastily cleaned charnel house.”

“Sir, I suggest you postpone any field visits until they work the bugs out of the security arrangement. They’ve had several close calls.”

Pilcher considered his warning. How an abby managed to get inside one of the vehicles stretched the limit of his imagination. Only sheer negligence made sense, unless Pope had been right about the turret hatches. He really hoped that wasn’t the case. Seeing Pope’s smug *I told you so* face would be intolerable.

“I promised the construction crew I would be there when they reached the halfway point. I intend to keep my promise.”

A long pause developed on the line.

“I suspect they won’t reach the halfway point tomorrow, sir. They haven’t reached the quarter-mile point. Black’s last report stated eleven hundred and sixty feet.”

“What? I thought they passed the thirteen-hundred-foot marker earlier this morning,” said Pilcher, squeezing his steak knife.

“Marcus’s team placed sensors out to thirteen hundred feet. He was a few

minutes from deploying the next string of sensors," said Upshaw.

"And now?"

"Marcus announced a one-hour delay while they let the area cool off. Pope agreed."

"I guess I'm not part of the decision-making process anymore. Very well. I'll be down in a few moments to speak with Pope," he said, hanging up the phone.

He placed the handset on the table and looked at Pam.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but the sheriff of Wayward Pines lives."

Her grin faded slightly.

"Sir, shall I put the final touches on dessert?" interrupted Chef Tim, appearing in the kitchen doorway.

"I'm afraid I've lost my appetite," said Pilcher.

"Anything for you, Pam?"

She shook her head. *Of course not.*

Chapter 54

Marcus sat quietly behind Pope in the Humvee, listening to him regale Mr. Pilcher with tales of bravery and quick decision-making—more like cowardice and hesitation. He'd coaxed the real story out of the driver. Granted, Pope's first foray out of the vehicle had been fortuitous. Letting his compulsive drive for self-preservation momentarily override his fear, Pope put himself in a position to prevent a morale-crushing event: the slaughter of one or more members of the fence-construction crew.

Call it luck. Pretend it was bravery. Marcus didn't care. The attack appeared to have a "come to Jesus" effect on Pope, tempering his support for Pilcher's ruthless timeline. With some of the downward pressure relieved, the entire construction proceeded at a safe and efficient pace. The occasional attacks continued, but they hadn't experienced a close call in more than thirteen hours of construction—an all-time record.

The Humvee approached a tall, metal pole protruding from the middle of the woodchip-covered road.

"Up ahead you can see the post Marcus's team added to the sensor array after the attack. We think the abbies used the road to approach the construction site. Our array used to start east of the road. Now it goes all the way to the cliff wall," said Pope, pointing toward the looming rock wall to their right.

"Excellent. It looks like the reports indicate a reduction in serious attacks."

Serious attacks? Spoken like a true pencil pusher. Marcus hoped he didn't use those words in his speech today.

"We've seen a complete elimination of opportunistic attacks, like the one two

days ago," said Marcus, careful not to take it any further.

Marcus wasn't convinced the abbies had randomly stumbled onto the only breach in their sensor array. The abbies didn't strike him as the type of predator to move in the open, especially against capable prey. It might make sense if they were dealing with a "human naïve" pack or herd, but the creatures north of the construction line had chosen to ignore the diversionary explosives, suggesting a familiarity with human tactics.

He couldn't prove his theory, but the abbies attacking from the north demonstrated signs of organized problem solving. Twice, the northern sensor array lit up like a Christmas tree, indicating multiple points of intrusion—only to yield a small attack. The sensors counted the same number retreating, minus the creatures killed, but something didn't sit right with Marcus. He couldn't shake the feeling that the abbies were somehow leaving a few behind while probing their defenses. They'd done it before, on a smaller scale, around the hatch. Covering the access road with motion sensors improved morale, but Marcus remained skeptical.

"Well, we must have plugged a gap they were…stumbling across," said Pilcher, clearly avoiding a word that might imply purposeful scheming.

"The security team continues to take every precaution possible to ensure the safety of Mr. Black's construction team," said Marcus. "We won't let our guard down until the fence is energized and every square inch of Wayward Pines has been searched."

"Once the fence is energized, we're going to have a crispy-critter festival," said Pope. "Might put you out of a job, Marcus."

His cocky remark referred to the plan to detonate the remaining diversionary explosives and lure any abbies north of the fence to their deaths. The idea was sure to draw some of the creatures into the fence, but not all of them.

"I don't foresee a threat to Marcus's job security any time soon," said Pilcher. "Is everyone assembled?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Black is offloading the crews as we speak," said Pope. "We're

almost at the fence. It's about a two-minute drive from there."

Through the rear passenger-side window, Marcus caught a glimpse of the clearing ahead, and the twenty-foot-tall, rectangular-paneled fence. The sun glinted off the razor wire coiled along the top. The barrier looked formidable, but represented little challenge for an abby. The sooner they got this thing humming, the better. Combined with the motion sensors, the fence would provide a sanctuary for the last vestiges of humanity—after his team swept the enclosed ground for predators. The Humvee turned, driving parallel to the fence.

"Marcus, what are your thoughts about the durability of the fence? Specifically against a large-scale attack?"

"Like a herd?" said Marcus.

"Precisely."

"I think we need to do everything in our power to keep a herd out of the valley. On a day-to-day, month-to-month basis, this fence will keep them out, as long as they don't get creative and try to climb the rocks. I'm worried about a few of the smaller canyons leading out of the boulder fields on each side of the valley. We'll need to survey those for entry points. We don't want to give them a back door into our home," said Marcus.

"Once the fence is established, we'll work on sealing up the cracks," said Pilcher, leaning his head between the headrests. "Where is everyone?"

"We arranged the security vehicles in a tight perimeter around the crew. They're waiting for us."

"That won't do," muttered Pilcher, leaning back against his seat.

"Sir?" said Marcus.

"I want to address the group in the open, with the vehicles arranged exactly how they are arranged during the workday. These people have spent the past eight days working under the constant threat of attack. I don't expect any special privileges during my brief visit."

"Actually, sir, we did this to discourage an attack. We never assemble this many people in the open. The heavy machinery operators are delivered to their

equipment in an armored vehicle. We have ten construction personnel working unprotected at any given moment, along with security escorts and our perimeter team," said Marcus.

"Stop right here," said Pilcher, patting the driver on the shoulder.

They parked next to the last section of completed fence. Twenty-five feet in front of them, a red, open-seat tractor, equipped with a spiral post-hole digger, sat poised next to a yellow "X" spray painted onto the bed of wood chips. A hundred feet behind them, a massive, wheeled tractor sat attached to a flatbed platform supporting several sections of fencing and a crane. Behind that, a cement truck waited to lock each post into place. He'd watched the fence-building procedure enough times to lead the operation himself.

The maximum point of exposure occurred when the team lifted the fence post into place and the foreman took measurements. This sometimes took several minutes as the team manually adjusted the post before the concrete could be poured. Then the team tethered it in place and the foreman confirmed the measurements. They repeated the process for three posts before the sections were tractored forward and lifted into place by the crane. The fence was attached while the concrete dried; a practice cautioned against by Black, but insisted upon by Pilcher.

To build the fence to specifications would double or triple the amount of time required to reach the far side of the valley, and in Pilcher's defense, they didn't have that kind of time. They needed an effective barrier in place immediately. Once the fence was in place, they could take the time to build another one—possibly create a no-man's-land in between. Black said they had enough fencing to do it.

Pilcher opened his door without warning and stepped outside.

"Security units, be advised. Pilcher is on the ground, headed toward the assembly," he said, opening his door—and shutting it firmly behind him.

Pope jumped out, pausing to close Pilcher's door.

"Upshaw, how are we looking?" said Marcus, jogging after Pope.

“Good from up here. No movement detected except for your vehicle.”

“Copy. All perimeter teams push fifty feet into the forest. I don’t think Mr. Pilcher intends on staying caged up all morning.”

He caught up to Pope and Pilcher, following them between two tightly parked tactical vehicles.

“Good morning, everybody!” yelled Pilcher. “Let’s give ourselves a little more room. Mr. Pope assures me the perimeter is secure. Join me for a walk.”

Pilcher stopped about twenty feet away from the vehicles and urged them to form a circle around him.

“Doesn’t it feel good to be out in the fresh air?” he said, receiving a few nods and confused mumbles from the crew.

“I know. I’m a bit preoccupied with the distance to the armored vehicles myself,” he said, garnering a few laughs.

“Seriously, though. Take a deep breath,” he said, waiting to hear exhales. “A few more days on this project, and you’ll have earned fresh air for everyone—without fear of those abominations. Everyone in there, awake or in suspension, is counting on you.”

“We haven’t lost a single man or woman on this crew. Heaven knows we’ve come close. Mr. Pope can attest to that. He had an uninvited guest in his Humvee yesterday.”

More laughter followed. The crowd was warming up, which impressed Marcus. He had been pretty worried about this public appearance.

“I’m told we have three, possibly four days of work left—”

“Four to five, sir,” added Black.

Pilcher immediately smiled and shook his head playfully. *Was this scripted?*

“All right, Mr. Bad News. I mean, Mr. Black,” he said. “I’ve been a tiny bit preoccupied with the schedule. I’m sure nobody has noticed.”

More laughter. Marcus couldn’t believe the transformation. Pilcher had them laughing in the open, on ground they wouldn’t have voluntarily occupied five minutes ago. He had to give Pilcher credit. The man had an innate ability to—

inspire? His gut told him that wasn't the right word. Neither was *deceive.* The truth lay somewhere in the middle of the two. He'd seen enough to be sure of that.

"So, give me four, maybe five days," he said, pausing to accommodate the muffled chuckling. "And we'll celebrate with a little champagne…and a well-deserved rest!"

Before they started the two-year town project—*which was scheduled to begin five days from now.*

Chapter 55

Waves of fatigue washed over Hassler as the last aura of blue sky disappeared over the western bluffs. He hadn't eaten since the move, having exhausted his supply of charred squirrel and half-eaten MRE pouches in the rocky hollow several miles away. Once he climbed into rocks north of the projected fence path, Hassler knew he'd spend the next two to three days lying on his back or stomach, with the thermal blanket pulled over him. His position overlooking the eastern end of the fence sat uncomfortably exposed to Mustin's snipers. Hunting wasn't an option.

He took a sip of water to momentarily curb the relentless hunger pangs. Even his water was approaching critically low levels. If Pilcher's crew didn't finish the fence tomorrow, he might have to consider a different plan. He could go another day or two without food, but water was non-negotiable. Even under optimal conditions, his reflexes and concentration were barely enough to keep him alive in abby-occupied territory. A single day without water would render him combat-ineffective against the threat.

Inching up the crease between two rocks, he peeked into the valley. His eyes registered the wide swath of razed forest beneath him, which easily stood out against a sea of dark pines. The monochromatic, dark blue image revealed little detail about the fence itself, only the general dimensions of the project. At least forty feet of forest had been removed on each side of the fence, giving the construction crews room to maneuver and preventing the abbies from climbing trees to breach Wayward Pines.

He lowered his night vision goggles and studied the green image. Several

pieces of heavy machinery sat next to the fence, parked on the northern side of the barrier. The fence itself appeared underwhelming. When viewed from a distance, against the backdrop of the greater valley, the fence withered to an insignificant, almost comical obstacle—incapable of protecting Wayward Pines from the threat of extinction.

Hassler slid down the rock and rested his forehead on the hard, cool surface. Was he kidding himself about Wayward Pines? Could the town survive with nothing more than a twenty-foot fence shielding it from annihilation? What happened in the winter, when eight feet of snow was dumped in the valley? A twelve-foot fence didn't sound as impressive. Maybe he was better off letting go and leaving the valley.

He pressed his head against the rock, wanting to scream. Theresa waited for him inside the superstructure. All that stood between him and the woman he loved was Pilcher—and a few hundred of his devotees. Fucking Pilcher. The lying, murderous speck of a man had condemned him to death, but remained his only hope of seeing Theresa again. Hassler couldn't let go. Wouldn't. He'd climbed into his suspension pod knowing damn well that Pilcher might unplug his machine on the other end. Theresa had been worth that risk.

"She's still worth the risk," he whispered, grabbing the coil of rope on the rock next to him and hurling it over the edge.

The rappelling device attached to his climbing harness jolted as the rope pulled taut over the rock. He could climb down unassisted during the day, but preferred not to press his luck at night. One twisted ankle on the way down and he may as well put a bullet in his head. Hassler reached below and grabbed his rucksack, pulling it next to him. He'd reloaded the pack with the bare essentials required to execute his final plan. Explosives, transceivers, wire—dangerous stuff in the wrong hands.

Under the thermal blanket, he slipped the backpack over his shoulders and clipped his rifle into the tactical vest. Once everything was in place, he leaned over the edge, scanning the rocks and boulder-strewn forest for abbies. Clear for

a rapid descent, Hassler gripped the rope and stood on the edge.

“Fucking insane,” he mumbled, walking backward down the rock.

Chapter 56

Ted Upshaw rubbed his eyes and considered calling it an evening. He'd spent the past week sleeping on the floor in Operations, leery of returning to his quarters. The quality of sleep had been miserable, but it beat the alternative. Pam insisted on paying him a late night visit, no doubt to buy his silence after Hassler's assassination. A quick whisper in his ear had saved what little remained of his humanity. He'd spent every night in Operations since then, trying to delay the inevitable. How bad could it be? He was on the verge of calling one of the off-duty operations specialists when one of the motion sensors registered movement.

"What do we have here?" he said, hooking the icon and running an analysis.

Heading south—out of the sensor zone. Damn it. Another abby materializing inside of Marcus's supposed safe zone. At least it was leaving. One less surprise for tomorrow's ceremony. He leaned back and studied the projections. Slow, steady movement. *Interesting.* An abby stalking a deer? The target stopped for five minutes and thirty-three seconds before turning right and moving slowly northwest. The computer calculated a path parallel to the fence. *Very interesting.*

Ninety-three feet after making the turn, the target stopped again, remaining in place for roughly the same amount of time. When it followed a direct path toward the fence, Upshaw was pretty sure they weren't dealing with an abby. A thought surfaced, but he dismissed it just as quickly. Impossible. He wished they had installed cameras with the sensors. They had the equipment, but Pilcher didn't see the point. Anything triggering the motion detectors would be treated as a threat when the construction crew was present.

The target passed the sensor line, now invisible to the devices pointed in the

opposite direction, but the computer continued to project its path. If it continued without stopping, Mustin's team could make a positive identification in three minutes. His mind ran with the impossible thought.

What was the worst Hassler could do? Blow up part of the fence? They could repair it. Sabotage the equipment? He had enough explosives to do that, but not enough to permanently cripple each machine and destroy a significant portion of the fence. The next thought brought a faint grin to his face. Pam was scheduled to accompany Pilcher outside tomorrow.

Upshaw shook his head. Ridiculous. Nobody was slinking around the forest—especially at night. Not even Hassler. The guy spent more time in the trees than on the ground during both of his trips outside of the superstructure. He navigated to the communications screen and selected "Overwatch," figuring he'd run it past Mustin. Maybe they could use some target practice. His finger paused over the mouse button. What if it was Hassler? He couldn't shake the damn idea!

Instead of contacting Overwatch, he switched to a different screen within the Communications window and conducted a frequency sweep of the valley.

"No shit," he mumbled, staring at two new radio signals.

Why didn't he put them on the fence? His grin widened.

"You son of a bitch!" he yelled joyfully.

"Everything all right in there, Mr. Upshaw?" sounded a voice from the hallway.

"Just fine, Leo. Got excited about something," he said, quickly minimizing the screen.

Excited was an understatement. Hassler was alive, and if Upshaw's theory about his activities proved correct, everything would change tomorrow—for the better. With redemption in mind, he carefully and permanently scrubbed every digital trace of Hassler's movements, along with the radio frequency discovery—praying that Pilcher had been asleep for the past fifteen minutes.

Chapter 57

David Pilcher held the sweaty bottle of champagne firmly in his left hand, working the cork slowly out of the glass mouth. At just the right moment, he looked up at the crowd of security officers, engineers, and equipment operators.

“Congratulations on a job well done! Welcome to Wayward Pines!” he said, popping the cork.

Two nearby explosions rocked the trees south of the fence, shaking the ground and eliciting cheers from the assembled crew of nearly forty dozen men and women. Pilcher cheered with them, feigning a smile as champagne bottles popped and glasses were filled.

He turned to Pope, talking through his teeth. “What the hell was that?”

“Hold on, sir,” said Pope.

The sheriff jogged over to Marcus, who appeared to be talking furiously into his headset. After a brief conversation, they both looked up and shook their heads quickly, trying to look at ease. Something wasn’t right.

“Pam, I think it’s time to go,” he said, suddenly swarmed by workers wanting to lift him up in celebration. “Pam? I don’t think this is a—”

Pilcher stopped his words, not wanting to start a panic. They had a fence protecting them on one side and six armored vehicles on the other. If push came to shove, Marcus, Pope and Pam would get him to safety. In his throne of arms and hands, he participated in the usual high-five rituals and accepted a glass of champagne. He took a sip, watching Pope and Marcus exchange heated words. He needed to get out of here, but there was no way to do it without physically and verbally attacking the people around him. The last thing he wanted to do

was sour a moment in history that would be taught to the children of Wayward Pines.

Amidst spraying champagne and shouts of joy, a faint screech reached his ears. He glanced at the turret gunner on the nearest MTVR. She sank into the turret and leveled the barrel of her machine gun at the northern tree line. A pair of hands grabbed him and pulled him down from the group.

“Mr. Pilcher, we need to go,” said Pope, pulling him upright. “We didn’t set off any explosives.”

“Hassler,” Pilcher hissed, throwing his champagne glass to the woodchips.

“Get everyone loaded up! We have abbies inbound!” yelled Pope, inadvertently creating a stampede toward the closest vehicles.

“Bring Pope’s Humvee up!” screamed Pilcher.

The chaos dissipated next to the fence as the crowd ran for safety. He hoped they could get everyone into the vehicles in time. They couldn’t afford to lose the heavy equipment operators. It would take too long to train new ones.

“Where’s the damn Humvee?” said Pilcher. “We don’t have all day!”

“En route,” said Pope, pointing to an armored vehicle racing toward them.

“Mr. Pilcher!” yelled Marcus, holding out a spare handheld radio. “You need to take this.”

“Kindly inform Mr. Upshaw I’ll get back to him,” he said, breaking for the Humvee.

A strong hand grabbed his champagne-soaked jacket, stopping him in his tracks and shoving the radio into his hands.

“It’s not Mr. Upshaw. You need to take this.”

Pilcher raised the handheld and transmitted. “This will have to wait. We have an emergency situation at the fence site.”

“You don’t know the half of it. The fence directly behind you and your entourage is rigged with plastic explosives, and I’m aiming at your head through a riflescope. Send the Humvee away, or this ends horribly for you.”

“You’re bluffing,” said Pilcher.

“Check out the fence, but don’t waste too much time. I can’t un-ring the dinner bell,” said Hassler.

Pilcher turned to Marcus, who was already on all fours peering through the fence section at the nearest post. A few seconds later, Marcus nodded with a grim look.

“I can rebuild the fence,” stated Pilcher.

“Can you rebuild the mulchers—or the feller-buncher things?”

“You can’t stop me from building this town,” said Pilcher.

“Maybe not, but I can keep you from ever seeing it. Send the Humvee away,” said Hassler.

“You wouldn’t dare,” replied Pilcher.

As the Humvee reached a point fifteen feet away, the driver’s side windshield spider-cracked, followed immediately by a second impact a few inches from the first. The vehicle screeched to a halt several feet away. Pilcher searched the boulders and rocks on the high ground to the east. It all looked the same to him.

“I’m pretty sure two more will penetrate the window. Send it away and get to the fence.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” Pilcher spat into the radio, waving off the vehicle.

“You better hope I do.”

Pilcher lowered the radio and turned to Marcus.

“He’s up there somewhere. Tell Mustin to put an end to this.”

Chapter 58

Staring at the scene a few hundred yards away, Hassler had to admit there was some truth to Pilcher's statement. He'd put a ton of variables into play within a confined system. Chaos was guaranteed, and the outcome was far from certain.

Gunfire erupted as the first abbies broke out of the trees, hurling themselves toward the men and women pushing frantically to get inside the armored vehicles. If the turret gunners kept their cool, the people would reach safety. If not, he'd have innocent blood on his hands. A deal breaker for returning to Wayward Pines. Somehow, he'd have to negotiate with Pilcher while helping the security team. On top of that, he had Mustin's snipers to consider. Hassler's position was concealed, but a well-trained spotter would eventually find him. He needed to close this deal before any .50 caliber projectiles were introduced to the unstable equation.

"All right! What do you want? I'm sure we can reach a deal."

"Sanctuary," he said, sighting in on an abby that had escaped the gunners' attention.

"You want back in? Fine. You're back in. Can we call this insanity off?" pleaded Pilcher, the sound of gunfire filtering through his transmission.

Hassler placed the crosshairs just in front of the abby and fired twice, hitting it once in the hindquarters. The creature tumbled across the woodchips, crashing into the last few workers climbing into the back of an MTVR. The impact knocked most of them off their feet, dropping them to the ground next to the thrashing abby. Before its talons sliced into flesh, the security guard in the vehicle's doorway fired a short burst, exploding the abby's head.

“I need a guarantee of safety,” said Hassler, searching for another high-risk target.

“A what? If that’s what you need. Of course. You have my guarantee.”

“That didn’t sound very convincing,” he stated. “And tell Marcus to quit communicating with Overwatch. I’m monitoring that channel on the radio I grabbed from the downed ultralight pilot.”

“Very well. I promise that you’ll be safe. No harm will come to you. Are we done yet? I don’t know how much longer we can hold them off.”

A quick glance at the scene validated Pilcher’s concern. At least two dozen abbies were converging on the scattered assembly of vehicles, and the security teams weren’t killing them fast enough to prevent a breakthrough. If Marcus had parked the vehicles in a tight line, parallel to the tree line, the machine gunners could have overlapped their fields of fire and slaughtered the monsters. Instead, nearly half of the turrets couldn’t fire at the abbies without hitting the other vehicles. He needed to wrap this up quickly.

“Upshaw, I know you’re listening. Broadcast this conversation on the loudspeaker inside the superstructure and on all radio frequencies.”

“Mr. Pilcher?” said Upshaw.

“Just do what the man says. They’re breaking through!”

From his perch in the rocks, he watched Pope, Pam, Marcus and two security officers tighten their one-hundred-and-eighty-degree perimeter around Pilcher. Hassler fired a hasty shot at a creature barreling between two of the Humvees, knocking it flat into the ground. Woodchips and dust erupted on all sides of the beast as Pilcher’s protection detail made sure it was dead. Another abby followed and was quickly shredded by automatic fire from the same guns. Shit. This wasn’t moving fast enough. His rifle bucked, spraying the grill of an MTVR with the contents of an abby’s head. A pale form crashed into the upright, headless corpse, knocking it forward in search of food. The only thing left was Pilcher’s group—so it charged into a hail of gunfire.

“Mr. Hassler, the conversation is live on all circuits.”

“About time. I’m sending for my Humvee,” said Pilcher.

“Not so fast. I need you to guarantee my safety again and apologize for leaving me out here to die.”

“I didn’t leave you out there to die,” said Pilcher.

“We can go with the other version of the story if you’d like. Not much time left,” said Hassler. “Nine o’clock, Marcus. Two fast movers.”

Marcus and Pope unleashed a volley that knocked the creatures into the energized fence, frying them.

“Tick tock, Pilcher.”

Chapter 59

Satisfied that the two abbies were fried, Marcus reloaded the empty rifle and shifted his aim to the creatures running past the vehicles. He fired briefly at each abby, not waiting to see the results before acquiring another target. The process was mechanical at this point. Anything that appeared in the green holographic reticle received two .308 projectiles.

Over the staccato gunfire, he heard the bizarre conversation play out between Hassler and Pilcher through his headset. Despite the intense close combat, he caught the gist of it. Pilcher had somehow fucked over Hassler, promising that it wouldn't happen again. Then Hassler started some nonsense about granting him a wish, and Pilcher agreed to give him whatever he wanted. *Time to move on.*

"Mr. Pilcher, we need to get the fuck out of here now!" he said, changing rifle magazines again.

Pilcher gave Marcus a thumbs-up, and they started to run toward the Humvee. They stopped a few moments later when several abbies scrambled past the moving vehicle, barreling toward them.

"Guns up!" he screamed, firing rapidly into the advancing pack.

The abbies hit the ground at their feet, shattered and broken by the wall of steel. Earsplitting screeches announced the arrival of a second wave, which leapt over the Humvee to get at them. A hurried barrage of rifle bullets tore into the frenzied monsters, inflicting lethal damage but failing to halt their momentum. The closest abbies careened into their group, slashing one of the security officers across the shoulder and slicing open Pam's thigh. Both of them howled in pain, the rest of the team fired point blank into the thrashing creatures. They needed to

get inside the Humvee immediately, or the next wave would break them.

The Humvee skidded to a halt twenty feet away as an abby climbed over the window and attacked the turret gunner. Blood sprayed onto the turret's ballistic windows as gunfire erupted inside the armored enclosure.

Marcus assessed the situation with one glance. The Humvee wasn't an option. Even if they could reach it, with the turret out of action there was no conceivable way for them to get into the vehicle without being torn apart. One or two of them might manage to pile inside, but the rest would be quickly overwhelmed as the abbies swarmed around the sides. There had to be another option. He looked behind them and saw that the clearing on the other side of the fence was devoid of threats. *That'll do.*

"Back to the fence!"

"We need to get inside one of those vehicles!" screamed Pilcher.

"Too late! Give me that fucking radio," barked Marcus, ripping the handheld out of Pilcher's grip.

"How many sections of fence are rigged with explosives!" he yelled into the radio.

"Three in a row. You're standing in front of the middle section," replied Hassler.

"Blow the one closest to the cliffs in five seconds!" he said. "Upshaw, deactivate the fence, right now!"

"You can't do that!" yelled Pilcher.

"Watch me," he said, grabbing Pilcher's jacket collar. "Everyone down! Fire in the hole!"

He jammed Pilcher to the ground moments before a thunderous crack ripped through them. The blast left him mostly deaf, reducing the gunfire to a muffled drumbeat. With a shower of dirt clumps and woodchips raining down on him, Marcus pulled Pilcher to his feet and pushed him toward a gaping breach in the adjacent section of fence.

"Through the fence! Now!" he yelled, his voice sounding underwater.

An abby scampered through the dust and smoke, momentarily disoriented by the explosion. Marcus fired two bullets through its chest before it charged them. More dark shapes materialized, racing through the thinning cloud toward their last known position. He sprinted toward the twisted, smoldering fence post, overtaking Pope, who was trying to reload his AK-47.

“No time for that!” he yelled right into Pope’s ear. “Get everyone set up on the other side. We can hold them at the breach.”

Pope nodded and took off for the fence, closely following Pilcher and Pam. Marcus wheeled around and fired, determined to buy them a few seconds. His bullets caught the closest abby, spinning it in a bloody pirouette. A surge of creatures stormed their previous location, skidding to a temporary stop before spotting their prey twenty feet away. Marcus turned and raced toward the jagged hole in the fence, pumping his legs and arms as the grey-skinned beasts chased after him.

He tumbled through the opening, quickly spinning around to face the fence. Hassler’s C4 charge had decoupled three-quarters of the fencing section from the post, bending it outward toward the opposite side and mangling the bottom corner. The detonation created a five-foot-wide gap next to the blackened post, and every abby on the other side was headed toward it.

“Upshaw, reenergize the fence!” he said, reloading his rifle.

The muffled response was indiscernible, and Marcus didn’t have time to figure it out. He centered the green circle in his rifle sight on the breach and pressed the trigger when a creature appeared. He was no longer part of an individual effort. Pope had formed the group in a semicircle ten feet away from the fence, focusing the combined gunfire of five assault rifles on the gap. The effort prevented an immediate breach—but the creatures were relentless. It was only a matter of time before one got through.

Chapter 60

Hassler watched the group's progress through his riflescope. So far, so good. With the fence energized, they should be able to hold the gap until the abbies thinned to a manageable level. His optimistic outlook ended a few seconds later when intensified gunfire from the vehicles drew his attention to the edge of the northern clearing. The turret-mounted M240s chewed away at a sizeable pack of abbies pouring out of the forest. Fuck. He had underestimated the number of abbies hiding in the northern valley, along with the effectiveness of his charges. By planting the C4 high in the trees, he'd created a different acoustic signal than the explosives buried miles away.

Tracers stitched through the grey mob, failing to slow it down. Within seconds, the monsters engulfed the vehicles, and the machine guns fell silent as the gunners sought refuge inside the thick armor. Marcus was in trouble.

"Upshaw, can all of the vehicle units hear this transmission?" he said.

"Yes. You're still live."

"Is the fence reenergized?"

"It should be, but I don't know how much damage you did with the C4."

"Marcus! Run west immediately! I say again. Run west immediately! Draw them away from the gap," yelled Hassler. "All vehicle units form a single line parallel to the fence and prepare to fire on the breach when Marcus is clear."

Looking over his scope, he saw the vehicles start to move. Marcus remained in place.

"Marcus! Anyone in Marcus's group. Get your ass moving to the west! You can't hold that line!"

Marcus peered in his general direction, tapping on his ear. *Shit. He can't hear what I'm saying.* Hassler pulled the thermal cover away and stood on the boulder next to him, emphatically signaling for Marcus to move down the fence. The ex-Ranger glanced at the swarm of abbies and nodded, urging the group west. As soon as they started running, the abbies adjusted their trajectory, jumping onto the electrified barrier. Sparks cascaded to the ground, obscuring his view of the slaughter.

Several abbies from the group continued for the gap, crashing through the damaged section like cannonballs. Tracers and bullets fired from the vehicle-mounted machine guns riddled their bodies before they could turn and pursue Marcus's group. With the Humvees and MTVRs covering the gap and the rest of the abbies frying themselves on the fence, the situation quickly stabilized. Less than a minute later, the flow of abbies stopped, and one of the Humvees raced toward the breach.

"Upshaw, this is Hassler. Looks like everything is under control down there. Can you make sure nobody shoots me on the way down?"

"The westernmost vehicle has you in sight, and everyone can hear this transmission."

"Roger. As long as they don't have me *in* their sights. Coming down now."

Hassler took a deep breath and grabbed the rope at his feet, wondering if this was a mistake. He'd never fully trust Pilcher, but if they wanted him dead, Mustin and his team would have punched a six-inch hole through his back by now. He threw the line behind him and rappelled until he reached solid footing.

Chapter 61

David Pilcher raised his head off the ground and spit several woodchips out of his mouth. He rose to his knees with an alien feeling. Absolute fear compounded by a complete loss of control. He had no idea what was going on around him—only that they had somehow survived. His ears still rang from the explosion, and the voices around him sounded distorted.

Pope helped Pam toward the fence, a sight he never expected to see in his lifetime. He urged the security officers forward at the same time, sweeping his AK-47 back and forth to cover them. Resentment washed over him. The story of Pilcher's "last stand" at the hatch would be overshadowed by Pope's heroism at the fence. Marcus kneeled beside him and yelled in his ear, the words subdued by the damage to his eardrum.

"Mr. Pilcher, the Humvee is waiting."

He stared at the scorched break in the fence, his eyes drawn to the abby corpses piled on the other side. Playing dead wasn't beyond their devious intelligence capacity. With the casual swipe of a talon from the ground, one of them could open his femoral artery.

"Maybe we should open the gate on the other side of the valley and have the Humvee pick us up on this side."

"I don't think that would be a good idea, sir. We made a lot of noise out here," said Marcus, aiming his rifle at the tree line behind him.

Pilcher turned his head and stared at the wall of trees to the south. Marcus was right. Paralyzed by fear, he wasn't thinking straight—and everyone knew it.

"Time to go, sir!" said Marcus, reaching out to grab him.

And now he was being manhandled like a child! Pilcher pushed himself to his feet, glaring at Marcus while he brushed the dirt and wood shavings off his jacket and shirt.

“Is the fence deenergized?” said Pilcher.

“Temporarily, sir,” said Marcus, guarding their retreat.

“And Hassler?”

“He’s on his way down, sir.”

Pilcher stopped in front of the fence, contemplating the unthinkable. Hassler couldn’t return to the superstructure. Not after this. It would be simple to justify given the hell he had unleashed on the construction team this afternoon. Tensions were high, and if Mustin’s team saw Hassler aiming a weapon at him or pulling out a brick of explosives—an honest mistake might be made.

“Marcus, I need your handheld radio.”

“Let’s get to the vehicle first, sir,” said Marcus, taking several steps in his direction while scanning the forest.

They didn’t take his orders anymore?

“Marcus, give me the radio.”

His external security chief removed the radio from a cargo pocket and threw it three-quarters of the way to the exposed tree line.

“You’ll thank me for that later, sir,” he said, tapping his headset. “We still have a big audience.”

He’d forgotten about the broadcast. Pilcher slumped his shoulders and stumbled toward the Humvee, afraid to glance down at the grey bodies under his feet.

“Mr. Pilcher! This way!” said Pope, holding the rear passenger door open for him.

Pam sat on the other side of the compartment, pressing a white compress against her left thigh. She extended a hand through the gunner’s suspended legs, gripping Pilcher’s wrist and pulling him into the vehicle. Blood seeped from the turret hatch, but the gunner seemed fine, shifting in the harness seat. Pope

slammed his door shut and jumped into the front seat. Behind them lay the wounded security officer, holding his bloodied shoulder.

“What about Marcus and the other officer?” said Pilcher.

“They’ll stay with the Humvees and secure the breach until we can repair the damage,” said Pope.

“Very well then,” grunted Pilcher. “Get us the hell out of here.”

The driver eased them into a turn, the suspension bouncing over abby carcasses. Pam winced, hissing through her teeth as they hit the bumps.

“How deep is the cut?”

“Deep. I’ll be fine,” she said, grimacing.

Pope turned in his seat. “What about Hassler?”

“Fuck Hassler. He can walk back,” said Pilcher.

The Humvee suddenly stopped, flinging Pilcher into the back of Pope’s seat and knocking his glasses off.

“What the hell is wrong with your driver?” screamed Pilcher.

He felt around for the glasses. When his hand brushed against the wire-rim frames in his lap, he quickly jammed them into place to see why they had stopped. Hassler stood in front of the Humvee with a hand on the hood. The other hand held a half-consumed bottle of champagne, which he casually raised for a long swig. Jesus. He looked insane.

Hassler tossed the bottle over his shoulder and walked down the passenger side of the vehicle, stopping at Pilcher’s door. Pam eased her pistol out of the holster on her uninjured thigh and pointed it at the door. A cough drew his attention to the turret hatch above him. Ragan’s blood-caked face stared back at him.

“That won’t be necessary, Pam,” he said, pushing the pistol barrel to the side.

The door opened, revealing the man Pilcher had tried to kill twice.

“Welcome back,” muttered Pilcher.

“Good to be back,” said Hassler. “Mind if I hitch a ride? I’d walk, but I’m kind of hungry. Can’t wait to see what Chef Tim can whip on short notice.”

“Chef Tim?” Pilcher chuckled. “We’ll put together something in the cafeteria for you.”

Hassler smiled and shook his head slowly. “I understand things got a little hectic on your end, but you agreed to grant me a wish.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m not a genie,” insisted Pilcher.

“I’m not asking you to return me to 2013. It’s something much simpler.”

“Theresa Burke is not coming out of suspension. That’s off the table,” said Pilcher.

“Even simpler than that,” he said, leaning forward to whisper in his ear.

Pilcher contemplated his demand for a moment, stunned by its audacity. Never in a million years, or eighteen hundred years, would he have guessed Hassler’s wish. They’d have to work out the finer details of the arrangement, but he could live with the request.

“Granted.”

Chapter 62

Ted Upshaw sat at his usual table, in the far right corner of the cafeteria. Nobody sat with him anymore, including the other operations specialists. Upshaw didn't blame them. He wished he could vanish too, but his soul already belonged to the devil. He kept his head down and shoveled some carrot-flavored slop into his mouth.

A shadow loomed over him, owned by a pair of torn camouflage pants and a strong urine smell. He caught a whiff of campfire through the ammonia-like odor.

"Hassler," he said, before looking up from his tray.

"Was it that obvious?" said Hassler, holding a tray.

"Campfire and urine. Pope might have pissed his pants a few times out there, but nobody stuck around at night to roast marshmallows. Glad you made it back," said Upshaw, motioning for him to take a seat.

"That makes two of us—in total," said Hassler, greedily spooning a grayish brown, chunky mixture through his dirt-caked lips.

"It's chicken-something. I guess you won't be getting that special meal?" said Upshaw.

Hassler mumbled while eating. "I declined the meal."

Upshaw felt sick to his stomach. He'd detonated a pound of C4 explosives meant to kill this man. Didn't he know?

Hassler looked up from his food. "Hey, I want to thank you."

"For what?" said Upshaw.

"Can we talk in here?" said Hassler, scanning the ceilings.

“For now.”

“Were you on duty last night? Late?”

“Maybe,” said Upshaw, taking a sip of watered-down apple juice.

“I hope you buried your tracks,” said Hassler.

“What tracks?” he said, smiling.

Hassler studied him for several seconds before standing up with an empty tray. “Lots of cracks in this foundation. I don’t see it ending well.”

“Neither do I,” said Upshaw, but Hassler had already started to walk away.

“Hassler!” he said, drawing a few stares from the nearest table.

The grizzled ex-soldier walked back to the table and whispered, “No need to apologize, Ted. He used you, just like he used me. That’s what Pilcher does. That’s all this is. We’re all pawns in his big game.”

“Even a pawn can check a king,” said Upshaw.

“Not by itself,” said Hassler. “And not while it’s surrounded by loyal subjects. I recommend we sit back and enjoy the good life—while it lasts.”

“The good life indeed,” said Upshaw, swirling the runny pudding.

Chapter 63

Adam Hassler packed the remains of his personal effects in the single suitcase he'd brought to the superstructure on New Year's Eve in 2013. His smart phone, loaded with a few thousand songs, was the last item to be stuffed in one of the outer pockets. The device was more or less useless outside of his extensive playlist, but of all the items carried forward over two millennia, the phone was his most valued possession. Besides the music, it contained several voice messages left by Theresa Burke over the period of Ethan's disappearance. He knew it was creepy to treasure these messages, most of them the sad pleadings of a desperate and estranged wife—but they were all he had to remember her.

He glanced around the sparse living quarters again, making sure he hadn't forgotten anything, an old habit formed over hundreds of hotel stays during his career as a Secret Service agent. Closing the door behind him, he pulled the carry-on-sized bag across the checkered linoleum floor. He stopped at a featureless door and removed a key card from his right pocket, waving it over a small, rectangular card reader next to the inset door. A few seconds later, the grey panel slid open, revealing a familiar elevator car. He stepped into the car unobserved and swiped the card across the reader positioned over the buttons. The doors closed and the elevator ascended to the top floor.

He stepped into Pilcher's posh residence and turned right, walking toward the unoccupied wing built for Pilcher's wife. Hassler's detailed investigation into Pilcher's private life uncovered a long-established rift between Mr. and Mrs. Pilcher. The two hadn't lived under the same roof for nearly a decade prior to 2013. It seemed logical that Pilcher would have constructed a separate residence

for his wife, who was obviously not among the superstructure's residents. Requesting the residence had been his final "wish."

Chef Tim stepped out of the shadows with a gracious smile. "Welcome, Mr. Hassler. Can I start dinner for you?"

"That sounds fantastic, Tim. Thank you," he said, sensing the chef's hesitation.

"Can I prepare anything in particular?"

Hassler winked at Chef Tim before nodding at the sullen figure in Pilcher's salon. "I'll have what he's having."

The End

To be among the first to hear about Steven Konkoly's new releases, exclusive content and future discounts, follow this link or send an email to stevekonkoly@gmail.com

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Steven graduated with merit from the U.S. Naval Academy, receiving a Bachelor of Science in English Literature. He was one of sixteen graduating ensigns selected for the elite Naval Special Warfare program (SEALs).

He served the next eight years on active duty in various Navy and Marine Corps units: From leading Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS) operations as a boarding officer in the Arabian Gulf, to directing Close Air Support (CAS) as a Forward Air Controller (FAC) assigned to a specialized Marine Corps unit, Steven's "in-house" experience with a wide variety of regular and elite military units brings a unique authenticity to his writing.

His first novel, *The Jakarta Pandemic* (2010), explored the world of "prepping" well before television and books popularized the concept. Hailed as a "grippingly realistic" family survival story, *The Jakarta Pandemic* introduced thousands of readers to the unfamiliar concept of "survival in the suburbs," motivating many of them to take the first steps to better prepare themselves for a major disaster. His recently launched series, *The Perseid Collapse*, continues Steven's legacy of engaging (and informative) post-apocalyptic (SHTF) fiction.

Steven lives with his family in coastal, southern Maine, where he wakes up at "zero dark thirty" to write for most of the day. When "off duty," he struggles to strike a balance between a woefully short sailing season and unreasonably long winter.

Go back to Contents