

ERIC THOMAS

The background of the cover features a silhouette of a man in the center, holding a megaphone to his mouth as if addressing a crowd. Behind him is a city skyline with several skyscrapers, all rendered in a dark, monochromatic style. The entire scene is set against a vibrant, solid red background, which creates a sense of urgency and drama. The overall aesthetic is reminiscent of a political poster or a protest sign.

FALL OF THE
CITIZENS

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Other works by Eric Thomas: DRT (A Ghost Story)

Boring stuff out of the way.

Lets get started...

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ONE

The snow was ankle deep when the soldiers entered Detroit. A black battle tank rumbled alongside at a volume to deafen and the heavy metal tracks turned all objects in its path to a finely tilled powder. The huge hulking metal beast sauntered past useless husks of abandoned cars, rusted red and oxidizing from inattention. The young men mustered only weeks before never imagined in their lifetime they would walk with rifles drawn, safety off, into an American city, chosen and charged with the mission to reclaim it.

This is what happened.

The city was ahead of them. Once the symbol of the auto industry, then the nation's example of economic instability, it had a very different identity in the months before the soldiers started walking. Now the buildings stood in the distance as dinosaurs of metal and rock. No more animated than fossils, they shouldered to the sky and reflected the dull gray from the wall of clouds behind them.

One foot in front of the other, the forces came and took their first building. The giant black edifice just south of the city towered impossibly up close. The soldiers called the building 'Quarantine' but the name made little sense now. Uncle Sam became its third owner in six months, an observation few made as they loaded equipment and people into its mouth. Forward squads already had freed the building and the civilians huddled around the base of the tower, their faces shocked with relief. A man with round glasses and a red tie too pristine for the circumstances seemed the most relieved of all. He hugged the men in uniform so tight they recoiled, one by one until he ran out of energy. It didn't take long. The liberated had spent most of their energy in the last few weeks trying not to die.

Platoons pressed on and fortified positions in the city. The front lines hit the city limits and broke like a wave, tide-pooling into neighborhoods and high value areas. They did so at the ready, looking for signs of men and women dressed as police officers or city sanitation workers. Eyes peeled, fingers on triggers, ears listening for the sound or smell of a chainsaw.

The enlisted encountered no resistance. They found only small groups hiding together in tiny self-declared sanctuaries. The soldiers expected enemy forces. What they found was people. They were bloody, battered, and broken but still alive. The sentries found tired and tarnished faces with no truculence, their hands smeared in dust and shame.

The scene repeated all over the city. Neighborhoods entered by uniforms were greeted with hands held high in the air, over and over, street by street. Forces traveled with caution among the dark buildings and stared in wonder. The power was cut before the operation began, a move that didn't seem necessary in retrospect. This city was drained of its energy long before it lost electricity.

Surrounding the arriving forces were sights familiar to them from training and the news footage they had watched in the weeks prior. There was a stage, a collection of twisted together metal and plastic. It was bumpy in some places like it had been hurried in place, before the events that brought forth the blood that now covered it. The thick red layer had dried in pools, like paint applied too thick. It flaked and curled when touched. The video screens surrounding the stage offered no explanation and only existed in dull, dark defiance.

The stage and screens sat in Hart Plaza at the foot of the Detroit Renaissance Center, its metal and glass columns gliding effortlessly into the dry winter air. There was a large collection of people remaining there, most of them turning their backs to blunt the breeze knifing off the river. A forward team had also been here. They left with the one they came for.

Outside the city a cloud of media waited like sprinters on a starting block. They carried recorders and cameras beneath fully gassed helicopters which hovered like kites in the flat gray sky. When word went out the swarm descended. Cameras, microphones, light reflectors, hairspray, and strands of long stringy hair pushed behind ears with anxious hands became the landscape on every corner of the streets.

Pretty men and women conducted interviews with confused, random soldiers who cracked smiles and waved to family back home. The enlisted men knew their loved ones were watching. Everyone, all over the world, watched every second with hands held over their mouths, eyes fixed on the feed for answers. The comely collection of reporters never bothered to mention their own contribution. They never suggested that they, in part, caused the carnage around them by cramming their foot on the gas of hysteria when some semblance of clarity was crucial to protecting the psyche of the public they were charged to inform.

The liberated men and women walked hunched, freezing, through dirty streets to waiting buses. They folded fabric over their heads to calm the cold but also to avoid the light. Media and soldiers referred to them as 'refugees', but that didn't accurately describe the men and women whom they found in this dead city. They were the witnesses. They not only saw what happened, but knew their motivations for being there in the first place. Many came from miles around for a chance to save lives and others came from farther to follow. They arrived in the city with chin held high, to join a man they believed, now they crawled on the concrete among the ashes of the utopia that slipped through their hands like water. The shame of believing in a collapsed ideal is all the residents had in common, and that shame ensured their silence.

The huddled men and women were processed and counted, the paperwork filed somewhere. They pointed their palms at the stars and stripes and swore to never stray again. They changed their names and existed in a fugue state, missing memories from a year of their lives that no one will ever know to ask about. They had families and futures and children, none of them ever aware.

They hid from the condemnation. Their history was demagogued and dismissed. Sworn off and sold out. Excluded and ostracized. Forgotten and forsaken.

Abandoned.

Their memories and experiences were buried so deep that no radiation will ever escape. Their history became unspoken in polite company. The only people who spoke of the events of that year in Detroit sold uninformed opinions of what actual atrocities occurred between the buildings. The city

was rebuilt, repopulated, and slicked with paint. The lies would crystallize and dry, lacquered into the woodwork.

The cycle was then free to begin again. The wheel of history reloaded for another lesson.

What humanity failed to understand is just how desperately they needed the witnesses to tell their story.

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TWO

Jack drifted off from the conversation and stared across the street to a row of brick buildings with high windows. Above them, balconies jutted out in front of sliding glass doors. Some of the doors were open and Jack's attention had been stolen by one with a tall white oscillating fan. He was happy the damned winter was over and that May was so warm and welcoming.

Birmingham was the most affluent suburb of Detroit and it reminded you with every sight and sound. Late model BMWs and Mercedes cruised down winding streets and stopped in front of stores selling Tiffany bracelets and Movolo watches. The women wore strapless sundresses, giant sunglasses, and designer shoes that cost far more than the weekly salaries of the store clerks who catered to them. The men wore sport coats with polo shirts and pressed slacks even though the sun blazed. Everywhere pedestrians walked small dogs that looked like dusters with ribbons.

“Did you hear about it, Jack?”

“What?”

“They're doing a piece on Wellco Sunday.”

Jack snapped out of it and focused on Tyson. The 6 foot 5 inch black man attracted a lot stares in a town like this. Tyson clarified, “The 60 Minutes thing. Frank Fisher finally agreed to an interview.”

Jack was back in the conversation. “Yeah, I heard. You know very well they'll ask him about the price of the vaccine. They're going to make the point for us.”

The three men lunched on the sidewalk at a table made of braided iron. Jack, a thin man in his early 50s with gray hair that gave him a paternal demeanor, reached for the tea cup in front of him. “What do you think, Max?”

Max leaned back into his chair. A tight white t-shirt and jeans framed his slight build. His hair was cut short and he wore thick stubble on his face. His eyes were deep blue. "It is what I have come to expect," he said with no emotion.

Jack held out a hand, "Well, that's what I meant. This is our opportunity."

"This is what the world is becoming. It will only get worse."

Jack forked a mouthful of omelet. Best not to argue, he thought.

Max looked at his sandwich, "I've been busy with the trucks."

"When will they be ready?" Tyson asked.

"Still trying to get that nailed down."

Jack swallowed. "What's the delay?"

"It is important for everything to happen simultaneously," Max rubbed his beard, "but it's proven difficult to arrange for that many operations to happen at one time."

Tyson said, "Is it the personnel?"

"No," said Max. "We have someone in every truck. It's just the timing. We need this one to go well. It will set up everything else."

"If there's anything you need just let me know," Tyson said, reaching for his glass.

"There is. I need you to head down to Florida," Max leaned over the arm of his chair and fished a newspaper out of his bag. "There are budget cuts coming in the St. Petersburg SWAT team."

Jack chuckled. "How do you find this stuff?"

"I look for it," Max said and turned back to Tyson. "I want you to bring me the talent."

Tyson grabbed the newspaper. Large block letters screamed of another Ebola outbreak above the fold. "How many do you need me to recruit?"

Max took a bite. "All of them."

"If we are talking about talent then you should also look at this," Jack interrupted as he handed Max a folder.

"The computer guy," said Max.

"I believe his name is John," said Jack trying to recall the details.

"This is the guy from Anonymous?" said Max.

Jack pulled a stack of emails from his bag and set them on the table. The bottom sheets soaked up the remains of a tea spill. "Ah, here it is, his name

is Josh. This kid has already cracked into the Wellco systems a couple of times. He isn't just a member of Anonymous, he is the best of them. Many of their people agree on this."

Tyson and Max nodded.

"Sounds good," said Max. "Any bad news?"

"I can't find any."

"Do you think that he will be with us for the long run or the short?" said Max.

"We won't know until we ask," said Jack. "But the fact that he runs with Anonymous is promising."

"It is. I wish we had him for the truck mission. It would be better if we knew their route planners and schedules."

Jack smirked as he put the emails back in the folder. "How are we going to get him?"

"That's on you," said Max. "You found him. Bring him to us," he looked at Tyson. "You're going to need money. Drive me back to the apartment so I can give it to you."

Jack opened his mouth to protest.

Max turned back to him. "Is there anything you need from me Jack?" Jack lost his nerve and closed his mouth. Max looked pleased. "It's quite a find, you just have to reel him in. Bring him to a meeting and I'll do the rest."

"What if he's not interested? What if he won't come?"

"Then I will be disappointed in you," Max said as he stood up. He tossed a fist of cash onto the table and walked away with Tyson.

THREE

The black van sat with all the windows rolled up. The Florida sun screamed down with lethal severity. The driver turned off the engine, shutting off the fans. Between the power of the sun, the windows, and the humid breath of six occupants, the inside of the van was a terrarium within seconds. The occupants, dressed in black, felt the sweat ooze from their pores.

“Did you have to kill the engine?” said the nervous rookie in back.

“Shut the fuck up,” said the driver. “We gotta listen.”

“Listen to me sweat my fucking ass off,” he replied, muttering.

She leaned forward in the middle bench seat. Her forehead pressed into her knees as she steadied her breathing. She learned this in a yoga class a couple of years ago, before she figured out yoga was boring. Now she used it to calm down before raids.

“Betty?”

“What?” said Betty, she didn’t open her eyes or move from her crouched position.

“What do you hear?” said the driver.

“You talking,” she said.

“I thought you were leanin’ down like that to concentrate,” said the driver.

“I do this out of habit,” she said.

“Well, do you hear anything?”

“What am I supposed to be listening for?”

“Clues.”

She opened her eyes and sat up. “What clues would we be able to hear?” she pointed. “We aren’t raiding any of these houses. We’re raiding the house behind.”

He turned around to face her. “I learned in the army that it’s best to study your environment. You might hear something useful.”

“We are in a van with all the fucking doors closed,” she said. “The only way we’re going to hear something is if the house we’re raiding had a live band on the god damn porch.”

The driver gave her an angry look and turned back in his seat. “You’d be hot if you weren’t such a fuckin’ bitch.”

She closed her eyes and folded forward again. “That’s sexual harassment.”

“I was giving you a compliment!”

“You suck at compliments.”

“You can’t even tell a woman she looks good in America anymore.”

“Not at work. If you compliment me at work and I like you, it’s flirting. If I never want to fuck you, like ever, ever, it’s sexual harassment.”

Stifled laughter came from the back of the van.

The guy sitting next to Betty grabbed the handle. “If you kids are done,” he said and opened the door.

They filed out. Betty went last. She watched them form a line in front of her, guns pointed. She followed. The sweat made Betty’s tight uniform cling to her, revealing a skinny frame. Her bottle blond hair spilled out from under her hat in strands.

The unit split when they got to the back yard and moved quickly, bent low. Three went to the front of the house, three to the back. Betty went to the front. They crouched by the front door and listened. The sound of movie dialog came from the front room.

Casino, Betty thought. Joe Pesci’s a fucking bad ass in that movie.

“POLICE!” one of them screamed from the back.

Betty jumped up out of pure muscle memory and shattered the front door with a kick.

She saw the gun pointed at her head and dropped to a knee. The sound of the shot and the bullet whizzing above her head mixed together in one fluid stream. She steadied her arms, pointed at the gun owner’s head, and squeezed the trigger.

The Hispanic man dropped his arm. He twisted in the air before falling to the ground with a final dull thud. Blood spat from the small caliber hole in his forehead.

The woman in the living room flew off the couch and lunged at a crib in the corner. The second team emerged from the back of the house, saw the movement, and fired. The exit wound on her temple painted the wall and furniture red before the body collapsed in a heap. Their hearing came back. An infant in the crib was screaming.

The cop who pulled the trigger dropped his gun. His eyes darted from the lifeless mass, over to the crib and then back again. "Oh, fuck," he said. He sounded like he was on the edge of tears.

Betty caught her breath, still on the floor inside the doorway. She could see the panic take hold of him.

"She looked... She looked like she was... oh FUCK." He cried and sank to his knees.

"Knock that shit off Rook," snapped the driver.

Two guys from Betty's team were already up the stairs. Within seconds they yelled down. "Clear."

The cop on his knees was in shock. Betty got up. She stepped over the body and slapped him on the shoulder. "Dude, fuck her. Don't live with people who shoot at the police."

The two cops who had given the all clear from upstairs came down carrying two brown cardboard boxes with 'Wellco' stamped on their sides.

The driver looked happy. "You found them."

They carried the boxes through the living room and to the kitchen in the back of the house. They set both boxes on the table. The rookie remained in the living room, blubbering some miserable prayer to no one in particular.

The driver waved a hand for silence as he called dispatch. "We're in but only one box is here. Two suspects down and we need child services here now."

The speaker crackled, "Ten-four."

He unfolded the flaps on one of the boxes. It was filled with toothpaste sized packages, each one marked with the same blue 'Wellco' logo and stamped with the word 'VACC' in large block letters.

The driver nodded, "We all have families."

Every cop took a handful. Betty took two.

<<>>

Josh got to his apartment stinking of sweat. He keyed the door open and hopscotched the piles of clothes in the living room. He pulled the

refrigerator door open and grabbed a Tupperware container from the second shelf.

He collapsed in front of his desk and leaned back. The little known best part about a workout is the pasta salad afterward. The container popped when he opened it, pasta heaven had arrived. He reached out to the keyboard and tapped the space bar. The screen turned on revealing something that made Josh curse, xChat was still open.

S_C: You There?

Josh leaned forward and typed.

Josh: Yeah

He went back to the macaroni curls of goodness.

S_C: I gave yr phone # to somebody today.

Josh stopped eating.

Josh: WHAT?

S_C: R U Mad?

Josh: YES

S_C: I didn't mean to piss you off.

Josh: WHY DID YOU DO THAT?

S_C: b/c this guy I know was asking about you.

Josh: WTF, dude?

S_C: I didn't think you would be mad.

Josh: The name of the group is “Anonymous”.

S_C: I know

Josh: Why would I want someone giving out my info if I belong to “Anonymous”?

S_C: It's a guy I know, he's cool.

Josh: I am so fucking FURIOUS at you right now.

Josh: Again. “Anonymous”. Not “Anonymous UNLESS the person is cool.”

Josh: Who is it?

S_C: It's a friend of a friend

S_C: His name is Jack

Josh: So now it's a friend of a friend

S_C: They have an opportunity for you

S_C: He said

S_C: You should listen to him. He sounded legit.

Josh: Yeah. Thanks for giving me a choice on that.

Josh closed xChat and set down his container. Pasta heaven was ruined. He needed beer. He grabbed the key card on his desk and walked out of the apartment. Why the hell had Sid thought it was OK to give out his info to some stranger? Josh had plenty of enemies in the world. The less information anyone had on him the better.

When he was eight his friend Richard showed him DOS code. He knew right away that this had to be his life. The small blinking box was a sea of endless possibility. He mastered it within weeks and was writing codes of his own in six months. A year later he learned UNIX and programmed proficiently in both languages by the time he finished junior high.

The stereotype was that nerds do really well in school. They graduated with honors and gave pimply valedictorian speeches that bored the hell out of classmates. Not Josh, organized learning wasn't his strength. School moved far too slow for him and he couldn't conform to how they thought he should learn. He rejected the idea of being told how books should make him feel. He did the math in his head and was marked down because he couldn't show his work. He loved computers but never really fit in with the LAN party crowd. As far as Josh was concerned, he was much happier writing a program that would display a middle finger on every monitor in the computer lab or finding different ways to change files on the school mainframe.

The boredom worsened in high school so Josh moved on to hacking. It's hard to keep your nose in *Walden* when you can manipulate the entire world around you. While other kids planned senior pranks that entailed shaving cream and streamers, Josh wrote a program that made all the bells ring incessantly, forcing the administration to send everyone home. The schlub IT guy they dragged in to fix it was no match and had a nervous breakdown from frustration. City officials had to shut down the power grid to finally stop the god-awful ringing.

From there, Josh got into alt.net groups and IRC chats. He may have been good in high school but after graduation, he became the best. College seemed like a waste of time compared to what he could already do on his own. He met other like minded people in Ann Arbor and they spent their time honing their skills on more and more complicated systems. Josh understood the principle that every code was built around the same language, a language in which he was fluent. He was methodical, clever, and patient. He would bounce attacks off remote servers and frame other people in the process. Of all the so called 'black hat' hackers in the world, Josh was the unquestioned king. It wasn't long before he never had to worry about money again.

Josh was an outlaw for years but had developed two iron clad rules that kept him out of jail. First, kill the prisoners. Anytime you broke into a system it had to be destroyed on the way out. Not just delete the OS, but brick the server. If you did it right, it would never turn back on. Showing mercy meant a trail of evidence. The targets would spend months trying to get back online before they could even think about an investigation. Second rule, no governments. Governments had nothing else to do but chase your ass all over the globe. Businesses had to get back to work, especially after a debilitating computer virus melted their very ability to make money.

After he turned thirty, Josh decided he had to shake his black hat accomplices. He chose UBS Bank for both their high profile and their use of the Swiss Interbank Clearing house, a system so heavily monitored that he was guaranteed to attract the attention needed. He left traces in the code like trails of illuminated bread crumbs that led the authorities straight to every last one of his partners. None of them rolled on Josh, because none suspected him. They just thought he had been lucky and never surmised the betrayal.

The next couple of years were spent laying low. Money still wasn't an issue but he lived in a hovel of an apartment so as not to attract attention. Untraceable offshore accounts pumped money into his state-side account. To the untrained eye the transactions were nothing more than domestic generated direct deposits. The plan was iron clad, with only one problem, Josh was retired and hiding in his early thirties.

The down time was torturous. Part of being the best at something is that you are also born with the burning desire to do it. Laying low made Josh angry and restless. He worked out twice a day because it took his mind off being idle. He looked for opportunities to take advantage of systems, if only to keep atrophy from setting in, but they were rare.

He got involved in the hacktivist group, Anonymous, last year. He needed it. The others in the group, whom he had only ever met on IRC chat, were amazed at his abilities. He could find someone's iPad and wipe it from a remote terminal. He could control systems that everyone else thought were closed. He hacked into the Wellco mainframe and cut their power just for fun. He became a rockstar in Anonymous with little effort.

Today, however, was the last thing that Josh needed. He was not ready to leave his self-imposed exile. He had paranoid thoughts that one of his

former accomplices had gotten wise to what had happened and was now using other Anonymous members to find him. He wondered if after all this time he would be exposed.

Josh parked his car in the convenience store lot and went inside. He walked to the ATM machine and slipped in a small piece of plastic. The screen said 'CARD NOT VALID' as Josh pressed buttons. Old habits die hard. The ATM screen flashed something in UNIX before it fired a line of code past the screen and counted out a stack of money.

He grabbed the cash, went to the cooler, and collected a 12 pack.

He waited to pay while another customer shuffled to the ATM and tried in vain to get the machine to accept her card. As Josh left the store he heard a shout as the door swung behind him.

"Is this broken?"

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FOUR

Steve Croft sits in a dark studio in front of a bright blue hexagon with 'Wellco' written in white block letters.

“Given our current population in the United States of roughly 313 million people, many of them living in densely populated urban areas, we as a nation have long lived under the threat of epidemic. The words ‘Bird Flu’, ‘Swine Flu’, and even ‘H1N1’ are well known for the concern, or what some might call panic, they each caused in recent years. Now health officials are giving out warnings of a new possible crisis, one that was not even on the United States Center for Disease Control’s radar before cases began popping up earlier this year in central Florida. It is the Ebola virus, an affliction once thought of as a problem only for sub-Saharan Africa. In light of the recent outbreaks we decided to find out more about the virus and what may be done to stop it.”

The screen now shows a shot of a white building and then moves to stock footage of a very sterile looking lab with men and women wearing full body hazmat suits working at various stations. Steve Croft’s voice narrates over the images. “This is the headquarters for the U.S. Center for Disease Control, or CDC, in Atlanta. After the virus first began showing up in 1976 in Zaire and the Sudan, scientists here developed an Ebola ‘super-vaccine’. This radical new kind of vaccine prevents healthy people from contracting the virus but also cures infected patients by increasing and hormonally manipulating the patients’ white blood cell count. Officials from the CDC declined to speak with us on camera but have continued to issue press releases that refer all inquiries to the organization’s website for the detailed plan currently being implemented to address what it calls ‘recent, isolated incidents of Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever or EHF.’”

The screen changes to a picture of a towering building sheathed in shiny black panels. The same blue hexagon logo is affixed at the top.

“So what is our government’s plan for this latest possible threat to the health of every man, woman, and child that could be affected? The answer lies in this imposing looking black office building that happens to belong to the Detroit, Michigan based pharmaceutical company, Wellco. A relatively unknown company until recently, they have been chosen by the U.S. government as our best hope against the possibility of a widespread Ebola outbreak.

When cases of the disease first began showing up in Florida’s Orange County three months ago, the U.S. Government and the CDC contracted with Wellco to not only begin mass producing the Ebola vaccine but to also coordinate care for those infected. Production of the vaccine immediately began in Wellco’s Detroit, Philadelphia, and St. Louis facilities. The company also began working with hospitals in affected areas to provide vaccination distribution and training on proper patient care. Since the first outbreak the virus has shown up in five more Florida counties. Each time a new outbreak is reported, Wellco mobilizes another team to address the issue. These teams include trained medical professionals stationed in any hospital with reported cases to administer the vaccine to afflicted patients. Their efforts appear to have been successful with many people crediting the company for containing the spread of the disease.

But this is where the story takes a controversial twist. The cost of the vaccine, which remember both cures and prevents the virus, is \$60,000 per dose. All major insurance companies have refused to cover the vaccine, calling it ‘extremely cost prohibitive’. This leaves those infected with the virus and those wanting to prevent contracting it to deal with the cost on their own. Who determined this \$60,000 cost? And why is it set so high above what the average American family can ever hope to afford?”

The camera cuts to a middle-aged man wearing an impeccable suit and tie. He has a full head of dark blond hair peppered with silver and a red face. He is seated in a very large office, richly decorated with Italian leather couches and art deco lamps. Steve continues to narrate. “We recently sat down with president and CEO of Wellco, Frank Fisher, to discuss his company’s role in the production of the Ebola virus vaccine.”

“Let me assure you of something Steve. The Ebola virus is not an epidemic in the United States at this moment. The threat has been contained, which is directly due to the actions of this company,” says Fisher with an air of complete confidence.

Steve Croft leans forward. “So why then are you marketing the vaccine to those who are not infected?”

“When situations like this occur, people like being assured they have done everything possible to protect themselves and their families,” Fisher replies. “We as a company want to be sure that this peace of mind is available. No one can say with 100% certainty that a widespread Ebola outbreak will never happen in this country and anyone that says different is being dangerously misleading, possibly even criminal.”

“So why is the price of the vaccine so high? Doesn’t \$60,000 seem excessive?”

“We are well aware of the criticism,” says Fisher. “However, what must be understood is there is a reason why the CDC never bothered to contract with pharmaceutical companies before the recent outbreaks. The relative risk of an infectious epidemic in this country was considered too low compared to the high cost of producing the vaccine in large quantities.”

“Wellco is the only company that has signed a contract with the CDC,” says Croft, scanning his notes. “A contract that also awards your company a rather large amount of federal subsidies. Shouldn’t this help defray some of these costs and bring the price of the vaccine down?”

“The staggering costs we incur are not only in the manufacturing of the vaccine but also in its distribution. We have mobilized dozen of response teams throughout Florida which include nurse practitioners and in some cases even doctors. You also have to take into account the costs of the crucial quarantine operations. All of this, salaries, transportation, training, adds up quickly,” says Fisher continuing to look calm.

“There are many who say that production costs aside, \$60,000 per dose places this vaccine far out of the reach of the average American household. How do you respond to that?”

“It’s not possible to steer the discussion away from the costs of this business. The production and distribution of this vaccine is a great expense to our company. If I actually showed you the numbers... well, that would

blow your hair back, Steve,” says Fisher with a chuckle. “Trust me, the price we are charging is a reflection of those costs, nothing more.”

The camera cuts to Steve Croft standing on a city street. People pass on either side out of focus. “Wellco is a privately owned company that is not publicly traded on any exchange. Exact figures on the sales of the vaccine have been difficult to obtain but are said to be staggering. The combination of these alleged record profits and the government subsidies has placed Wellco on target to be the world’s most profitable corporation for this year. Not bad for a company that has struggled in obscurity for years behind the other, more notable pharmaceutical giants. As you can imagine, Wellco has come under considerable fire for their pricing practices as the sole producer of the Ebola vaccine.”

The camera is following a professionally dressed woman with shoulder length hair and glasses as she walks down the street and into an unassuming office building. Steve’s voice narrates again. “This is Angela Worrall, a consumer health advocate for the non-profit group Patients’ Rights Initiative. She is leading the charge against what she describes as Wellco’s ‘government sanctioned monopoly on health’, filing a complaint last month with the Florida State Attorney’s office.”

Steve is now sitting across from Angela in a tiny office with the typical awards and pictures of smiling children covering every available space.

“Why is your group so upset with Wellco?” asks Steve.

“This company has hijacked the American health care system,” says Angela. “They have been allowed to select a price point that is so prohibitively expensive to the vast majority of health care consumers in this country that it is not only destroying the normal market for health care services but is also destroying people’s financial livelihoods. We are taking calls everyday from distraught parents forced to take out second mortgages on their homes so they can afford to have their children vaccinated. What happens if another emergency arises for these families? What if one of the adults loses their job? This ludicrous pricing has left them with no means to survive an unexpected financial crisis. It’s insane.”

“The CEO of Wellco has described their pricing policies as ‘the necessary cost of production’ and says Wellco would not be able to afford to continue its operations if the price of the vaccine was any lower. Do you believe this statement is accurate?” asks Steve.

“If that’s the case Steve, I’d like to know where the subsidy money is going. If they are charging \$60,000 per shot, where is the millions of dollars of our tax money being spent? Why aren’t these funds going to programs to make this imperative medicine accessible to more than just the wealthiest consumers?” Angela replies.

“You’ve called their actions treasonous.”

“Absolutely,” she says. “Their refusal to charge a fair price for this vaccine, while continuing to accept government funds, is nothing short of an attack on the people of this nation. Wellco is bankrupting families by deliberately exploiting the fact that we are all scared to death. They have ignited a class warfare discussion that should not exist in one of the wealthiest countries on this planet.”

“Why are you calling Wellco’s actions intentional consumer abuse?” continues Steve.

“This situation has been played out too many times in recent years. Fat government contracts and monopoly power only lead to the gouging of the American consumer and absolutely no accountability for a company’s actions. The government looks the other way while corporations who make sizable campaign contributions earn record profits off of consumers who have no other option but to pay what they are told. The only difference this time is it’s not just about the lack of choices or even another economic crisis. This virus can have up to a 90% fatality rate. For those who cannot afford the cost of the vaccine, Wellco may as well be handing them a death sentence.”

The camera cuts back to the office at Wellco as Steve Croft continues his interview with Frank Fisher.

“The discussions regarding the outbreaks and your company always seem to gravitate back to the issue of cost. Given the \$60,000 price tag for each dose, a family of four would need \$240,000 to be protected. How does Wellco expect consumers to afford that kind of bill when the average household in the United States only earns \$63,000 a year?” asks Steve.

“They just will. Most people in this country find a way to pay for what they want. People spend \$250,000 or more on their home alone. If you value the extra layer of protection this vaccine provides, who would say their life and the lives of their family weren’t worth the cost of an average house?” questions Fisher.

“I’d hardly call a \$250,000 house ‘average’ in this economy. There are plenty of families in this country who couldn’t afford a home priced at half that much. We’re talking about the middle to lower income households that are typically two young parents with small children and absolutely no means of obtaining that kind of credit. What happens to those people if they contract the virus?” asks Steve.

“Again, most people can afford the vaccine. However, there is a contingency plan that was developed with guidance from the U.S. Government to care for those who are unable pay. These patients are considered by health officials to be highly infectious and a serious health risk to the general public. To guarantee the safety of everyone, infected individuals are sent to our quarantine facility here in Allen Park,” Fisher responds.

“The building people call Quarantine?”

“We call it the South office,” says Fisher.

“Do the patients have a choice about coming to the quarantine facility or are they brought there by force? Could they be considered prisoners?”

“Absolutely not. Every patient there understands it is the best place for them to be in order to keep the rest of the population from getting infected. I want to be clear on this, the government has charged us with public safety and they are perfectly within the law to give us the authority to quarantine any infected individual who does not receive the vaccine,” says Fisher.

“Why are no cameras allowed inside the quarantine building?”

“We have a duty to not only contain the virus but also to protect patients’ privacy. I can assure you that these people are being given every possible comfort. Serious effort went into the building and staffing of the care wards. The patient rooms even include satellite TV and full internet access to allow for continuous contact with family members.”

“How many people are currently in quarantine?”

Fisher gets very serious, “All records have been classified by government officials and we are not authorized to release any patient information.”

“Do you know?” presses Steve.

“I am not at liberty to talk about any matters that may violate patient privacy.”

Steve pauses for a moment, his hand held in front of his mouth. “So a single company, your company, has the authority to detain people. Does Wellco have the power to decide who lives and who dies?”

“I wouldn’t characterize it like that. We are merely caring for those who do not receive the vaccine in a place where they are prevented from spreading the virus to others.”

“How many have died in your facility since the outbreaks began?” asks Steve, leaning forward in his chair.

“Again, I cannot answer questions regarding patient privacy,” says Fisher.

“Is this too much power for one company to have?”

“The U.S. Government would not have trusted us with these operations if they did not feel we were the right ones for the job. I think our performance so far has proved that.”

Steve Croft is now back in the studio. “With the summer months looming, concern has now been raised of outbreaks spreading to the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast as warmer temperatures make it easier for the virus to survive outside the human body for longer periods of time. As we wait for when and where the next outbreak might occur, one question continues to be on the minds of many. Should one company be allowed the privilege and responsibility of putting a price on a human life?” The lights fade on Steve as the station goes to commercial.

FIVE

Josh hove the twelve pack into his refrigerator. The plastic grate beneath it sagged from the weight. He punched a hole in the front and put his fingers around a glass bottle. He heard a knock at the door and straightened with a start.

The paranoid thoughts returned. It had only been a few hours since Sid spilled about dropping his name to a stranger. Josh never had visitors. This could only be one thing. He now wished he had gotten around to buying a gun but even a baseball bat or a golf club would be better than nothing. You pay the price for procrastination, he thought.

He opened the nearest drawer and grabbed a steak knife. He walked to the door, knife in hand, and stood at the door for a moment as the knock came again. He leaned forward and peered through the hole.

The sight revealed the shape of a person and not much else. The peep hole is the most useless invention in history, Josh thought. You never realize how awful they are until you actually need one. He felt weird standing there with the knife. He set it on his computer desk and then gripped the door handle.

The door opened to reveal a rather kind looking man in his 50s wearing a pair of round glasses. He looked about as harmless as Josh's own grandfather.

“Josh?”

“Are you Sid's friend?” Josh said.

“No, I am a friend of Sid's friend.”

The answer frustrated Josh but he decided he would prefer to have this conversation inside the apartment.

“Whatever. Just come in.” The man stepped in and Josh closed the door.

He looked around. “Nice ... place.”

“Who are you?” Josh wanted this to be over. He had been spending the last hour and a half trying to relax.

“I’m Jack.” Said Jack, extending a hand.

“Jack ...”

“Just Jack. We like to keep it first name only.”

“Why? Who’s we?” Josh started to get annoyed again.

“To protect our families and others. We have powerful enemies,” Jack shook his head. “But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“I’m going to be honest, Jack. I am pretty pissed off that you’re here at all. Sid had no right to give out my number, my address, or in fact any information on me. I’m not interested in working with anyone I don’t know.”

“Josh, forgive us. When we heard about your talents we sought you out. Your skills are well known around the Anonymous IRC.”

“I’m retired, period.”

Jack shook his head again. “You’re misunderstanding me. I am not trying to recruit you into a hacking group.”

“I didn’t suggest you were trying to recruit me,” said Josh, walking past Jack and back to the kitchen. “Is that what’s happening here?”

“If you want to get down to business, yes, I am trying to recruit you.”

“No.”

“Hold on.”

“Hope you didn’t have far to drive.”

“If you’ll just allow me to-”

“Show yourself out,” Josh opened his refrigerator again and retrieved a beer.

“Can you please just hear me out, Josh?” Jack sounded more insistent. “I want to talk to you for a minute. Surely that couldn’t do any harm.”

“Okay. You have one minute. Need a drink?”

“Thank you. A gin and tonic would be nice.”

“I don’t have either.”

“I was probably dreaming there,” Jack said, looking around the sparse and dirty apartment. “No matter, one of those beers will do just fine.”

Josh grabbed another of the glass bottles and wrenched off the cap. He handed it to Jack. He walked to his couch and sat down. Jack stood, beer in his hand, as if lost in his own thoughts.

“This is an odd way to spend your minute,” Josh said. He was starting to enjoy himself.

“Yes, you’re right. What would you like to know?” said Jack.

“Tell me about yourself,” said Josh, offering a seat.

“In my old life I was a teacher. College to be exact,” Jack said.

“A professor?”

“Yes.” He lowered himself onto the couch.

“What did you teach?”

“Philosophy.”

“Why did you stop?” Josh said, taking a pull off his beer.

“I was laid off due to budget cuts. Just like most people these days. The state cut funding and people lost jobs,” Jack said. He took a drink of his beer and winced.

“I have a lot of friends who have gone through that.”

“Which brings me to the point of my visit. The group I represent has been working to find some solutions for the inequality in this country.”

“The occupy movement?”

“No but many of them have joined us in the past few months,” Jack took another drink but didn’t wince this time. “We are hoping for more and that’s where you come in.”

“The Citizens.” Josh had heard of them on IRC.

“We prefer The Citizens of the United States. But, yes, ‘The Citizens’ for short,” he said, looking more comfortable.

“I thought that was a group for ex-military.”

“We began primarily as a group for unemployed military personnel and laid off police officers. We are looking to expand however, help more people.”

“What kind of expansion?”

Jack seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “We are ... of the opinion that the government has abandoned most of us. We feel like they are allowing companies like Wellco to decide who lives and who dies.”

Josh leaned forward, drawn in.

“We think that someone needs to respond,” continued Jack. “We have decided to be that someone.”

“And you can because you have a lot of ex-military and police already on your side. Smart.”

“Exactly, and we are recruiting more,” Jack said as a smile oiled into his face.

“Where do I come in?”

“We need someone with the skills and knowledge of a black hat hacker but the values of a hacktivist. We believe you are that someone.”

Josh stood up and walked back to the fridge. He thought about the boredom that had crept back into his life lately. The thrill of possibility filled him as he pulled the cap off his second beer and stood in the kitchen for a moment. His rational side begged for consideration.

“What do you say, Josh?”

“No.”

Jack’s smile sank away.

“I can’t. I have a rule, no governments. Too much risk.”

“What are you risking?” said Jack, motioning at the crummy apartment around them.

The words were a slap of cold water. Josh took a nervous swig of beer and set down the bottle.

“Thank you for coming by,” said Josh.

Jack got up, his hands out in front of him, “Look, I respect your decision but can you at least tell me you will think about it?”

“No governments,” Josh motioned him to the door.

“Can I give you my number?”

“No, you need to go.”

Jack pulled a pen out of his pocket and leaned over the desk by the door. He jotted the number down on a random piece of mail. He handed it to Josh.

“You may find you want this later.”

Josh crumpled the envelope in his hand. “Thank you. Please leave.” Josh opened the door to the list of protests he wanted to prevent. Jack stepped out.

“Please reconsider.”

Josh shut the door. He walked the crumpled piece of paper to the wastebasket and opened the lid.

<<>>

The cell phone rang but sounded distant. Betty’s hand found it on the nightstand. She slid her finger across the screen, held it to her ear, and

mumbled a hello.

“Betty, I need you to get in here right now.”

“Wha- ... What’s the,” The words would not flow as she wasn’t yet conscious. Calls never came this early. Her body’s protests aside, she needed to rouse herself. It was the captain. His tone flat and authoritative.

“What’s the problem?” she said.

“...”

She pulled the phone from her ear and found he already hung up. She struggled with the monumental tasks of getting out of bed, pulling her hair back, and gathering herself into a gray zip-up and yoga pants. You didn’t have to love yoga to love the pants.

An hour later she sat in an unforgiving wooden chair in front of the captain’s desk. He just stared at her as she shifted her weight uncomfortably. The tension in the room was palpable.

“What’s up?” She needed to end the awkward silence.

“Betty, we have to let you go,” said the captain.

“Okay,” Betty felt her heart sink. It came out like an exhalation. She wouldn’t allow crying.

“As you may already know this department is faced with budget cuts. However, this decision was made when I learned you stole evidence.”

“...”

“The raid a couple of days ago where your team recovered the Wellco vaccine from...from...Mr Alvarez.” said the captain. He flipped through the pages of the open case file in front of him.

“...”

“A box of vaccines came up missing, a box you were supposed to secure. Do you admit this?” The captain continued despite her refusal to answer him. “We’ve questioned the men in your unit. All of them said that you were the one that took the syringes.”

“All of them?” she said.

“Yes, all of them. Look, we are not going to charge you. We don’t want an expensive investigation the department can’t afford. We feel letting you go will be enough. The union agreed to the deal yesterday.”

Betty did the math. She wasn’t going to roll on anyone because it wouldn’t make a difference. The tribe had spoken.

The captain looked uneasy but continued. “You did a great job for us while you were here. I’m sorry that things worked out this way.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s it.”

“Good,” she left his office with difficulty but did her best to hide it from the captain’s view. He didn’t deserve to see her struggle.

<<>>

Megyn Kelly sits in front of a window with Manhattan unfolding in the background, a wide smile directed to the studio camera. “Welcome back,” she says. “It seems not everyone has a problem with the high cost of the Ebola vaccine. The country’s most fashionable socialites have turned getting inoculated into this season’s most coveted invite. Our Keith Green reports.”

The camera switches to a nightclub where blond women are dancing, carrying martinis that slosh in the glass.

“It appears the price of the Ebola vaccine isn’t out of reach for everyone,” says Keith, in voice over. “Inoculation parties have become popular with the wealthy in many places around the country. Invitations to these exclusive events can cost up to \$80,000 and offer a chance to drink and rub shoulders with America’s elite. The invitation includes the vaccine, a full bar, gourmet hors d’oeuvres, and even a Botox treatment. The shots at the party you see behind me are being administered by a recent graduate of Stanford University.”

The camera pans past colorful drinks, spiky haired men with bare chests, beautiful women in sparkling dresses, and ends on a pile of syringes on a silver table. A young man in a white coat stands smiling next to the table.

“It’s fun,” says the doctor. Deafening music blares in background. “You are saving lives and making everyone beautiful. It feels great to know I’m helping.”

The camera cuts to a stunning woman in a sleek black dress. She says, “I am really busy. So when I can go out and...you know, get this out of the way at the same time, it’s awesome, right? It’s so much easier than going to a doctor’s office and waiting. I mean who has time for that?”

Keith asks a question off camera, drowned out by the pulsing music. “How did I afford to be here? My friend paid for me! Not my boyfriend but you never know!”

The camera shot widens to reveal a very tan, well dressed man smirking at the woman as Keith wraps the story and moves the broadcast back to Megyn.

“Thanks Keith,” Megyn says with her unwavering smile. “Just a reminder to everyone that today’s Ebola alert level is 8. Stay tuned for more information. If there is an outbreak reported anywhere in the country, we will have it here first on Fox News. Up ahead! Some people are calling it the most offensive birthday party ever. Thrown by who else? Kim Kardashian, of course. We’ll have all the pictures for you when we come back.”

<<>>

Betty’s mother was the kind of woman who thought of herself as supportive. She loved to tell anyone who would listen that she was Betty’s biggest fan. However, this had never moved beyond theory and into actual practice. As it turned out, Betty’s mother was only good at saying she was supportive.

“Honey, you shouldn’t have gotten me that shot. Really Betty we could have gotten those shots in a way that didn’t get you fired.”

“Mom, could we not do this right now.”

“What are you going to do, sweetie? Have you thought of that yet?”

“It just happened this morning, mom.” Betty was trying to understand her mom was just scared but couldn’t help regretting the decision to tell her she had been fired. She really didn’t need this shit right now.

“Well, honey, just remember that I’m here for you, okay? And there is no shame in washing dishes.”

“I am not gonna wash dishes.”

“Why not? You don’t think you are above it do you?”

“Mom, I was a SWAT cop for years. So, yes, I think there would be a degree of shame in washing dishes.”

“Your grandfather would never have thought himself too good to do anything, Betty. Let’s keep in mind that you just got fired. That does not put you in a position to be choosy.”

Betty decided to tune out the rest of the pep talk and walked outside. She wouldn’t hold this against her but it was taking all her strength to contain the sarcasm she wanted to hurl at her mother’s self-serving comments. There had been understanding and sympathetic looks when

Betty first got home. But hanging around the house all day had been an open invitation for continual browbeating.

Betty was three steps out the door when her phone rang. She didn't recognize the number but wasn't surprised. She had changed her work status to "unemployed" on Facebook around noon. There had been a rash of these calls since then.

"Hello?"

"Betty?"

"Yeah, who is this?"

"My name is Tyson, one of your former co-workers gave me this number."

Betty wasn't aware that any of them had her phone number. "Which one?"

"Officer Carlos."

"Oh did he?" she recognized the name as one of the guys in her unit. "Well you tell Manny that he can kiss my ass for flipping on me!"

"I'll pass it along."

"Good."

"The reason I am contacting you is that I represent an organization that supports laid off police officers."

"Sorry, but you've been misinformed. I was fired with cause, NOT laid off."

"The circumstances don't really matter. I was wondering if I could have some of your time."

"Well, I certainly have a lot of time on my hands. When?"

"I can meet now and get you the information I believe you will want. Does The Independent work for you?"

Betty considered her options. She could choose to meet a strange man in a downtown bar who just called her at random or go back inside.

"Yeah. On my way."

Her car was parked on the street and she thanked herself for grabbing her keys before she had left the house. She leaned in the door for a second and yelled. "Going to the bar!"

"Be careful, sweetie! You wouldn't want to drink too much and make a bad situation worse."

<<>>

She drove to the bar in blessed silence. As she walked inside she realized that she had forgotten a very important detail. She had no idea what this Tyson looked like. Getting sloppy already she thought as she called the last number on her cellphone.

A phone rang behind her. She turned around and was face to face with a black man that towered over her. His linebacker bulk was covered in a dark blazer with a red shirt underneath.

“Holy shit.”

“You must be Betty,” said Tyson.

“You’re huge.”

“Have a seat.”

They sat in a booth with wooden back seats. For the second time today she was uncomfortable and nervous, mostly because she didn’t know what to expect. She hated not knowing and wooden seats.

“So...Tyson, is it?”

“Yes.”

“The boxer or the chicken?”

“You have a sense of humor.”

“I’m under the age of 60 and live in Florida. You have to.”

“I represent an organization that could very much use a woman of your talents.”

“What organization?” she said, motioning to the waitress.

“You might have heard of us.”

“Well, we won’t know that until you tell me. Do I have to guess?”

“We’re called the Citizens of the United States.”

She grinned, “I think I’m already a member.”

Tyson laughed. “No, we have been reaching out to police officers that are victims of budget cuts and soldiers that have been unable to find jobs when they return to civilian life. We think it’s wrong that our fellow citizens who have served have such a hard time providing for their families. We think that companies like Wellco harm this country and we want to be part of the solution.”

“What do you plan on doing?” she said but held out a hand to pause his reply. “Hold on,” she looked at the waitress. “Smithwicks. What do you want Tyson?”

“I’m good.”

“Okay, a Smithwicks and he seems content to watch me get drunk.” The waitress nodded and walked away. Betty looked back at him, “Well, this rape is coming right along, isn’t it Tyson?”

Tyson was no longer smiling, “Betty, I need you to be serious.”

“Well, you’re asking for a bit much,” she said, looking worn. “I’ve had a rough day.”

“We are looking for your services. We need your help.”

“Exactly what are these services of mine you’re so desperate for?”

“We think the Wellco corporation is overcharging for that vaccine.”

A beer was placed in front of Betty and she took a drink. “Well, they are,” she said.

“You’ve been busting drug dealers for years. Have they ever sold vaccines before?”

“No.”

“A black market has been created, which means Wellco got greedy and everybody has to pay for it.”

Betty thought about the woman and the screaming infant, their lives forever changed in crossfire that had lasted seconds. Destroyed by a drug trade that revolved around medicine. This was something that was supposed to be kept within the sanitary safety of a doctor’s office, not peddled like meth from filthy living rooms blaring mob movies.

“What are you thinking?” she said.

“We need to act. We are going to take shipments from them and give the vaccine away for free.”

“Like Robin Hood,” she said with the bottle hovering near her lips. “Rob from the rich and give to the poor.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know,” Betty said, even though she was entertaining the thought. “What happens if I say yes?”

“We put you on a plane to Detroit.”

“Detroit? Sounds cold.”

“Wellco is in Detroit,” said Tyson. “We also have other strategic reasons for thinking Michigan is a good place to be.”

“Yes, but the cold,” she said taking another sip of beer. She was definitely thinking about it.

“It’s summer right now.”

“Does it pay?” Betty asked.

“Well, yes and no. Will you get a traditional paycheck? No, but you will be given everything you need.”

“So I get a place, food, clothes. What about my cell phone?”

“We have people involved with us who will take care of your bills.”

Betty sucked in a breath through her teeth, “I don’t think I can, sorry. I need to get back on my feet, maybe do some security stuff for a while. If I join you, as dazzling as this new life of crime sounds, it could really mess stuff up for me. Worse than it already is, if that’s even possible,” She said, trying to convince herself it was a bad idea.

“Okay. That’s it then,” Tyson nodded and pulled out a thick fold of cash. He peeled a bill off and dropped it on the table. Betty felt a knot in her stomach. She wanted to do it. She had heard of the Citizens. If you were a cop in the last year there was no way to avoid the stories of people going to Michigan to be advocates for the laid off, the searching, the hopeless.

It turns out they weren’t just some charity organization. They were building an army for a purpose, a great purpose. They were talking about not just being an advocate, but a warrior. A revolutionary. She loved the sound of that.

Tyson put his hand out in farewell, “It was great meeting you. Can I just ask you one last thing?”

“Sure. I wasn’t planning on wasting good beer.”

“The whole police thing. It’s protect and serve, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Who are you protecting?” said Tyson.

“Well, the people,” Betty said, confused.

“What people?”

“Everybody.”

“You seized those boxes of vaccine from a drug dealer. He was going to go and sell those on the street for far cheaper than what Wellco sells them for, right?”

Betty was silent. She took another swig of beer.

“So you stopped him from giving poor people a chance at what only the rich can afford. The greedy people who set the price so high in the first place.”

“What’s the point?” she said.

“You remove cocaine, marijuana and meth off the street,” said Tyson. “Which paves the way for the more expensive, and corporate, Oxycodone and Xanax. You stand in front of bullets so that someone else can get rich.”

Betty took another drink. What did he want her to say to all this?

Tyson continued. “You get paid the minimum for maximum hours. They take away your collective bargaining rights so they don’t have to pay for health insurance. You do all the work while they stay rich. The one time you do something to help yourself, to preserve your own life rather than look the other way and be thankful to do this work for them, they fire you. Seems a bit ungrateful for all you did.”

“That’s right,” Betty said with a beer rasp.

Tyson leaned forward. His giant frame blocked out the light from behind him, his face in shadow. “You’re their slave. You are property. You act how they want you to act. They pretend you have freedom but it’s only freedom to do what they tell you to do.”

The knot in Betty’s stomach grew into her throat.

“Go ahead and go back to being a cop in some other jurisdiction. You have no choice but to look for another job because they are making you dance. We are offering you the chance to respond to their demands in a way they do not expect.” Tyson smiled from ear to ear. “A slave revolt, if you will.”

“You...uh...You make some good points there.”

“Those are not my words Betty. They are from Max. I hope you will choose to meet him,” said Tyson.

Betty took another drink of beer as she thought about everything that would need to be done and the lie she would need to tell her mother before she left for Detroit.

SIX

The moon hung enormous in thick blue twilight. The humid air heavy, as evidence of the rain that had passed. A lazy breeze blew and bent the long brown grass. It was still waking up from a winter spent under the suffocating blanket of snow.

A large, white, unmarked truck drove east. Its sides stretched high in the air, dwarfing the bubble cab in front. The driver drove fast in the middle of the night to avoid any attention paid to the precious cargo. Russell held his arm out the open window as he drove, drinking in the clean night air while the headlights burned a yellow halo into the murky darkness.

Russell wore a smile, the open road ahead welcomed him. Not a soul in sight. He was in his element and couldn't believe his luck. He was hired to drive this truck only a few weeks before. It was the best Russell could hope for considering he hadn't graduated high school until he was old enough to buy beer.

Russell had always been a proud man, a self-sufficient man. But last year Russell was among the many in Michigan who had been swallowed by the wave of recession. He had swept floors at a warehouse in Brighton for fifteen years. His boss let him go when he found a company that would do it cheaper.

The shame of collecting unemployment didn't sit well with him. Every time he filed for a another week it announced some silent defeat.

Russell's parents were disappointed. They were always disappointed but this was worse. His father called him a leech. His mother called him a loser. Each visit was a fresh reminder of their judgement. His father wondered aloud why anyone would have a job when you can just take welfare from working people. Russell hung his head. He tried to explain that no one was hiring. He would have stopped visiting but needed the groceries.

Those days were over. Russell worked for Wellco now. It's the largest company in the world, Russell told his buddies. They showed their congratulations in the bar, lifted containers and sipped in his honor. Russell's friends were happy to see him get something, they had discussed their worries behind his back for months. Now they celebrated just as much as he did.

Russell's boss at Wellco told him he had been hired with high hopes. Russell loved hearing that. He was already making more money than he had ever made sweeping floors at the factory. This was a real job and a real wage, it even had real responsibility.

The job had a real gun.

He fell in love with the gun the first time he saw it at training. He lowered it into the holster on his hip and it felt like home. He loved the matte black finish and its weight in his hand. He felt the power when he pulled the trigger. It was like holding thunder. Russell always thought about having a gun but never had the money. Now that he had one, Russell wondered how he ever existed without it.

The first day Russell came home with his gun he immediately went to the mirror and found a new man looking back. He was a powerful man, a respected man. He pointed the gun at his reflection and said threatening things. It turned out that all he needed was a gun to complete himself and that gun was in his hand. Russell slept on his side so that he could look at it, the gun slept on the pillow next to him.

Something this amazing should not lay around, it was meant for greatness. This gun was meant to be a peacemaker. Russell's gun was meant to exact justice, not punch holes in a paper target. This gun was meant to kill bad people.

He drove down the highway, his hand found the gun in its holster. He stroked the grip, ran his finger to the hammer, and tapped it gently. He pushed the flat part of his finger down across the sight. It felt awesome. Like wildfire in your pocket.

"Russ?" said Craig. "You haven't said anything for a while. You okay?"

"It's Russell."

"Russell, right. Are you okay? You haven't said anything for a while."

"No. I mean, yes. I was just driving. Thinking," Russell shrugged with each syllable. He turned to Craig. "You haven't said anything either."

Craig swallowed. "I guess I haven't. Fair enough," Craig was new to the company, just like Russell. He had mentioned something about being a former police officer. Russell couldn't remember where. Craig was a distracted man, with a tendency to drift off when other people were talking.

Russell saw signs warning drivers of overnight construction. Orange reflective barrels narrowed the road to one lane. Russell drove in the construction zone for a couple of miles. They came to a truck sitting motionless between the barrels. He pressed the brake to slow, then stop.

"Ah shit," said Russell, his body jerked forward from the final brake press. "This always happens."

Russell turned to Craig and noticed beads of sweat on Craig's forehead. It wasn't hot.

"I'm sorry," Craig said.

Russell heard a click behind him. He turned around and noticed a pistol pointed straight at his head.

"Step out of the truck, please. Let me see those hands."

Russell was struck dumb. He watched out the windshield as the stopped truck opened. The men and women inside jumped down to the pavement. One man carried a chainsaw.

"Come on," said the man with the pistol. He pulled up the lock through the window and popped the door open from outside. Craig opened his own door and stepped out of the truck.

A blond woman dressed in black met Craig by his door and she waved her pistol to motion both of the Wellco employees to the front of the truck. "Get to your knees," She said.

The attackers formed a circle around two Wellco employees. Russell didn't count them, his eyes clouded with confusion. A man in a green baseball hat fumbled a walkie-talkie from his coat and nodded to the blond woman in black. "Theresa, get the tires. Matt, secure the firearms. Everybody else, start working on the contents of the truck."

Russell watched in horror while the stocky man with a military jaw line named Matt took his gun from the holster and tossed it to the dirt. It bounced gently before coming to a rest. Russell shuddered.

"Hey!" Matt said to Russell. "You with us?" Russell didn't understand.

"No, I am," said Craig.

Russell's confusion started to clear. The thought slithered like sludge and ate like poison. Russell's face felt hot, betrayed.

The man with the green hat looked down at a creased piece of paper he held with shaking hands. "Okay, so that makes you...Craig?" Craig nodded. "Nice work. If everything goes all right you leave with us. Just sit tight while we work all this out."

Russell didn't feel Matt's hands wrapping plastic restraints around his wrists. Craig looked over at him with apologetic eyes. He was saying something. Probably explaining why he would do this but the sound didn't get through. Russell felt like his ears were filled with foam. He heard his heartbeat and a throbbing lump in his throat.

The green hat guy pressed down the large rubber button in the middle of the walkie-talkie. Chirp. "One eight to Max."

"Go ahead one eight," Said the speaker.

Chirp. "Cargo's secure sir, loading it up right now."

"Ten four."

Russell heard none of this. His chest pounded, his eyes burned.

The gun lay in the dirt just ahead of the grassline on the side of the road. It reflected dull light from the headlights of the trucks. It looked helpless. Russell fixed his vision on the precious gun, rendered powerless without the care it needed. It just laid there in the almost wet dirt, pleading. It called to him. The gun wanted to be back, cradled by its master. Russell stared at the sacred metal on the ground. He listened.

Craig did this. Craig knew all along. He was quiet because he knew what was going to happen. Craig tricked you, Russell. Craig is a liar.

Craig is a bad person.

Russell didn't need to hear anything else. He lowered his bound wrists beneath him, lifted his ankles off the ground, and pulled his hands forward. I'm coming for you, he thought. The gun was pleased.

Russell lunged at the gun. His gun. Craig screamed for help but Russell already had the gun in his hands. It felt good. Russell turned back toward Craig. He pointed.

Russell squeezed the trigger. He saw the muzzle flash bright in the darkness and heard the crack echo toward the horizon. The sound of a chainsaw cranked behind him.

Craig fell backward to his elbows. His blue shirt turned red. Russell grinned with extended arms and watched Craig fall to the side. Evil punished by the peacemaker. The gun and its master were one.

The teeth of the chainsaw swept through Russell's arms. A spray of blood slapped Russell in the face. It was suddenly hard to blink. He looked down to see the arms still holding the gun drop to the dirt below. Russell saw what was left of his arms among the torn fabric of his uniform.

He felt cold. The chainsaw stopped. Russell heard the thieves yelling but he was having trouble understanding the words. It was a muffled sound, like they were yelling through a blanket. His vision got blurry and dark spots formed in his eyes.

Theresa's voice yelled. "What the fuck? Matt! You were supposed to be watching him!"

Matt rushed to Craig's side and was yelling too. Matt sounded desperate now "Craig! Are you hit? What happened?" Craig only answered in pathetic high pitched whimpers. The man in the green hat watched the red color on Craig's shirt grow darker.

"Of course he's hit! You should have been paying attention!" said Theresa

Russell looked down in front of him. Where his arms had been was now just hanging meat. Blood fell out of him in galloping gushes, clotting in the dirt and grass below. He was still on his knees. It was difficult to breathe.

Somewhere in the swirling distance, Russell heard the man in the green hat sputter into the walkie-talkie again. "One eight to Max!" he shouted.

"Yes?"

Chirp. "One driver shot, one of ours!"

There was a moment of silence before the speaker crackled back. "Use the saw to cover the bullet hole," Said the speaker with no sign of panic or distress. "Theresa is in charge for the rest of your operation. No more issues. I am so far disappointed in you."

Russell heard shouting and activity around him as he continued to stare at the stringy gore that only a second ago held the gun. The dark spots in his eyes were growing and he found it hard to concentrate on anything else. Behind him, the chainsaw started up again. He felt a kick and fell forward, his face bouncing hard off of the dirt.

He smelled gas. He blinked his vision clear and saw his gun. It now sat smoking and satisfied close to his cheek. His fingers were still curled around the trigger. Russell felt peace.

Somewhere on his body the teeth of the chainsaw tore him apart. The oily dark circles in his eyes spread and swirled around him. He stared at his gun, surrounded by a cyclone of black. Just the two of them, Russell and the gun, alone in the world, and then everything was gone.

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SEVEN

The camera swoops through the Situation Room and focuses on Wolf Blitzer standing in front of a video wall. He is circled by seven different video feeds with aerial shots of identical white box trucks, wreathed with yellow police tape. Camera flashes pop at random intervals in each of the feeds. People dressed in blue uniforms and black suits walk through grass and crane their necks. In every shot, a white sheet obscures evidence on the concrete behind the trucks.

The screens now begin to focus on close up shots of the multiple crime scenes as Wolf's voice is heard over the images.

“At this moment, we are following the stories of seven separate highway attacks all apparently executed simultaneously early this morning. We have confirmed that all the incidences involved delivery trucks belonging to the pharmaceutical company Wellco and were carrying shipments of the Ebola vaccine. As Christine Amanpour reported just a few hours ago, FBI sources are describing the sites of these attacks as grisly scenes. Each truck appears to have been forced to stop, their drivers hauled out of their cabs and murdered by the side of the road, brutally butchered with chainsaws. The cargo was then stolen. A note stabbed to the side of each truck read: ‘Liberated by the Citizens of the United States of America.’ The Citizens is the well known advocacy group representing unemployed police officers and former military members. Up until now the Citizens were not known to have committed any acts of violence. These incidents are being described as ‘sophisticated’ due to what appears to be carefully planned coordination and precision timing. Let me bring in FBI profiler Cliff Van Zandt. What do you think we are seeing here?”

The camera focuses on Van Zandt. “Obviously, what we are seeing here is a group of people that came very prepared for the kind of operation that

was meant to grab the maximum amount of attention. If these attacks truly are the work of the Citizens, this is a major problem for US law enforcement. This group is heavily populated with men and women that possess intimate knowledge of the police, the procedures of their departments and also military operations. This may make it almost impossible to investigate both the group's movements and its individual members. Officials are hoping the Citizens believe the Wellco Corporation has received their message loud and clear and that this proves to be their first and last act of senseless violence. However, law enforcement needs to be vigilant because an organization that can pull off a complex undertaking like last night's attacks is capable of much more."

"FBI profiler, Cliff Van Zandt, thank you very much," says Blitzer. "Obviously, we will continue to bring you details on this unfolding story."

<<>>

Josh let the door close behind him and sat down on the stoop. The complex was dark and lights hummed from street lamps over head. Windows opened on various lighted apartments, their activity echoed across the courtyard. Yellow squares stacked like speaker boxes played songs of various family trauma. Mothers adjudicated disagreements between unreasonable children and people clapped at baseball games on TV. The scenario formed a symphony of sound that wafted down to where Josh sat.

Most nights Josh spent a moment enjoying the exasperated cacophony but tonight he had to think. He saw the reports on the news. The Citizens intercepted a million doses from the Wellco trucks they hijacked. Josh turned Jack's words over in his head. He wanted to agree to it then, but had turned it down on principle. The 'no governments' rule was more excuse than anything else. Any act of hacking is an act against the government in some way.

Josh first got involved in Anonymous as penance for his black hat transgressions. He had helped with their attacks on HBGary and Sony, punishing corporations for using their money as a blunt instrument. When Anonymous joined the Arab Spring, Josh stayed away, no governments. Their accomplishments that summer shook the mouth of the Nile and the reverberations resonated in every corner of every continent. He always regretted sitting on the sidelines because he was too afraid to dance.

After Wellco started selling the vaccine to the wealthy, it looked like fertile and familiar ground. He jackhammered his way into the Wellco mainframe and sent paid orders to schools. Sid probably passed his name to Jack because of that particular hack, thinking that Josh would leap at the opportunity. What Sid hadn't anticipated was Josh's cowardice.

He swallowed to finish the first of the two beers he had brought out and set the bottle on the concrete. The group Jack had spoke of was familiar to Josh. The Citizens were well known among Anonymous circles. They had been known as a peaceful advocate group, but there had long been rumors the group had higher ambitions.

Josh looked into the courtyard. Beams of light from above hung humid in the air as a haze of insects circled and swarmed to bathe in the glorious bright. He removed the top from his second beer. There was a stillness that mixed with the sounds of mothers and children in the one bedroom coffins surrounding the yard. For a decade he made his fortune as a black hat in the shadows. He hid in the darkness and away from the glory. Josh decided it was his turn to bathe in the bright.

He got up off the stoop and returned inside. He grabbed the crumpled envelope he had tacked to the fridge. He smoothed it and picked up his phone.

EIGHT

A week later, Josh pulled his car into a parking spot across the street from the address Jack had given him. He turned the GPS off on his phone to save battery, pocketed it, and stepped out into the blazing sun.

The gate was open on the giant property, fenced at the edges with a suggestion of chain link. The buildings were organized by an absent mind. They stood haphazard facing the inside and outside at odd angles. Every building was a series of garages, painted with thoughtless slaps of blue and orange.

Josh heard voices rising from the back and turned a corner to find them. The Citizens. There were no signs or logos that would announce their presence, but you could recognize them from the knowledge of what they were. Young men and women, only a few above 40, all mixing with cheer. It certainly didn't look like the terrorist group the news had been haranguing the last couple of days. They had the chiseled chests and arms suggesting men and women of uniform.

You could tell where they worked by what they were wearing. Sanitation jumpsuits mingled with business casual. Firefighter caps with service industry polos. A wide swath of demographic, the proverbial all walks of life. And there were many of them. The sound of their voices combined to a clamor that could be heard down the street.

The gathering centered on a single storage facility whose door yawned open near the center of the crowd. Josh approached it, walking past the many different uniforms. The Citizens had become far too large to be confined to the storage garage.

“Josh!” called Jack, somewhere.

Josh turned to find him and nodded to acknowledge.

“Welcome aboard,” said Jack, beaming with pride.

“You have a lot more people than I thought.”

“I need you to come with me,” said Jack with a folder in his hand. He turned and walked toward the open garage and Josh followed. They turned their shoulders around groups of men and women conversing casually, moving deeper into the garage. They finally arrived at a corner in the back where a hurried collection of desks sat grimy and cobwebbed.

A much smaller collection of people posed around the desks. They stood shifting on their feet and not talking. They all held folders. In the corner of his eye, he saw pink. Jack stopped and turned to Josh.

“These are the other newbies. We get a couple more every week, these days,” said Jack, motioning to the people standing around. Jack handed a folder to Josh. “I know that it seems weird that we keep records on our members but Max likes to keep everything well organized. You will see that most of this has already been filled out, but make sure we have everything correct and bring it back to me.”

Josh took the folder but didn’t look at Jack. The pink had caught his eye again. It was a woman. She was about his height, an athletic frame clearly visible through a tight t-shirt and dark capris. Her skin had a slight tan and she had a small, sparkling stud piecing in her nose.

The color that had drawn his gaze was her hair. It was electric pink. It stood out even in the dim light of the garage. She had gathered it into braids, some tucked behind her ear while others fell into her face. Somewhere in the distance, Jack said something.

She was laughing. She had green eyes, and they squinted when she laughed.

“Okay, I am guessing it’s the hair,” she said.

Josh didn’t say anything even though he knew her comment had been directed at him. She made him nervous to talk.

“I just did it, it came out brighter than I thought.” she said.

Josh stared back at her. He struggled for words.

“You’ve got the new person folder, too. I just got here yesterday,” she continued despite Josh’s silence.

“Hi,” he said finally.

“Hi yourself. What’s your name?” she said.

“Josh.”

“I’m Betty.”

“Betty?”

“Yeah, I know. I am probably the first Betty you’ve met that isn’t 100.”

“Yeah.”

“So you think the hair is a little much? I decided if I am going to do all this revolutionary stuff, why not go nuts, right? I got this too,” she pointed at her nose.

“No, it looks great. I mean, you look great. You really pull it off.”

Betty laughed. “Thank you, Josh. Do you always flirt at work or just with girls with pink hair?”

“Uh... well...” Josh felt caught.

“So,” she said, letting him off the hook, “did Tyson recruit you too?”

“No, Jack did,” he said.

“Oh, I haven’t met him. I haven’t really met anybody but Tyson yet.”

“What does he look like?”

“Like Manute from Sin City. The Michael Clarke Duncan character from the second part with the hookers.”

“I knew who you meant. I love that movie.”

“Cuz it’s awesome,” she said.

“So does that mean he only has one eye?”

“Well no, he’s just a giant bald black guy who looks menacing. But he’s super nice and smart.”

“Yeah, I don’t see anybody that looks like Manute.”

“Okay!” said a loud voice near the door.

The crowd came in closer. The people outside pushed their way in. The conversations turned from casual to an excited buzz as the Citizens took places in the garage and held them. Jack’s voice was shouting in the distance. “Okay, we are ready. We are ready. We are all here.” He said, sounding both excited and nervous.

A small circle was left in the middle of the room with a clear path for a single file line to enter from outside the garage. Jack walked through it to the circle, followed by two others.

Josh and Betty were pushed closer by the mass of bodies. They stood on their tiptoes and craned their necks to see. Betty pressed her knuckles into Josh’s back. “That’s Tyson.”

Josh saw him. “Good call on the Manute thing,” he whispered.

“I know, right?” she said.

There was one more walking down the line. The buzzing crowd hushed. Josh guessed him to be in his early 30s. He was thin, wearing sunglasses and stubble on his face. He had a full head of brown hair, buzzed evenly. He was dressed casually in a t-shirt and jeans.

“I think that’s Max,” Betty whispered.

Jack stood on a folding chair. “Wow, so many of you now. The big news is that this is our second to last meeting here before we move on to the next location, the expo center in Birch Run.” The crowd murmured. Betty shrugged at Josh to indicate she had no idea where that was.

“Yes, I know,” Jack continued, “it’s a little far north, but we need the central location. We think we are likely to get the most people there. Now of course, if you watch the news, you know that we had a successful lift of vaccine. Between the trucks and the supply that we have purchased, we estimate we now have over 2 million doses.”

The Citizens cheered. The sound was deafening against the tin walls of the storage garage.

Jack waved his hands to quiet them. There was a slight hush but the crowd was impossible to silence. “We are now able to start the new program. If you or your families still need to be inoculated, please let us know. Also, inform your friends who are still active police or military that if they need to be inoculated, we will do it. If they need members of their families inoculated, we will do that for them, too.”

More loud cheers. Brilliant, thought Josh.

Jack admonished the crowd again. “Okay, okay, quiet please. So if you need help with that, see me or Danton. We all know who Danton is, right?” Many in the crowd confirmed. “Our last meeting next week before the move is going to be very special. Please be here and bring everyone you know.” The crowd buzzed a little louder. “Okay everyone, Max has a few words for you.”

Whispers went through the crowd like electricity. Some shushed the talking person nearest them. Others whispered, “Max”.

Jack got down off the chair. Max did not replace him. He stayed on the ground.

“Thank you, Jack,” He said. The crowd was dead silent. “The operations the other night went well. Some of you participated in them. Whenever we do these things, you must hold yourself to a high standard. You only have to

turn on the TV to understand what is happening here. Your actions are shaping history. They will be written into songs, your names memorized. Your actions, every one of them, are rocking this world to its core. Presently. Not in some far away future that will never materialize, right now. So make sure that you understand that when you act, history is watching. Those people, out there, watching us, they don't know what you know. What we know. They are not aware yet. They have been asleep for a century. You are shaking them awake."

There was a second of silence, and then a deafening cheer.

Betty looked at Josh. "Wow," she said.

"Thank you," said Max and the crowd fell quiet immediately. "Now, where is Josh?"

Josh held his hand in the air with a sudden twist in his stomach.

"There you are. I need to speak with you. Josh comes to us from the famous Anonymous hacktivist group. He is going to be very valuable in the next phase. We are glad he is with us."

Excited faces turned to Josh from all over the room, smiling with religious enthusiasm. Betty poked him in the back. "There you go, Mr. Man!"

Max looked peaceful. He held his hand up, "That's all."

The room started filing out. Some of the Citizens lingered outside the garage, others went right for their cars and home. Jack and Max looked in Josh's direction.

Josh looked at Betty. "I think I have to go. When am I going to see you again?"

"Whenever, I don't really have anywhere to go. I guess I'm just going back to the hotel room they got for me." She said. She spoke fast like she was running out of time.

"What's your number?" Josh said, taking out his phone. She gave it to him. He pushed send. "That's mine."

Betty's phone rang. "Cool. Cool. Well, okay. I will let you get to your big shot meeting or whatever." She walked away. Josh watched.

<<>>

The garage was empty. Jack beckoned Josh over to him.

"Josh, this is Max," he said, and moved out of the way.

"That was quite a speech."

Max shook away the compliment. “I don’t like to waste people’s time. I tell them the truth,” he said. “When you tell people the truth these days it sounds like a revelation.”

“Oh,” said Josh. He didn’t know how to respond.

“How long were you with Anonymous?” Max asked.

“About a year.”

“What did you do before that?”

“I worked.”

“So you don’t have a job now?”

Josh felt a little unsettled by the questions. Max had no emotion at all in his voice. “Well...I don’t have a...no.”

“So what did you do in your work before you joined Anonymous? Were you a black hat hacker?”

Josh felt a twinge of shame in his stomach. He hadn’t felt this way when Jack brought it up. “You did research on me?”

Max nodded his head. “My people are thorough. You were never caught?”

“Because I’m good.”

“You worked alone?”

“Well, no. Not at first but...you learn things.”

“Where are your accomplices?”

“They are in jail, mostly.”

“Mostly, or all of them?” asked Max.

Josh felt his pulse get quicker. Max was listening to every word. People don’t usually listen this closely to what you say. Josh felt surrounded. “Yeah, they are all in jail.”

“Why aren’t you with them?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s the first lie you’ve told me.”

Josh felt the blood drain from his face.

“You have been honest until right then,” said Max. “You set them up to take the fall, didn’t you?”

Josh didn’t answer.

“I don’t mind you lying to me Josh,” said Max, taking off his sunglasses. “It means you want to be part of our group and will bend the record of your history if you have to. I have respect for that.”

“How did you know?”

“Because I listen. I pay attention. I never stop listening and paying attention. People have no idea how much information they miss by thinking about other things,” said Max.

“...”

“I just need to know that you aren’t going to do anything like that to us.”

“I won’t.”

“Good, let’s talk about how you can help us. I am taping a message next week. I need that message to be heard by as many people as possible.”

Jack joined the conversation, “We were wondering about those digital billboards on the side of the highways. Can you access them?”

Josh snapped out of his haze. Max had shaken him. “Yeah,” he said, “That shouldn’t be a problem but they might not all have sound.”

Jack looked at Max. “Is that a problem?”

“We need the images,” said Max. “Enough to attract the media’s attention.”

“Then we put the file on the Internet,” said Josh, catching on.

“Any ideas?” said Max.

“Well, for every billboard you need a person with a smart phone.”

“We can do that,” said Max. “How long will it take to train them?”

“No training, we just need someone to turn on their WiFi and stand next to the billboard. I can do the rest with a smart phone app.”

“How long does all this take?”

“Couple of days. I need to write the code and then hide it in an established app. Both Apple and Google are written in UNIX so I should be able to get it uploaded in a couple of days.”

Max looked at him. He almost had a smile on his face. “I guess it’s time for me to get to work on the message, then. I need your cellphone number, Josh.”

“I put it on the paper,” said Josh, waving the folder out in front of them. Jack grabbed the folder.

Max pulled out his phone. “The papers are to remind me who we have in the organization. Different backgrounds, skills, etc, I am going to remember where your talents lie. You will be very important in everything we do after this.”

“That’s awesome,” said Josh.

“Do you have any questions for me?” said Max.

“Just a couple. Why are we going to Birch Run?” said Josh.

“The distribution of the vaccine will be there because it is well north of Detroit and in a centralized location. We are using the vaccine distribution to gain more members, then we plan on taking control of Detroit.”

Josh nodded.

“I am sure you are wondering why Detroit,” said Max. “They have hardly any police force or infrastructure in that city anymore. The economic recessions have left it vulnerable. If we can take over one city, we can be in the position to make a real difference. People will join us then.”

“People will join us in Detroit?”

“Detroit will be a very different place after we get there. Plus, it’s an easy win for our organization. People join when you are winning.”

“One more question?”

“That’s fine.”

“What’s with the chainsaws?”

“Understand,” said Max. “That we only use violence because we have to. The people we are up against are firmly entrenched.”

“I understand.”

“We use the chainsaws for two reasons. First, they do a lot of damage very quickly. It gives the target a quick ending. No suffering,” said Max. “Second, if I shoot or stab someone, I am just a common thief. The use of a chainsaw is a deliberate act. Our weapon of choice forces the observer to wonder about our motivation. That’s the point.”

It was brilliant, thought Josh.

“Josh I won’t take up any more of your time. It is important I leave you to your work but I will need frequent updates about the app you are building.”

Josh took a second to process this, then realized Max was telling him to leave. “Okay. I will get to work on that.”

“Good to have you with us,” said Max.

Josh walked out of the garage to his car. He felt power. His decision to come out of the shadows now felt like the right one. He could barely contain his excitement when he turned the key and put the car in drive.

He repeated the phrase over and over again in his head. We will shake the world awake.

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NINE

Hacking digital billboards is easy. They are all controlled by the same Verizon box. In the rare cases that the box is different, they still use the same standard interfaces. For hackers, the best thing about all the cell companies merging was the move to consolidate equipment and technology. As soon as you knew how to crack one, you could crack them all. The Verizon units all had WiFi so they didn't have to pay a technician to make changes. Just send a guy with a laptop and he doesn't even have to get out of his truck.

For Josh, tonight would be programming, debugging, and beer. Max and his new role with The Citizens were not the only things on his mind though. How could they be, when there was Betty. The woman that had floored him in the corner of the storage garage. He mustered up some courage and sent a text.

Josh: Hey.

He set the phone down and walked away, nervous. Josh was a computer nerd but he wasn't completely estranged from women. He had a few girlfriends, nothing serious, and the occasional late night tumbling encounter with girls he met in the bars of Ann Arbor. In the world of computer nerds, he did very well. Having a lot of money helps. But Betty, that was something far more interesting. She was just...awesome. His stomach flipped when the phone vibrated. No woman had ever made him this nervous.

Betty: Hey yourself

Josh: What are you up to tonight?

Betty: Playing a game called “Oh my god what is that smell in this hotel room?”

Betty: I am open to other suggestions.

Good sign, thought Josh.

Josh: I have a long night of coding ahead of me.

Betty: Awesome!

Josh: I think you are being sarcastic.

Betty: No, not at all! (Insert heavy sarcasm)

Josh: lol

Josh: Want to keep me company?

Betty: Sitting around and watching you work on a computer. Enchanting. :)

Josh: Well there’s also alcohol and weed.

Betty: I have to get ready, where do you live?

Josh: Well that worked!

Betty: Baby, that will always work.

<<>>

Jack’s apartment looked like a thrift store. There was an old style green couch with deep buttons, and a quilt draped over it that looked like a lead apron from a dentist’s office. Max was on his cellphone and Jack sat in a

white wingback chair with wooden legs, waiting for Max to end his call. Tyson stood by the door in silence. His frame was huge in the dark.

Jack and Max had formed a friendship when his career as a professor came to an end. The two men had met in DC during what journalists and economists now call the “Great Recession”. Jack washed ashore in the nations capital out of options. Reports of a bounty of government jobs had been exaggerated. Websites and bulletin boards told tales of entry level embarrassment. He answered a Craigslist ad for political canvassers and showed up on a heavy humid summer afternoon to the address listed.

Canvassing is easy work if you can get it. Every cause from Greenpeace to the AFL-CIO has a canvassing operation in DC. Choose any street in the city and you’re likely to run into some young person waving a clipboard and asking for “monthly gifts”. It’s the equivalent of a fast food job in any other city, only those jobs don’t require you to chase down people as they stride to something important.

The applicants were herded into a powder blue room and seated in flimsy chairs above a cafe near Dupont Circle. Wide eyed twenty-somethings with hipster clothes addressed the applicants as a whole. One by one they would be taken behind a door and interviewed, but before that happened they first needed to fill out the paperwork. Jack remembered hoping that the person on the other side of the door would be armed, and without hesitation, blow his fucking brains out.

In the powder blue room, Jack noticed Max. They nodded at each other and passed the time by chatting. They talked about politics, the bailout, and other relevant news topics. Jack was stunned at the depth of his knowledge. They both lasted about a week canvassing, but it only took that week to become friends.

Max and Jack talked endlessly about history, art, and civics. They had heated conversations about the state of the union. Jack drank at Kramerbooks and debated with Max at Busboys and Poets. The conversation kept coming back to the same thing, there was need for change. Not an elected change, either. Elections didn’t work anymore. There needed to be a change in philosophy and that could only be done by force.

It started with Max on the Facebook pages of former military and police officers, asking questions. They started meeting and organizing, gathering

and promoting. Jack went on television interviews as a spokesperson for police and soldiers. They visited Clarksville, Tennessee and Fort Bragg. They struck up random conversations with people in Waffle Houses and Chick-Fil-A. Everywhere they went, they gathered more people for the cause.

They relocated to Michigan when the state started cutting police and fire by the hundreds. They bolstered their numbers with unemployed ex-soldiers from Flint, Saginaw, Grand Rapids, and Ann Arbor. They met and gathered, they planned and they organized. They worked social media and spoke at VFW halls. They passed out flyers at police stations and Max monitored the papers for budget cuts. They met Tyson near Detroit and he was part of the planning process less than a month later.

When Max and Jack first conceived of the Citizens, the idea was pure. Win over the population with the strength of ideas. Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. changed history forever without a drop of violence and Jack thought they could achieve long term change the same way. Since the operation with the trucks, that philosophy had shifted.

“Danton says we can get two hundred guys at different billboards,” said Max as he clapped his phone closed.

“Has Josh finished with the code?” asked Jack.

“I haven’t called him.”

“I agree. Best to let him work on it.”

“I need to focus on what I am going to say.”

“Are you done with it?” said Jack.

“I have been working on it my whole life,” Max said. He headed to the door.

“If there is anything that you need me to do,” said Jack as he followed, “please let me know.”

Max stopped at the door and turned to him. He slapped a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I have this handled but thank you.”

TEN

Josh coded in his apartment alone. He added lines, copied and pasted from others. He scanned through the different blinking letters in the black window open on his workstation. He grabbed his phone and sent a text to Max.

Josh: Should be done in three days.

Max: Applications?

Josh: Task Killer on Android. Everyone has it even tho they don't need it anymore. Probably Mint on iOS, working on it.

Max: Talk soon.

Josh put down the phone and turned back to the screen. At 7:00, Betty said she would be over as soon as she got ready. He looked at the clock, 9:20. Time crawled by. Was she still coming over? Should he text her and ask? Would that be overstepping? Would she think he was a psycho?

She did just meet him this afternoon and now he was asking her over. The second he asked he wished he hadn't. Looking eager, in Josh's experience, was a bad thing. The last thing a woman wants to see is a guy being vulnerable.

He had cleaned his house for an hour. He sprayed the linoleum and moved the piles of clothes. He vacuumed insomuch as he turned it on and rolled it back and forth a few times.

He went back to work on code but found it hard to concentrate. He clacked at his keyboard for what seemed like eternity. He finally gave into

his restlessness and took another shower. He didn't think tonight would end up in sex but best to be prepared. He grabbed the condoms he had bought earlier and drawered them in his bedroom.

He looked at the clock again, 9:25.

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At 9:45 his phone rang. Josh's heart went into his throat. His hand was shaking as his thumb dragged across the glass. "Hello?" The voice on the other end only made him more nervous.

"I'm here. Which one is yours?"

He leaned backward and looked out the door of the balcony. He craned his neck to see the parking lot, where a pair of tail lights glowed through the smeared glass. "I see you. I'll come out and meet you."

"Okay."

He hung up and looked around his apartment one more time. The lotion on the computer desk might give the wrong impression, he thought. He grabbed the white bottle with the blue cap and put it in the bathroom.

Down the steps to the security door and he was outside. She emerged from the car and walked toward him. The smile on Josh's face would be there for a while. "Hey," he said.

"Hey you. So this is where you live?" she seemed a little awkward.

"Yep."

"It beats my hotel."

"I take it you found the place."

"Nothing gets past you. This must be why you got a one on one with Max."

"Must be," said Josh with a laugh.

"Well, you promised me coding...and other things, not standing outside all night," she said.

Josh nodded. He turned around. He hoped that he wasn't blowing this by being too nervous. She followed him, carrying a backpack.

They went through the door and Betty laughed. "This is definitely a guy's apartment."

Josh stammered, "What does that mean? Is that bad or ..."

"No...no, it's just...pretty much what I was expecting."

"Good, hate to surprise anybody. I like keeping people off their toes," he said as he walked to the kitchen. "Beer?"

“Always,” she said. She took in the apartment.

He wrenched one open for her and himself. “So what got you involved with this Citizens thing?” he asked from the kitchen.

“I got fired from the SWAT. That guy Tyson contacted me and asked if I wanted to join. So now...’ she trailed off a second when he emerged from the kitchen, ‘I’m here.”

Josh handed Betty the beer and they clinked bottles.

They drank in silence for a few minutes. Josh didn’t know how to interpret this, crossed the room, and sat in front of the computer.

She walked up behind him, “So how far along are you?”

Josh grabbed his mouse. “Here’s the app,” he said as he pulled up the emulation window. “All you have to do is turn your Wifi on and then any video you play on the phone will play on the billboard.”

“How do you know it’s going to connect?” she said.

“The app connects automatically. Those digital boards all run on the same equipment.”

“What happens after you walk away?” she said.

“Well, I like to say, ‘kill the prisoners’,” he said.

“I get all hot when a man quotes the Khmer Rouge,” she said and took a drink.

Josh laughed at Betty’s dark humor. No wonder she made him nervous, he thought. Every word she said made her more amazing. “In this instance, it means a line of code that breaks the device after you log out. Think of it like a virus that freezes whatever screen its on and stops it from working. That’s what I did in this app. I have a line here that tells the OS to repeat the image infinitely. It basically freezes itself. You have to cut power to get it off the board.”

“Cool,” she said. “and this works for every phone that has that app on it?”

“Starting tomorrow,” he said.

“What if two people are trying to do it at the same place?” she said.

“Well, in that instance, we have to hope that there aren’t two people near the same billboard using WiFi and trying to play videos,” he said. “It would be rare, but still a risk.”

She took a drink. Even the way she drinks is cool, thought Josh.

“Pretty impressive,” she said.

Josh was finally getting comfortable. “Well, seeing as how you took so long to get here...”

“Fuck off. I had to get ready,” she said. “It takes time to pick just the right outfit to sit around an apartment and watch an elite from Anonymous code stuff.”

“I’m surprised you agreed to it.”

“Well, I can certainly get my ass out of here if you think this is beneath me.”

He held his hands out, desperate not to give that impression. “No! No, I totally want you here.”

“You’re easy,” she said as she fell back into the couch. She looked very pleased with herself. “Nice to know if I protest you fold like a kicked tent. Pussy.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

She likes me, thought Josh.

“So what’s your deal, Josh?” She held out the “sh” sound with her barely detectable southern accent.

“Like what, with Anonymous?”

“Whatever.”

He told her everything. She was the easiest person to talk to he had ever met. She was self-deprecating and funny. She laughed at his jokes. They sat drinking beer and talking about movies and TV.

She pointed at him. “You...,” her speech was a little loose from the beer. “got major points for knowing about Manute.”

Josh shook his head. “How could anyone not know Sin City?”

“Because we live in a country where *Grindhouse* was a flop but there are five fucking Air Bud movies,” she said shaking her head.

“There are five Air Bud movies?” said Josh, joining her on the couch.

“It’s not something that is mentioned in polite society,” she said with her eyes closed. “But we’re getting to know each other over beer. I felt you could handle the truth.”

Her pink braids hung in her face. Through the braids, her smile was thrilling. He couldn’t believe she was there.

“So, what’s your deal, Betty?”

She seemed relaxed and buzzed. “What’ya mean, what’s my deal?”

“Well, I just told you about me, now I want to know about you,” said Josh.

“What’ya want to know?” she said.

“You were on the SWAT team.”

“Yep, I’m fuckin badass,” she said with a slur.

Josh thought the next question was obvious. “Did you ever kill anyone?”

“Only bad guys,” she said. She stared at the beer bottle perched on her lap.

“Wow.” Josh got another thrill. “What’s that like?”

“I never had that thing where I shot someone and regretted it. Everyone I ever shot had a gun in their hand. It bothers some people, but not me.”

“So it was always self defense.”

“Don’t worry Josh. I don’t plan on killing you. Not unless you ask me to watch *Eat, Pray, Love*.”

He laughed. “Did you get the Ebola vaccine already?”

She darkened a bit. “Yeah.”

“Did you have to pay for it?”

She took a drink of beer and swallowed it slowly. “In a way.”

Her words hung in the air for a minute, obvious to both parties. A bubble of awkwardness formed and occupied the air between them. Josh noticed a scenario playing out in Betty’s mind.

“I don’t want to talk about that now,” she said. She turned to Josh on the couch and laid her legs across his. She grabbed his hand and looked him in the eyes. “Is that a problem?”

“Nope,” he said and meant it. He wasn’t sure what the problem was she was asking about and he didn’t care. Not with her legs draped across him like that. A subject change seemed like the proper remedy. “So do you like working in a storage garage?”

Her laugh broke the tension, which shattered in all directions. “There are so many rats in that fucking place I could be Cinderella. The whole musical number and everything.”

Their combined laughter came in like a wave, and as it subsided the moment slowed down. They shared a comfortable silence where they just stared at each other. She curled one leg, lifted herself across the couch and straddled him. He leaned in to kiss her but she pulled back abruptly.

“Listen,” she said, “this isn’t something I do, okay? I just know what I want.” She ran her hand down his face. “As soon as I saw that face...and

your eyes. I get all girly when you look at me with those eyes.”

His heart was racing, she was so beautiful and she was here. “Well, then never stop looking in my eyes.” The phrase sounded almost smooth when it came out.

“Good answer.” She leaned in and kissed him, then paused for a moment. “I hope you don’t mind if I don’t put on the brakes.”

He looked right back at her, swimming in those green eyes. “I am into this just as much as you are.”

She pulled him forward and they kissed. He gripped her shirt and pulled it over her head. He fumbled at her bra with shaking hands and couldn’t quite unhook it. She reached back and snapped it off. He pulled his shirt off and felt warm skin on skin. He kissed her deeply, she tasted like home. Finally after several minutes of kissing, exploring, and shedding of every bit of clothing, he asked with no breath, “Do you want to go to the bedroom?”

She got off the couch and stood waiting, naked in the dark. He led her by the hand through the apartment to the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

ELEVEN

Betty never went back to the hotel. She tried to make Josh's place a little more aesthetically pleasing but gave up within a day. She spent her time smoking pot on the couch and watching Josh code. She told him she wasn't worried about living in the ratty apartment because they were moving to Birch Run soon anyway.

The week passed quickly. Josh finished the phone app later the next morning, uploaded it, and sent Max a text to let him know it was done. Max responded with the information about the next meeting in the storage garage. Betty was impressed that he had Max's cell phone number. With his work completed, Josh could spend all of his time with Betty, and that first week was very good.

They stayed up late playing video games and watching movies. Josh's favorite was *The Big Lebowski* and Betty's was *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. They were equally impressed with each other's selections. Sex always followed these revelations of like minds.

It was hot on the day of the next meeting. Late spring had given way to early summer and the sun bludgeoned the earth below. The radio reported record temperatures all around the country. When Josh and Betty arrived at the storage facility, he broke into a woozy sweat the second he stepped out of the car. She laughed at him when he complained about how hot it was, and told him Florida was much worse. But even she waved a hand in front of her face in the storage unit, the metal roof turned the whole thing into an oven.

The crowd of Citizens was massive. Police closed off part of the roads to accommodate the foot traffic and said nothing about the obvious fire code violations. The Citizens didn't just consist of laid off cops anymore. It appeared people on the job were starting to join the ranks. Josh wondered if

they could call themselves the resistance if they had control of the police but didn't deny it would certainly make things a lot easier.

Danton, an average sized black man with muscles and tattoos approached them. He organized people, which was a nice way of saying he told people where to stand. He basically ran errands for Max and Jack.

"Betty," said Danton. "I need you to keep an eye on the street."

She looked disappointed, but she was a good soldier. "Okay." She looked at Josh and squeezed his hand before she walked back to the road.

Tables that had been inside the garage were moved out into the parking lot and now cooked in the direct sun. In the rear of the storage facility was a backdrop and near the middle was a digital RED camera that stood on a tripod. Josh had no idea how they were able to get their hands on such a sophisticated piece of equipment but one thing was perfectly clear, the Citizens were an organization with some serious reach.

Jack moved around with purpose. His shirt and hair were drenched in sweat like he took a shower in his clothes. He barked orders to the young men near the backdrop about the light reflector and told Max to stand still. Max took the orders in silence. He carried a bouquet of white copy paper and would occasionally wrap it into a roll and release. He stood with his eyes closed, rolling his head from side to side. He was calm and dry, not a drop of sweat visible in the vicious heat.

The atmosphere was tense. Most people were hurried and nervous. There was a definite urgency in the air. The world was watching. News channels churned on a 24 hour basis about the truck mission. Scores of anchors and reporters mentioned the Citizens in hushed tones. Some of the media called them terrorists and murderers, but more asked if their actions compared to Robin Hood and his Merry Men. Josh was surprised there were no media at the storage facility. Maybe that's why there were so many police present.

Josh had only been part of the organization for a week but had already decided to keep his mouth shut. The group was clearly very good at what they did and there was no reason for him to rock the boat with questions.

Jack looked the most nervous. He shouted "We need more light!" to no one in particular and the people holding the reflector would react. He paced and made clicking sounds with his mouth. After what seemed like forever

he spat words at the room. “Okay. Are we ready?” No one answered. “Well, let’s huddle up.”

The group formed a hasty circle around Jack.

“This is the moment where it all begins. Everything that has come before has been building to this. And...” The words came haltingly like waves slapping on the side of a boat. “I just want to thank everyone for all the hard work. That’s first...um...” he was searching. “After today...this is real. The beginning of our liberation, the beginning of the country’s liberation. If you are unsure, this is the last chance to walk away.”

No one moved. They knew the time to back out had ended with the trucks and the chainsaws. No one felt like correcting him and no one felt inspired. Max was still standing in front of the camera in silence.

“Okay. Let’s do this!” said Jack with a clap of his hands.

They broke the circle and Jack positioned himself next to the camera. He looked in Max’s direction. “Ready when you are!”

Max said nothing. He unfolded his arms with the papers still in his right hand. The tension that was living in Jack was transferred to the entire assembled party. Josh felt a nervous knot in his stomach.

Jack pulled his sweaty eye from the RED. He raised his hand in the air and said, “Three ... Two...” and dropped his hand to his side.

Max lifted his chin. He was cool and confident, unaffected by the nervousness of the others. His eyes blinked slowly once. The papers dropped to the floor beside him. He took a deep breath and fired his message down the lens of the camera.

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Max walked out of the garage after he finished without saying another word. The crowd was quiet, their heartbeats recovering. When they came out of the daze, Max was gone. Danton began shouting orders.

Jack handed the RED camera to Josh.

“Do you know what to do?” said Jack.

“Yes,” said Josh. The importance of his actions were clear to him now.

“Take this and do what you need to do with it. We need to get everyone up to Birch Run,” said Jack.

Josh left, clouting the camera into the car. Betty stayed to help with the move north.

“I will see you up there,” he said.

“You better,” she said.

The Citizens gathered supplies from the storage garage. There were chainsaws and gas cans. They also grabbed coolers, chairs, and lights. They tossed everything into large trucks that had been used in the operation a week ago. The various supplies were not enough to fill the trucks which left room for many of the Citizens to ride in the back.

The storage facility was bare in less than an hour. The only artifacts the Citizens left behind were some trash and spilled gas from a chainsaw. The line of trucks rode north on US-23, past Flint, and on to Birch Run.

Josh got back to his apartment and closed the door behind him. After hearing what Max had said, he understood. He could fully appreciate what lay ahead. He paced in his living room. The future was exciting and important, yet dangerous. He was now part of a powerful organization poised to shake the world.

If he wanted, he could stop it all right now. He had the message in his hands. He could simply hit delete and disappear into the mist. He could run far away and change his identity. A large part of him wanted to, he was unprepared for the enormity of this, unaware of it until just now.

He lived in his indecision for a few moments. Betty. The name came to him and cleared any doubt. He plugged the RED into his computer tower and uploaded its contents.

He looked around the apartment. He had asked Betty that morning if she was okay with leaving everything behind. She laughed and told him she would like to leave a match behind too. Betty. She made this all very easy, he thought. He grabbed a few computer towers and the RED.

He never saw his apartment again.

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Toby brought his car to the shoulder of the highway. He fumbled for his cellphone and pushed the emergency flasher button on his dash as he opened the door.

Above him the digital sign was a flourish of color and graphics. It bragged about furniture sales and dinners at the Japanese steakhouse before changing the subject to low mileage leases, car insurance, and the best variety of the 70s 80s and TODAY.

He rounded the hood of the car and listened to the sounds surrounding him. Cars passed at amazing speed to a person standing still near the grass.

He clutched his smart phone close to him.

He looked up at the sign and considered what he was about to do. He had been in the storage garage a few days ago and heard Max's message. There was no going back from what the world was about to become. Toby felt good about that.

Toby was 40 but he felt like he was 100 at this point. When he was a kid, Toby lived with his "grandparents". They were a childless couple that decided his adoption would be the salve for a relationship that had long passed distant.

For most of his life, Toby was sure of one thing. He was meaningless. He was a prop for two people to prove that they still cared about each other. He was a receptacle to store the pain of his barren grandmother and the embarrassment of his grandfather that wanted a real son.

The day to day life of living as a solution to someone's sorrow grew heavy on Toby. His grandfather had drunkenly confided in him after his 14th birthday that Toby's adoption was never his idea. He had to fend for himself after his grandmother passed on his 15th.

In high school he got into a lot of fights. Punching people was basically a balance transfer for the mother that abandoned him, the father that didn't know he existed, and the grandparents that never wanted him to begin with.

He became a police officer when he was 20, a solution to his inability to control anything. He worked hard at the job and loved it. He loved being a cop because it brought order to a life that had known none. The power gave him confidence and that confidence gave him Laura.

Laura was a hairdresser in her late 30s and Toby loved her from the moment that they started talking. He was a bad ass as a cop but always felt safe when she drew him close in her arms. In the dark he loved how her voice broke with emotion when she told him just how much she loved him. He would bury his face in her chest and smell her body. Whatever gunshots came over his head and whatever perp ran at him with an AIDS needle melted away when he could feel her close.

Budget cuts had left him jobless a year ago, but Laura didn't bat an eye. She started working doubles at the beauty salon and she believed him when he said it was going to get better. Six months ago he joined the Citizens to inoculate her.

He now stood on the side of the road as the carrier of a message. For the first time in his life, Toby felt like he actually meant something. He held the smart phone out in front of him. He pushed the icon and prayed.

Above him the furniture ad dissolved to a test pattern. Toby looked to the highway. The drivers looked up with their brows curious. As cars slowed down, the traffic started to stack. Cars ran into the cars stopped in front of them, puffing out clouds of broken glass and dust. Within minutes nothing was moving and a snaking gridlock emerged for miles beyond what Toby's eyes could see.

The screen blinked. Then Max's face appeared and began to speak. No sound emerged from the video board, but Toby was sure the drivers would know those words soon enough.

In a nursing home decades later, Toby sat in a wheelchair. Dementia took much of the time with his grandparents, which was fine by him, and the days that he was fired from the police, but he still remembered Laura's face as she lay in the bed next to him.

Regardless of the blank spots in his memory, he could always recall vividly what happened that day. The day that he took over the video billboard with his phone. Historians now called it "The Words". Toby remembered it because he was involved. He didn't watch it on the news or read the countless books that were written about the Citizens. He stood on the side of that road and made history.

No matter how far away the world seemed he could always remember the day he delivered The Words. They played vivid in his head the day his heart stopped beating.

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Wolf Blitzer's video wall is a horror of twisting traffic jams. The screens go to black as he addresses the camera.

"We can now with confidence confirm that the video displayed just hours ago on hundreds of digital billboards all over the state of Michigan was again the work of the Citizens. In the taped message delivered by their leader, a man who goes only by 'Max', the Citizens have revealed their agenda to the world. What we are about to show you is a copy of this message obtained by CNN..."

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TWELVE

A man with a thin black beard and deep blue eyes stares into the camera. He takes a breath and begins.

“I ask a question. Who are you fighting for? The answer is different for all of us. Many used to answer that they fight for freedom, they fight for their family. These days, most of us just fight for survival.

You're not alone. The great recession was a tidal wave of pain. It left many of us broken. We still sweep up the pieces of a shattered life that was once reliable as a sunrise. There are families who live in parking lots of homeless shelters. Children stay strong because they have to. Parents beat their fists against a wall in frustration without remedy.

Schools close, police laid off, and teachers tossed out. Soldiers come back to the reality of homes foreclosed by a banker who shrugs their shoulders because he or she had orders to follow. The people who count themselves in the middle class feel a lot more like the bottom now and you are not alone to think that.

Not everyone suffered. Some thrived. When the wave crashed on our shores those in palaces kept them. Those who caused these problems never had to move into their car. Their child never switched schools because of budget cuts. Their lives stayed the same. We suffer because of their choices.

We have been walled off. They educate their children away from yours and hand them millions to make sure their child will never become like you.

They see your life as the worst case scenario, but in every decision you make, from setting the alarm clock to buying certain clothes, you make them more money. You fight in wars to protect their resources and they buy politicians to keep your wages down when you get back.

Even the ability to survive itself has been walled off. They used to provide decent health insurance. They don't bother now. They don't have to. They have seen that we will thank them for not firing us. We have given them license to do whatever they please. Now a company even charges \$60,000 for a vaccine so they can save their lives, not yours.

The people you fight for are exterminating you. You fight for them, they watch you die without regard or remorse. You have always known this, but it is far too late to simply nod your head. We must respond.

My name is Max. You don't know me, but you know our organization. You don't have to live in fear. You don't have to thank someone for the scraps they throw. If you have not been able to afford the Wellco vaccine, let me ease your fear. We liberated a million doses and bought another two million.

Come to the Expo Center in Birch Run, Michigan. We will give you and every member of your family the shot for free. We invite you, all of you, to join us.

They will say this is about revenge. They will say this is about class warfare. You know, and I know, this is not about them.

It's about the fear of losing everything. It's about everyone who has ever felt the shame of collecting unemployment. It's about the constant anxiety of hanging by a thread while the people who hurt you celebrate. It's about that little girl sleeping in the backseat of her parents car whispering prayers for a better tomorrow. We need to stand up, not just nod our heads. We must stop wondering what we can do and do something. It's not enough to

simply agree with me. The time has come to draw the line. We must look them in the face and in one voice and say:

I refuse to be your slave. I refuse to let you distract me with fear and promise me a tomorrow that will never come. I refuse to let you drain me of hope so that I am docile, broken and clinging to the absolute minimum. I refuse to live my life as a reaction to your choices.

I swear on the heart that is beating in my chest that I will not die as a piece of your property.”

The tape ends.

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THIRTEEN

The small town of Birch Run, Michigan was known for its expansive outlet mall, its tale told on billboards all throughout the Great Lakes. The huge expanse was populated by the likes of Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Coach, the expensive names broken up here and there by food stalls that kept marathon shoppers properly carb-loaded. Across the street from the outlets stood the Birch Run Expo Center, a white building bordered in red.

Birch Run was a typical bedroom community featuring people who worked in Flint or Saginaw when the auto industry was booming. Both of those cities had slipped into atrophy in recent decades, but Birch Run had been largely unaffected. People still went to the outlet mall and hunters still pit-stopped at Tony's on their way to the Upper Peninsula.

When Max's announcement began playing on every news source in the country, the Citizens were already entrenched. Local law enforcement abdicated at their arrival. Many from the Birch Run police and fire departments joined the cause.

The Citizens stayed mostly in the hotels around the outlets or at the resorts in nearby Frankenmuth. None of the hotels charged them for their rooms, either by choice or by force. Max, Jack, Josh, and Danton stayed in rooms across from the Expo Center. Betty roomed with Josh.

Birch Run was a town of 1,600 before the country heard The Words. In the next two months, the number of people within the borders of the town would increase to two million.

They came from everywhere. A great snake of cars lurched forward in inches. The highways were not designed to handle such numbers. The day the inoculations were announced, the waiting line started north of Detroit. By the end of the week, I-75 was a parking lot south of Toledo. Families

packed into cars, spilled out and ate sandwiches on the median. Many ran out of gas and pushed their cars uselessly to the shoulder.

The line stayed peaceful. Fist fights over resources were rare. A few people needed medical attention and died waiting for the response. Emergency teams had no way to make it through the congestion. Still, the atmosphere was filled with hope. A strange mix of hippies and soldiers, all heading to a small town in Michigan. Some sought the vaccine and others to join the Citizens.

Families gathered in the car waiting for a chance. There were men and women, boys and girls and even elderly in wheelchairs. Single couples left their service industry jobs behind. Students surrendered the futility of an education and rode north for a chance at a better world.

Airports all over the country were deluged. The lucky early ones got an arriving flight at MBS or Bishop. Soon flights to Detroit were oversold, then even Gerald Ford airport in Grand Rapids. People in suits bellowed at beleaguered airport employees who desperately tried to mitigate the situation. Those hoping for tickets to Michigan but arriving after noon on the day of the announcement wept on benches outside of glass retracting doors at almost every airport in the country.

Helicopters buzzed overhead. The media had full team coverage of the waiting line. Morris Jones sat on an overpass in Toledo and panned the progression of crawling vehicles. Natasha Barret reported live from Sault Ste Marie where I-75 southbound was stacked to the border. She waved her hand and the camera measured a frightening procession of metal full of drivers, passengers, and hope.

The 10 mile radius around the Expo center was a massive congregation of the collected evidence of humanity. Many walked for miles after their car had given up. The Citizens turned unused fields near Montrose into massive parking lots. Several of the cars parked there never moved again.

Once they arrived at the Expo Center, they were greeted with metal barricades. Large video screens dotted the landscape, playing a message from Jack. On screen he welcomed everyone with a reassuring smile. "You have been on a long journey. You are now safe."

Just like the massive traffic jam that stretched on for hundreds of miles, there was no chaos at the Expo Center. People who arrived looked relieved. They walked through entrance points in the barricades and stood in a

winding line that sometimes lasted overnight. Members of the Citizens who patrolled the perimeter answered questions and offered assistance. Some of the patrols carried chainsaws. No one ever had to turn one on.

In DC, the White House continued to brief the press in half-filled press rooms. The President himself addressed the nation from the Oval Office the day after The Words and asked the country to remain calm. The White House circulated reports that the outbreaks in Florida had been contained months ago. Those reports passed without noticed, ignored by the population that dismissed them as lies and spin. There were threats that the Army would be brought in to disperse the gridlocked throng. Those threats were hollow as well, as much of the military was stuck in the waiting line.

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Josh walked through the Expo Center lobby with Tyson. The people standing in the line stared holes through him, offended he might be cutting ahead of them, until they saw Tyson at his side.

Tyson became the most recognizable member of the Citizens during that summer in Birch Run, next to Max, and not just because he was a gigantic black man in a suit. He spent hours on the waiting line, adjudicating any disagreement. Tyson's size gave him an immediate advantage. When he approached a person, their first instinct was fear. As soon as he started speaking, he could see the person ease. He spoke in a calm and loquacious manner, his voice was deep enough to be soothing but not enough to be menacing.

Tyson had always been typecast. He never found it difficult to obtain work as a security guard or working crowd control and was often tapped by management as personal protection. His size made people think that his only purpose was the protection of others and he used this to his advantage. He founded his own private security firm when he was twenty-three, with visiting celebrities scrambling to hire him based solely on his ability to intimidate with mass. It paid very well. This was the role assigned to Tyson because of how he looked but it was never what he truly wanted.

Tyson was an intellectual. He loved reading and education. His favorite authors were Flannery O'Connor and James Joyce, in that order. He had an astute appreciation for the classics and the voracious appetite to consume them. However, he didn't limit himself there. He read plenty of contemporary authors. He liked the flowery prose of Richard Mason and

Stephen King's mastery of the art, but Tyson always felt most at home when in the hands of early Hemingway and Anthony Trollope.

The world chose to see Tyson a certain way and he saw himself as such, until he met Max.

Tyson met Max and Jack at a policeman's ball in Farmington Hills. The three men were on the same mission, recruiting. Max asked Tyson if he would like to finally combine his God given talent with his chosen ones. Since then, he had recruited exclusively for the Citizens. While Tyson had felt like he was in his assigned seat with his security detail, he felt inspired by the Citizens.

Tyson was with the Citizens because he chose to be. With his security firm, he was there because other people told him this was where he belonged. When a man can choose for himself, it's worth more than any amount of money in the world. Tyson's respect for Max had only grown since he met him.

"Where do we go?" said Josh.

"Through these doors and up the stairs," said Tyson.

"Did he say what he needed?" said Josh.

"He needs to discuss the next step."

The two men climbed the gray carpeted stairs and arrived in a room with glass walls. The ceilings were high and between the floor to ceiling windows were strips of red. A hundred feet below, people were getting the vaccine shot into their arms. The line that snaked for hours outside ended here. The Citizens walked the crowd like stadium vendors, offering water and power bars.

Max stood at the windows, looking down at the crowd below. Jack sat on a couch just to the right, pouring over a thatch of papers. Max must have felt the presence of Josh and Tyson. He turned around to greet them.

"Thanks for coming up here," said Max, emotionless.

"How's things going?" said Josh

"Well, very well, but we now have to begin planning our attack on Wellco. I need you to crack into the Detroit power grid."

Josh took a moment to piece it together. "We need a wireless relay clipped onto one of their network cords. We'd have to have access to the DTE office to make that happen," he said.

Jack spoke from the couch behind him. “We have police in Detroit already. They are able to enter anywhere on police business.”

Max nodded in agreement.

“Wow,” said Josh. “We are already in control of Detroit. This is a ceremonial thing.”

Max shook his head. “We will meet with resistance, especially at Quarantine. I am expecting professionals.”

“Professionals?”

“Yes,” said Max. “I am expecting mercenaries.”

Jack changed the subject. “What was that first thing you needed Josh?”

“I need a wireless relay, the smaller the better.”

“We can get that,” said Jack. “I will get you in touch with who you need to speak with in Detroit.”

Josh got the impression it was time to leave. “If there is anything else you need me to...”

“We will let you know,” said Max, interrupting.

Josh turned around and noticed that Tyson already had the door open for him.

FOURTEEN

Lester Turner was on a mission. A mission he had not chosen. He would have been happy to be in his house in Martinsburg, West Virginia. The town had everything he ever wanted and nothing else. He missed it as he walked north.

Lester lived a simple life in a rented house not far from downtown. He walked to the grocery and work. He kept it simple. Monday through Friday meant work, Saturday was the gun range, and Sunday was the Lord's. He lived alone. He only owned one book, The Bible, and he read it in every spare moment. He thought about God looking down on him while he read. He knew God was happy with how Lester spent his time.

Lester married a woman when he was 19, but she left almost a decade ago when she found out Lester couldn't give her a baby. Around that time, Lester decided women were more trouble than they were worth. They were a distraction. If every man could take a lesson from Adam and avoid them, people would be a whole lot happier.

On a day like any other, Lester heard a knock on his door. The preacher told him that Lester had been selected, by God. Lester didn't know why the Lord chose him but the preacher had been specific. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

The preacher told Lester about the problem and how God had told the preacher to send Lester to solve the problem. Lester wasn't about to turn down a personal message from the Almighty. In fact, it felt like all those years of reading the Bible finally paid off.

The problem was in a place called Birch Run, Michigan. The preacher had brought several sheets of paper. There were printed maps and blurry pictures. The preacher pointed out news stories documenting the long line

of cars trying to reach the problem. One of the papers had a picture of the problem himself.

The preacher laid it out, this mission from God. Lester listened, nodding as he heard the instructions. Lester knew he might have to live off the land, so he gathered supplies. He filled several plastic milk jugs with water from the tap. He went to the grocery and got bags of trail mix. He stocked up on Winston Regulars. He could be on the road for over a week. He needed to be prepared.

The morning he left he went through the checklist. He had all the food and water he was going to need for a week on the road. He had a backpack that was up to the job. The same pack he would have taken on a weeks' hunt in the wood. Lester understood now why God had blessed him with these skills. He was ready to go.

The last thing Lester grabbed was the problem solver. He eased the rifle off its perch and loaded it. He placed the problem solver into the back seat of his car, along with plenty of ammo. He even strapped his knife to his leg, just in case.

Lester Turner left his house that morning and drove. The maps told him to find US-23 after he got to Ohio. He joined the waiting line in Toledo. After several days he had only inched his car to Brighton. He realized it would be quicker to walk the rest of the way, and parked his car on the shoulder.

Lester walked north on a mission from God. The mission to solve a problem named Max.

<<>>

Betty and Josh sat in a booth at Tony's. Josh's status as a VIP in the Citizens meant that he always had a table at what now had to be the world's most exclusive restaurant.

"I want one of those bacon sandwiches again," said Betty.

"That thing has like a pound of bacon on it," said Josh.

"Is that supposed to make me want it less?"

"I swear I have no idea where you put it all."

"If you make it sound like I eat a lot of food one more time, I am going to kick your ass," she said.

"You wouldn't kick my ass, baby," said Josh.

“Maybe not, but I will bacon fart in your face when we get back to the hotel.”

He laughed as the waiter came to the table and they ordered.

“So,” she said, “how is your project going?”

“It’s pretty much done. I talked to the officer in Detroit this morning, he’s waiting for the relay. From there it’s just a question of clipping it on.”

“And that’s not going to be a problem?” she said.

“No, the Citizens, well, we are basically in control of Detroit now.”

“At least the police force.”

“Right.”

“Max is always a step beyond everyone else,” she said, looking out the window.

“The guy is brilliant. He’s tough to talk to, but brilliant,” said Josh.

“Look at you! Name dropping and bragging that you get to talk to Max,” she said, playfully.

“How about you? What are you doing?” Josh said, he was ready for a new subject.

“Danton has me keeping an eye on the crowd inside. The ones that are about to get shots.”

“Oh yeah?” Josh said.

“It’s rewarding because they are so happy when they get the shot but at the same time it’s so fucking BORING,” she said. “I just sit there and read the whole time. People have been really cool. There haven’t been any problems in the Expo Center or in that tent city they’ve put up.”

“What are you reading?” he said.

“I have been going through the whole ‘dragon girl tattoo’ thing,” she said.

“How is it?”

“I hate it.”

“You are the first person I have ever heard say that.”

“Well, it’s just that...” she searched for the words. “There is this new thing in books, and movies do it too, that a woman can’t be strong on her own. If she is a woman who can handle herself, she must have been raped.”

“Raped?”

“Yeah, every female character who is tough gets raped somewhere in the story and that’s when she becomes heroic. It’s like they are saying that rape

gives you special powers.”

Josh laughed. “Rape powers?”

Betty giggled. “Right. Like I could be Spiderman if only someone would rape me.”

“I would rape you, baby.”

“You would? Awww!” she said.

“I promise, as long as you use your powers for good. With great rape powers, comes great responsibility.”

“That is the nicest thing ever,” she said. “I know I have been living with you for over a month but you are my boyfriend now. That sealed it.” The waiter set the sandwiches down in front of them. Betty looked at him. “I’m getting magic rape powers tonight from my boyfriend. Because he’s awesome.” The waiter walked away shaking his head. Josh laughed until his stomach ached.

FIFTEEN

Scott Pelley stands on the grass near the Birch Run Expo Center, the scene behind him an ocean of tents, blankets, and people.

“This is Birch Run, Michigan and it now holds a distinct record. No city or town in U.S. history has ever experienced such exponential population growth in so short a time. The sleepy hamlet has swelled to estimates of over two million people in just six weeks.”

The camera pans through what looks like an endless campground. Shots show men and women standing around tents talking while children play around them. There are American flags everywhere. Scott Pelley’s voice is heard narrating over these various pictures.

“The men, women, and children of this tent city hail from places all over America. They were drawn here by the promise of free vaccines, Ebola vaccines stolen from the Wellco Corporation. While they came here for the vaccine, many have stayed to join the cause, a cause that some in the United States government are calling treason.”

The camera cuts to Max. He is sitting in the enormous glass room at the top of the Expo Center.

“A government’s only purpose is the protection of its citizens. Our government is letting us die, they have failed us. It can never be treason to protect yourself from extermination.”

Scott Pelley speaks in voice over. “This is Max. He is the face of the Citizens movement. Before the raids on Wellco trucks last month, the group was known as a peaceful advocate for unemployed police and former soldiers. The group has grown to include the unemployed and underemployed from all walks of life. It has even been rumored that the Citizens can count within their roles many current police officers who have been surreptitiously assisting the Citizens from inside their own

departments. Max's reach even extends beyond borders as his invitation to Birch Run has been watched by people all over the globe via social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube."

Scott Pelley sits in a chair opposite Max. "You refer to yourself as just 'Max'? Why no last name? Is there something about that name that needs to be hidden?"

"No, we merely want to ensure the safety of the people close to us. To avoid endangering our families, those that join the higher ranks of the Citizens drop their last names."

"You are the leader of the Citizens?"

"I am the spokesperson. There are many important people who are involved in this movement."

"Will we be allowed to talk to them?"

"Yes, soon."

"The raids on Wellco trucks carried out by your group, in which drivers were brutally cut to pieces with chainsaws, are considered by some to be the most violent act involving innocent civilians in recent history. Do you consider yourself a murderer?"

"Those men were armed, Scott. They refused to give us the vaccines when asked."

"So you consider this justification for murder and theft."

"By your metric, every great man or woman that has ever risen to lead is a murderer. Margaret Thatcher, Joan of Arc, Nelson Mandela, all had to make the decision to sacrifice the few to save the many. Even Ghandi spent time in the military. Every president that has ever raised his hand in oath to protect his fellow countrymen has had to give the order for people to be killed in the name of that cause."

Pelley looks up from his notes.

"Every person in that line outside, every person living in those tents, live because those drivers do not. For seven lives, we saved a million."

"Wellco officials maintain that the disease has been contained through their efforts and all remaining cases have been successfully quarantined in their care facility in Detroit. Do you not believe the company's statements?"

"Quarantine is a pit in which the poor were thrown. Wellco sends human beings into that building, turns the key, and leaves them to die. We are trying to prevent people from being forced into that awful place for nothing

more than the sin of being poor,” said Max. He speaks directly, with no clear sign of emotions.

“Your critics say that you are only interested in punishing the rich. Would you consider the actions of the Citizens to be class warfare?”

“Of course they are,” says Max. His brow furrows in surprise to the question. “To be clear, we did not start this fight. Wars are begun when one side goes too far. When Germany became expansionist, there was war. When Europe invaded the Middle East in order to seize control of the Holy land, there was war. In this present day, the wealthy heads of state and corporations hoard 99% of the country’s wealth for themselves.”

“But their actions are not illegal.”

“This is not a police action. I am not saying what they have done is ‘illegal’. We are questioning the very validity of the law in which they operate under. Who was responsible for writing those laws? Do you really expect the ruling class to slap its own hand? The laws they crafted make them free to do as they please. In that same manner, we have the freedom to respond.”

“Are you saying this is a revolt against the laws of this country?”

“What I am saying is if the upper 1% wants to layoff and cut the wages of those who create their wealth, fine. If they want to send the poor to fight wars that only benefit them, fine. But these people should have a chance to respond, we are helping them get that chance. This is our response.”

“What do you mean when you say you ‘refuse to live by someone else’s choices’?”

“When a country only works for a few select people,” said Max, leaning forward. “You are a slave. You are merely a reaction. Someone at the top rains on you, and the only thing you can choose is the color and size of the umbrella. Many of these people out there have never had a true choice in their lives. This is their first chance to taste freedom,” Max pauses, his breathing became measured, “I dedicate my life to the cause of keeping them free.”

The screen fades to black.

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SIXTEEN

Jack held a hand up to shade his eyes as several Citizens rolled a large video board into position on the grass. The bowels of the Birch Run Expo Center proved to be a treasure trove of supplies. As soon as Max decided it was time to announce the next movement, Jack started gathering the things they would need.

In the two months since the Citizens came to Birch Run, their numbers had swollen to an impossible level. People were everywhere and Tent City stretched on for miles. After the 60 Minutes interview, Max became internationally famous. Clips of the interview played on an endless loop. Stolen excerpts became the most popular videos on YouTube. The number of hits climbing exponentially within hours of being posted.

Millions on Facebook changed their political affiliation to 'Citizen'. There were music beds put to The Words and turned into videos. Shirts declaring 'I Refuse' sold at a brisk pace across the country. 'I refuse' was translated into dozens of languages and gained popularity throughout the world. Many governments banned the shirts, causing the population to wear the shirt inside out, keeping the printed words against their hearts. Quiet solidarity, is solidarity nonetheless. In America, the unrest that some hoped would fizzle out continued to grow.

The stock of vaccine was dwindling. Max decided it was time for the Citizens to move south, and Jack agreed. Best to change the focus and location of the group before they actually ran out. Leaving that many people outside idle and without a common goal could prove very dangerous. The next step of the plan had to be started, like the last one, with an announcement. They needed amplification for this particular message, as the numbers had grown beyond those days of the little storage unit and Jack's ability to shame them into quiet.

Jack saw Danton. He held his hand high and waved.

“Danton!”

Danton made eye contact with him and jogged over. “What kind of a presence do you need for this?”

Jack looked at him surprised, “Presence? No, this is just for us. We need to announce the next step.”

“Shouldn’t we have some kind of security?” said Danton.

Jack waved his hand. “We just need crowd control to get people from Tent City to here.”

“When?”

“Let’s get everyone here by 2PM.”

<<>>

A flourish of graphics. Maria Menounos sits at a desk with a large screen behind her.

“Welcome back. While people try to decide how they feel about the Citizens movement in Michigan, one thing is for certain, Hollywood has gone gaga over Max, the leader of the Citizens. One Hollywood insider tells us that a major network has already offered him millions for the movie rights.”

“Max has people thinking all over the country, but for some of his fans, those thoughts are dirty. Our own Adrianna Costa has the story.”

Adrianna speaks in a voice over. “As the Internet fills up with fan pages and YouTube tributes to Max, others have found even more exciting ways to show their love.”

The camera cuts to a club where loud music is playing. “This night club in Arizona is having a Citizens Party to raise money for the organization.”

The camera cuts to a woman standing next to the packed dance floor. “We are here to raise money for the Citizens because we support giving people medicine for free. I’ve watched the Max clips a bunch of times and we just wanted to help.”

Adrianna again in voice over. “But not everyone is just here for the charity.”

The camera jumps to another woman in a clingy sparkle dress. “Max is SO hot,” she laughs. “He started a revolution in my pants!”

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Josh pointed the RED camera at the front of the stage. The stage itself was one of the supplies they had found in the basement of the Expo Center. It looked professional, and had probably been used for touring bands. Unfortunately, it didn't come with Ikea-esque pictograph instructions so they had to assemble it with a series of educated guesses. They had managed to screw together the pieces of metal, plastic, and wood without any leftovers but there were lumps and imperfections on its surface. Several Citizens took turns trying but they could never get the god damn thing to actually lay flat. After hours of frustrated wrench throwing, they finally decided that the stage was only erected so that Max could stand on it, and small gaps and uneven cracks were sufficient for one person to navigate.

Josh turned to look at the crowd behind him. Several thousand people shifted anxiously in the field facing the stage. Some were wearing dirty uniforms, some plain clothes, and still others shorts and shoes in the blazing heat. Josh felt the heat too but decided to enjoy it. The cold was only a few months away.

Far in the distance he saw Betty's face in the crowd. She was impossible to miss with her bright pink braids. She smiled, waved at him, and went back to controlling the crowd, pointing and shouting like a punk air traffic controller.

The enormous field was just south of the Expo Center. Nothing had been planted this year so the soil yielded only clumps of patchy grass. It provided a perfect spot for Max to deliver his message. Josh helped with assembling the audio visual portion of the presentation. He found the video board in the bottom of the Expo Center, along with the PA. He set it up with a wireless video relay, another great discovery, and could control it all with the same smartphone app he designed for the billboards. The RED camera was rolling.

Josh was ready for the move to Detroit. The operation would be at the end of the week. His wireless internet relay was in the DTE office, connection tested and everything. The only thing left to do before the Citizens took Detroit was Max's statement.

Max appeared from the trees, climbed the stairs, and approached the microphone. A smattering of claps could be heard in the crowd. He looked like he didn't even notice the mass of people. Max and Josh met eyes and Josh gave him a thumbs up to indicate everything was working.

“Citizens! Thank you for coming today. This is the first time I have had a chance to talk to you in person,” he said, his voice echoing far into the distance. The screens had Max in tight closeup. The video was matched perfectly with the audio and Josh felt proud of himself.

“Our numbers have grown and so has our strength. We now stand ready to take the next step. Our fellow Citizens are prisoners in a large building south of here. They were locked in a room to die because they could not afford the medicine they needed to survive, and someone could not profit from their misfortune. The only crime they have committed is their lack of resources. They have not stolen, lied, or cheated to increase their wealth. They have worked honest jobs for honest livings and this country has sent them to a room to die. Today, Citizens, we are going to change that.”

The crowd cheered. Max held a hand up and they were silent immediately.

“Up until today, our response has been defiance. We have cocooned ourselves here in Birch Run. Simply saving our own lives is no longer enough. We need to assert our positions. We now must use force to make our voices heard. The time for requests has passed. Our bodies are healthy and our minds are rested. Now it’s time for us to take our place in the world.”

The crowd roared.

“We leave here on Friday morning to travel south, to the building called Quarantine. If you would like to help us, meet us at the base of the Ambassador Bridge. From there we will go to Quarantine. We will take the building, heal the sick, and release them. When we do this, they will stop ignoring our message. Then the voice of the Citizens will echo across this nation. We will stand up and we will scream in their faces. You cannot ignore or kill us anymore. You will respect us as human beings or we will respond!”

The crowd roared again, deafening. Max held his arms up to the crowd.

A gunshot pierced the sound of the crowd. A bullet cut the air above them. Max didn’t move. Many in the crowd screamed. People ran, but most of the Citizens looked to see where the sound of the shot had come from.

A man stood in the tree line, cursing and reloading a rifle. His hair long, his beard straggly and filthy. He was covered in the dirt he had been sleeping in the last couple of days.

From out beyond the crowd, Tyson ran at the stage. He was consumed with the crowd control when the shot rang out. It was then that he realized Max had become a high profile target. Tyson surmised that his job would be protecting Max from that day forward, if he could save Max's life right now.

Max turned around to face the source of the gunfire. He made no move to duck or avoid the next shot. Max stared into the eyes of the man holding the rifle, the edges of his mouth curled slightly.

The assassin raised his loaded rifle and aimed. He dropped it down for a second, looking a little unsettled that Max made no move to hide or get out of the way. He shook it off and held the rifle back to his eye, Max's head in the sight. He squeezed the trigger.

Betty lowered a shoulder and rushed the assassin. She ran at full speed from 1000 yards away and hit him with amazing force. The shot went high, and Max didn't flinch at the sound of the gun. The rifle fell out of his hands and landed in the dirt with a thump. He collapsed to the ground and struggled to breathe, the wind knocked out of him. His hand searched around for the Bowie knife strapped to his leg.

Betty grabbed the rifle off the ground and held it by the muzzle. The assassin curled his fingers around the knife as Betty swung. She connected the butt of the rifle to his hand and the knife went out to the ground. She brought her foot down on his hand and slammed the rifle into his arm, shattering it. He screamed and curled into the fetal position. The would-be assassin looked pathetic as he let out sad little cries, cradling his useless arm.

Tyson arrived at Betty's side, panting. He looked humiliated.

Betty stood next to the whimpering man and regained her breath. She looked up at Max. He nodded at her.

She's awesome, thought Josh.

SEVENTEEN

“How did this happen?” screamed Jack, in the office above the Expo Center.

Max sat at the window. He hadn't said anything since the incident outside. Tyson hadn't said much either. He was humiliated. The only thing Tyson offered was the occasional, “I'm sorry.”

“Sorry isn't going to cut it, Tyson!” said Jack, “You need to prove that this will never happen again.”

Tyson stared at the ground, muttering something to himself. Jack poured a gin and tonic and collapsed onto the couch.

Max seemed completely unaffected. “Who was the girl?” he said.

Tyson spoke. “Betty, I recruited her from a Florida SWAT team.”

Max turned around, “Impressive.”

Jack shook his head. “Yes, it's not often you see someone run toward gunfire.”

“Where is she?” said Max.

“She's downstairs, with Josh. He's cutting up the video right now,” said Jack.

Max turned away from the window, “Is the video usable?”

“Did you say everything you needed to say?”

“I said enough. It needs to get on the Internet today.”

Jack took a drink from his glass. “Josh said he will be able to cut it and it should be fine.”

Max went back to looking out the window. “She's with him now?”

Jack nodded.

Max turned and looked at Tyson. “I want to see her.”

Later that day, Betty and Josh walked the grounds of the Birch Run Expo center. They went through the parking lot, pausing to talk with random people. Some were from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, others from Syracuse and Buffalo. Betty and Josh continued past the parking lot and onto the I-75 overpass.

“So what did Max want?” asked Josh.

Betty looked lost in thought. “Have you ever thought that we might be part of something that will change the course of the future? Like we could be in the history books for this?”

Josh thought a moment. “I have been thinking that lately.”

She looked out over the overpass at the massive crowds moving around. “I mean, the people in the history books were just normal people like us, right? They just found themselves in a crazy situation and...”

Josh joined her in the trance. “We are making a difference. These people were waiting to die and now they are here. Here for a chance we were able to give them.”

Her green eyes remained transfixed on the collection of automobiles laying dead in front of her. “We should fuck right here.”

He responded deadpan. “The Halo Burger bathroom it is.”

She stifled a laugh of her own and turned to him. “No, I’m saving that for our honeymoon.”

They both laughed. It felt good. A release of the fear and tension from earlier that day. After a moment Josh asked her “So where does this all go?”

She tucked her pink braids behind her ear. “I would say we are pretty committed at this point. To the Citizens, I mean. We have a lot ahead of us.”

Josh nodded. “I’m really happy to be with you right now. I am...” The words refused to flow as he looked at her. She was so beautiful, especially in the sunlight. He looked right into her gorgeous green eyes.

“Josh, I am getting really attached to you and that might be a bad thing,” she said.

“Why?”

“We are going to war, in a way, and I don’t know if I could handle it if anything happened to you. You’ve seen Patton. I don’t want that face of yours to be a puddle of goo.”

“Well, I don’t either.”

“Aw, yet another thing we have in common.”

They started to walk again, sharing the laugh. “I know what you mean, though,” he said. “This has been so intense.”

They kissed and just held each other, feeling the moment.

Josh pulled away. He was getting better at reading her. “What are you not telling me?”

“Max wants me to lead the Quarantine operation, me and Danton.”

Josh’s first emotion was worry, but he had to be honest. “You’re perfect for that.”

A wry smile spread across her face. “You had to go and be all supportive, didn’t you? Never mind that you completely ruined my whole ‘fuck you I am capable’ speech.”

Josh laughed as she drew him close. “You are going to be amazing,” he whispered into her shoulder.

They hugged tightly, Josh could feel her excitement. “We really could be in the history books, baby, a happy ending though, not like one of those tragic heroes who falls in the heat of battle.”

Josh’s insides dropped at the thought but he would be strong for her. “Orson Welles always said that a happy ending...”

Betty’s eyes became wide with recognition as she finished his sentence, “...depends on where you stop telling the story.” She grabbed Josh’s hand and started walking off the overpass towards the grass behind a collection of billboards, dragging him behind her.

“What? Where are we going?” Josh protested.

“We’re fucking,” she said. It was a statement. “Right now. Not later, now. Well, probably later too. You support me on the Quarantine thing and then you quote Orson Welles. You are more perfect than that whiny sparkle vampire in that fucking asshole of a movie.”

Josh thought that was the hottest thing that any woman had ever said. His laughter could not be contained. He feigned protest. “We shouldn’t, people will see us.”

“What are they going to do? Arrest us? I just saved Max. If someone has a problem with it, I’ll sick chainsaw Bob on their ass.” She stepped off the concrete and pulled Josh down into the grass.

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EIGHTEEN

The next day the Citizens began to prepare. Buses that Danton had been gathering for several weeks drove into the parking lot of the Expo Center. The day before they left for Quarantine, thirty buses sat in front of the building. They came in various flavors of public, private and school. Citizens took turns gassing them until the fleet was ready to go.

The supplies from the belly of the Expo Center were tossed into large white cargo trucks. The stage was broken down and loaded in, along with the video board, PA, and various wireless relays. Max was particularly interested in a pair of old-style wooden ladders and told Tyson to make sure they both made it into a van.

People in tent city packed their belongings. Many of them had already decided to follow the movement to Detroit and lobbied for their chance to be on a bus. Thirty busses meant that there simply wasn't enough room for everyone to be the tip of the spear. Some walked the miles back to their abandoned car to find that it wouldn't start again. Others turned their engines over and headed down to highway to meet the Citizens at the Ambassador Bridge.

The month turned into September, as night fell on Birch Run, Michigan. The Citizens slept in their beds, resting determined on the plans for the next step.

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Josh and Betty weren't sleeping much in their hotel room. They were preparing for time apart. They lay naked with the bedsheets bunched underneath them. Betty's braids had come undone and hung heavily with sweat. The pink looked like a deep red in the blue light of the television. Her body was licked in moisture as she cuddled up to Josh. She pulled him tight, her chest heaving against him.

She whispered into his ear. "That was amazing."

He pushed against her, also speaking in whispers. "What is it about hotel rooms?"

"We don't have to clean up after."

They kissed. He tasted salt and a hint of the alcohol they had both been imbibing in before the acrobatics began. He rolled over onto his stomach. She rolled on top of him and rubbed his back.

He let out a moan. It felt good. "So how was your meeting?"

"With Max?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"He's an intense guy, isn't he?"

"Oh I know. When he asks you a question you feel like he knows the answer already," he said.

"He didn't really ask me any questions. But, I admit, I was intimidated."

Josh rolled over. "Intimidated? You?"

"A little, he is so smart, you know?" she said.

"Are you attracted to him?" the question was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"Huh?" she said, sounding caught.

"You are! Admit it! You have a thing for him," said Josh.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I do think he's cute, obviously."

Josh felt his stomach drop. He hoped he kept his poker-face.

"And he is really intelligent," she continued. "But I don't know, he doesn't seem like..." she trailed off.

"He doesn't seem like what?"

"It doesn't seem like he's all that interested in the whole 'girl'...thing."

Josh turned and faced her. "You think he's gay?"

"No!" she said. "I never got that impression at all. It's hard to describe..." She looked at the wall searching for the words. "He seems like he is above that. You know what I mean?"

Josh did, kind of. Max was the alpha male. He seemed so focused on the task ahead that sex would simply be in the way.

"But baby," she rounded to him and pulled tight against him again. "I am so happy that I met you." She kissed him.

"Me too, baby," he said. They held each other.

“I gotta sleep now,” she said.

“Okay,” he kissed her. “Goodnight baby.”

She held her forehead to his. He loved the smell of her body. It smelled like home. She backed up and flipped over, he could see the curve of her spine facing him, perfect in the dim light of the hotel room.

He waved in the dark toward the nightstand and found the remote. He fumbled the rubber buttons for a second before the TV blinked and went dark.

It was pitch black in the room. Josh turned his back to Betty. He settled into the mattress and closed his eyes. Deep in the back of his head, the flicker of a thought remained. He wondered who Betty really wanted to be with. Was he her first choice? The idea burned blue like a pilot light as he drifted into unconsciousness.

NINETEEN

Tom Tucker was sure of one fucking thing, the little shits weren't gonna get by him. Today Tom Tucker was the general on the ground, the last of the private contractors still providing mercenary service. That fucking President with the terrorist middle name had shut the doors on most of the contract mercenary business. Tom Tucker's company was more or less printing money during the Iraq war. He commanded an army of private soldiers, tanks, and helicopters.

Wish I still had the fucking helicopter, Tom thought. Frank Fisher's office contacted Tucker forty-eight hours ago about protecting Quarantine from the Citizens. Tom was happy to be of service. He took back roads overnight to get to the front, because every cocksucker in the country was trying to get to Michigan. The thought made Tom laugh. You know the world is fucked when everyone is trying to get to Michigan all at once.

Tom summoned three hundred mercs and gathered them around the giant black building. They stood in teams around the perimeter, ready to kick some pseudo-terrorist ass. Tom Tucker didn't care about the ex-military and police in the ranks of the Citizens. He worked with enough military in Iraq to know most of them were fucking brain dead, in Tom's opinion. If they had any real fucking skill they'd have been mercs. Tom saw regular enlisted as human barriers to keep IED explosions from hitting the valuable merc squads in Iraq. Fuck 'em if they have ex-military among them, Tom thought. They abandoned their country, my country.

Max's message didn't exactly resonate with Tom. He lived in a palatial mansion outside Nashville, Tennessee. The dimensions of his house read like the measurements of most shopping malls. In the back yard he had a series of tennis courts and a massive swimming pool that looked like a lagoon. Guests admitted to the spectacle often wore expressions of

amazement mixed with horror. The expanse of property was almost as impressive as his platinum blond wife. She was twenty years younger than Tom, with the body of an athlete and incredibly large fake tits. Between her and the house, Tom had the life of his dreams.

The fucking house had turned into a liability after the money started getting scarce. It cost him almost as much as the wife that never adjusted her spending. She flew around in the couple's private jet almost every day. Tom would tell others privately that she logged more travel miles than the fucking Secretary of State. He would have asked her to calm it down on the rolling account at Tiffany's but he knew she would divorce him the second she found out there was a bottom to the pit of money from which she drew.

Tom had to fire most of his men, which was fucking sticky business. The goddamn severance packages cost him a fucking fortune but was better than having a shit ton of disgruntled mercs walking around holding a grudge. He sold all of the aircraft back to the government, as well as the tanks. It was hell to let the tanks go.

Even after the liquidation and layoffs, Tom was still in trouble. The phone hadn't rung in a long time and the wife kept spending. When the Wellco offer came in, Tom almost jumped out of his skin. He mustered up the guys and headed for Detroit in less than twenty-four hours.

Representatives from Wellco seemed a little steamed about the fact that ten million only bought them a force of three hundred. Tom calmed their nerves by telling them that they were getting three hundred of the best on short notice and other similar explanations. Tom knew the reason had nothing to do with any of the offered justifications and everything to do with platinum blond hair, a giant pair of tits, and a house the size of a stadium.

Fuck 'em, Tom thought. Who gives a shit how many mercs you got? The only thing that matters is the job gets done. Hell, Tom knew his guys could take out ten thousand of those fucking whiny, entitled brats.

When Tom thought that, he was talking tall. He didn't actually think they would have to take on ten thousand but that's what Betty and Danton found when the buses stopped at the Ambassador bridge.

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Betty's jaw dropped. She couldn't believe it. Danton craned his neck to see out the bus window.

“How are we going to organize this?” he said, whispering in her ear.

Betty shook the bullhorn in her right hand.

“Is it weird that I’m more scared about speaking to the crowd than I am about storming Quarantine?” she said.

The buses passed under the overpass. A throng filled the bridge, packed shoulder to shoulder. Beyond, another two overpasses were packed with men and women waving their hands like a parade was passing. The crowd roared at the arrival of their champions. Some brandished pistols and rifles, while others carried axes and sledgehammers. Many of the men were shirtless, slicked in warpaint.

“Who the hell told those guys this was a Renaissance fair?” said Betty.

Danton pulled back from the window. He looked down in thought.

“Betty with this many people we can overwhelm them. We just have everyone charge at once.”

“Like Braveheart?”

“Yes, like Braveheart,” said Danton.

The bus lurched to a stop. Betty sat at the back of the school bus and let everyone else get out first. She was getting a lot of stares, more than usual, and she loved it.

Her pink hair was pinned up in tight braids. She wore a black sports bra without a shirt and fitted military style cargo pants. A Bowie knife was strapped to her right leg, a pistol to her left. She was almost late when the bus left Birch Run because she had spent so long making faces and posing in the mirror. She loved how fucking bad ass she looked. Beats the stupid cop uniforms, she thought.

The last of the volunteers shuffled down the steps of the bus. She walked down the aisle, jumped off the top step and landed with a clap on the asphalt. She moved with confidence. Danton followed her, shaking his head a bit. The crowd quieted when she held her hand out. She felt powerful.

Betty pressed the key down on the bullhorn and started speaking. “Ok...” She let go of the key and coughed.

Fucking frog in my throat, Betty thought. She was nervous now that she had messed up the beginning.

“Ok, listen up! Thank you all for coming! My name is Betty, and I am here to lead you guys today!” she said, and realized she sounded like a tour

guide. She needed to fucking get it together, fast.

“Where’s Max?” A voice called out. Several voices agreed with a low rumble.

“Max is in another part of the city, doing something pretty awesome right now with other elite members of our team.” The crowd was silent. Several of them were nodding. She pressed the key down again. “He needs us for this important part of the mission and we are not going to let him down! Now let’s go take QUARANTINE!”

The crowd roared. The sound scared Betty a little. There were so many people beyond the overpass. She wondered if everyone could even hear her.

“Okay, we are just going to start marching. Let’s GO!!!!” That wasn’t exactly Braveheart, Betty thought.

She felt like she missed an opportunity as the massive crowd started to move south on I-75.

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Josh sat in front of a row of computer screens in Birch Run and hacked into the DTE mainframe server. He looked around the giant concrete room, feeling a little lonely. Tyson’s voice crackled from the walkie-talkie in front of him.

“Coming up on the Joe. No one around.”

Josh could hear the hum of the van coming through the tiny speaker. He picked up the walkie-talkie.

Chirp. “Any word from Betty or Danton?”

“Negative. They are probably just getting there. She’ll be fine, Josh.”

Chirp. “I’m concerned about Danton, too!”

“Sure you are,” Tyson said.

Josh was looking at Google Maps to check their location. They were getting close. Josh would switch off all the power in Detroit at Max’s signal. He didn’t think it was necessary, but Max had insisted.

Josh was concerned, if he knocked out power would he be able to get it back on? He had no idea where the main server for DTE was. If he turned off the juice and rebooted, would there still be power for the server to turn itself back on?

Max’s voice came on the speaker.

“Okay. We’re here. Where are you white team?”

“Just pulled up,” another voice said.

“Josh, hit the switch.”

Josh clicked the mouse to change work spaces and fingered a couple of keys. He hesitated a moment before hitting enter. “Done.”

“White team. Go.”

He watched the server cycle off, then go dark.

Hopefully the power was salvageable, he prayed. He waited in silence.

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TWENTY

The Citizens walked for two hours. Betty felt her skin getting dry and tight as they made their way down Fort St. in the blazing sun. She wished she would have thought of sunscreen, but forgave herself because the thought of the raid had occupied her mind. Quarantine stood ominous on the horizon for most of the journey, its giant shadow stretched across I-75. After the bridge, the group made a left to stay on South Fort and continued forward. They passed the fuel tanks and neared the foot of the tower.

Betty noticed the abandoned construction equipment littered around the base. Then she noticed the mercenaries. Their group was much smaller than the Citizens. They shouted at each other and shifted around nervously, positioning themselves between the building and the massive crowd that approached them.

Betty marched her army forward until they filled the length of the property. The Citizens permeated the entire street and spilled into the neighborhood behind. Their numbers were intimidating.

She pressed the button on the megaphone. “AAANNND HALT!” she screamed without irony.

Between them and Quarantine was a ten foot tall chain link fence topped with razor wire twisted like landscaping from hell. The Citizens tasked with carrying the chainsaws started them and revved the engines. Danton ran six men to the fence and yellow sparks flew everywhere as the chainsaws did their work. Within seconds the fence tipped over like a flimsy tin toy and the men swept it away.

Betty was surprised that the mercenaries hadn’t started shooting yet. They were all heavily armed with guns that almost dwarfed them. It was only a matter of time before they started pulling the triggers.

The whiny brats had a fucking army. Tom Tucker's men looked at the dizzying crowd in front of them. Tall American flags waved in the bright sunshine behind the mass of people staring them down. More than one of the mercs wondered what he was doing on this side of the line.

Tom Tucker was not about to give up without a fight. If the little shits actually started advancing, it was gonna be their last day on earth. Little whiny shit bags never bring enough firepower. Then he heard the chainsaws rev up. Several of the men exchanged nervous glances when the fence clanged to the ground.

Tom held his arm up. "Okay, men! Steady!"

They didn't steady. Tom hoped this fucking moment of doubt would pass quickly. If these fagots remained yellow, Tom would be lucky to get out of Detroit alive.

He started shouting louder at his men. "Form a line! FORM A LINE!"

None of them moved. One of the mercs looked at Tom and said, "There are women in the crowd! You want us to open fire on women?"

Tom was disgusted, fucking amateurs. A small shiver of panic ran through him as well as he thought that he probably should have brought the body armor.

He thought of the vests in the warehouse back in Tennessee and could picture exactly where they sat useless in their crates.

<<>>

Josh watched the mainframe screen go black. His heart beat a little faster now as he stood up and paced in front of the monitors. He thought of his friends and how much danger they were in. He thought of Betty and how much he wanted to see her again. Right now.

He sat back down in the chair and shut his eyes, rocking back and forth with nervous energy. He was so frightened for them.

Jack's voice crackled from the speaker. "Mansion secure."

Another moment slipped by and then Tyson's voice on the speaker. "Coleman Young Center is secure. Same for the Renaissance Center. We have control of the city."

Chirp. "Copy that both teams!" A wave of relief went through him like electricity. "Any casualties?"

Jack breathed heavily in the speaker. "No, not a one. Any resistance we had ran off. How about you, Max?"

“No casualties among the good guys,” said Max, he sounded like he was smiling. “Turn on the power, Josh.”

Josh clicked the mainframe screen and prayed. A couple of keystrokes, white letters blinked and scrolled rapidly across the window. It worked.

“We’ve got lights,” said Jack.

“So do we,” confirmed Max. “Nice job Josh.”

Hearing that filled Josh with thrill and relief. He grinned from ear to ear with pride but it was short lived. His finger went to push the button on the walkie-talkie.

“No, we haven’t heard from Betty yet,” said Tyson before Josh had a chance to speak.

Josh moved his finger away from the button. “You have to be ok,” he whispered to himself as he sank back into his chair.

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Betty was stunned. The mercenaries still weren’t firing at them. She decided that she couldn’t dwell on good fortune. She turned her back to Quarantine and pressed the button down on the megaphone.

“Prepare to charge! Ten count! Watch me!”

She turned back to face the building and smashed the megaphone on the street. She was shouting the countdown and walking forward toward the mercs. “Ten...nine...eight...seven...six...”

By the time she got to 5, she was running. She heard the screams of battle from the thousands behind her. Mel Gibson would be proud.

<<>>

Tom Tucker saw the skinny bitch with pink hair turn around at the front of the crowd. He heard what sounded like a bullhorn but couldn’t make out the words. The sound traveled the other way as nothing but faint high pitched speaker noise.

Figures, he thought, the fucking assholes are following orders from a bitch. He watched her start to move forward, walking at first. She needed to be dropped in her tracks. That would make the rest of those fucking babies rethink their motivation for following a woman into battle against him.

“Okay, FIRE!” No fire came. The mercs watched impotent as the massive crowd start to move on them. The skinny bitch was at a dead run now.

“THEY ARE GOING TO KILL US YOU FUCKING IDIOTS!” Tom screamed. They continued to stare with wide glass eyes.

Tom grabbed a machine gun from the closest man. He pulled the sight up to his eye, zeroed in on his blurry pink target, and squeezed the trigger.

<<>>

Betty saw the guy with the white hair grab a gun. She sprinted now, leaning forward to gain more speed. He raised the rifle to his face. Betty fumbled for her gun as she ran.

A yellow crucifix of flame erupted from the muzzle. She heard bullets hissing past her, the flat thud of them connecting into bodies, but she didn't dare look back. She pulled her gun and fired, more spraying than aiming. Her first couple of shots sailed over the merc's heads but the next two connected into the unarmed guy standing next to Mr. White Hair. He crumpled to the ground. Bullets whizzed by her and she felt the wind on her cheeks. She raced ahead with everything she had.

She fired more shots, driving the mercs back. She reached for the Bowie knife as she got closer.

Mr. White Hair lowered his weapon and ran, just out of the reach of Betty's fingertips. She grabbed a mercenaries head and pulled him forward. She drove the Bowie knife into the back of his neck and dragged the blade free. His windpipe screeched as it cracked open. She saw the next man and with her momentum spun and sliced his throat. He fell to the ground in a heap of pooling blood.

The Citizens consumed the men who opposed them, their shrieks echoed off the metal of the great building. One merc lay begging on the concrete while a man with an axe hacked off his limbs. Others were torn apart by chainsaws.

Betty shoved her Bowie knife into another man's throat. She twisted it, freed the blade, and stabbed another merc going for his pistol. She spun around in a fast circle, looking for the next threat. There was none. She stood shaking for a moment before realizing all the mercs were gone. Those that couldn't run lay strewn around her ankles gasping and bleeding out.

She squatted on the concrete with her knees to her chest. Around her the Citizens started bellowing victory cries at the blue sky, holding their weapons aloft. Just like Braveheart, she thought. She closed her eyes and

felt warm tears roll down her cheeks but refused to sob. The tears she let fall dissolved some of the blood that had begun drying on her face.

<<>>

Tom Tucker ran as fast as he could. He galloped to the train loading dock and ran south on the tracks. Occasionally, he would trip on the buried wooden planks and fall to the ground, filling his cheeks with gravel when he was lucky, cracking his teeth on the metal rails when he wasn't.

He ran south until he found a neighborhood near Francis St. and tore through backyard lawns. He found a child's small plastic playhouse, a hideout covered in grime and leaves. He ducked in, curled into a fetal position, and sobbed. No one came looking for him.

He left quietly a day later.

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TWENTY-ONE

The dead laid in hopeless heaps around the parking lot. A few still moved, gasping for breath. They made blood bubbles on sticky lips before stretching their arms and falling lifeless. There were bodies ripped apart, others had single gaping holes. The survivors sobered from the adrenaline and began to attend to the dead. They dragged the corpses away from the entrance doors and arranged them in piles to be dealt with later.

The rest of the Citizens surrounded the building, the largest concentration in front of the giant black metal doors. Betty and Danton stood among this crowd and measured what to do next. Danton pulled a cellphone out of his pants with a bloody hand.

“Max, it’s Danton,” he said, panting. “Heavy casualties, maybe a thousand. We met up with a bunch of mercenaries but we were able to break them and surround the building.” Danton fell silent, listening. “We haven’t breached it yet.” He listened again. “Yeah...she’s standing right next to me.” He concentrated on the voice at the other end for a few minutes as he doubled over and tried to catch his breath. “Okay...Ten four.”

He thumbed the phone off and started giving orders in a loud voice. “Okay, cut the doors. Everybody stay outside and make sure no one gets in,” He looked at the chainsaw guys and Betty as he spoke. “No cameras inside, Max’s orders.”

The chainsaw guys nodded and two of them got to work cutting the door around the handle, spraying yellow sparks as they went. The knob dropped inside of the door when they finished.

Inside was a massive warehouse. Workers in white uniforms bearing blue Wellco logos stared at them as they walked in. The warehouse looked old, as if all of Quarantine had simply been built on top of it. At the far end of the room was a row of elevators. Danton gave orders which echoed in the

open space. “Okay. You five, stay on this floor. If anyone gives you problems, kill them.”

They advanced to the elevators. After pushing the call buttons, 3 freight elevators arrived announcing themselves with yellow lights and chimes. Danton gave more orders, “Get everyone on here that we can. We will get the rest later.”

Betty stepped in, Danton stayed back for a few loads. She arrived at the second floor and the doors opened to reveal a florescent lit room that stretched on in the distance. The room was packed to the gills with cubicles and was surrounded by offices with glass windows that looked inward. It looked like a normal clerical office. When everyone had arrived, Danton told 20 men to remain. This repeated with each new floor they encountered.

The 15th floor was marked ‘QUARANTINE’. Betty steadied herself as the elevator doors curtained open to reveal a reception area. The floor was covered in dark gray marble. The walls were red and base boarded in black, giving the room an almost regal quality. The employees stood with hands in the air, some in the lobby area and others behind a glass reception window.

“Let us in,” Betty said.

A nurse went to a door on the far wall and lowered her badge to a scanner. A green light flashed and the lock clicked open.

The group shouldered through the heavy security door. Inside they found a massive white room, the same size as the warehouse downstairs. The walls and floors glowed radiantly. There were no more lights than usual, but it felt like light reflected from all surfaces.

Rows of beds. Not hospital beds, but painted white metal frames that served no other purpose than to elevate thin mattresses. Most of the beds were neatly made, with a green fuzzy blanket on top and blue sheets peeking out from underneath. Others were in disarray, their blue sheets mottled with small purple stains in the places where a head had once lain. There were televisions strewn in random spots. Some were flat screens screwed to the wall, others sat on tables facing beds. They were all tuned to the same program.

“Are there more beds upstairs?” Betty asked.

“Upstairs is a recreational area. The computers with cameras and Skype are there.”

Betty stared. It wasn't the largeness of the room that surprised her. It wasn't how clinically organized the whole thing seemed. It was the total lack of patients. She counted seven people laying in beds, looking more lonely than sick.

"Hand those out," she said, pointing a finger at a stack of the toothpaste sized little packages. The nurse nodded and got to work.

"Where...where are the rest of them?" Betty asked the second nurse.

"We had more when it first broke out, but there really haven't been a lot since then. Not for a while," she said.

Betty tried to sober from the shock of this revelation.

Danton shook Betty out of the haze. "You ten keep this room secure. Betty, come with me."

Betty and Danton walked to the elevators and got in.

"SEVEN people?" said Danton. "Hundreds of people dead in the parking lot for SEVEN people watching Jeopardy?"

"Are you going to tell Max?" said Betty. She sounded distant.

"Of course I'm going to tell Max but I need to just think a sec. NONE of this to the group outside, okay? I don't need them pissed at us when their blood is still hot. This is a need to know basis."

"Right," she said with dry lips. What was Max going to say about this? Would he be upset? Would he freak out? What happened to all the victims? The thoughts came at Betty in waves. Was that why Max told them not to bring in cameras? What was she going to say to Josh? Josh. She realized that she hadn't talked to him since she had started walking toward Quarantine.

"Hey, Danton, can you give me your phone?"

TWENTY-TWO

The Wellco board room in the Detroit Renaissance Center was long and rectangular. A massive cherry oak table reflected a view of the city that stretched from the floor to the vaulted ceiling. The board members sat around the table and looked frightened. At the head of the table was Frank Fisher, a sour expression clouding his face. The mercenaries were his idea. He had hoped that the Citizens would turn around at the sight of guns. He was wrong, and sat stewing in his humiliation.

Downtown Detroit was overrun. The police were in control of the city but the police answered to the Citizens. The members of the Wellco board had tried to leave but officers stationed at the front door of the Renaissance Center advised them to stay where they were.

Prisoners. The thought of being held hostage in his own board room made Frank Fisher seethe. He was the kind of man who was used to being in control. He could not remember the last time any person had dared to tell him what to do. Fisher held his chin to his chest and realized he didn't care what happened today. He just wanted it to be over.

The door opened and a man walked in that everyone recognized. He was alone, carrying a yellow walkie-talkie. He stood calm as he looked around the room.

Frank Fisher didn't get up from his seat. "What do you want?" he grunted.

Max turned his head and looked at the President of the Wellco Corporation. "Ah Mr. Fisher, I find it best not to give away your position at the beginning of negotiations. Don't you agree?"

The twelve members of the board stayed silent, frozen in their seats. They were a collection of men and women of advancing age, with the

exception of a young woman who appeared to be in her thirties. She wore a white button up shirt with a blue scarf. All wore nervous faces.

Fisher rose. "Is that what you think this is? A negotiation?"

"Mr. Fisher there is no reason we can't be reasonable people," said Max. "I respect your position and I expect you can respect ours."

Fisher's face went a shade redder than normal. "I find it hard to believe I'm respected by a man who holds me prisoner in my own building."

Max found a chair along the side of the room and sat down. "I have no problem allowing every person in this room to leave, Frank, once our business here is complete."

"I am not in the habit, Max," said Fisher, spitting out the name as if it were poison, "Of negotiating with terrorists."

"Name calling seems to be a terrible place to begin our discussion," said Max, shaking his head.

A small man with round glasses and a pristine red tie spoke. "I am sure that we can come to an underst-

Fisher waved his hand, interrupting him. "No, Steve."

"Mr. Chamberlain?" said Max. "I believe you are the vice-president?"

Fisher walked in front of Max. "I am the only one you speak to in this room," he said.

"I am just trying to correct my disadvantage, Mr Fisher," said Max. His voice grew cold. "Everyone here knows me, but I don't know any of you."

The red in Frank Fisher's face was now darkening to purple. Rolling rage bubbled below his skin. "What do you want?"

"I need you to order 100 million doses of vaccine from your suppliers, today."

Fisher laughed. "That's never going to happen."

Max stared at him stone-faced and silent.

Fisher looked around the board, no one joined him in laughter. "I am guessing that you intend to give the vaccine away for free?"

Max nodded.

"You know perfectly well a move like that would bankrupt us."

"I am trying to save lives," said Max.

"But what about the life of this company?" said Fisher, his rage barely contained. "What happens if we have to shut our doors? What about all the people who work here? What about their lives?"

“I need you to make an order for the doses and hand them over to us. You can do what you please beyond that,” said Max.

“YOU DON’T CARE ABOUT MY POSITION!” Frank erupted. “This company holds patents on COUNTLESS vaccinations for thousands of diseases! We are the only company that handles the quarantine for the whole country. If this company fails, there will be thousands of deaths!”

Max still didn’t flinch. He betrayed no emotion. The twelve on the board looked more nervous, sweating with anxiety.

“You are asking me to act recklessly. You are demanding that I destroy the work of thousands of people just because it meets the needs of you and your little group. I will not let this company die on your say so.”

“So, that’s a no?” asked Max.

“OF COURSE THAT’S A FUCKING NO! YOU FUCKING TERRORIST PIECE OF SHIT! I’D RATHER DIE THEN LET YOU TELL ME HOW TO RUN MY COMPANY!”

A small smile curled onto Max’s face that made Fisher take a step back. Max lifted the walkie-talkie to his mouth. Chirp. “Come in.” He set the walkie-talkie back down. “Mr Fisher, it’s become clear to me that you’re not interested in negotiating. I, out of respect for your decision, must accept that.”

“You want to respect my decision? Then leave. Accept responsibility for what you’ve...”

Four men came through the doors, among them a tall black man with a shaved head. Two of the group carried the old-style wood ladder, the other two carried chainsaws.

Fisher turned white.

“Mr. Fisher, I imagine your position was easier to take when it was hypothetical,” said Max.

Two of the men grabbed Fisher. He struggled, screaming protests. Behind him, the other two men raised the ladder. They held his arms high and stretched him out, lashing him to the ladder by his wrists and ankles using zip ties.

Fisher couldn’t move. The humiliation that he felt, bound to a ladder in his own boardroom, was too much to take. He started sobbing. The twelve around the table stared aghast, looking sick. One of the women had tears rolling down her cheeks.

The men holding the ladder flipped it upside down. Fisher began to beg.

A few of the board members scrambled to their feet. The large black man in a suit held up a hand. "Probably not the best idea, please sit back down."

Behind the ladder, one of the men handed Max a chainsaw and he started it on the first pull. The roar of the gas motor startled everyone, they began screaming. Their cries were drowned out as Max gunned the chainsaw.

Fisher fought desperately to free himself but he was unable to move. All of Max's men took stations at the ladder to hold it steady. Fisher was vulnerable and helpless. He looked up to see the chainsaw appear between his feet, he could smell the gas.

Max lowered the blade and the teeth of the saw ripped through two rungs of the ladder, and then into Fisher. He screamed, the sound dampened in the din of the boardroom. Smoke from the chainsaw filled the room, obscuring the carnage in a gauzy film. The board members writhed, covering their mouths, shielding their eyes from the horror, but they could not escape the sickening smell.

The gas engine slowed down, then fell silent. The curtain of smoke that permeated the room lifted to reveal the aftermath. The men holding the now separate sides of the ladder let them drop. They fell to the ground with a wet sound, the two pieces of wood now tied to a disaster of meat and bone shards.

The twelve of the board cowered in their chairs. They stared at the scene in front of their eyes in shock. They made gasping sounds, vomit dried on their chins. The woman in her thirties mouthed prayers, her white shirt now a glistening crimson.

Max dropped the chainsaw.

Steve Chamberlain cowered against the wall. He had turned his chair around, using it as a shield as he lay curled on the seat in the fetal position, whimpering unintelligible words.

Max walked to Chamberlain's chair, turned it around, and pushed it back to the boardroom table. Steve sat useless, cheeks full of tears. The last of his color drained away when he looked down and saw pools of Frank Fisher's blood congealing on the polished wood.

Max pulled up a chair and sat next to Steve. He looked calm. “Mr. Chamberlain,” Max said gently, “I am very optimistic that we are going to be able to work something out here. I noticed earlier that you were the kind of person I might be able to negotiate with. Recent events mean you are the new President of this company. If the board would like to put that to a vote they can, but I hardly think it will be necessary. Now let’s talk about taking care of that order for us.”

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TWENTY-THREE

Wolf Blitzer stares into the camera. “CNN can now confirm that the popular revolutionary group known as the Citizens has taken control of Detroit. In the wake of this upheaval, the Detroit based Wellco Corporation has announced a partnership with the group and the departure of its long-time president and CEO, Frank Fisher. Mr. Fisher has been replaced by former Vice Chairman Steve Chamberlain, who released a statement thirty minutes ago, ‘The board at the Wellco Corporation is pleased to announce that a clinic is now being set up at the Coleman Young Center here in Detroit that will offer the Ebola vaccine free of charge to the general public.’”

Gloria Borger appears on the video wall behind Wolf. “Gloria, in the past twelve hours we have seen what can only be described as unprecedented events. What does all this mean moving forward?”

Gloria addresses Blitzer. “Wolf, this is a worst case scenario for the United States government. The seizing of an American city by former law enforcement and armed forces members has been described by White House officials as ‘a matter of grave concern.’ Among the reports of mostly non-violent takeovers in buildings all over Detroit come rumors of a firefight near the Quarantine building. No media are being allowed into the city at the moment but cell phone videos from residents are showing heavily armed guards stationed outside not only Quarantine in Allen Park but also the Renaissance Center downtown. We’re going to continue to sift through the details of the day to make sense of what has happened here but the bottom line appears to be that, at least for the moment, the US government seems paralyzed to stop the Citizens.”

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Betty turned off the TV. Josh was laying on the bed in the hotel the Citizens found near Quarantine. They hadn’t heard what the plans were from Max

yet, but from the news reports it sounded like the meeting with Wellco went well. The vaccines would be distributed in the city to anyone who wanted them. The Citizens were now officially in control of the city.

Josh had met Betty and Danton at the hotel. He spotted her in the parking lot and they ran to embrace. Josh didn't care that Betty was covered in dried blood, he was too relieved at the sight of her. Now he rested on the bed, calming himself after a torturous drive south from Birch Run.

Betty was clearly relieved to see him too, but headed to shower as soon as they hit the room. Washing off the day was a herculean task employing endless scrubbing and loofah sponges. The shower had been successful for the most part, but an hour later she was still finding ghosts of red behind her ears and under her fingernails.

Betty had told him most of the story on the elevator ride up to the room. She relayed the information, the huge unexpected crowd, the mercs, the sights of people dying, but when she got to the part about entering the building she trailed off. She seemed troubled.

Josh thought that was strange. He could sense there was something on her mind. She sat at the end of the bed, wrapped tight in a white robe despite the heat outside, and stared silently past Josh.

"Hey," Josh said.

"Yeah."

"Was there a problem in Quarantine?" he said

"No...not really a problem."

"Was there anything weird?"

"You mean weird like no patients. Like, at all?" she said.

"What?"

"Seven, total."

"Seven? What the hell happened to the rest of them?" he asked.

"I don't know," she seemed to be bothered by the same question.

"When did they stop taking victims, I wonder?"

"Maybe when we started taking the vaccines," Betty said, she hadn't considered this. "It seemed like they have been out of commission for a while. Like they just weren't collecting people any more and they burned the bodies in the incinerator." Saying this out loud calmed her in an odd way.

“If only we could have gotten there a little sooner,” Josh said. “They were letting people die.”

Betty got up and walked to the mirror above the TV. She grabbed a hand towel and tried to rub out more spots she had missed.

“So did you kill anybody?” said Josh.

“No, they just threw blood at me. It was like that show on Nickelodeon with the slime.”

“There’s no need to be a snot.”

“Have you talked to Max?”

“On the phone, but I haven’t seen him since yesterday.” Josh pulled his legs forward to sit Indian style on the bed.

“I think I want to talk to him about what we saw at Quarantine. The lack of people and all,” she said.

“I’m sure you’ll see him,” said Josh. He wanted to change the subject. “I am sure he will let everybody know what happens next.”

“Mm-kay.”

“You have been through a lot today, are you sure you are up for sex?”

She dropped the hand towel, pulled off her robe, and tossed it aside.

<<>>

Danton took off his shoes and rolled his toes on the carpet of the hotel room. He always thought of that movie Die Hard when he did this. He found it relaxing. Truth is, Danton’s life had been turning into an action movie lately.

He spent most of his life as a military paramedic and did tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. People always asked about the tours of war, and he told stories about how he dealt with victims of roadside bombs and stray sniper bullets. About dressing wounds and holding hands and whatever fucking war movie bullshit they expected to hear.

The war tours were nothing. It was just a job that had to be done, you were part of a team. The people you meet in a war zone become your brothers and sisters and you think about them every day. When he returned stateside he was stationed at an army base near Phoenix. At the front, being a paramedic is about saving the lives of heroes, but once you go back to the states, all you do is clean up messes.

People point to how many lives are saved by modern medicine in military conflicts. What they neglect to tell you about is the suicides. You

might come home physically healthy but now you have to live with the ghosts. It robs you of the quiet moments, and fills them with fear. You brace for death while you lay on the couch. After a while some soldiers decide to stop feeling the fear. They decide to embrace it and that's where Danton came in.

There were 2 suicides a day at a minimum. It was always the same. Someone discovered what was left and MPs get the call. You had to push past whatever family member or friend would be traumatized for the rest of their days and get to the job of cleaning up.

If Danton was lucky, it would just be a pistol to a guy's temple. Then it was just playing the game of 'find the skull fragments'. The more committed marines put the gun in their mouth. Danton hated those. When you trigger an explosion in your mouth, teeth go everywhere. You can spend hours trying to find them. The little white pebbles wind up in some of the strangest places. It would take so long, Danton would often get another call for clean up while trying to find the last one. The soldiers that blew their heads off with shotguns were just being rude.

Somewhere during the second month, Danton started to realize something. A soldier never really comes back. Sure, they look like the person you married or went to school with but they aren't the same. Something changed. The thing that changes isn't minor, either. It's not like they are going to be nicer to cats or have a new respect for art. They are different people than they were when they left. Whatever boy or girl signed up for service vanished, and all you have left is photographs. When a soldier goes to war, they die before they ever get on the plane.

When Danton heard about the Citizens he dropped everything and went to Michigan. He tracked down Jack in a bar in Ann Arbor after asking around for a few weeks. They spent hours talking while they drained pitchers of beer.

That was months ago. He became a recruiter for the Citizens because he knew exactly how to talk to soldiers. Enlisted men and women knew what a raw deal they got. They got paid a pittance for risking their physical lives and giving over their mental ones. They basically served as shields for Halliburton employees that made eight times what the soldiers did. The men and women of the armed forces did all the work, and other people who never stuck their neck out went from millionaires to billionaires. Then

soldiers come back and businesses are reticent to hire them because of their 'lack of experience.' It was enough to want to scream.

The Citizens was an easy decision for Danton because he believed in everything Max said. Danton's entire world was surrounded by people who had been stepped on and forgotten. With the Citizens, Danton felt like he was righting a wrong. He believed in doing the right thing for the guys he served with.

But today, he led an army. This was not what he expected.

There was a knock at the hotel door. Danton limped over and opened it. Max was standing there alone, no Tyson, no Jack. He was carrying a large file folder.

"Max...sir," said Danton. He left the door open and walked back into the room.

"You're limping."

"Yeah, more from tension than anything. It was pretty brutal at Quarantine." Danton sat in a chair and massaged his fingers into his thighs.

"You did well. I wanted you to hear it from me."

"Thank you."

"I have a job for you."

"Am I going to get shot at again?"

"You never know."

"What is it?"

Max handed him the folder. "These are the records on the people who have been with us for a while now, at least since Ann Arbor."

"I already know all these guys."

"Yes, I know, the reason I am handing you this is I want you to assign patrols. We're in the Coleman Young building, for instance, but we don't have total control. The safety of this city is going to be your responsibility."

"So I'm the General?" said Danton.

Max paused, then said, "Yes."

Danton stood up, at attention. "Sir, I am honored to accept this position. I will do anything I can to serve you, sir."

"Good."

"I will not let you down, sir. This is the biggest honor I have ever received."

"I thought it might be."

Danton's heart swelled with pride. They shook hands.

"Max, I will not let you down."

"You said that already, and I was glad to hear it. Now I have to get going. I expect those grids and patrols in forty-eight hours," said Max, as he strode out into the hall and pushed the button to call the elevator. "We are going to relocate to the hotel at the Renaissance Center downtown. Jack, Tyson, and myself will be living at the Mayor's mansion. I recommend that you stay at the hotel to be close to your forces. Gather your things, there will be cars here in an hour to transport everyone." The elevator dinged open, and Max paused before he got on. "I am glad to have you on the team, General."

Danton stood in the hallway at attention as Max got onto the elevator. He caught his breath once the doors slid closed. The enormity of the task and the honor of the assignment thrilled him.

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TWENTY-FOUR

The Renaissance Center was a collection of seven glass towers in downtown Detroit. It stood confident on the riverfront, reflecting light in all directions. Completed by Henry Ford II in 1977, it was conceived as a city within a city. It featured offices, movies theaters, restaurants, a food court and a hotel. The RenCen stood in giant crystal defiance of the city that crumbled around it. Residents of the city who shuffled past its base were reminded that some do better than others while they starved on the cold concrete below.

The Citizens from the storage garage moved into the hotel at the Renaissance Center within two hours after the raid on Quarantine.

The Tent City moved south, seeking accommodations of their own. Their travel took longer. Many members of Tent City hitched rides with the lucky ones whose cars still worked, several hundred walked. Once they arrived they found abandoned houses in the suburbs and moved in. Most of them continued downtown. Workers at the hotel-casinos handed over keycards to ruddy faces who walked in until there were no more rooms to hand out. The workers kept the suites for themselves and abandoned whatever housing they had before.

Thousands of people streamed into the city. Many who were reticent to go to Birch Run had all their fears assuaged when the Citizens were in control of Detroit. The rumor of a society built on trade didn't hurt either. Sanitation workers, firefighters, and police from every state in America entered the city and set up permanent residence. Detroit hadn't boasted numbers this large since the riots in 1967.

The population was peaceful. There was a sense of community. Everyone looked out for each other as they all felt a stake in the new order. Danton's forces kept the peace in highly organized shifts. The entrenched

criminal element that had plagued the city for so long vanished. Some gangs, chasing rumors of riches to be found in the emptying cities, left for Ann Arbor and Lansing. The ones that remained greeted the arrivals with friendly faces. The people were ready for the city's rebirth after decades of decay and corruption. So many had watched their hometown crumble and took great delight when it became the seat of the new utopia.

In other cities in Michigan, the population fled. The government in Lansing gaveled and ran. No one wanted to be in the state when their city became the next target for social upheaval. A few people stayed, in hope that this storm would pass, but even the outliers who didn't trust the Citizens had left by the end of October.

Josh, Betty and Danton found the RenCen comfortable. Max, Tyson and Jack moved into the Mayor's Manoogian Mansion, plenty of space for the three of them.

The first month passed without incident. Betty and Josh ate and drank in the restaurants of the RenCen, Betty pitching in on patrols while Josh kept the city's free WiFi running.

In DC, the government waited. The Citizens were popular among the population, so an attack on them could lead the country into open revolt. People on television screamed and complained, pointing to the fact that the problem was ongoing. Some blamed the fecklessness of the President, others said that it was the fault of the Congress for cutting military pay so many times. Inside the halls of power the US government bided their time. They planned for a way to take back the city, but it was best to wait it out for now.

<<>>

Jack walked through the halls of the mansion, carrying a tablet full of downloaded newspapers. He worried about the press coverage of the Citizens and read it daily. The reading was motivated by pure self-preservation. If the Citizens suddenly became unpopular, they would be finished. A month had passed without the group having to comment and that was promising, but it was time to get active.

Max was in the living room, staring at the TV.

"Do you ever sit down?" said Jack.

"What's up?" said Max, he didn't turn around.

“We need another round of media,” said Jack, making himself a Gin and Tonic. “If we lose the message war, it’s all but inevitable Blackhawk helicopters are coming to burn this place to the ground.”

“Okay.” Max said, his response sounded disinterested at best.

“We also need to have more people talk to the press than just you.”

Max said nothing.

Jack looked around the room, feeling uncomfortable. He looked at the gray security camera in the corner of the living room. “Or we could have everyone move in here and we could tape a reality show using all the security cameras,” said Jack, wondering if Max was totally ignoring him.

Max turned around. “Who do we trust to do an interview?”

Jack sat down on the couch and took a drink. “Well, I thought I could do one, Tyson is capable...”

“Of course.”

“What do you think about Josh?” said Jack.

“That could work. But nothing high level,” said Max.

“You, obviously.”

Max looked down, thinking. “How about Betty?”

“That’s a good idea,” said Jack, sitting up. “She’s TV perfect. What about Danton?”

“He’s not ready.”

“Max, he’s ex-military. That looks good for us.”

“Fine,” said Max, “When do we need to do this?”

“Networks are going to be all over us if we do this in the last week of October,” said Jack. “They’ll be ramping up for sweeps.”

“So a week from now.”

“Yes, a week from now.”

“Can you handle it?” said Max

“Yes, I will put out a press release and email it around,” said Jack.

Max nodded, and turned back to the TV.

Good talk, thought Jack. He wondered why he didn’t just do it himself. He walked out of the living room and toward the computer room. Max watches TV a lot these days, Jack thought.

<<>>

Josh and Betty were at dinner when Josh’s cell phone rang.

“Hey Jack.”

“We are doing some national interviews next week. We would like you and Betty to each do one,” said Jack.

“Like TV interviews?” said Josh. Betty’s eyes got wide.

“Yes, like TV interviews. We’ll write out some talking points for you, the things that we would like you to say. You can call Max or myself if you have questions.”

“Okay,” said Josh with a grin.

“Make sure you let Betty know about it, too.”

He looked at her. “I will let her know.”

He hung up. Betty was thrilled. “We’re doing interviews? All of us?”

“Sounds like it. Are you nervous?” said Josh.

“A little, but I think its awesome!”

“They have things we need to say, and we have to stick to them, but we are both going on TV.”

Betty grinned from ear to ear. “I hope I get Matt Lauer, or maybe George Stephanopoulos. I hear he is super short. That would be kind of a turn off if it’s true.”

“What?” said Josh.

“Sorry, I am just excited that’s all! If it’s Ryan Seacrest, I might just chainsaw him myself.”

Betty ordered another drink and spent the rest of the night excited about her TV debut.

TWENTY-FIVE

If attractiveness is measured on a scale of one to ten, Pamela Brown was a fifteen. She had always known she was different from other girls. The words beautiful and stunning had faded into the wallpaper long ago. Wherever she went stares followed her, and she loved being stared at.

This explained her obsession with being in front of the camera. No family photograph was taken without her jumping in. Friends thought she should be a model or actress but she wasn't interested. Models and actresses have days when they are not in front of the camera.

She went to broadcasting school only for the piece of paper. Most spend four years slaving over a degree in journalism but most don't look like Pamela Brown. When you are a fifteen out of ten there are no doors closed to you. Besides, the idea was not to become an award winning journalist, the idea was to be on camera.

Graduates just out of low-rent broadcasting school don't get jobs immediately. Pamela Brown had the pick of the litter. She took a job in a small market and did the reporter thing for a couple of weeks before she was moved to anchor. People were jealous, of course, but she was used to that. The station that put her in the anchor chair didn't even bother firing the person she replaced. The news director knew she was going places.

She jumped from market to market gaining celebrity along the way. Her journalism was called trash and fluff but it didn't matter. When she didn't anchor she always had a package at the top of the show, because her face on television spiked the numbers. Every assignment she asked for was given to her with little argument.

Some journalists work until they are in their fifties to get to the major market stations, Pamela was there at twenty-five. There were articles about her in trade magazines, asking if she was what had gone wrong in

journalism. She didn't care about the criticism, because Pamela had found the formula. Stand in front of the camera, smile that smile, and she would never stop winning.

She walked through the maze of cubicles at her office in Washington, DC with a single purpose. She had heard that the Citizens were allowing journalists into Detroit for interviews. She wanted this one badly. Scott Pelley's interview with Max was number one for the week by a mile. The Detroit interviews would be no different. Everyone in the country would be watching. In Pamela's mind, once she had that many people watching, she would know she had arrived. This was the interview that would finally make her a national star.

Her new boss was Jim Hightower, an affable disaster of a man who sat in an office that was packed with stacked papers. He wore a bow tie, in theory, but it was never tied and hung around his neck indicating some level surrender. He sat behind a glass desk with his hands in his thick but rapidly graying hair.

Jim didn't even look up when he spoke. "You're late."

Pamela was gliding into a chair, in full persuasion mode. "What?" All of Pamela's other bosses had been pushovers. Jim was a much tougher nut to crack. He was in his sixties and a series of divorces and heart attacks made him completely uninterested in women like Pamela.

He was still looking at his desk. "Well, the press release announcing interview avails from the Citizens came out five minutes ago. I thought you would appear in a flash of fire."

"Jim, can I have the interview?" she said.

He looked at the ceiling. He sighed and looked at her with narrow eyes. "You know the rumor around here is that you get all of the top assignments because we're fucking."

"So? I don't really mind what anyone says," she said.

Jim looked at her, mildly offended. "Well, I care! I don't need that shit! Why would you let people believe that?"

Pamela just kind of blinked this series of questions out of the way. "You know I want the story and you know I will do a good job!"

"I know only one of those things is true," said Jim, now leaning back in his chair. "You won't do a good job. Let's be honest, the only reason I give you the big stories is because you get great ratings. But whoever does this

interview is going to get big ratings no matter what, so I'm not really seeing what you bring to the table here."

Pamela slid her butt out of the chair and dropped to her knees. She extended her arms onto Jim's desk with her hands folded. "Please, Jim. PLEASE."

Jim rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling again. He was embarrassed for her. "Please stop that, NOW. Just let me think about it okay?"

She remained on her knees, "Jim, if I let you think about it the answer might be no!"

"No, if I think about it then I will absolutely say no, big difference. These interviews are documenting history."

"Jim, PLEASE," she looked near tears.

He went back to looking at his ceiling. "On the other hand, I really want you out of my office," he looked down at the sheet of paper on his desk. "Looks like we are getting screwed anyway. They gave Max to Brian Williams."

She pulled herself back into the chair quickly and dropped all begging from her voice. "Who are the other ones?"

Jim was already opening his laptop on his desk. "There are five of them," his brow furrowed under the riot of hair. "We get the computer guy."

"Thank you, Jim."

He didn't actually assign it to her, but that didn't matter. Jim rolled with it because she would be out of his office soon. "Don't mention it, really. Now, It's going to be a two camera one on one, in Detroit. One of the conditions is that we go to them." He nodded in the direction of the door. "And bring Scott as your producer. Hopefully the damn thing will actually be newsworthy if you take him."

"You won't regret this, Jim!" She was already heading for the door.

"Of course I won't. It's not consequential enough. It's just the computer guy."

Jim went back to holding his head in his hands and smiled at the moment of silence.

<<>>

Jack sat in the palatial living room of the Detroit mayor's mansion. He had his feet up, drinking a strongly poured gin and tonic. Jack seemed a little

tipsy already and was reviewing the results of today's planning. Tyson stood near the door.

Jack grabbed a notebook he had left on the coffee table and read the yellow pages to Max. "Betty is talking to Ellen Degeneres..."

"Who is that?" said Max. He was staring forward into space.

Jack looked up. "Daytime talk show. The best we are going to do in that arena, I am afraid, now that Oprah's gone. As you suggested, I am going on Charlie Rose. Josh is being interviewed by the ABC affiliate in DC, Danton is going on Hannity, and you are going to do an exclusive on NBC Nightly News."

"Brian Williams?" said Max

"Only the best for you."

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TWENTY-SIX

The hotel room door knocked. Josh opened it and Jack walked in, carrying two file folders.

“I have your interview assignments.”

Betty jumped off the bed and grabbed hers. Josh took his and opened it.

“ELLEN?” Betty protested.

Jack furrowed his brow. “That show has a huge audience and you have the personality for it.”

She threw the folder into the corner. “What the fuck, Jack? Why can’t I go on something more dignified?”

“Every type of media has to be covered Betty,” said Jack sounding cross.

“So just because I’m ‘the girl’ I have to go on fucking Ellen? You suck, Jack!” she whined. She sat down and pouted on the bed.

“Who is Pamela Brown?” asked Josh as he reviewed his folder.

“She’s from ABC,” said Jack, annoyed at Betty. “She’s just a reporter they are sending.”

“Okay. I take it that this is the time and room number at the top of the page?”

“Yes, make sure you aren’t late. Spend tonight going over the talking points. Again, call us if you have questions,” he said and left in a huff.

Josh burst into laughter after he was gone. “Jesus Betty, don’t hold back!”

Betty was still angry. “If she makes me dance I am gonna rip his fucking face off.”

<<>>

Max sat in a dark room lit by klieg lights in a chair opposite Brian Williams. The NBC anchor crossed his legs, a notebook balanced in his

lap.

“Thank you for taking the time to sit down with me today Max. To begin, are you at war with the United States government?”

Part of Max loved these interviews. He loved how these gullible little sycophants ate his words. He had developed a taste for their rapt attention, how they looked at him wide-eyed and listened to his every sound. But he hated being questioned.

“Of course not. We are not oppressive overlords. The whole point of this is to give the people their right to have choices. We think the America that many of us have lived in doesn’t allow choices anymore. For decades we have been given only the illusion of choice. We must have a car, a house, a college education, and all of those things enslave us to a debt from which we will never recover. We were promised the American Dream, far too many were sold snake oil.”

“How would you respond to those who are critical of your methods, some going as far as calling you a communist?”

“It doesn’t surprise me. There are those individuals among society who will always call new ideas ‘communism’,” Max said, wishing the interview would end. “It’s true that we are a community but we respect each others’ property. We don’t invent financial tricks to steal other peoples’ things.”

“How can you guarantee safety with no law enforcement officials?”

“That’s another lie,” said Max. “We have thousands of law enforcement officials. We haven’t made a system of courts because we haven’t needed them. We have plans on forming a committee of public safety, but this kind of thing takes time.”

“Are you currently controlling the Wellco Corporation?”

“We have never taken control of that company,” he said. Max heard his heartbeat. He steadied himself. No emotion, he thought. Emotion is for them. It is their infection. “We are collaborating with them on vaccine distribution, nothing more.”

Williams put his hands in front of him. “I ask because the President of the Wellco Corporation, Frank Fisher, left the company very abruptly on the day your organization arrived in Detroit. No one from the company will discuss his whereabouts and neither his wife nor any family members have had any communication from him in some time. Given the Citizen’s past

violent tactics, there is a question that needs an answer. Is Frank Fisher alive?”

“I have no more idea of where Mr. Fisher is than I have of anyone else. I know where I am, I can see where you are, but beyond that there is nothing,” said Max. “As for the violence of the Citizens, this has been rare. The only time we have acted out in violence is when others have tried to do us harm. We are saving lives.”

<<>>

Josh walked down the hall and toward the door that carried the same number as the assignment on the page. The door was propped open and an unshaven man wearing a baseball hat stood in the door jam. When he saw Josh he disappeared into the room.

The most beautiful woman Josh had ever seen then came out of the open door. It was like she wasn't real. She had long, flowing blonde hair and perfect skin. Her eyes were electric blue. Her body was Barbie doll in proportion, and her upper lip curled slightly. Her smile radiated into the darkened hallway.

Josh stood stunned for a moment. “Josh? Pamela Brown.” She grabbed his hand and shook it. She was looking directly into his eyes, rendering him speechless.

Pamela demurred a little and her smile got wider. “You are a lot cuter in person. Your pictures don't do you justice.”

Josh was trying to stuff his composure back into his chest. It wasn't an easy task after hearing that. “Well, thank you!” he said.

She led him into the hotel room. After the interview, Josh was pretty sure that during this time he was introduced to people but he did not have the foggiest idea who any of their names were nor what they looked like. There could have been a murder in progress in that hotel room for all Josh knew. He could not take his eyes off of Pamela.

At some point she sat in a chair and gestured for Josh to take the one across from her. The chairs were sitting under a flood of lights in an otherwise darkened room. Bright light on Pamela made her even more gorgeous.

“All right, here we go!” she said. She put on a Cheshire cat grin and stared down the lens without talking. Her eyes were just a little too wide,

making her look slightly crazed. In the darkness a voice counted three... two...

“We are here with Josh,” she said in a stilted voice, “one of the leaders of the Citizens movement.” She turned smiling to Josh. “So Josh, how has your life changed since...everything happened?”

“Well, obviously there is a lot to do, and there are some scary moments. But we are trying to give people a choice,” said Josh, using Max’s words. “If you are one of the people who are happy with the old way, stay where you are. But if you want a chance at a different kind of life, you can join us.”

“What do you mean by a different kind of life, Josh?” she asked in a halting cadence.

“We operate without money. Everyone goes to work and produces things for free. We trade goods and services.”

“So how do you buy things?” Pamela countered.

“By providing someone your service,” said Josh. “It’s like the open source community in computers that has been thriving for decades.”

“For the people who don’t know what open source are, what is it?” she said, still smiling from ear to ear.

“No, open source. It’s when a computer person designs a program and gives it away for free.”

“That is amazing. There’s an online community that is all free?”

“Yeah, one hand washes the other. We are doing it in Detroit now on a much larger scale. Those on the patrols, the cops, they trade the protection they offer for goods. The bartender can get tires because he serves drinks to the manager of the tire store. We do this all without the oppressive hand of government intervention. We are a collection of people, not rulers.”

“So I can get a car for free in Michigan?”

“Absolutely,” he said, remembering Max’s talking points, “But it’s not just getting things for free, Pamela. We also respect property. If you have a house, it’s your house. Unlike the US government, we would never try to take your property.”

“The government can’t take your house!” she replied, looking suspicious.

“Yeah, they can, it’s called eminent domain. The government can take your property whenever they want if they say it’s for public use. Your

property rights are non-existent with the US government.”

“How are you going to make sure no one steals from each other?” said Pamela. She made a shrugging motion while she said it.

“If you see someone step out of line, gather another witness and report it to the council of public safety. Is like the old ‘see something, say something,’ campaign. We have frequent patrols but we also hope the people will stay vigilant on behalf of themselves and the community. So far, our fellow Citizens have not let us down.”

“Sounds pretty, great Josh,” she said as the lights shut off.

He was slightly shocked by the puerile nature of her questions. He had to remind himself that the interview was for a network and not a school newspaper. After the interview, Pamela hugged him. The thrill danced in his stomach for a moment as his body pressed against hers.

She pulled away from him. “Thank you so much,” she looked really grateful. “This is the biggest interview I have ever done. I was a little nervous.”

“You did fine,” he lied.

She leaned in close for another hug. “Hey,” she said, gathering herself, “they’re telling me to stick around for a couple of days so that I can get a feel for what is going on around here. Can I get your number so we can have dinner?”

“Absolutely.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Betty stared into the bathroom mirror. The interview with Ellen had been okay, not nearly as bad as she feared. Apparently, this was the first time Ellen had attempted a serious interview and wanted it perfect. She wasn't Oprah good, but who was? Betty, however, felt like it could have gone better on her end. She got out the messages Max had given them, "Committee of Public Safety," "offer people a choice," "respect for people's property," blah blah blahtey blah.

She kept checking the door, waiting for Josh to come home. It was weird to call a hotel room 'home'. She was definitely smitten with the boy.

Betty never had any intention of letting a boy get her all smitteny, but here we were. She had dated a long line of utter douche bags when she lived in Florida, a series of Xeroxed men who all strove for the same middle brown skin tone and shaved every single inch of their bodies. They would speak in scripted lines, developed through trial and error, like a customer service rep or a 'choose your own adventure' book. You could forget about a decent conversation. It was like intelligence had been left behind in the male evolutionary process. She kept winding up with jealous guys who would get emotional or possessive. Betty valued one thing above all else, she was no one's possession.

The problem got so frustrating she convinced herself that she was in to women but that experiment was short lived. If you were trying to avoid relationships with overly irrational and jealous people, lesbianism was not the way to go.

Josh should have only been a bed of convenience but she loved looking in those eyes. She was in a completely unfamiliar place and knew that he was going to be around for a while. He was a cozy port in a crazy storm when they met in the spring but the summer had changed that.

Now she got the stupid butterflies whenever she thought about him. She had tried to keep her feelings at an arm's length. The time in Birch Run had made that plan impossible. He turned out to be a boy with a brain and Betty couldn't believe her luck. He wasn't anything like the hairless, silk-shirted idiots in Florida. He actually liked good movies and understood Betty's jokes.

She would certainly not be telling him this, determined not to put herself out there to that extent. No way, no how, would she expose herself to that level of pain. It didn't matter if her fear was unfounded. Old habits die hard.

She stared at her hair in the mirror, removing the barrettes. She had decided to wear it up for her big interview. She wanted to look tough like the chick in that movie 'Girlfight', except with pink hair. It looked awesome but it was a giant pain in the ass to free all the braids.

She heard the door open. She ran out of the bathroom with half of her hair in her face and the other half still in 'Girlfight' mode. Josh looked hurried.

"Baby! Hey! How did your's go?"

He looked at her like he hadn't heard her words but was staring right at her.

"Huh? What?" said Josh.

"Your interview, baby. How did it go?"

"Um...fine, fine. How was Ellen?" Josh walked across the room and lay down on the bed with his hands behind his head.

"Dude! She had on this Hilary Clinton pants suit. I mean, it was a decently tough interview but really soft lighting. Like if Ted Koppel did Nightline in a Pottery Barn."

He didn't laugh. He usually laughs. Betty realized he wasn't listening.

"So," she said, continuing, "I was thinking that we could go down into the city tonight. Do you want to go out babe?"

"..."

"Josh?"

"What?" he snapped.

The strength of his response shocked her. She had never heard his voice so sharp. "I was just asking if you wanted to go into the city tonight."

"I can't tonight. I'm having dinner with the reporter...we have to... continue the interview."

She felt an uncomfortable fog lay a thick cloud down onto the room. It was that bubble of awkwardness they both felt on their first night together, but this one felt different. This was that uncomfortable silence where both people know that one person isn't being honest.

"That's totally cool," Betty said, not meaning a word of it.

"You can come with me, if it's a problem," said Josh. He sounded annoyed.

"Do you want me to come?"

"Well, I...I don't really think it's necessary," said Josh. "I don't know why you have to get all up in my shit right now."

"I just asked a question," she said. "You're the one who made the offer, not me." She swallowed a lump in her throat and went back to dealing with her hair in the bathroom.

"What's wrong?" Josh leaned into the bathroom.

"Who said anything was wrong? I asked if you wanted to go downtown, you said no, and that's what happened."

"It's only because I have to finish this interview."

"Who was the interview with?"

"Pamela Brown."

Never heard of her, Betty thought, but it was a woman's name. You had to give the boy credit, at least he was honest. She let him eat the silence for a little bit.

"I said you could come if you wanted to!"

"Josh, it's...fine. If you want to go have dinner with some woman because you have to finish the interview I am perfectly fine with it. You don't have to keep inviting me along because you think I'm worried. I am not one of those jealous girls," said Betty. Betty knew very well she was being one of those girls, the number of times she had just used the word 'fine' was testament to that. Everyone gets jealous, only liars claim otherwise.

Josh of course didn't pick up on that. He moved to her and kissed her forehead.

"That's why you're my girl," he said and walked away.

Betty started back on pulling the bobby pins out of her hair. This is EXACTLY why you don't get smitteny she thought.

<<>>

Peter Keane drove his family toward the Michigan-Ohio border. Now that the Citizens were in full control of Detroit, it felt like it was time to leave. Peter had read enough history books to know that you wanted to get your ass out of Paris before the National Razor rolled in.

Peter didn't really buy into the Citizen thing but had stayed so long out of necessity. He was a doctor with hopes of becoming a surgeon and advancement was based on seniority. Leaving the hospital behind was an absolute last resort. When the Citizens first came to Detroit, Peter assumed that the army would take them out in a couple of weeks. After a month passed, he knew there was no way this was going to end well.

Lisa told him for weeks that she wanted to leave. They lived in Farmington Hills, an affluent suburb where the buildings looked like they were built by a series of copy and paste functions. Many of their friends and neighbors had already gotten out of Dodge. Lisa now sat next to him in the Escalade, wearing a face of relief. The distance they traveled south represented safety to her. Their two kids were in the back. The infant, Gray, was sleeping (finally) and so was their six-year old, Matilda.

Peter pulled out a pack of menthol cigarettes.

"You're smoking?" said Lisa.

"I'm nervous. I smoke when I become a refugee, Lisa," He always said her name when he wanted to be left alone.

"Whatever, anything that gets us out of this state is fine with me," she said.

In fluid motion he pushed the window open and sparked the lighter. He inhaled and the steering wheel reflected flame. He blew out in the direction of the window.

"Just don't do it in front of the kids," she said.

"I won't."

He stared out the windshield, looking at the red tip of the Marlboro glowing reflected in the glass. He noticed the two cars that were abandoned in the middle of the road, blocking southbound US-23.

"Just turn around," Lisa said.

"We've come all this way," Peter said while he put the car into park. "We can just put the cars in neutral and move them off the road."

He popped the door open and got out, his wife stayed behind. He walked into the headlights in front of the car.

A gigantic man wearing the uniform of a sanitation worker emerged from the darkness. Two others joined him. They walked toward Peter at a casual pace. One of the men was carrying a chainsaw.

“Evenin’ folks! What brings y’all down here?” said the gigantic man. He spoke in the distinct drawl of midwest white trash.

“We were just leaving. I found another job and my family and I are taking advantage of that opportunity,” Peter stammered as he lost confidence.

“Movin’, huh? Don’t seem to be taking a whole lotta stuff.”

“The moving company took care of all that. We’re just driving to the new house.”

“Ho-ly shit!” the gigantic man said to his companions. “If I move, I have to hope I have a friend with a pickup truck. Whole company helps you!”

“Well, the company that I am going to work for is paying for all of it. I can’t afford anything like that.”

“You cain’t? Well, I guess you’re drivin’ one of them budget Escalades?” The other two guys started laughing. The third stood motionless with his chainsaw.

“Guys, I just need to get through. I’m just trying to get to Toledo.”

“What’s your name?”

“Peter.”

“Well, Peter I’m goin’ to strongly advise you to reconsider,” Said the gigantic man.

“Look, I watched the interview with Max tonight about everybody working together, and he said we all have a choice. I’m making the choice to go to Ohio.”

“You got the right to do what you want, Max ain’t a liar, but if you choose to leave,” all three men started walking closer to Peter. “We got choices that we gotta make, too.”

“Guys,” Peter pleaded, “I’m just trying to get to Ohio. I agree with everything Max says, I just have to go where I find work.”

“You know what I think?” the gigantic man asked his silent companions, “I think he wants to leave so he can go back to livin’ large,” He then stared squarely at Peter. “I think you want to go back to where we’re all just slaves to Escalade drivin’ little fucking faggots like you.”

From inside the Escalade, Lisa screamed as two of the men grabbed Peter's arms.

"Guys just let us go and I'll go back to the hospital and work. I'm a doctor!" Peter said, fighting the men holding him. Peter heard the Escalade doors open.

The third man pulled the start on the chainsaw. It turned over dryly but did not fire.

A piercing, loud noise cut through the commotion. Everyone stopped. Lisa was already out of the car and rounding in front of it.

Matilda stood tiny on the asphalt. Her brown hair was in pigtails and she was wearing a light pink Hello Kitty shirt. Her cheeks were squished and devastated by tears. Her mouth hung open in a wail, covered completely in snot and spit.

Her cry cut through the silent night and echoed into the fields around them. She drew every molecule of air around her in a gasp and screamed out.

"Let go of my Daddy!" Lisa stepped in front of her and dropped to a knee. The child and the woman held each other, Lisa shielding Matilda from the sight in front of the car.

Peter felt the hands on his arms release. The men stared at the family and the one holding the chainsaw dropped it to his side.

"Just get out of here," said the giant man, sobering. "I can't let you pass. Turn around and get the hell out of here."

Peter wheeled around and ran right into the grill of the Escalade. He yelled to focus Lisa's attention.

"Get her and get in the truck!"

Lisa lifted the wailing girl to her shoulder and hurried her into the passenger side. Peter leapt in, keyed the engine and tore ass going north in the southbound lanes.

He got far enough to feel safe, pulled over to the shoulder of the road, and joined the girls in a cry. His heart was racing. Matilda just saved his life. Could you feel this grateful to a 6 year old?

He had to get his family out of Michigan. He would have to go north.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Jack left his interview with Charlie Rose elated. He felt like a head of state. There was Charlie in that suit and there was the round wooden table. They were images Jack had seen a hundred times before but this time Charlie had been looking at him, talking and asking questions to him. A couple of times, Jack froze, taking in how surreal it all was. He felt the detached perception of a man living inside a TV show.

He pushed the car window down and inhaled the crisp autumn air. He could feel the heat draining from the world. It would be cold soon. Jack shuddered at the thought. Why couldn't they have taken over a city in a nice, warm climate? One where it doesn't snow so much. The Citizens had been formed in a Michigan winter so Jack knew what was coming and dreaded it.

He pressed the gas and aimed toward home. He looked forward to the gigantic bed. It's easy to grow fond of living in a mansion. It is, after all, a mansion.

He took mental stock of the situation and realized that he had not discussed any of the next steps with Max. This had gone on a lot longer than Jack had ever considered. He knew the American government would not just stand aside forever and allow open revolt. At some point, the military was going to get its act together and retake the city. Jack did not want to entertain the thoughts of what would happen to them when the army decided it was time.

Air strikes on the RenCen would take care of this little revolution in one fell swoop. The only reason the Citizens were still alive was they were winning the message war. The media gave them favorable coverage in order to land exclusive interviews. Even Charlie Rose had asked softball questions. The public sympathized with their arguments. Survival depended

on the Citizens ability to keep this going while they came up with an exit strategy.

To Jack, the best case scenario would be a negotiated surrender of Detroit. Jack loved the idea of living the life of an exiled despot, sunning his stomach like a Salamander in some obscure island nation populated by tax cheats and mafia snitches. If the Citizens could get some of their platform ideas adopted by the United States government, it would solidify them in history and the rest of their lives could be spent in the reflected glow of their accomplishments. It all sounded like a very nice ending to Jack.

He pulled his cellphone from his front pants pocket and thumbed through the contacts. He pushed Danton's name on the screen and held the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" He picked up on the second ring.

They exchanged pleasantries, "Have you talked to Max?"

"Yeah, I did, just hung up with him in fact. He told me about the meeting tomorrow."

Jack was surprised but feigned knowledge. "Oh, yes, the meeting, remind me what time that is again?"

"It's at 10:00 AM."

"Great, how did your interview go?" Jack asked but his mind wandered away without waiting for a response. Why hadn't Max called him first about this meeting?

"Not too bad but I was nervous. I mentioned my tours of duty. They even thanked me for my service."

"Good to hear. Charlie Rose was an incredible experience..." Jack trailed off and the two men lapsed into an awkward silence. Jack and Danton had almost nothing in common and they had said everything they could have possibly said to each other in a little under 20 seconds. "Okay. Well then, I will see you tomorrow."

"Yep. See you tomorrow."

They hung up, mercifully ending the clumsy exchange. Jack was getting close to the mansion anyway.

<<>>

Josh rode the elevator down into the lobby of the RenCen. He had some sickness about what he was doing. The elevator came to a stop and the

doors dinged open. He walked out and sat on a cushioned bench. His mind turned in acrobatic flips.

He loved Betty. She would probably be horrified to hear him say it, but he did. He wanted to stand up, get back on that elevator, and return to the room he shared with her. He remained on the bench.

Josh had dated around but had never been to quite this level. Betty was amazing, a beautiful, smart, and strong girl. But opportunities like Pamela only come around once in a lifetime. He got to his feet and walked to the restaurant.

She stood out like a beam of radiant light in the restaurant bar. Every eye stared. She wore a form fitting blue dress. Her hair cascaded around her shoulders, shiny and perfect like gold. Her blue eyes scanned the people around her. When she saw Josh, her mouth beamed into a perfect smile, which only served to make her shine even brighter.

This...is my date, thought Josh.

“Hey!” she said.

“Hey yourself,” said Josh, and immediately wished he had thought of something better.

They exchanged pleasantries and walked to the table. She lowered herself into the seat and set down a long stem wineglass. The white wine wobbled in the glass, casting yellow shadows across the tablecloth.

“So you live here?” she said.

“I do.”

“Do you like living in a hotel?”

“It’s right downtown so you are kind of in the middle of everything. That helps.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything.

He brought it back to her. “What about you? Where do you live?”

“I live in Falls Church, Virginia. It’s basically the DC area. Do you know where that is?”

“I know where DC is.”

“Right,” she looked nervous. Josh couldn’t believe she was nervous. She continued, “But I travel around so much that I’m never home. You know, always covering something. I miss my cat.”

“What do you cover?”

“Nothing as big as this! Usually if there is an earthquake somewhere or a disaster, they send me.”

“That’s pretty awesome,” Josh said with a smile. “So you are used to living in a hotel too then?”

They ordered and they kept talking. He told her about his time with Anonymous. She didn’t seem all that interested. Then he told her about Birch Run and hacking the signs. The food was served. He told her about broadcasting The Words and the fight to take over Detroit. He never mentioned Betty.

Pamela was on the edge of her seat when he talked about the Citizens. She curled her fingers around the stem of her glass and said. “I wish I was doing something that was making this much of a difference.”

“You’re telling people about us, that’s making a huge difference.”

She held out her glass and let it gently tap into his. “I guess you’re right, I do feel like I am making a difference sometimes,” she said.

“How so?”

“I have covered some disasters. I was there for the Japanese Tsunami and I covered Joran Van Der Sloot when he killed that girl in Brazil. That’s helping people, I guess.”

“The tsunami? Did you see the bodies?” asked Josh, not realizing how ghoulish this sounded until it was out of his mouth.

“I’m usually far away from that. I see the ambulances. If I ever actually saw that stuff I don’t know what I’d do.”

Josh had butterflies just from looking at her. He couldn’t believe that he sat here at this moment, and she looked at him like there was no one else in the world.

<<>>

Betty wandered around Greektown knowing full well that her boyfriend was having dinner with another woman. She was a television reporter, so she had to be attractive, Betty guessed. That particular thought did not make her feel any better.

It was a weekend night in downtown and the streets were packed. There were girls in tiny slip dresses that reflected the city’s neon lights and men in button down shirts with the collar popped up. Betty thought that the collar popped style rightfully died off a decade ago, but surmised she was wrong. Every smile was bleached, every chest completely free of hair.

She shouldered into a crowded club and made her way to the bar to get a drink. She heard the hoarse whispers of people around her, mostly douche-bags that looked at her ass. She ordered a Vodka Tonic and waited with her arms crossed. Douche-bags, she thought, this is your lucky night.

She wasn't sure she wanted to talk to a guy tonight, she was still trying to make sense of this afternoon. She loved Josh, but she had seen the signs. She knew when a guy was window shopping, just like all women do, and Josh had all the signs of a guy that had picked out what he wanted and was haggling over the price. The only thing keeping her from forgetting him forever was denial. Sweet, comforting denial.

She looked down the bar, her side touching against the counter. She beamed a fake smile and a douche-bag walked up. Betty eyeballed him. He was wearing a white dress shirt, half buttoned to expose his, of course, shaved chest. His black hair was gathered into a point on the front of his head like a crusty stalagmite.

The douche-bag spoke. "Is this seat taken?"

She stared at him. "There are no seats."

"Oh, right. Do you want to do a shot with me?"

"Sure," she said. Keep 'em coming, she thought.

He looked at the bartender. "Two Red-Headed Sluts." He looked at Betty. "Sorry."

"My hair is pink, and you are really fucking bad at this."

"I'm really, sorry. You're just so hot and I'm kind of nervous to talk to you," he said over the loud music.

"Getting better," she said. He must know I'm lying, she thought.

"I'm Trevor."

Figures, she thought. Betty imagined that somewhere there was a factory pumping out 'Trevors' at a rapid pace. She grabbed his hand and shook it. "Betty."

"Oh wow!"

"What?"

"My grandmother is named Betty!"

"Okay," she said. Ugh.

"That's pretty crazy, huh?" he said.

"No, Trevor, that probably wouldn't exactly qualify as 'crazy'. In fact, I don't think that it even qualifies as a coincidence."

“Oh, I just thought it was pretty ironic.”

“Again...” she said, but suddenly decided to change the subject, “So what brings you to Detroit?”

“Free shit,” he said, waving his drink at her. He made a face like she said something stupid, “Obviously!”

“Of course. So are you fighting with the Citizens?”

“No,” Trevor said, as he shook his seemingly empty head. “Well, kind of. I am totally into what they’re doing but I don’t fight or anything.”

Betty hoped the alcohol would work quick. “Well, you should join up. You look like you work out a lot.” She slapped a hand on his chest.

“I do! Yeah.” Betty stared at him and watched him struggle for thoughts. She gave some arched eyebrows of encouragement.

“You’re so hot. You know what?” he said.

“What, Trevor?”

“You remind me of the Girl With the Dragon Tattoo.”

“I don’t have tattoos,” she said. “And isn’t she goth?”

“I saw the commercial, you know. I think you’re just as hot as her.”

Betty fantasized about jamming a knife into Trevor’s fucking forehead. She left the club.

<<>>

Josh and Pamela walked out of the restaurant and toward the elevators.

“So are you staying in the hotel?”

“Yes.” She was unsteady on her feet, clearly buzzed.

“What floor?”

She looked him in the face and locked eyes. “Let me show you.”

For a moment, Josh’s stomach dropped. He thought of Betty. He pushed the wave of guilt aside.

Pamela tapped a button on the elevator. It dinged open immediately and they went inside. She pushed the button for her floor.

As soon as the doors closed she pushed him up against the wall of the elevator. Pamela leaned in and kissed him passionately. Josh couldn’t believe it was happening. She rubbed the back of his head with one hand and the front of his pants with the other. She tasted like wine.

In all of Josh’s life he never thought he could be so lucky. The doors dinged open and this beautiful woman pulled away from him, stepped out

of the elevator, and walked ten paces to the same door that Josh had gone to for the interview.

She swung the door open and put her back to it. “Are you coming in, Josh?”

“Looks like I am,” he said his thoughts out loud.

They kissed, fumbling inside the room. The only light came in blue from the window. Pamela undid Josh’s belt and slid his pants off in a clumsy motion. He fell back onto the bed and she stood above him, pulling off her dress. Her perfect body glowed, even in the darkness. Josh sat up and licked her stomach. She smelled like perfume and detergent. Her bra dropped off, then her panties, and she stood naked in the blue light of the hotel room.

Josh cast off the rest of his clothes, staring at her the whole time. He reached up and pulled her down to him. They rolled around awkwardly. She seemed eager. She kissed him almost too hard, slightly missing when kissing with her mouth that was a little too wet. He stared at her face.

She smelled clean. Like a hospital.

<<>>

Betty pushed the card into the slot and opened the door. The room was empty. She stood just inside, looking at the dark empty room and realized what that meant. She allowed the door to close behind her with a heavy metallic thump.

She was alone, alone in a world that didn’t make sense anymore. She was alone in a revolution that she helped start. She had no idea what to do next and was far from home.

She sat on the bed. The comforter was smooth and untouched. The bed was made with clean linen that the staff must have put on while she was gone. The room was neat and clean because there was no one in it. This room wasn’t home. The point was bright and honest inside her head. He had abandoned her for someone else.

She pulled her knees forward and fell sideways onto the bed, facing the door. She held herself in a ball and cried. She cried because she knew that he would not walk through that door tonight.

God damn you, Josh.

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TWENTY-NINE

Max marveled at the size of the mansion's living room. He admired its high ceilings and twisting decorations. A fire snapped in the fireplace. He thought about how fun it would be to watch this room burn, flames rising like water levels, eating at the columns and wall pattern.

Tyson went into town an hour ago. Max assured him he would be safe but Tyson still walked out the door with a reluctant look. Max felt relief. He wanted to be alone tonight.

Max stared at the panel TV casting light onto the floor. The blue glow collided with the red of the fire on the hardwood. The news was broadcasting stories from around Detroit. The eye of the world was fixed on Max and the things he accomplished. Detroit, a symbol of crime and corruption, was now a utopia, the envy of the world.

Former gang members mowed lawns. Trash was picked up and hedges trimmed. They operated with no money, gave away the fruits of their labor, and were happy to do so. It was perfect harmony in the city and surrounding areas because they all agreed with an idea, his idea.

Max smiled as he ran a finger across his chin. They looked like ants, moving and breathing and tasking because he told them to. They acted perfectly, the ants. They ran around every day like their useless little lives mattered. He flipped to another channel and the same images greeted him. Every channel on television documented the reach of his power.

On one he saw a woman, face drawn tight from plastic surgery, dragged out of a large house in Bloomfield Hills because she would not help her neighbors with trash pick up. She protested to the cameras, threatening that people would be in jail as soon as her husband came back to Michigan. The Citizens loaded her into the back of a van and drove away. Neighbors were

interviewed and said that they wished she would have been hauled away months ago.

The images thrilled him but Max thought it peculiar that no one was thanking him. It seemed a little rude. They were singing the praises of the lifestyle that he created, and still no one thanked him. The ants did not mention his name. They offered no title.

Max held his breath. For the first time he felt regret, in that moment he realized his mistake. In allowing the others to do the interviews he elected to share the credit. He had willfully given the others a chance to bathe in his reflected glow.

Max shook his head. I doubted my power, he thought. It's my only flaw, doubting myself. Even Max couldn't have predicted his omniscience, every inch of Detroit was different or changing because he was in control. Self doubt, in and of itself, relinquishes control. Max needed to remain in control.

He closed his eyes and thought of the mess he made. He shook it off. Max reminded himself that emotion would only get in the way. His error in judgement can be corrected whenever I choose, he thought. This calmed him.

Max steadied himself. The greatest thing about being in control is you don't have to feel anymore. You can simply do. He exhaled slowly and felt content because he never had to doubt himself or any of his urges ever again.

<<>>

The security system beeped when Jack walked in the door of the mansion. He saw Max standing motionless in front of the TV, his standard pose for the majority of the last month. He was watching the news coverage of the developments in Detroit, again.

“Oh good, you saw. We are having a really good day, media wise.”

“How was Charlie Rose?” said Max, not breaking his gaze.

“It was amazing,” said Jack, already pouring himself a drink. “I felt like a world leader or something.”

“Really,” said Max.

Jack thought he detected a hint of sarcasm in Max's voice but shook it off. “Yes, they treated me as if I was the ruler of Detroit. Well, I guess we are now, when you think about it.”

Max turned around to stare at Jack but said nothing in response.

“Where’s Tyson?” Jack asked.

“He went into town.”

“Good for him to get out of here. How did his interview go?”

“Sounds like it went well.”

Jack plopped down on the couch. “Did you hear from everyone else?”

“I spoke to Danton. We need to plan for the next step.”

“That reminds me,” said Jack, after swallowing more of his drink. “I’d like to talk to you about this Council for Public Safety.”

“It’s necessary to detain the people that are accused so they can be dealt with. I see nothing that needs to be discussed.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, Max.”

“...”

“If you saw the footage of the woman being dragged off, that is not going to play well in our favor.”

“...”

“I understand the need to set an example, but if it continues for too long we’ll be seen as rounding people up,” said Jack. Almost on cue the TV showed the footage of the woman being dragged off again. “We would be in danger of losing public support, and when that happens this is all finished.” Jack motioned with his hand as if to prompt Max to look around the richly furnished room they were both inhabiting.

Max only offered a cold stare.

Jack started to feel uncomfortable with Max’s deliberate silence. “We need to figure out what kind of a trial to hold. We owe these people due process.”

“I don’t owe anyone anything,” Max said, firmly.

“We will lose everything we have fought for if we act without thinking, Max,” said Jack, ignoring him. “Have you thought about our exit strategy? We have to have a plan for bringing this to a close. We’ve made our point. This can’t go much farther. We have done all we can.”

The room was silent except for the cracking of the fire.

“Here is what I was thinking, we could send a message to the government, and set our terms to surrender the city. We could demand that police unions and benefits for soldiers can never be cut. Then we could set

the terms for our exile. We can get away alive and we will have accomplished everything we ever wanted.”

“...”

“Max,” said Jack, gently. “I don’t want to make you mad but we honestly have to think about these things before it’s too late.” Jack’s thoughts traveled to air strikes again.

“I’m not mad. I moved on from anger long ago.”

Jack looked directly into Max’s eyes, desperate to be heard. “So, you agree?”

“Let’s go out to the barn,” said Max. He stood up and walked to the back of the house without another word.

Jack sat on the couch for a moment, he didn’t understand the tone of the conversation nor Max’s distant manner. He downed the rest of the clear liquid until the ice bumped his top lip and followed Max out the door.

At the back of the property stood a brown pole barn, shelled with thin metal walls. At its mouth was a giant door that could slide to either side. Jack walked to the barn and pushed the door open. Max sat on a wooden picnic table inside. As Jack approached Max turned his head to look at him.

“Did you need to talk to me?” Jack asked in obvious confusion.

“No.”

In a single, rapid motion, Max pulled a Bowie knife and sliced Jack’s Achilles tendon. He screamed. The howl bounced wildly around the metal walls of the pole barn. He collapsed onto the floor, slamming his shoulder into the concrete. Max sat back down on the picnic table and stared at him blankly.

Jack screamed something that had the vague semblance of words.

“I disagree with your assessment,” said Max.

Jack rolled on his back, writhing in pain. He tried to get up but he felt a heavy hand clap down on his shoulder.

Max dragged him across the floor of the barn. Jack could feel his right foot following useless behind him, he couldn’t move it at all. It hung there ghastly at the end of his leg. The wound gathered dust as it scraped the floor and felt like it had been set on fire.

Jack sensed Max’s presence looming. He cowered on the ground, not knowing what to do next. He finally looked up to see Max standing over

him with the knife. Max leaned forward and slashed at Jack's clothes. Within a few motions he was left in only his underwear. Jack still couldn't make any sense of what was happening.

Max grabbed Jack and lifted him off the floor. He slammed Jack's hand into the rim of a large buggy wheel hanging against the wall. Max fumbled for something beneath him and then lashed Jack's hand to the wheel. He leaned down to grab more rope and did the same to his other hand. Max walked away.

Jack was immobilized in the fluorescent light of the barn, crying while crucified on the wheel, his half-severed foot hanging off his leg. Through the agonizing pain he thought about everything that had come before. Jack realized his blind spot, he had neglected to ask the right questions. He never thought about Max's motivations. He listened to Max's words, but was never curious about why he was saying them. Jack remained lashed to the wheel and wondered what he had wrought on the world.

Max reappeared. He lifted both hands in the air, his face and form covered in shadow, the light from outside shining brightly behind him. He brought the sledgehammer down on Jack's right arm, shattering it between the spokes. Max lifted the hammer again. A flash of light passed in front of his face, revealing a frightening grin and the look of passion in his eyes. The hammer crashed into Jack's arm again.

Jack prayed that he would pass out from the agony of it all. He didn't.

<<>>

Max stood in the living room of the mansion. The room was licked with the warm red light of the embers gasping in the fireplace. Max listened to his heartbeat slow. He steadied his breathing. Outside, the birds began to chirp, announcing their awakening. Within an hour the sun would burn the darkness away and the day would begin again.

He rubbed his beard, concentrating. The time when Max doubted himself was finished, he had solved that weakness. Now with Jack gone, Max would no longer have to ask for anyone's permission. He calmed himself, to concentrate his thoughts, and realized the next step.

Max had to consolidate. Only one more threat remained. Only one of the Citizens had the ability to temper Max, and that one must be eliminated before it too started thinking about an exit strategy.

Betty.

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THIRTY

Josh rolled out of bed. He hadn't slept. He looked at the soft blond hair of the naked beauty laying next to him. He swung his legs off the bed and onto the floor. The sun poked through the blackout curtains. Josh laid there as long as he could, knowing there was no turning back once he walked out the door. Last night was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Now he understood the cost.

He couldn't face Betty. Not with all this shame. He wished that life had a rewind button. It doesn't. What's done is done and there is nothing you can do to change it. You wait for the sun to come up and accept the inevitable. He closed his eyes in a silent prayer. Please give me the strength to make it through today, he said to no one in particular.

He pulled his pants on and searched for his shirt. Pamela stirred under the covers that clung to her perfect curves. "Taking off?" she said in a voice coated in morning rasp.

"Yeah, I'll call you."

"You say that to all the girls, don't you?" she said attempting to seem funny but her voice was anxious.

Josh rounded the bed and kissed her forehead. "I will call you. I promise," he said. He worried that he might be telling the truth, depending on the events of the next few hours.

Pamela turned over to her stomach. She seemed satisfied with the answer. "Okay, see you later," she said with a mouthful of pillowcase.

Josh looked back a final time and went out the door. Was he ready to see Betty? Would he ever be? A part of him prayed that she would already be gone. He fantasized about opening the hotel room door and seeing the evidence she had moved on. He loved that idea, he would never have to feel the shame of her disappointed gaze.

He shuddered. His guts turned over like a clothes dryer as he walked to the elevator and pushed the button. He wished the walk was longer or that the elevator ride would stretch on for days. Instead the doors swept open and Josh started toward his room.

Not knowing what horrors lay behind that door was killing him. He didn't think there would be any dramatic shout fest, but then again who knew? Josh did not think he could handle the possibility of a full on excoriation. Even so, he would have to take it if that was the case, maybe if there was a screaming match she would get all of the hate out of her system. Maybe then she would forgive him. He would never see Pamela Brown again and the whole mess would be behind him.

He grabbed the key card from his pocket, his heart thundered in his chest. He pushed the card into the door, the green light flashed, and it popped open.

The curtains were open wide, bathing the room in bright. Josh could feel the humid air from a shower filling the room. It smelled of Betty's shampoo and body wash. It smelled like home.

Betty emerged from the bathroom. She walked past him, picked up a pair of jeans, and stuffed them into a backpack that was sitting on the bed. Josh looked at her but she did not look back. The silence was so much worse than anything he had imagined she would say.

Josh wanted to scream. He wanted to fall to his knees in front of her. He wanted to tell her that he was sorry and would never do it again. He wanted to cry and throw himself at her mercy but he did not.

A bubble filled the room, far more great and terrible than the silence before it. It was a bubble of grief. The same pallor that hangs over a funeral clung to every surface. Josh felt sick to his stomach. His tongue felt thick and useless. He stood paralyzed with shame. Betty stood frozen as well, looking down at the backpack.

He needed to beg for forgiveness, beg Betty to understand that he regretted it before it had even started. He wanted to tell her that Pamela was beautiful, but he realized now that she meant nothing to him.

He wanted to say these things, but his throat remained clogged. Finally, after a time that felt stretched out to eternity, Betty zipped up the bag. Josh could feel the end was here. If he was going to offer any protest, it would have to be right now. She was leaving.

His mouth felt filled with sand as it opened. “Betty, I...”

“Nothing you are going to say matters.”

The words hit like a brick. He stood silently as she pulled the pack to her shoulder and walked past him out the door. It slammed with metallic finality behind her.

The hotel room was cold and empty in an instant, desolate and absent of life. The bright sun still came in from the window but did nothing to burn away the pallor of the room. It was a terrible place now. The room he called home yesterday was transformed into a shrine for his selfishness. The only thing left of Betty was the smell of her body wash wafting from the bathroom. Everything else was a tomb, without clemency or comfort. No solace could be found in the sadness that surrounded him.

He sat on the bed. Too broken to cry and too angry to scream. There was no reason to spend hours weeping over this, he thought. The choice had been his to make. If he had told Pamela Brown he didn’t want to go to dinner none of this would have happened. Betty would be here, next to him, and everything would be as it should. He was happy with Betty, why had he done this?

He knew why, because he was weak.

He thought that Pamela Brown was an opportunity he could not let pass and if he had he would always regret it. Josh realized at that moment that there was something far more terrible than regret. Acting on desires and living with the consequences.

The door knocked loudly. He shook his head to break the trance. Was that the first knock? The second? He had no idea. He opened the door with hope but was greeted by Tyson and two other large men.

“Hey Josh, is Betty here?” asked Tyson.

“No,” said Josh, sounding miserable. “She left.”

“Okay, do you know where she went?”

“No, I don’t know where she fucking went.” He held back the tears but there was gallons of venom in his voice.

“Okay, do you know when she is going to be back?”

“She isn’t coming back,” he said. The words tore through his chest like a shotgun blast, they made the nightmare real.

“I don’t understand, she doesn’t live here anymore?”

“I ANSWERED YOU ALREADY!” Josh’s voice cracked from the volume of the scream.

They stepped back. “We seem to have come at a bad time,” said Tyson. “We’ll just go, okay Josh?”

Josh let go of the door without response and slunk back inside the hotel room. He felt like his insides had filled with Styrofoam. His throat burned with bile as he collapsed on the bed. He wanted to cry, relieve some of this horrible tension, but he couldn’t. The misery of the truth could not be denied.

She wasn’t coming back.

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THIRTY-ONE

Betty walked into a bar in Greektown, hopped onto a stool, and dropped her backpack down next to her. The best way to get over a guy is to get under another one and this was no time to be picky, she thought. Well, he at least had to know enough not to annoy her.

A waiter walked into Betty's view and bent over to wipe the table. She saw him glance in her direction and then do a double take. He had brown hair, dimples, and the tight t-shirt he was wearing framed him nicely. This could work, she thought. "How do I get some service around here?" she said.

The waiter looked at her, perplexed, then grimaced in a way that made his stock plummet in Betty's eyes. "Hey, haven't I seen you on TV?"

"How would I know what you've seen on TV?" she said. Ellen fan, she thought. Please be straight.

"The hair stands out."

"I guess so."

He extended a hand. "Chris, nice to meet you. You look so much better in person!" Betty had never heard that before, but she liked it. Chris recoiled a bit. "Not that you looked bad on TV, it's just that you're so hot in person. Okay, I am making a fool of myself here"

She could use the hero worship. "It's okay, Chris. Telling a woman she is attractive is never a bad idea. So, you work here?"

He still seemed a little nervous when he spoke. "I do now. Ever since I heard Max's message. I wanted to help the community."

"Good to do your part," she said.

"I live within walking distance, so it's perfect."

"I agree with you on that," she said. "So, you watch Ellen, Chris?"

“It was on in here earlier today. We turned up the sound. You were really great. I can’t believe you were the one who liberated the people in Quarantine!”

“That’s me,” she said with a weak smile. The discovery at Quarantine still bothered her.

Chris changed the subject. “So you live in the RenCen?”

She waved him off. “I’m not interested in talking about me right now, Chris. So you live within walking distance? What time do you get out of work today?”

<<>>

Doug had tended bar at the Detroiter for years. As it turned out, the trade system was the best thing to happen to Detroit. The fucking place was paradise. There were no more gunshots, no more gangs, and if someone misbehaved, they were hauled away in a van. It was perfect. He didn’t have to charge for drinks but he didn’t get tips either. Though that doesn’t matter much when you don’t have to pay rent.

The lack of money made people unreliable, but Doug wasn’t going to blame Chris for bailing on his shift. If a woman like that had flashed him those pretty green eyes he would have left his post too. Doug was staring at her from the second she sat down, but was apparently not on her menu. Lucky half-retarded fuck, he thought.

Doug pulled beer inventory from the cooler. He turned around and noticed the van that had pulled up outside the bar. Several large guys with chainsaws popped out of the back. The new Detroit was peaceful and fair, but the sight of chainsaws still made everyone freeze.

Two other men in cop uniforms walked past the Detroiter and out of sight. The guys with chainsaws manned their post. Twenty minutes later the door swung open. It was the two guys in police uniforms.

“Good afternoon Citizen,” said the officer that looked like he was in charge.

“Afternoon Citizens,” Doug said. “What can I help you guys with?”

The officer rummaged in his pants pocket and pulled out a smart phone. He held the screen up to Doug. "Have you seen this woman?"

Doug took the phone and squinted. A photo of the pink haired woman was on the screen. "She was here a couple of hours ago."

The men in uniforms exchanged a glance. "Do you know where she went?"

"She left with my waiter, Chris."

"Where did they go?"

"Didn't say, it's possible they went back to his house."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know. I would assume close but that's relative, guys."

The other officer looked incredulous. "You don't know where your own employee lives? He didn't fill out any paperwork?"

The guy was probably a cop back when there were such things as money and paperwork. "I have no idea. I don't even know if I can call him 'my employee'. He works here on his own free will like everybody else."

The officers looked frustrated. One of them muttered. "Yeah, unfortunately, that makes sense these days." He rose his voice again, "But he comes here to work, he'll be back?"

"Hopefully at some point he will, yeah."

The officer pointed to his partner. "Radio to base. We need a plainclothes to build a tent right around our current location. He may be back tonight, maybe tomorrow. But we need to find...Chris is his name?"

"Yep. Chris."

"Okay. Thank you Citizen." The officers walked out of the bar making plans along the way. They jumped into the open back of the van and it left in a puff of blue exhaust.

The new world is starting to feel a lot like the old world really fast, Doug thought.

THIRTY-TWO

Peter looked at his gas gauge, it read an eighth of a tank. He had to make a stop. They had been traveling most of the day and were just now getting past the Zilwaukee bridge. There were less abandoned vehicles going north, now they littered the shoulders on the southbound side. He passed I-675 and came around a corner. The exit for Saginaw Rd/M-84 was posted ahead. A blue sign advised of two different options for gas stations. Peter merged to the right and onto the ramp.

He turned right and found an abandoned gas station. No attendant and no gas either. Every pump produced a dry belch. Peter got back into the Escalade and drove on. A little farther down the road a beaten up gas station appeared. The sign had long ago forgotten its name but the lights were on in the building.

Peter pulled into the station. He looked at his wife with hope in his eyes and got out of the truck. He heard her push the locks after he started walking toward the building. Figures. Lisa wasn't nearly as brave as his daughter.

The building was empty. He saw the switches for the pumps behind the counter. He walked around the mountain of single serve salty snacks and moved to the switchboard. He had never worked at a gas station before but he was pretty sure he could figure it out. If a mentally challenged person making four dollars an hour could work the pumps, a medical doctor should be able to.

Peter heard the shotgun rack in his ear. He closed his eyes. He heard the holder of the shotgun breathing behind him. "Hands up." Peter didn't fight the instructions. "Turn around."

He turned and looked down the barrels of the shotgun. It was an inch from his face. "You're on private property, rich boy."

The man who spoke stared down the barrels on the opposite end. He was grossly overweight with orange hair that curled like straw from under his hat and an orange mustache that was filthy and stained. He wore enormous glasses that looked like television panels held together by thin wire frames. His face was streaked with the ghosts of oil long dried on his cheeks.

“Sir,” Peter was almost unintelligible. His voice shook with such intensity that the man with the gun pulled one eye away from the sight in order to appreciate the sound. “My family and I are just trying to get out of the state. We need gas to get...”

“I shoot thieves.” The man was wearing a white undershirt that was speckled with blood spatter. “And you went behind the counter. That makes you...a...thief.” On the last word he pressed his gun into Peter’s face.

Peter felt urine come gushing out of him and he cried.

The fat man lowered the firearm. “Okay, okay, Jesus. No need to go and piss yourself and start crying like a fuckin’ girl. Make me fucking feel all sorry for you.”

Peter dropped to his knees and bawled. It wasn’t so much the gun shoved into his face. It was the whole situation. Peter wasn’t accustomed to this level of adversity.

“Pull yourself together you little fucking faggot.”

Peter finished crying and sat up. His pants were wet, heavy, and felt nauseating against his legs.

“I just need some gas for my truck,” said Peter.

The man was enormous. He moved like a glacier. He finally settled his considerable heft onto a stool behind the counter. “Everybody needs gas. It’s a valuable commodity these days.”

“What can I do?”

The man smiled and looked at him with pig eyes. “You gotta trade.”

“What do you want?”

The man sucked air in through his teeth. Peter assumed that this was the man’s thinking sound. He snorted and squinted out the window. “That’s an awful pretty lady in the truck.”

“Oh my God,” said Peter. He felt like he was in a horror movie.

“Tell you what, rich boy,” said the man, chuckling. “You can either give me your wife or that truck. I’ll trade that for fuel.”

“For the Escalade? How will I be able to get my family to Wisconsin if I don’t have my truck?”

“I got a Chevy Cobalt out back,” said the man as he lurched forward. The counter creaked from the weight. “I’ll gas it up and send you and your family on your way.”

Peter felt a little sick. “My Escalade, my fully loaded Escalade for a Chevy Cobalt.”

“It’s a 4 cylinder. You’ll make it to Wisconsin on one tank of gas,” said the man. He rested his hands on his belly.

Peter rubbed his face with both hands. He spent an absurd amount of money for that truck.

“You can either trade me the truck or your wife,” the man repeated.

“How long with my wife?”

The fat man exploded with laughter. He slapped the counter with his open hand and let the laugh out. He snorted, “I was just kidding about your wife! Skinny bitch like that I would get tired of first thing.”

Peter needed time to accept handing over his car that he paid over \$80,000 for in exchange for a \$10,000 car and a tank of gas.

“So, buddy, do we got a deal?”

<<>>

Betty sat up and arched her back. The sheets on the mattress were heavy beneath her from the combined sweat of two people. Chris lay on his shoulder. He reached down to the ground to find his pants and fished out a smoke. Betty heard the spark of the lighter.

“Hey, you got another one of those?” she asked. It was two years since she smoked but today was going to be a day without caution.

Chris rolled over onto his back with the cigarette in his mouth. He handed her one and his lighter in one outstretched hand. Betty took them, lit the cigarette, exhaled, and handed the lighter back.

She looked out the window on the other side of the room. The windows were old, framed in cracking white. The window panes themselves had yellowed and blurry images came through them like jaundiced sepia photographs. The apartment looked like it had been abandoned before Chris started living there. The mattress came from God knows where and the sheets from God knows what. The walls were plastered with decaying drywall, soft and bubbling with brown rot peeking out from behind them.

For a reason that Betty could not articulate, the grime of the apartment turned her on immensely. She enjoyed the animal quality of the afternoon. This is how many people in Detroit were feeling right now, she thought. Fiercely independent and free, living in a frontier of possibility.

“So what do you have planned today?” Chris asked with smoke rolling out of his mouth.

“Haven’t thought too far ahead,” she said. “It worked out for you.”

“Hell yeah, lucky me,” Chris said.

Betty knew what this was. She was stalling, with some getting even mixed in. Still, there are a lot worse ways to spend your afternoon. The fact remained that Betty had decisions to make.

“I probably should head back into work,” said Chris.

She looked at him. “Why? It’s not like an actual job. You’re just doing it for your part in the community.”

“That’s why I want to go back in,” he said, seeming a little annoyed. “I know it sounds weird but I feel like I am working for something more important than money now. I know you understand that. I am here because I support what Max is all about. I think this should be how the world is, not everybody competing but everybody working together.”

She smiled. Max really is brilliant, she thought. Giving these people the illusion of doing something vitally important while they are cleaning up bottles and glasses. Give somebody a salary and they know their value. Give them purpose and they become pious.

“That’s good to hear,” she said. “I’ll tell Max about you and how much you like what he is doing.”

“Really? You’ll tell Max about me?”

She put her hand on his head and ran her fingers through his hair. She leaned away and butted the smoke. She didn’t really have much to say to Chris but she certainly had a lot on her mind.

“You’re leaving,” said Chris, sensing it.

“Yeah, I have some loose ends,” she said, dressing. She grabbed the backpack and walked over to Chris’ side of the bed. “You were great, though. Thanks for a nice afternoon.”

Chris was still in bed when he heard the door close. He lay motionless under the sheet and thought about how amazing his day had been.

<<>>

Danton's phone rang, the screen announcing 'Max'. He answered quickly.

"Do you remember the operation we talked about yesterday?"

"Yes," said Danton, "I remember. Have you talked to Josh? He said if we take out the cell towers and cable stations it means that none of our stuff works either. That means no walkie-talkies, no Internet, nothing. We might not even get a dial tone if we plug into a land line."

"I understand. Josh is sure there's no way around it? Have you talked to him today?"

"He isn't answering my calls."

"Interesting."

"Do you have my guys out looking for Betty?" asked Danton

"Yes, we can't find her. I think she deserted us. Jack, too."

"Well, that could definitely be why Josh isn't answering calls."

"Perhaps."

"They didn't give a reason or anything?" Danton said carefully. There were reports that the US military was offering much higher pay rates to soldiers in order to attract new recruits and discourage desertion. They also offered health care, including vaccines. Danton was very worried that his men would hear about these new offers and leave the cause, but he never thought that Betty and Jack would walk away.

"Max we have to do this today," Danton continued. "We have problems big time and we are going to lose more people if the communication lines stay open. We need to pull the guys off the search for Betty."

"That's acceptable. Get your people together and move on the cell towers."

Max hung up.

<<>>

The cab came to a stop. She put a hand on the driver's shoulder and felt him shudder. "You can stop here."

A young sweaty face turned to her, "Good. You can get out now."

She pulled the door open and the car was gone before she could close it. What the hell was he so worked up about? No matter. Memories flooded into her. She remembered this ground, the images fresh in her mind as anything before. She thought about doing this since the day it happened.

She wasn't sure why she needed answers so badly. She didn't even care if she stayed with the group anymore. In fact, finding out the truth might be

the catalyst to leave. That's if she found what she thought she was going to. She hoped not. She prayed not.

Betty put one foot in front of the other and walked forward to the doors of Quarantine.

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THIRTY-THREE

The warehouse ground floor of Quarantine looked the same as it had on the day of the raid but with less people. The few that were there stopped and stared from under dirty hooded sweatshirts when she walked through the door. As she moved past them, they went back to working on enormous green tractors. Betty wondered if they lived here.

She walked to the elevator and stepped inside. She needed answers, reassurance that this whole thing was not some giant mistake. Ever since she was last here, the cancer of a thought gnawed at her skull. Was Wellco a lie?

She walked into the lobby with red walls and black trim. The woman behind a pane of glass seemed more of a lookout than a secretary. Betty walked to the window and leaned over the counter, offering a friendly smile.

The woman just stared at her. There was no ‘can I help you?’ or anything else offered. Betty broke the silence, but not the tension. “Can I talk...to...whoever is in charge?”

“Aren’t you people the ones in charge?” said the woman. For some reason she had a face that reminded Betty of trees.

“I mean, whoever is personally in charge of this area,” Betty smiled wide. “I want to tell them what a beam of sunshine you are in an otherwise cloudy world.”

“Follow me.”

Betty walked to end of the glass wall where the tree woman was standing, holding a door open for her. The room she entered was a chasm of cubicles and strewn paper. They walked through the center of the room, passing rows of cubicles that were each a carbon copy of the last,

disheveled and abandoned. The room was freezing and carried the stale smell of spilled toner and air conditioning.

Betty felt unsettled as they continued. The landscape around her was dark, save the occasional flash of a florescent bulb or a glowing green exit sign that radiated the immediate area in cool green.

There were whispers from unseen sources. Not one face or shadow of a person was anywhere in the stadium of an office. They finally approached a line of obscure walled offices at the far end of the building, all shuttered with doors firmly sealed.

The tree lady walked to one of the closed doors and opened it without a knock. "Steve, you have a visitor, one of them."

"Oh...fuck," said the man. The florescent light above his head was down to one tube but the room lacked the ominous tone of the cave she had just walked through. The occupant was a short man with a dark suit and a red tie too pristine for the circumstances. His eyes met Betty. "Can I help you?"

"I have some questions. Are you with Wellco?"

"I'm Steve Chamberlain, acting president," he said, holding out a shaking hand.

"I'm Betty."

"I know, I saw you on Ellen."

"Oh, right," said Betty. She didn't really know how to respond to that statement yet. "I don't understand, if you're the president of Wellco, what are you doing here?"

"Once your people moved into the Renaissance Center we were told to relocate here."

"What do you mean 'told to relocate'? Who sent you here?"

Betty could clearly see that Steve wanted badly to change the subject. "I guess there wasn't enough room. Now what other questions did you have?" he said.

"When we took over this building, there were only seven patients here."

"Yes."

"Well, something the nurse said to me that day caught my attention. She said there were a lot of people here at first, but then not. I'm trying to understand, just how bad was the Ebola epidemic?"

Steve sat behind his desk and said nothing. He just stared at her face for a while rocking back and forth in his chair. He then shifted his gaze to the desk and began rubbing his hands together. Finally, his shoulders fell and he relaxed into his chair. He leaned back and sighed.

“There was never an epidemic. It was a single, small, isolated outbreak in Florida. There were likely fifty patients total.”

Betty’s stomach dropped. “I thought that there were several outbreaks...”

“We were a company that stood to make a lot of money from a widespread epidemic. At first we thought there was going to be one. But after the government contracts were signed, we found that Ebola is a very easy virus to contain.” The words seemed to come out of his mouth like pure deliverance.

“But the vaccine...”

“We announced that we had the vaccine, and people wanted it, no questions asked. There was no way to contain the demand. They were paying absurd amounts of money for it. The patients stopped coming in here but the money never stopped. And no one wanted it to. We were making too much money for anyone to think about much else.”

“How did no one know?”

Steve opened a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and held it out to Betty. She declined. “I think in the beginning we just kind of lied to ourselves. We still felt like we were doing the right thing. Saving lives,” he said. He pulled out a Zippo, flicked the wheel, lit the cigarette in his mouth and clapped it closed. He concentrated on inhaling and exhaling the smoke for a minute before he continued. “It all happened so fast. We didn’t have time for research, design, or anything else for that matter. Tons of money flowed in without any effort.”

“Why didn’t you tell the media it was contained?”

He leaned forward. His goatee was shoved into a smile. “We did. We tried to make the point, the U.S. Government tried to make the point for Christ’s sake...but they didn’t seem to care. We kept getting pressed for more information on the outbreaks, the vaccine, what was being done to keep the public safe. So we began to think that maybe we better be certain it was really over. Seriously, how do you know absolutely that a virus has been contained? You don’t know, and when it’s a financial windfall for you,

you drag your feet about asking the right questions. We just kept tabling the discussion. We had plausible denial on our side and that commodity made us rich.”

“But you did try to get the truth out?”

“Eventually, but it was too late,” he inhaled and exhaled more smoke. “When you were doing your clinic up in Birch Run we were trying to release statements that there was no more virus. We even got the White House to release it. No one believed us. People thought we had an agenda to stop you, when the truth was we had an agenda all along.”

She thought about the raid on the house. The man she shot, the woman who was killed just for being there, and the infant who’s life would never be the same. She thought about the chain of events, stretched out like an ocean, useless and avoidable. Lives destroyed so that this man, and dozens like him, could maintain their plausible deniability. She thought about the heap of corpses that laid slain at the foot of the building.

“So what is this building? Why build this thing when you didn’t even need it?”

“We thought we would need it. The building was designed to be a symbol, the image of a strong, capable, and competent company. When people started calling it Quarantine,” said Steve as he looked gravely at the wall. “we realized that we missed the mark. I guess that’s the problem with symbols. They are open to interpretation.”

Betty had no idea what to say, stunned didn’t even begin to describe it.

Steve chuckled to himself, halfway through the cigarette, he had clearly saved the best for last. “The worst part? I am not even sure if the vaccine works. The goddamn thing was created in the 70’s and then shelved, never once tested on human subjects. We didn’t test it either. The CDC just handed us the formula and then fast tracked it through the FDA because they thought it would calm everybody down.” The room was filled with smoke. Betty thought the words were far more poisonous than the smoke in the air. “It didn’t,” Steve said while looking at the cigarette burning in his hand.

“Thank you for answering all my questions,” she said, all she wanted to do was leave.

“I think about what happened to Frank Fisher every day,” Steve said. The relief draining out of him with each subsequent word. His voice was

low and flat. “Memories of it float to the surface. I hear the sounds and... smell the gas...it’s the worst when I sleep. But as bad as it was, he probably deserved it. He was in charge of all of this. Someone had to take responsibility,” he said in a trance.

“I’m sorry, Steve, I don’t understand. What happened to Frank Fisher?” she asked.

Steve stared at her, as if he was searching her face for answers. Then it looked like he found one. “I don’t know,” he said, sounding less honest.

She let the lie go. It didn’t seem important, not after everything she had just learned. “Why do you stay here?”

“Fear. Your boss told us to stay. I am too afraid to run.”

“When was the last time you saw Max?” she asked.

“Yesterday, he’s been here almost everyday since you guys started keeping your prisoners in the hospital wards upstairs,” he said. “The beds are getting full now.”

“Thank you.”

Steve said nothing as Betty walked out into the darkness and moved forward down the flickered path ahead of her. She heard the whispers again. A few shadows appeared on the other side of the cream colored cubicles.

She got to the warehouse level and made it through the large cargo door. As she walked past the enormous green tractors, she thought about stealing one before realizing how ridiculous that would be. She looked around for an option. On the side of the building there were enormous carts with high metal cages on either side. She recognized them as the imposing carts that farms use to carry hay bales, or tourists when it was hayride season. They look dramatic, she thought.

<<>>

Danton stood inside a Comcast cable office, his fifth of the afternoon. The men under his command were making excellent time. His team had bricked every office visited and the other teams reported they had chainsawed the lines on several cell towers already.

They were making progress, but that progress came at a cost. They would not be able to communicate with one another. As every office got shut down, they would have a little more trouble with cell reception and WiFi service.

Danton knew it would be unrealistic to shut off all of Southeast Michigan, there were always going to be stragglers, but every time they took down an office or a cell tower he felt there was less danger of his army deserting him. Max gave the orders but Danton was the general. He loved being the general, he believed he was a really good general, and the US army would not take that away from him.

Danton found the box he was looking for in the back of the office. He nodded at the large man with a chainsaw standing next to him. The chainsaw's engine started and the room smelled like gas in an instant. The blade lowered on the box and sparks flew everywhere.

Not even cables are safe under my watch, Danton thought.

<<>>

Betty reflected in the car. She realized her part in this story had come to an end. She thought about how much she missed Florida, how excited she was to go home. She even missed her mom.

She rode in the passenger seat, staring out the window. The sun had gone down and the evening clouds had moved in. Somewhere along the journey, a lazy rain started. The drops landed clear and smeared down the glass, disappearing into stubborn black rubber.

She felt stupid for leaving Florida, but regretted not a minute of her time with the Citizens. The Citizens were the reason that Wellco was stopped. They would have never paid for their crimes if it hadn't been for them. Betty thought about Danton, Max, and Jack. She thought about the storage garage in Ann Arbor. She thought of the day that Max recorded The Words. She thought about the faces at the Expo Center that were filled with life and hope. None of those things had been fake, regardless of the lies coming out of Wellco.

She thought of Josh and for the first time that day she did not push it aside. She thought of that face. Those eyes she loved to stare into. She thought about the summer spent in Birch Run with dinner at Tony's and sex behind billboards. Their pillow talk about movies and how she felt when she laid next to him.

She thought about how he had raced to find her after the Quarantine raid, he had been so worried. She had never felt so cared for. She closed her eyes. She thought about watching him work on his computer the first night

they spent together in that dirty hole of an apartment in Ann Arbor. She remembered how impressed she was when she found out he was a member of Anonymous. She thought he was awesome. He thought she was awesome, too. She missed hearing him say it.

She opened her eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks. She realized that she had forgiven him. She wished she was strong enough to face him again, say that she acted out too quickly. A giant hook in her heart wanted to drag her back to the RenCen, he needed to know how she felt.

But she couldn't. She wouldn't. Betty was strong, but not strong enough to hear that he had moved on. If she poured her heart out to him and he turned away, she would never recover. She knew that was only a slight chance, but it was enough of a chance not to go back. Her stomach felt sick.

“Are you crying, honey?” said the driver. Betty had forgotten his name.

She wiped the tears away. “Yeah,” she said, breaking out of the trance.

She put her hand on the door handle and she grabbed her back pack. “Here is good.”

The car came to a stop and she got out. She got herself distracted in the car but it was time to snap out of it. She thought of the goals.

She walked. She thought of the warm Florida sun. She was excited to tell her friends the stories about the whole experience.

She climbed the white steps. The first step toward a 1000 mile journey. She felt good, she felt optimistic. She pushed the button to ring the doorbell on the Detroit mayor's mansion.

She could start all of it after she explained to Max why she was leaving.

THIRTY-FOUR

Peter rolled the window down a couple of cranks. He hadn't realized they still made cars without power windows. He fished a cigarette out of the box and noticed there were only a few left now. He put it to his lips and lit it. It didn't matter if the fucking kids saw him smoke anymore. The Cobalt was a veal box. Matilda was quietly coloring in the back and the baby was still silent in the carseat. The kids had been great during the escape. Lisa was far less pleasant.

"I totally would have blown him if we got to keep the Escalade."

"Look, we will list it as stolen when we get out of Michigan," he said.

They rode in silence for a couple of seconds. Lisa turned to Matilda. "Mommy meant like blowing on boo boos," Matilda looked up from her coloring book with an expression indicating she wasn't following nor did she give a shit.

They had stopped in West Branch and found the town looking like it was on the other side of the apocalypse. Gas station signs hung with only half the little plastic numbers still attached. The family took turns urinating behind a large plastic man holding a mug of what looked like beer.

Peter looked at the wasteland around him. Behind him a Target store was stacked in a strip mall of brown brick and glass. He drove there, smashed the glass, and loaded the car with slats of Gatorade and water. Good thing there hadn't been any looting before the last residents got the hell out of dodge.

The first wrinkles of dark were starting to peek over the horizon. He hoped they would reach the Mackinaw Bridge before nightfall. There was no way the Citizens had put their chainsaw brigades this far north. If they had, they would be a Cobalt hood ornament. Peter had long lost his taste for negotiation on this trip.

The landscape was desolate. Night fell like a sledgehammer. The lights on the Mackinaw Bridge were visible for several miles.

He passed the sign for Jamet St and continued north. His wife silent next to him as he drove toward the lights in front of them. It became obvious that this was no normal bridge lighting. There were floodlights on the bridge.

“We can’t turn around,” said Lisa with panic rising in her voice.

“Why not? There is no one else on the road,” Peter said. He was weighing the next move.

“Do you think they saw us?”

Humvees tore out of the exit for Jamet St and blocked the way behind them. Men carrying AK-47s came pouring out of the Humvees like they were clown cars. Some screamed “down” others screamed “out of the car” and “get the fuck out of the car” all at different times. Matilda and the baby joined them in the din while Peter and his wife leapt from the vehicle with their hands in the air. They belly flopped to the ground and bumped their cheeks against the asphalt. Lisa started crying immediately, screaming about the children in the car.

More trucks from across the bridge. More men poured from those trucks too and surrounded the family with guns drawn. Peter and Lisa were bound with plastic. Their children whisked out of the car and taken away.

Peter was terrified, but being in the hands of the US Army came with some level of relief.

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The family reunited an hour later in an outpouring of hugs and ‘Thank God’s’. The Upper Peninsula side seemed like it had been occupied for quite some time. Peter wondered if this was established as soon as the Citizens took Detroit. There were thousands of helmets and guns. The US army processed them, collecting their names and social security numbers. They were made to say the pledge of allegiance, which Peter thought was dumb, covered in blankets and led to a field on the other side of the bridge.

The refugee park was gigantic. It stretched far beyond the scope of vision and was a morass of white canvas tents. It was dark but several campfires burned yellow in the night.

They walked past thousands of families. The parents huddled close to their campfires, swaddled in Army blankets, while the children paired off and went to find more stimulating environments. The parents let them roam

freely, either because they felt safe in the Army's keep or were sick of attempting to entertain them.

Peter ached. He propelled himself forward in an act of bravery, aching and stinking with every foot step that landed on the well trod and browning grass. A family wearing brightly colored sweater vests flagged them down and showed them to an available tent. He crawled into the tent, disrobed, and collapsed. He snored loudly within minutes.

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THIRTY-FIVE

Tyson opened the door to find Betty looking back at him. She gave him a wan smile and a wave.

“Hi,” she said. “Is he here?”

Tyson’s shoulders moved to the side to allow her in. He rubbed his head in confusion as she walked past and stood behind him. They stared at each other for a minute. “Tyson, you ok? You have to show me where he is, I’ve never been here before.”

“Sorry,” he said. He led her toward the living room.

They found Max alone, standing in front of the TV. He wore a tight thermal shirt and was rubbing his chest as he watched the news coverage.

“Hey Max, I wanted to talk to you,” said Betty.

Max spun around, startled at the sound of her voice. He looked at Tyson with something almost like shock on his face. “Betty?”

Betty sat down on the couch, feeling a lump form in her throat. She knew she was going to disappoint Max and having Tyson there just made it worse. After all, he was the one she committed to in the first place.

She drew in a breath and made up her mind to just say it. “I’ve decided to go back to Florida. I don’t want to disappoint you and trust me, I still believe in what we are doing, it’s just that...” she trailed off. Max seemed uncomfortable. He looked off guard. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No...so you just showed up here, on your own?”

“Should I not have come?”

“No, not at all! I’m sorry if I have been rude. I am just not used to surprises. Especially,” he grinned, “pleasant ones.”

“Thank you. Josh and I have hit a bit of a rough patch...well, I mean we are not together anymore. I know, I know, I shouldn’t have been dating someone in the organization to begin with.”

“So you want to leave? I see.” He walked over to the fireplace and began to look around.

“Yeah, I need to go, but I think that you guys have got this handled. I feel honored to have been part of it.” She was trying to say the words as she had practiced them on the ride over but Max’s odd behavior was throwing her off.

She began again as she remembered what she had meant to tell him, “Oh also, I went to Quarantine earlier today and ended up talking to Steve Chamberlain. I’ve never said anything, but something has always bothered me about the raid.”

Max continued searching around the fireplace. “What would that be?”

“When we freed Quarantine, there were only seven patients.”

“Only seven? They let everyone else die?” he said, his back still to her.

“That’s what Josh said too, but as it turns out, when I talked to Steve...Max I really need you to listen to this,” she was getting frustrated. Max had still not turned around to face her. “There was no epidemic. The whole Ebola thing was a lie for the company to...”

A sudden flash drew Betty’s attention. The fire reflected off the clean blade. Alarms started going off in her head, her breath quickened, and she sat up straight. Out of the corners of her eyes, she saw two men approaching her from behind. She panned back to Max. He was now looking her directly in the face.

“You saw that, didn’t you?” he said. “You pay attention, I admire that. Most people don’t.”

She realized she made a terrible mistake. She would kick herself for this later, she hoped. Frozen on the couch, Betty tried to figure out what to do next.

“Grab her,” said Max. The two goons grabbed her arms and pulled her off the couch. Betty was still too shocked to offer much resistance. She stood in the living room, trying desperately to survey her surroundings. Tyson stood behind Max, watching.

Max pulled the Bowie knife from behind him. He addressed the men holding Betty. “Watch out for this one. She’s tricky.” Max looked behind him, “Tyson if you would like to leave I understand.”

“No,” said Tyson, “we talked about this, it has to happen.”

She closed her eyes and hung her head. She hadn't seen it. How could she have walked right into this? She should have just left for Florida. A few tears rolled out of her closed eyes, not out of sadness but of shame and embarrassment.

She opened her eyes and Max was nose to nose with her. "What you're doing right now is very disappointing," said Max.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" she said containing a sob.

His voice shook with anger. "I believed in you. You led an army, yet you would come here and CRY in front of me?"

"You...LIED to us," she hissed.

Max sliced her under the arm. She recoiled from the pain and felt warm blood pulse out onto her shirt. She tried to double over but she was held up by her captors. Max pushed his face so close she could feel his lips moving on her cheek.

"I gave you a life. You were just some insignificant female cop in Florida. You were only there so that the men had something to look at. You were a morale booster, a prop. You were there because they weren't allowed to hang posters in the locker room anymore. You were meaningless, replaceable. They found another common creature with low self-esteem and a firm body to stare at. They forgot you ever existed. You were nothing."

Betty thrashed in the arms of the men holding her. She screamed. Max screamed louder.

"I ALLOWED YOU a chance to have importance. I gave you a choice. I gave you every ounce of dignity you have AND YOU CRY IN FRONT OF ME? I have allowed you a life that people notice. You repay me now by acting like a common, useless, piece of TRASH?"

Her heart pounded. The fireplace again flashed against the weapon in Max's right hand.

She pushed forward, twisting around as she fell. She broke the grip of the men holding her, landed on her back, and drove her heel into one of their kneecaps. It shattered inside of his leg and he fell screaming to the ground.

Betty rolled over fast, ducked Tyson's outstretched arms, and ran. Behind her, she heard Max say, "Like I said, difficult."

She kicked open the french doors and found herself outside. She was in the back yard, a high privacy fence surrounded the property. Scaling it was

impossible, as there were no spaces to get a foothold. Then she saw the pole barn in the middle of the yard.

A gunshot sounded. The bullet pierced the patio doors behind her. Glass rained down onto the concrete as the bullet stuck in the grass just inches from where she stood.

She ran. She heard the shattered doors open and then two guns fire. The bullets whizzed past her as she ran toward the pole barn.

Two more shots. She felt the wind from one. The other passed her overhead, clanged off the metal wall of the barn and hit her left shoulder. She screamed but kept running. The slug in her shoulder burned. She reached the barn, wrenched the knob of a small door, and fell inside. She landed hard on the concrete floor, injured, miserable, and trapped. She heard more bullets hit the door as she pushed it closed with her feet. Two of them dented the metal, a third one went through.

The guns went silent. She heard snippets of idle chatter from Max and Tyson as they walked across the lawn. Betty looked around the barn, eyes adjusting to the darkness. She saw no opportunity for escape.

Over on the far wall Betty heard something. The noise sounded dry and desperate, like something choking. She squinted at the sound through the dark. The only light was leaking through the bullet hole in the door.

She laid on the floor, exhausted. The bullet felt hostile inside her shoulder. She couldn't lift her left arm. The pain in that one part of her body sought to paralyze the rest. She could not stop her face from curling into a cry while she struggled. She didn't want to die here.

The front barn door opened, the blue light that hung cold overhead now bathed the insides of the barn. Betty heard the same gasping, choking sound from the wall and turned in its direction. She screamed at what she saw, her eyes filled with tears.

An old fashioned large wooden buggy wheel with wooden spokes hung on the wall. A man, whose extremities had been crushed to powder, was hanging grotesque inside the wheel, what was left of his arms and legs threaded between the spokes. His eyes blinked. His destroyed body was slimy from sweat and blood. His face indicated no recognition, clearly driven insane by this torture, and his tongue stuck out of his face, purple and chapped. The face gave away the identity. It was Jack.

Betty's scream carried out of the barn and amplified in the night. She was off the floor and retreating backwards in terror when she tripped over a toolbox, scattering the tools across the concrete. Shocked and disoriented, she tried to process the horror.

Tyson and another man grabbed her and pulled her up. The man to her right threaded his leg around her leg and the other did the same on the left. She couldn't move.

Max looked at Jack. "As it turns out, that was a better idea than I thought it was," he said, sounding pleased with himself.

"Should we flip her upside down?" asked the nameless thug.

"No," said Max. "She deserves better." He turned his back and walked away. Betty couldn't take her eyes off Jack. The horror of it washed over Betty in waves.

Max returned with a chainsaw. He pulled the cord and it started immediately. He walked toward her with his back to the open door. His face and body were dark but his frame was haloed in blue light, the chainsaw smoking and shaking in his hands when he gave it some gas.

There was no escape, her series of wrong choices had seen to that. She squeezed her eyes closed so tight spots appeared. The chainsaw was close, she could smell it.

She thought of her mom. She would never find out what happened to Betty. Betty blamed herself. She felt the wind from the chainsaw coming close.

She opened her eyes and saw the chain whirring above her head. She accepted her fate. She looked at Max and could see the look of absolute joy. His eyes were intent, he was taking his time. He held the saw high above his head. She noticed the two men weren't gripping her quite as tight as before.

She reached up and grabbed the black handles of the chainsaw and pulled it toward her body. As she pulled, she twisted free. She pushed the chainsaw down until its blade sparked against the floor. Max, still gripping the handle, looked at her with disbelief.

She grabbed the hammer from the spilled contents of the toolbox and smashed it into Max's jaw. He crashed to the floor, spitting thick ropes of blood. Tyson lunged at her, and she swung the hammer in an uppercut motion, connecting with his chin.

With Tyson dazed, she leaned into his coat and pulled his gun from the holster. She pointed at one of the other guys who was fumbling for his gun and fired point blank. His forehead spat from the new red hole and the back of his head exploded.

Betty stood up. She stepped over Max and walked to the buggy wheel. She pointed the barrel at Jack's head and pulled the trigger.

Max rose off the ground groggy, a look of murder on his face. She lifted the gun to his eyes and pulled the trigger. The pistol dry fired with a click. Max didn't even blink. He lunged at her, but she smashed the butt of the pistol into Max's nose. The cartilage collapsed under the metal with a crunch, and he doubled over in pain.

Betty sprinted out the door and across the lawn. She ran through the french doors, past the living room, and out of the front door of the mansion. She raced down the street, her shoulder seering and covered in blood.

She found a house for sale and smashed the door in. She located a hiding spot, sank to the floor, and inhaled dryly for a few minutes before she passed out on the cold linoleum.

THIRTY-SIX

Josh woke up with his mouth dry and tasting of vomit. He grimaced the first time he dared to open his eyes. His head throbbed and felt thick. He looked over his shoulder to see blond hair on the pillowcase. He remembered the events of yesterday.

Josh and Pamela had gone down to the hotel bar. Pamela thought she was just going to have a fun night out, while Josh intended to send his sorrows to a watery grave. She kept up with him, shot after shot, all the while reminding him that members of the media can always drink civilians under the table. He found her bragging annoying.

He didn't remember much of the late evening. All he knew was that he was in Pamela's care and they had somehow wound up back in her hotel room. Josh abandoned the room he had shared with Betty. He never wanted to see that place again. It was like going into a tomb. He would have bricked it off if he could.

He got up with considerable effort. He staggered to the bathroom and collapsed his weight onto the toilet. He reached for one of the complimentary glasses, filled it with water, and drank.

Pamela came into the bathroom. "Are you okay, baby?" she sat on the tub next to him and rubbed his shoulders. The worst part was that Pamela was such a nice person. She was warm, supportive, and fun. She was so gorgeous every man in southeast Michigan thought he was the luckiest bastard alive when she spoke to them. She was amazing in every way but one. She wasn't Betty.

Josh felt her hand on his shoulders and his stomach turned over with guilt. He made a mess of things. Pamela deserved better. He was devastated about Betty. She had deserved better too. His stomach turned again, but not

with guilt, it was all the water he had just dumped into his poisoned stomach.

He turned around and the vomiting began. Pamela patted his back as he retched.

This went on for a few hours. Josh alternated between hot showers to cool the pounding in his head and splaying supine on the couch. Pamela attempted to nurse him.

Around 10 AM there was a knock on the hotel door. Pamela swung the door open and her producer walked in. "Hey can you get cell service because I..." he said, stopping his statement when he saw Josh laying on the couch.

She tried to change the subject. "Yeah, mine doesn't work either."

"Okay, I'll go downstairs and see if the Sat Link works. If you don't see me in an hour, just come down to the truck. They want your descriptions of what is going on," he looked at Josh. "They probably don't need to know everything, though."

Josh would have said something if his stomach had felt better. Pamela stared at the back of the door as it closed. "Shit," she said.

"Ah, fuck that guy."

"Sleeping with sources is frowned upon," she tapped his big toe with her finger. "Hope you're worth it."

Josh felt sick again but he had something to check. He grabbed his phone off the table. It wasn't working either. Danton and Max had cut the cell towers. He had forgotten about the meeting.

Josh jumped off the couch, startling Pamela. "I have to go. I will see you later baby." He pulled on a pair of jeans and gave her a hurried goodbye kiss. "I have a meeting!"

Before she said anything, he was out the door. He ran to the elevators, pushed a button, and was on his way up. He put on his shirt in the elevator. The doors dinged open and he raced down the hallway. He hesitated at the door because he knew he was about to see Betty.

Max, Tyson, Danton or Jack were not in the room, and neither was Betty. Josh made his way to an open chair and sat down. He rubbed the left side of his face with an open palm.

The meeting was supposed to be about Danton's 'captains', the men in charge of various parts of the city. They were the same people from the

storage facility back in Ann Arbor. Josh nodded at some familiar faces, but drew a blank on their names. Danton had asked Josh to sit in, but didn't elaborate any further.

The door opened. Tyson and Max walked in, followed by Danton. The room gasped. Tyson had a deep bruise on his chin and his right eye was swollen. Max's face was wrapped in a series of white bandages. Some of them were smeared with dried blood, brown and crusting on Max's beard. He had two pieces of cotton stuffed up his nose.

Max crossed the room, sat down with a thud at the head of the table, and waited a minute for the collective to get over it. He knocked on the table softly to pass time. He looked at Josh and said, "Stay after. I have work for you."

"What the hell happened to you?"

"That doesn't matter right now," he said to Josh. "There are enemies among us," he turned to address the room. "Jack and Betty have abandoned us."

Josh could think of a reason why Betty had abandoned the Citizens. He lowered his head. The thought now seemed more real than ever: He was never going to see Betty again.

Max raised his hand to Danton, indicating that he should take over. He rubbed his jaw.

"First things first," said Danton. He seemed eager, "I am sure you have noticed that you can't use your cell phones and there is no Internet available. The US government has decided it's best that we not be able to communicate with each other."

Josh snapped to attention. Did he just hear that correctly?

Danton continued, "We will be setting up a public address system in downtown Detroit and Josh will lead that project."

The room looked at Josh. It was the first he heard of it.

Danton held up two fingers. "Second, we are setting up a perimeter around Detroit. If the enemy has their spies in our city, they will not be getting out.

Third, let's announce the members of the Council on Public Safety. The council will be headed by myself and Tyson, along with..." Danton read a list of names that was basically a list of Max's personal security detail. "The

council will start meeting today and will adjudicate those who have already been held prisoner for too long.”

A person sitting at the table spoke. “What will happen if they are found guilty?”

Max cut Danton off. “If you seek to destroy our society, then you will be executed publicly. I understand your concerns, but this threat needs to be eradicated. Further attempts must be discouraged.”

He then waved his hand. “Okay, thank you. Please let your people know what was said here.”

Max sat back in his chair, looking miserable. Some of the white medical tape that was on his chin was starting to peel. The room emptied out until it was just the four of them. Josh looked at Max and asked “Did we cut the phone lines and internet?”

“They beat us to it,” said Max.

Danton changed the subject. “Did you hear about the PA system? What can you do?”

“I assume that we have the stage and set up from Birch Run. We just need some relays if we want more screens.”

“Write down what you need,” said Max, pushing a piece of paper across the table. “My guys will go get it. I want this ready tomorrow.”

Josh got up to leave.

“I will be down to your room in an hour to get the plans,” said Danton.

“I’m in a different room,” he said, giving Danton the new number.

“Why did you switch rooms?” asked Danton, “Isn’t that a media room?”

“I’ve...uh...been spending some time with Pamela Brown from ABC.”

Danton looked at him with a worried look. “Josh, I think you should have let us know about that.” He looked over at Max for approval.

Max sat silent with a disgusted look on his face.

Danton turned away from Max, clearly not getting any help. “Be careful,” he said.

Josh left the room. He didn’t like the feeling of any of this.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Peter awoke. The floor of the tent felt lumpy and cold. He was alone in the tent, wrapped in a thick military style blanket. He pulled his arms out from under the cloth and felt even colder as he reached for the army issue clothes that had been left for him. Peter needed a shower. He wondered how long he had been asleep. He pulled on the clothes and pushed the tent flap to survey the world outside.

The landscape was vast and bustling with activity. The tops of white canvas tents stretched all the way to the horizon. To his right, the bridge ran the length of the great lake at the foot of the camp. Soldiers marched south across it with tanks and other armory. The invasion had begun while Peter slept.

The sun was bright in the clear sky, brilliant, cloudless, and blue. The air was so brisk you could see your breath. Peter shivered and chattered as his body adjusted to the bitter.

“Daddy you’re awake!” said Matilda.

Lisa hugged him and pointed into the distance where showers were available. He nodded and started walking. Despite the camp’s size, every tent was occupied as far as Peter could see. The exiles had dirty faces, tired expressions, and designer labels. The filthy threadbare clothes told their own harrowing escape from the Great Lakes. The men wore polo shirts emblazoned with logos of golf courses. The women were wrapped in pastels and diamonds. The first refugee camp in history whose residents wore Prada and Chanel.

The shower facility was a makeshift plastic structure that didn’t look very sturdy. Peter stood in line for almost an hour. By the time he got into the stalls, the water was cold. It didn’t matter, it felt good to wash the smear of dry piss off his legs.

He redressed in the army clothes and walked back to the tent. Lisa sat next to a campfire in a large wooden chair. She noticed his presence and motioned for him to sit next to her. The chair had soaked in heat from the fire, Peter relaxed at the feeling against his skin.

“Peter, these people just sat down...I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your names?” said Lisa

The older couple looked up at Peter and smiled.

The woman spoke, “I am Patty Walcott and this is my husband, Tony.” The couples exchanged pleasantries.

Peter recognized the husband. Tony Walcott owned the largest chain of car dealerships in Southeast Michigan. Peter recalled Tony’s face from a series of commercials in the early 90s.

“Bought a car from you a while back,” said Peter.

“And I appreciate your business,” said Tony.

“So when you did you guys get here?” asked Lisa.

Patty looked at Tony. “I think it’s been, what, three weeks? Maybe even a month? Is that possible? We were some of the first people here. How about you two?”

“We just got in last night,” said Lisa

“Where are from?”

“Farmington Hills.”

“Wow, you guys were close,” said Tony. “How bad was it?”

“It certainly wasn’t promising,” said Peter. “I probably stayed too long. I was working at the hospital there.”

“We had a lot of trouble getting out,” said Lisa. “The Citizens are trying to close the borders.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” said Tony. “It was only a matter of time before they shut everything down.”

“Has the Army told you anything?” asked Peter.

“A little,” said Tony. “They are trying to minimize casualties. I think they are giving it time because they expect the Citizens will fall apart on their own.”

“Fucking cowards, unbelievable.”

“Why are they so interested in protecting their lives?” said Lisa.

“If they level Detroit,” said Tony, “there will be tens of thousands dead. Not to mention having to rebuild.”

“They should level that city anyway, it was mostly empty buildings to begin with,” said Peter, grumbling.

“A lot of people moved to Detroit when all this nonsense started,” said Tony. “Those buildings are occupied now.”

“Peter,” Patty said, gently, “we were angry when we first got here, too. We felt the same way you did, but it goes away.”

“You wanted them dead because they completely ruined your life?” said Peter

“I still want Max dead,” said Tony. “I think that he’s a malignant opportunist. However, I don’t want all of those who followed him into Detroit dead. They were just looking for answers, trying to change their lives.”

“They wanted a handout.”

“It was join the Citizens or die. That’s how they saw it. I can’t hate them for making that choice.”

“They could have saved up the money for the vaccine or borrowed it.”

“So bad credit is a death sentence?” said Tony. “I knew that Max was going to be dangerous when I heard that first message. I was warning everybody.”

“He was,” said Patty, nodding her head in agreement.

“Because the general population is stupid?” asked Lisa

“No,” said Tony, “he was dangerous because he was right. He appealed to soldiers and police officers. Max is a brutal despot but he clearly studied history. Your society is vulnerable if your soldiers are poor.”

“All volunteer military,” said Peter.

“If you are going to have a military, Peter, you are going to have to respect it as one of the pillars of society. The military attracts people with limited skills, but believe me, they have skills when the military is done with them. Societies throughout history have paid their military well because you don’t want them upset. They can do the most damage.”

“But the Citizens aren’t just soldiers. A lot of people joined looking for free vaccines.”

“What option did they have? Should a person die just because they don’t have a lucrative job? Not to be cliché Peter, but the world needs ditch diggers. Society needs every single walk of life. We don’t need to guarantee

them luxury, but you have to give them a safety net. Peter, you're a doctor, you know that you have benefitted from the efforts of countless others."

"I never asked for a handout."

"Do you really expect me to believe that you paid every dollar of your college tuition yourself? Without government loans, grants, or help from your parents? What about all the state sponsored aid they send the colleges and universities? What about the billions of dollars the government has paid for research? Medicare, Medicaid, these are all government services that pay you, at least in part, right? And what are you sitting in right now? This is a giant handout that rolls on for miles! We take the government for granted until we need it. If there is an earthquake or fire or hurricane, you are the first person in line for a hand out. It's not like people are telling the government to stop fixing the roads."

"You have a point."

"Max was right about the divide between rich and poor," Tony said as he looked at the fire. "Part of being rich is helping the poor. Societies get into trouble when we cut the safety net. Being wealthy means you must leave some room for upward mobility. People at the bottom need to have hope. When a homeless guy asks you for change, it's best to give him what you can, because eventually he stops asking. He just takes it."

"So you guys have been here three weeks?" asked Peter, "Why haven't you gone somewhere else?"

"We are waiting for a chance to go home," said Patty, "and it's not so bad here. At night we sing songs, we drink the hot drinks they provide for us. They give us blankets, showers, and meals."

"We are just waiting," said Tony, repeating the sentiments of his wife. "the Army is already on the move. We figure the rebellion will be over in a couple of weeks. Might as well stay here until it is."

The wind blew cold from across the lake. Patty pointed over to the row of trailers on the left hand side. "If you need to call family just go over there, but if any are still in Detroit, you can't contact them."

"Why is that?" Lisa asked.

"Max cut communications, that's my guess," said Tony. "The Army raised the salaries of enlisted men. I hear they're getting close to six figures now."

"How is the government going to pay for that?" asked Peter.

“They raised taxes,” said Tony. “Big time.”

Peter thought for a minute and asked Tony, “Do you ever think it will get back to normal?”

“Things swung too far in one direction. History will balance things out. Every hundred years or so something like this happens. We learn our lesson, then we forget again. Does that answer your question?”

“No.”

“I can’t help you then,” said Tony.

Peter got up. He wanted to call his mother. Lisa rose with him. He looked at Tony. “We have to...”

Tony waved him off. “We’ll meet again I’m sure, we are both going to be around here for at least a little while longer. I love discussing this stuff. The great thing about this camp is it gives you a lot of time to think.”

Peter and Lisa started walking toward the communication center.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Carrie Newhauser sat on the floor of the cart, back pressed up against the bars. Above her their metal stretched high in the air and curled. She heard the tractor laboring far in the distance. She hadn't been allowed a coat and the metal bars of the cage around her weren't helping with the cold. She looked down at her lap, her head hung heavy, running over the rim with resignation. She stared at the spattered blood on her arm, it wasn't hers.

Carrie and her family had spent the last few weeks held prisoner inside Quarantine. She was never sure why they were captured but she had her guesses. Carrie had not been the best neighbor. She hit several parked cars while intoxicated and drove away. She let her dog shit in other people's yards so that she didn't have to clean it up. She took full advantage of every privilege her father's status afforded her.

Carrie's father was famously successful and the family flaunted it with pride. Carrie didn't see the flaw in this. She was proud of her father and hoped to one day repeat his level of success. The family felt like their status stood as a beacon to which others could aspire.

Carrie had every reason to believe that she could achieve just as much as her father. She was beautiful, a fifteen out of ten, and had easy access to endless resources. College would only be a formality. Success was a foregone conclusion for Carrie until the Citizens took over Detroit.

Carrie didn't pay any attention to the reports on the news but she remembered her mother's concern. Her father was confident that the government would step in and was reluctant to abandon the house he worked so hard to pay for. Carrie's parents argued late into the night about whether or not they should leave.

The Citizens van came tearing up their driveway one morning without announcement. Large men carrying chainsaws kicked down the door and

took her mother and father, two more men swept up the large living room staircase to get Carrie. The family was shoved into a van and driven to the large black building in Allen Park called Quarantine. They took the designer clothes she wore and dressed her in dirty medical scrubs.

Men and women of all different backgrounds were stuffed into Quarantine as prisoners. Carrie and her family were among the first. Within a few days there were not enough beds but they continued to bring more people in. Women were given priority to the beds, though Carrie hardly thought they could be called that as they were little more than thin mattresses perched on top of flimsy metal frames.

At least Carrie had something to keep her off the disgusting floors. The white tiles were slicked with a brown film within days after the prisoners numbers began to swell. There were showers downstairs but hardly anyone used them. People just laid in the beds or on the floor, filled with terrible feelings about what fate awaited them.

Carrie cried a lot for the first week she was in Quarantine. She never experienced such awful conditions. Her parents always gave her an amazing life. Christmas morning was like an episode of the Price is Right. She would get cars, vacations, jewelry. One year she even got a horse. Carrie took all this for granted. After the second week of living on a dirty mattress in a room filled with over a thousand people, she realized how much her parents had done for her.

But Carrie had run out of tears. Her eyes felt heavy and stiff all the time now, as if she was blinking through scar tissue. Despair was only reserved for the good days and there were none of those left. Now as she bounced around, sitting on the floor of the cart, she felt only resignation. She thought of depression like an old friend she longed to visit. At least with depression there is a ghost of hope. Depression usually means you can remember when you were happy and that was not the case for Carrie Newhauser.

She saw her first person chainsawed on her seventh day in Quarantine. A man who couldn't take the cramped conditions any longer started loudly protesting. He demanded due process and a bunch of other things she only half-heard. He screamed when the guards held him down and cut him into quarters. His lasting legacy were the screams that bounced off the white walls and when they faded, all that remained was a silent pile of scraps on the floor.

Carrie didn't really see out of her eyes after that. The world just moved around her. She felt like life was happening through a keyhole, miles off in the distance. She heard it happen a couple more times. The shouts of protest, the screaming prisoners, the chainsaws, the wet sounds, and then back to silence again. The sounds were just sounds, abstract and distant. Carrie Newhauser wandered in a distant world of muted noise.

The morning she rode in the cart, the Citizens rounded up 100 of the people on the 15th floor. Carrie was among them, along with her mother and father. She didn't remember the elevator ride, but she sort of remembered seeing the carts and tractors in the warehouse. Her mother had started thrashing in the line. She started screaming things about not hurting her baby and Carrie only assumed she meant her. Carrie's mother started begging and pleading with the guards. She was forced to her knees and sawed in half. Carrie's father stopped protesting and finally let go of his wife's hand when the blade was halfway through.

Thoughts in Carrie's mind played like a slide show of far away photographs. It was another life, in a distant time and place, and Carrie only got reports of it. Her entire existence now was sitting on the floor of this cart while a tractor pulled the prisoners down I-75, destination unknown. She looked at the blood drying on her arm. It wasn't hers.

<<>>

A massive crowd had assembled in Hart Plaza at the foot of the Renaissance Center. The thousands gathered to hear the words of the leader. They buzzed and murmured about what he was going to say.

Those in the front bellied up to a stage made of metal, plastic and wood, quickly erected over the last week. The stage didn't quite lay flat, a mess of gaps and uneven surfaces. There were rows of speakers on either side of the stage and a table stood near the front. It was made of sanded wood and had large metal bindings on each of the corners. There were video screens standing at various places all around, but the largest one was at the back of the stage. All the screens displayed the same countdown clock.

The crowd was mixed with many different races, ages, and genders, but all looked for answers. The Internet and cell phones stopped working two weeks ago, and there were whispers about the scarcity of resources.

On that day, there was no sun. The clouds formed a firm ceiling far above the ground and the area below was lit by the gray light filtered from

the heavens. The air blew in cold gasps across the river. In the distance you could see a herd of TV news vans, flashing lights, and curious onlookers, all gawking from across an international border for safety's sake. Pamela Brown and her camera crew were the only ones with a lens pointing directly at the stage, standing at the front of the crowd.

The countdown ended and Max appeared near the back of the stage, coming up the rear stairs. He was wearing a white hooded sweatshirt. The crowd roared. He extended his arms out to the sides, welcoming the adulation. He bowed and the crowd approved. Max walked to the side of the stage where someone handed him a microphone.

"Citizens," he said, and the crowd quieted immediately. "The progress that we have made in Detroit has come at a cost. We now have many enemies."

Max continued, "As you already know, the leaders of our enemies have cut our ability to communicate with each other. There is no phone, Internet, or television. We are working every day to restore service."

"We should have expected this, Citizens. The overlords in Washington, DC have to try and destroy us, because this is working. The fact that people can exchange goods and services without their money and live full happy lives outside of their control is a problem for them. Our success means that they can't keep holding down the population and make us slaves that work in their fields. Your happiness here means they can't keep selling their lies. Your happiness is dangerous to them."

The crowd rumbled in agreement.

"Because we are dangerous, they will try to destroy us. But they can't use their army anymore, because the soldiers are...here."

The crowd roared.

He held up his hand and they were silent. "So they are doing the only thing they know how to do. They sent spies to infiltrate us. We have caught many but I need your help to get the rest. If you suspect someone is guilty of doing harm to the Citizens, you need to let the Council of Public Safety know. This life of peace and community will vanish if you are not vigilant." The crowd applauded.

Behind the crowd, a giant green tractor rumbled up the street, towing a large cart with metal bars behind it.

<<>>

Josh stood on the side of the stage. His long sleeve shirt did little to protect him from the heavy chill in the air, and he steadied himself for what he was about to see. Today was the first day that he would bear witness to violence. He had hoped to avoid the matter altogether, but Max insisted that he go in case something went wrong with the public address system.

The tractor lumbered forward and came to a thudding stop. The metal door of the cart was swung open and the prisoners were led to the stage.

“So understand Citizens,” Max continued, “we must make this statement. If you do not want to see this I understand and you may leave. However we need to show our enemies that their attempts to take us back to the old ways will not be tolerated. These people will not die in vain. Their deaths represent the beginning of the end of this conflict. Their deaths will make everyone think twice before they cross us again.”

The crowd cheered. Max dropped the microphone to his side. Josh felt his heart start to beat faster. It was time. Max stepped to the side and Tyson signaled for the first prisoner to be brought forward. He had black hair with wisps of gray throughout. He looked like he was in his late 50s.

Two men hoisted him into the air. The crowd cheered loudly. He made no sound as he was slammed down onto the wooden table. The prisoner looked up to see the crowd wildly cheering in his face. The two large citizens strapped the victim to the board and Tyson walked forward carrying a chainsaw.

The condemned lay prone. Josh thought he saw him close his eyes. He did not struggle. Tyson pulled and the chainsaw roared to life.

Tyson brought it down. Josh couldn't see it but he could hear it. The body of the prisoner was obscured by smoke but the sounds of the saw told the tale. Seconds later the chainsaw stopped and Tyson turned around, revealing what remained of the man.

Silence fell over the crowd. Josh looked out to see many with flat hands over their mouths. In that moment, Josh was terrified. He wondered if the Citizens had finally gone too far. He wondered if these people would turn on them. He wondered if the crowd would rush the stage and kill every last one of them.

Voices in the middle of the crowd started cheering Max's name. It caught on. The crowd became deafening, all agreed on the object of their cheers. In unison, thousands chanted Max's name with a brutal intensity.

At the front of the crowd, Pamela Brown stood with her mouth agape. Max motioned to the executioners. It was time for the next prisoner.

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THIRTY-NINE

Pamela pulled the IFB, and felt the air pop inside her ear canal. Jim, her boss, sounded delighted about the footage. He told her it would be picked up around the world. Everyone would see that the Citizens were doing public executions. There would be raging debates sparked by the information provided by Pamela Brown. This brought her no comfort as she walked away from the news van.

She wasn't sure how this was going to end. She wondered if she was sleeping with the enemy. The violence of the Citizens was easier to swallow when it was more theoretical, not watching people being ripped apart by chainsaws on a stage.

She remembered the blond girl the most. The camera had zoomed in on the girl before she was strapped to a board in front of the cheering crowd. She was gaunt, with vacant eyes that looked so resigned, like she had no protest left to give. She was a ghost before she became one for real. The girl looked like the mirror image of Pamela Brown.

She saw the footage before they had loaded it into the truck. She didn't want to send it. The images didn't tell the tale. When people saw this on a screen, they wouldn't understand the horror. They couldn't hear the cheers coming from actual people standing next to them. They couldn't smell the gasoline.

The sights and sounds were seared into Pamela. She tried hard not to lose her composure. The feeling persisted. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Her producer slapped her on the shoulder. She turned to him. His eyes offered some comfort, some solidarity. She could do nothing but return the gaze. She realized that she needed to get moving. She needed to talk to Josh.

She still liked Josh. She wasn't in love with him but the circumstances were convenient. His access gave her gallons of inside information that she could run back to her bosses. Her reports from Detroit had made her internationally famous. But did sleeping with Josh make her complicit in the activities of the Citizens? In some small way, did she responsible for what she saw today?

She walked from the van parked outside the RenCen and walked into the large lobby. Her heels clicked loudly on the floor, the sound bounced off the walls of thick glass. She walked to the elevators. She needed to think and that required a shower. She needed to be alone in the uterine warmth of water. She needed to feel safe for a moment.

The elevator doors curtained open and she got in alone. She splayed her fingers into her thick blond hair and she felt herself grimace as the doors thudded closed. The elevator lunged skyward, for a moment it felt weightless. Pamela got dizzy.

She thought of the blond girl. She thought of her chest falling open, the bones of her ribcage pointing out with jagged edges. Pamela remembered the girl's jaw falling open and her tongue passing her teeth, pulled only by the gravity, no muscle to save it.

Pamela felt her stomach drop. She found it hard to breathe. Her eyes filled with tears. She reached out for the red emergency stop and closed her fingers around it. She pulled. The elevator slammed to a stop and a bell started ringing. The bell blared awful from an unseen source but Pamela heard nothing.

She lay on the floor of the elevator, with her knees pulled to her nose. She sobbed and wondered if her heart would stop. Could a person's heart just stop, she wondered? Could she feel her heart explode in her chest? Was she about to? What if she just stopped breathing?

Pamela left her body. Her vision rushed out of the elevator and through the top of the RenCen. She went higher and higher into the atmosphere. Pamela felt the people in every single house and apartment, all going about their lives. They were cleaning, cooking, laughing, praying. Pamela was only one person in a vast universe. A speck of sand in an immense desert. She was so small, so insignificant at that moment. She felt so alone, without anything in the vastness to reconcile, rectify or soothe. She felt herself stop breathing.

Her vision blurred. She pounded her chest hard with her fist. She kept pounding. Her breathing began again, and she blinked her eyes. Her sight slowly leaked back. She was laying on the floor of the elevator, she could hear the bell blaring overhead.

She hauled herself up and pushed the red emergency button back in. She felt the elevator start moving. She breathed slowly. Her nerves were raw, worn.

The doors opened to her floor. She let herself into her room and collapsed onto the bed. She tried to calm down. She closed her eyes and prayed. She prayed to whoever was listening. She prayed that she would make it out of here alive.

<<>>

Danton rubbed his hands on his cheeks. Fucking shit is out of control, he thought. He grabbed the rocks glass and took a swallow. Usually you would sip scotch, but you don't usually have the head of your organization doing public executions in front of TV cameras, do you? This was bad and Danton knew it, but it wasn't like he was going to abandon Max. It was far too late for that. Danton was guilty of the same treason as the rest of them. He couldn't give himself up now, the words "high value target" flashed in his head.

The executions were a big hit inside Detroit. Of course they were. Max could sell anything at this point. The chainsaw was almost inaudible over the sound of the roaring crowd, but the blond woman with the TV camera had been standing right there in front of the stage. Did Max really think that the news would play the whole thing in context?

Danton sat in a conference room at the RenCen watching a television that had been set up for satellite TV. The news was not being kind. Anchors introduced the footage in hushed tones, warning how "disturbing" the footage was going to be. It was the same skinny blond woman every time. Over and over again, she was strapped to the table and buzzed with the chainsaw, bits of her body flying everywhere.

Danton thanked God that the residents couldn't see this. If his guys saw what was happening in the so called "court of public opinion" the whole thing would be over. The outrage was being measured in twenty-four hour increments. Every news channel featured talking heads clucking their

tongues about the Citizens “going too far” and how they needed to be stopped.

Danton guessed that the military was closing in now. They had probably mustered thousands of new, well paid soldiers. The volunteer military was probably bursting at the seams and fully equipped. The mistakes of the past few decades had been fixed, sure as shit. Danton wondered if history would remember his contribution. He swallowed more scotch.

The door swung open. It was Max and Tyson. They walked with purpose toward the end of the table. Danton decided to be honest. “This is not good.”

“Why?” asked Max.

Danton leaned forward, pushing his chest to the table. “They are calling us murderers! The army is closing in on us. They are going to take us over, Max.”

“I have been called that before,” said Max.

“Well,” said Danton, spitting a piece of ice back into the glass, “they didn’t have footage of you DOING it!”

“Are you telling me that you are incapable of leading my forces anymore? Are you unprepared?” Max said, in a low voice.

A twinge of fear shot through Danton at the sound of this question. He heard Tyson stepping closer. His stomach lurched to the side and filled with bile. He shook his head.

“Good. How are you preparing?”

“Urban warfare,” he said, the scotch burned in his throat. “I want platoons of guys throughout the city. Checkpoints at major thoroughfares, every route in and out of the city. We need to protect them and not worry about much else.”

“Then do it,” said Tyson.

Danton looked at Tyson, wondering if he had two bosses now. “Do you have any contingency plans?”

Max got very serious, “Contingency for what?”

“If the Army captures us, retakes the city.”

“Then I will be disappointed with you. But believe me, I will make the necessary changes before that would ever become a problem.”

Danton felt a chill.

“You aren’t going to disappoint me, are you General?”

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FORTY

Tom Tucker was freezing his balls off.

He had spent a month in the refugee camp and as far as Tom Tucker was concerned, that was fine. He had no interest in going back to his plastic wife and her pair of giant fake tits. Tom fully expected she was gone by now anyway. He screwed the pooch on the Wellco operation, so he was sure the check bounced. It had been his responsibility to protect that building and he allowed it to be overrun.

But Tom Tucker was over that shit. Oh sure, he cried like a little girl for hours after the bullshit at Quarantine. He hid in an abandoned house in Allen Park and remained for several sunrises and sunsets. Tom wasn't really sure how long it was, but by the time he came out of the house, the trees had turned colors. He wandered around for about a week, living off the land. He finally found a car with gas in it along I-75 and drove south.

Tom almost made it to Toledo before he was captured by the Army. They confiscated his vehicle and forced him to stay in the refugee camp. Tom didn't put up any kind of a fight. He gladly accepted a bed roll, three squares a day, and a canvas sheet that protected him from the rain. The officers had asked him if he wanted to call any loved ones, and Tom told them he didn't. If that bitch thinks I'm dead, he thought, she might not even try to divorce me. She had helped herself to plenty of money as it was, as far as Tom was concerned.

When Tom first arrived, the commanders on the scene debriefed him. They held their little meetings in a building that was buried deep in the base. He had been interrogated for two days, and had to tell them every single detail about his time in Michigan. He had told them about his contacts with Wellco and how they hired him. He told them about how he and his team had been overwhelmed by thousands of Citizens at the

building they called Quarantine. He told them about how he fled the scene. He left out the part about the tears. Fuck them if they really need to know that, Tom thought.

Tom adapted to life in the refugee camp quickly. He preferred it to that castle of a house in Tennessee. He started his day taking a cold shower. The water shot out of the head like needles and would take your breath away but you were awake after that, sure as shit. Then it was down to the mess area for something the Army called “eggs”, some wheat toast, and some good old motor oil coffee.

Some people around him complained, but Tom loved it. He didn’t miss the Starbucks latté frappé mocha whateverthefucks. The coffee tasted like coffee and it woke him up almost as much as the shower. So he sat and enjoyed breakfast in the mess-hall and stared at the televisions bolted to the walls around the hall, broadcasting news from Detroit.

Afternoons these days meant getting wood for hundreds of fires around the camp. For Tom, that meant carrying an actual axe into the woods and chopping down a real fucking tree. Tom had been doing this every single day for the last three weeks and he wasn’t even sore any more. He felt strong, capable, and even important. It was worth every swing to see the happy faces of the families when he showed up with the wood for their fires. Children ran up to him excitedly and husbands would shake his hand. The wives would look at him with desire in their eyes. At least that’s what Tom Tucker thought he saw in their eyes, didn’t really matter if it was actually the case.

Tom felt better than he ever did in his life. There was no fucking stupid private jet to gas, no diamonds to buy, no fucking nagging bitch that needs every little thing immediately. There was no money to make, just good, honest work. People were cold, so you go get them some wood for their fires and they give you gratitude for your time. For most of his life, Tom had been feared because of his power and status. In the refugee camp, he felt respected for his abilities.

He forgot about the situation in Michigan after a while. It was all about getting fuel in the morning, chopping the wood, and then distributing the wood to people who needed it. It didn’t matter that he kept having to walk farther and farther for trees to chop down. He liked the work.

Tom totally forgot about the Quarantine. Until the day that the skinny bitch with the pink hair walked out of the commander's building.

Tom wanted to attack her when he first saw her but her frail frame stayed his hand. Her shoulder was wrapped and he saw purple skin peeking out from under the bandages. He thought about saying something to her but she had walked right past him looking at her piece of paper. She found a tent near the front and disappeared inside the flap. Tom thought about following her, but he decided against it. He stood there, looking at the tent. Suddenly Tom wanted to have a conversation with the skinny bitch that killed his men.

<<>>

It had been two weeks since Betty had left Max's little get together. She had passed out in the atrium of a house near the Manoogian Mansion. When she awoke she realized that she needed a better hiding place. She dragged herself into the basement of the abandoned house and remained quiet as possible. She wasn't sure what hurt worse, the slash under her tit or the bullet wound in her shoulder. As the days waned on, the bullet wound won the contest. She dug the slug out of her arm, which sapped the remainder of her strength. Somewhere around the second week the bruising started to spread and Betty realized that she needed to form a plan.

She was going to try and call someone but she lost her phone somewhere along the way. In someone's car? In Max's little horror show? She couldn't remember, but she missed it immediately. Not just to call for help (that would be nice), but to look at pictures or something. Anything so that she could get the images from the mansion out of her head. The sight of Jack. Max's face pressed against hers.

She cried a lot. She was never a weepy chick, but she had to forgive herself at the moment. Between Josh, Quarantine, and the situation at Max's house, life had become rather challenging lately and crying was a decent way to get the poison out.

She thought about Josh a lot. She wondered if he was in danger and she was desperate to let him know what happened. He needed to know what Max really was. Or was Josh safer not knowing? If Josh went on not knowing, would that insulate him? Was his ignorance bliss?

The decisions were taken care of when Betty realized that she needed medical attention on her arm above all else. She wouldn't be able to help

out anyone if she died of these wounds. Betty finally summoned the strength to drag herself out of the basement.

She found a pair of keys that worked for the Benz in the garage. The car had a full tank of gas and started on the first turn. Finally, she thought, some luck. She twirled the wheel one armed and propelled the car out of the driveway. She got a little lost trying to find the highway.

She thought she might be caught by Danton's Citizen patrols. She saw them occasionally, hulking and ominous, carrying chainsaws. She didn't know if the entire force was looking for her or if it was just Max's private security guys. Betty didn't exactly want to pull over and ask.

She finally found the highway and pressed the gas hard to go south. She found no Citizen resistance. She went south for an hour before she drove right into the waiting arms of the United States Army.

They were rough at first, pulling her out of the car and slamming her down. The last thing she remembered was laying prone, with her cheek resting on the asphalt. She must have passed out after that.

She remembered seeing the lights of what she could only assume was a hospital. She remembered hearing the whir of equipment, and the faces of men examining her. She could smell their breath and when she opened her eyes she could see nostril hair. At some point, they must have operated on the bullet wound.

She awoke to find that she had been out for a week. The Army found her cooperative. She told them everything. They were very interested in Max's location and his daily routines. She to go drive a tank up Max's ass herself, but the commanders waved away her "joke". Five days later the commanders decided to let Betty into the refugee camp, as they had everything they needed from her.

She sketched a plan while she laid on her back in the tent. She would nurse herself back to health and then she would go get Josh. She was furious at herself for not being able to go back to him in the first place, but the gunshot had made things more complicated. She was sure that the Army was going to storm Detroit, and she needed to get to Josh before they did.

But first, Betty really needed some sleep.

FORTY-ONE

Josh carded the door to the hotel room and pushed. Pamela sat on the bed, looking distant into the wall ahead of her. He walked across the room and passed without her noticing. He pulled the chair from under the wooden desk on the far side of the room and sat down.

Josh could sympathize. Men and women were stood in front of a cheering crowd and ripped apart by chainsaws. His stomach hung sick, but Pamela looked worse. Josh wanted to cry during the proceedings or at least scream out in protest. He hadn't. The only emotion he felt was the paranoia that the crowd would turn on them.

"Pam," Josh said, trying to wake her. It didn't work, he wasn't surprised. "Pamela, are you okay?"

"Huh?" She suddenly seemed to notice that he was in the room. "Oh, hey."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Pamela's eyes went to the carpet. "Did you know that was going to happen?"

"I did. It was a lot worse than I thought it was going to..." he said, trailing off. He didn't have the words.

"What did those people do?"

"I am not really sure, that was up to Tyson and Danton."

"Are you okay with what happened down there?" she asked, sounding sick.

"No, I'm not, but I couldn't have stopped it."

"Did you say anything, to anybody? Any word of protest?" she said, sounding accusatory.

"That's not really how it works," said Josh, he hated the way his words sounded. "Max says things and we do them."

“I thought it was a group thing.”

“No, we’ve just always followed whatever Max says.”

“So you’re all just taking orders?” her words coming quicker. “Do you condone this? Why did you let this happen?”

“Because Max is always right.”

“Josh...I really need you to answer this for me. Do you still believe in this?”

He opened his mouth to answer when a knock sounded. Pamela let out a startled noise.

She walked to the door and opened it, revealing two of Max’s goons. Their large frames crowded the doorway. Pamela turned around, looking horrified. One of them stared at her in confusion before speaking. “Josh, Max needs to see you.”

“What for?” he asked.

“Max asked for you.”

“Okay. I will be down there in a moment.”

“We are going right now,” he said. “We are gonna give you a ride.”

Josh grabbed his coat and made for the door without protest. Pamela didn’t say anything but looked terror-stricken as the door closed behind him.

<<>>

Josh rode the elevator in silence down to the lobby. The goons didn’t seem nervous at all, simply going through the motions. He felt encouraged by that, for some reason.

Before Josh had joined this little group, he had a rule, no governments. He made this rule because governments hold grudges. Larceny and reckless endangerment are minor infractions. When compared to crimes like treason, fraud seemed like a love tap. But it wasn’t until today that Josh thought of a new one, War Crimes. When Pamela asked him if he still believed in the Citizens, the answer that came to his mind was ‘it doesn’t matter.’

Josh was a dead man, and he knew it. There was no way out of this and there shouldn’t be. He stood there while the organization that he belonged to tied a woman to a plank and sawed her in half while she was still alive. There was no plea bargaining. There was no chance of trying to mitigate the responsibility. He was responsible. It didn’t matter if he had signed up for this, he now had a lifetime subscription by default.

The three men walked out of the glass doors and into the chill. They moved across the great concrete walkway and past the stage, where men in sanitation coveralls sprayed blue ammonia solution. There was a few people still around from the morning throng, walking around aimless in the middle of the city.

Josh had time to think as the two goons put him in the car and drove him towards the mansion. He remembered that cramped, hot storage facility. Betty had been so amazing when he saw her standing there in the group of new recruits, but that was not where his mind wanted to go on this car ride. He thought of the time that he found her after the raid on Quarantine.

Josh drove as fast as he could that day. The only thing that occupied his mind was reaching Betty. He knew that she was fine, but he needed to see her. When he arrived at the hotel hours later he saw her standing in the parking lot. She was covered in blood, except on her cheeks. She had been crying.

She had looked up at Josh, recognition and relief in her eyes. He remembered that look. He remembered her green eyes brighten when she saw him, she had a genuine smile, and the sun that came down bathed Betty in radiant light that made her look like she was glowing. He remembered she ran the moment she saw him. Just letting out a single "Hey!" as she flung herself into his arms.

She was amazing when he first saw her, but on that day in the parking lot her beauty seemed complete. He was lucky enough just to know her, let alone be the person who got to hold her in that moment. He held her hand on that overpass in Birch Run, he had had conversations about books and stories into the early hours of the morning. He heard her hoarsely whisper her love for him in the dim light of hotel rooms through clumps of sweaty pink hair. She looked more beautiful than ever that day because he knew so much more about her.

He replayed the thought in his mind. He felt a lump in his throat, but a smile on his face. He thought of her in his arms. He thought of those green eyes. He thought about how much he loved her, in ways that could not be understood in language. She moved him on the inside. He felt pure joy caused only by the presence of her memory.

The absence seemed a cavity now. He knew that he would never see Betty again. Josh accepted that, but that didn't make it any easier. He knew

that a part of him would never, could never, be the same again. Like if someone cut off your arm at the elbow. You could move on and live a full life, but you would never forget the lack.

People say that the final stage of grief is acceptance. Josh had heard it many times. But just because you have reached acceptance doesn't mean that your grief is over. People make it seem like acceptance is a destination to be desired, as some kind of sanctuary from the hot danger of anger and bargaining. Josh knew, as he felt the soft bumps of imperfections in the asphalt beneath the car, that wasn't true.

Acceptance is a graveyard. The place to bury your memories. Acceptance is when you decide to forget because you can't take the pain anymore. You slink into permanent denial. Your mind forgets the happiness that you felt and how much it destroyed you when someone you cared about was gone forever.

Josh swallowed the lump in his throat. He understood that these feelings would never fade and it was all his fault.

<<>>

Josh shook from his trance when the car stopped. The goons snapped the door open and motioned for him to get out of the car. He felt the rush of cold air coming through his clothes.

Josh wandered through the Atrium and saw Max standing in the living room.

"We are having some messaging problems after today's event," said Max. Max didn't turn around to address him. "I need you to pull some web sites down."

Josh sat down on the couch. He felt something hard and plastic beneath him. "Which ones?"

"A couple of news sites," said Max. Josh saw the laptop open on the table in front of him. "I need the Huffington Post and the New York Post pulled offline and altered. They are going a little far. I also need you to plant some stories on their sites." He walked out of the room holding his index finger up to indicate Josh should wait.

Josh put his hand between the crease of the two couch cushions and fished underneath him. His fingers wrapped around the plastic thing and pulled it out to see what it was. His heart stopped. He stuffed it into his pocket seconds before Max walked back into the room.

“Tyson has already written the articles for you,” said Max.

“It won’t work,” Josh said. He pushed the laptop to the center of the table.

“Why not?” asked Max.

“I need a wired connection,” lied Josh, “laptops won’t work in this case.”

“Okay, I have one of those. Follow me.”

They walked through the living room and into a small room off the hallway. In the center of the far wall was a PC, wired to an internet connection. “Does this work for you?”

“It wasn’t cut by the government?” Josh asked.

“This is a T1 line. I believe those can’t be cut.” Max said.

“This will work perfectly,” said Josh.

“Then I will let you get to it.” Max walked out of the room.

Josh pulled the chair away from the desk. He looked behind him to confirm Max was gone from the room. He pulled Betty’s cellphone out of his pocket and looked at it again.

FORTY-TWO

Danton sat in the first bench seat of a cargo van. He tapped the driver on the shoulder. “Stop. Stop. Stop!”

There was no efficient way to spread information anymore. Danton feared it would take days to get all his people into the city. The walkie-talkie system was a pain in the ass that he missed every day now. It sure beats the hell out of finding a group of guys one at a time and telling them to spread the word.

The side door on the van opened and Danton’s feet smacked the concrete. He walked up to a group of five Citizens on the corner that he recognized. “Guys.”

They straightened up a bit. They were not really standing at attention but certainly close enough. Danton liked the fact that he got all this respect. It was the only thing that kept him going anymore. He would keep his post and at that moment keeping his post meant defending the hell out of the city. The five Citizens on the corner nodded back at Danton, “Sir.”

“I need you two,” Danton identified them with his hand “to go spread the word. We need all hands on deck to defend the city. Get word to all outposts. We need every single person here. I want constant patrols in every area.”

The largest of the group looked down his nose a bit. “Are we falling back, Danton?”

Danton shook his head, “Fortifying, Citizen. The army is coming but they don’t know how capable we are.”

One of the others narrowed his eyes a bit. “What are our chances?”

Danton waved his hand in front of his face. “The Army isn’t good at urban combat. They proved that in Iraq. They might have all the rich people funding them but we still have the numbers.”

One of Citizens nodded. "I did three tours in Iraq," said one of them. "These new recruits don't have a chance."

"That's right," Danton said. "I need this done NOW guys. Get the word out to everyone you can."

Danton closed the door and tapped the driver on the shoulder, never once making eye contact with the man. Danton rode silently with his eyes affixed to the glass. He was sure that his plan would work. He had become an impressive general. The key to doing anything well is to love it, and Danton loved being the General. He thought about that movie. The one about the 300 Spartans that had all the crazy monsters. Danton thought of himself in those terms. He was leading a small force, and what he did over the next few weeks would be spoken of in legend.

<<>>

Josh put things together. Betty had acted out on those urges she had so long ago. She was mad at Josh for sleeping with Pamela, so she must have come here and slept with Max.

The pilot light burned large. He couldn't believe it. Was Max lying? Josh could understand how Betty could be upset, but why Max?

He needed proof. He thought of the small cameras affixed to every corner of the living room and wondered where that footage was saved.

Josh sat at the PC terminal. He moved his hand to the mouse. His mind a thunderstorm, it made concentration difficult. Max asked him to do something and Josh was trying to remember what that was.

Josh was mad. Mad at Betty, Max, himself, Pamela, at the whole situation. He was sure that his actions pushed Betty into Max's arms, but it didn't matter. Josh's mind was not at all capable of rational thought at that second, he was living on pure jealousy.

Josh pushed the mouse around the screen. He pulled up DOS. Faster this way, he thought. People can hide things in Windows. Josh pulled his phone out of his pocket. It was a useless thing these days, basically serving only as a calculator and a calendar. It reminded Josh of the old days of PDAs when you would tap a screen with a stylus in order to keep your days straight.

He looked at today's date and counted. You would think he had the date Betty walked away from him burned into his head by now but he didn't. His fingers started clacking wildly against the keyboard. He found the file location.

He tabbed over to the window that was now open in front of him. He didn't really see any activity. Too early in the day, Josh jumped ahead. He looked over his shoulder again. Max would be furious he was looking at the video surveillance, but Josh had to do this. He had to see Betty at the mansion.

Josh braced himself for what he might see. What if her cellphone fell out of her pants because she was removing them? If that was the case Josh wasn't sure what he would do next. Would he run? Would he confront Max, punch him? All seemed plausible. He fast forwarded.

In the black and white video on the screen, Josh saw Tyson building a fire. He jumped forward again, watching the fire dance in flashes, but still there was no Betty. He saw Max standing motionless in the living room, staring at the television. He moved the video forward again. Now Max was gone and something was wrong. The glass door was shattered and the drapes were torn apart. Josh jumped the video back a bit. The glass door was now back to normal, and there was Max standing at the fire again.

Josh tapped the right arrow key once. Betty appeared on the couch. She was talking. His stomach pitted at her sight. Max was searching around for something around the fireplace. When Max turned around, Betty was leaning back.

Two of Max's goons grabbed Betty as Max walked over to her, Tyson close behind. Josh felt his heart slam into his chest. In the video, Max pulled a large knife out and slashed her along the ribcage. Josh saw the love of his life thrashing in the arms of the men that were holding her. Josh was shaking. He wanted to scream. On the screen he saw Betty escaping as Tyson pulled a gun and fired out the door.

Josh felt rage. He wanted to erase Max. He wanted to bury his fists in Max's face. He wanted to rip his tongue out and throw it in the fire. He wanted to rip every limb off of his body. He wanted to squeeze the life out of his neck and watch his eyes as he died.

He rose from the chair. Josh was a rampaging beast guided only by emotion. No plan was guiding him. He came out of the computer room and back into the living room.

Max was standing with Tyson in the living room. He looked at Josh, reading his face.

Tyson tilted his head, "Is something wrong, Josh?"

“Where is she?” seethed Josh.

Max looked at Tyson. “Okay, grab him.”

He walked across the room. Josh swung at Tyson with everything he had. He connected a punch to his shoulder, but the large man barely flinched. Tyson grabbed his arms and wrenched them. Josh couldn’t move.

“I am guessing you found the surveillance footage,” said Max. He motioned at the cameras in the room. “Nice move. I didn’t even know where that footage was stored.”

“You fucking piece of shit,” said Josh, struggling.

“I didn’t need you to go rooting around my computer but, I guess that’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“You killed her,” said Josh. Tyson bound Josh’s hands with plastic and pulled it tight.

“Did I?” said Max. “I don’t know. Doesn’t really matter right now. Your little trespass was not on the menu, Josh. I didn’t think this was the way it was going to be.”

“You said you always told the truth.”

“I am. It’s not my fault that you are putting your concerns first. You fell off the wagon, Josh, not me. Your current predicament is your own choice, now you are forcing me to deal with it.”

Josh struggled against his restraints. Tyson held him down. “You are...a butcher.”

“What is this, a movie?” Max said. He sounded annoyed. “You are finally going to get anger off your chest and that is what you come up with? I’m a butcher. Okay, Josh, I will go with your little premise. Yes, I’m a butcher. Do you know why?” Max got close to him, Josh turned away.

“A butcher provides, Josh. That is what I do. I offer food and life to people. What do you do, exactly? Are you a provider? You only steal and destroy. You know, before my conversation with Betty turned unpleasant, she told me you two had hit a rough patch. Let me ask you Josh, was it because you were greedy? Is that why you’re now shackled up with that TV woman? Because you offer this world nothing?”

“FUCK YOU!”

“You, are a drain,” said Max, “you suck everything in and give nothing back. You call me names but you don’t even bother to notice that I am giving people hope and life. Everything you have has been taken from

someone else. Just like a drain, you make everything more empty until someone forces you stop.”

Max straightened up. “All right, I think we know what to do now. You can solve my little message problem after all, Josh,” He looked directly at Tyson. “Take him to Quarantine, please. Put him with all the others that aren’t contributing.”

Tyson dragged him out the door. Max followed. He threw Josh, bound, into the back of a car and Max looked in the open window.

“Josh, let me take this opportunity to thank you for all you’ve done. You have been important to this organization and I am sorry that you lost faith recently.”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

“I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you, because I don’t think I am going to get another chance.”

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FORTY-THREE

In the morning, Danton walked through the hall to the boardroom of the RenCen. He felt like his mission was complete, everyone informed, the wheels now in motion. Danton gripped the door handle to the boardroom and pushed it open.

The floor to ceiling windows at the end of the room revealed a cloudy sky. The gray hung low over the landscape. Detroit stretched out for miles below them, in flat browns and grays.

Max was at the end of the table with Tyson at his side. He didn't seem to notice Danton walk into the room.

"All set," said Danton, "when are they coming?"

"We have some time," Max said. He turned around in his chair to face the window. "Josh has betrayed us."

Danton's heart sank. A small voice in the back of his head reminded him that there was no turning back. And then there were three.

Max turned the chair back to Danton. "We have him locked up in Quarantine," he said. The two men allowed the silence to pass between them. "You know what has to happen," said Max. "I need to know that you are okay with this."

Danton fell into a nearby chair. "Do I have to answer now?" he said. "I mean, I've known the guy for a couple months now. It's hard to just..."

"There is only one standard, Danton."

Danton nodded. He wanted to run. He wanted to run screaming and never see this place again. He had stayed because he was the General. He commanded an army. Now he felt like a water boy.

Tyson's eyes narrowed. "Having trouble with something, Danton?" he asked. "If you are, you need to let us know."

"I need to know something," said Danton.

“What is that?” said Max, turning again to look out the window.

“I need to make sure that you aren’t killing one of us publicly so that people won’t question what you did two days ago.”

Max did not turn around as he answered, “You have my word.”

Josh’s face appeared on the TV screen. Tyson tapped Max on the shoulder, and they all looked. It was video of Josh’s interview with Pamela.

Tyson rose from his seat and walked to the TV. He pressed his thumb against the volume button.

“This is coming to us from Pamela Brown who has been reporting out of the Detroit Renaissance Center. This man, known only as Josh, has been imprisoned by the Citizens. There is some speculation that he will meet the same fate as several people publicly executed just a few short days ago. Our panel of experts join us to discuss the prospect of more public executions in Detroit. Gloria, when is the military finally going to put a stop to all this bloodshed? It appears, according to our Pamela Brown, the man we know as ‘Max’ is simply eliminating people who disagree with...”

Max waved his hand at Tyson. He had heard enough. Tyson turned off the TV.

Danton looked at him. “What are we going to do about this?”

“About what?”

“We have to call off Josh’s execution.”

Max put his elbows on the table and looked Danton square in the face. “Your stomach is still a little weak. Those reporters on television have never been on our side.” Max pointed out the window and toward the city. “They will fight for us. The media have doubted us every step of the way, but our people believe in us. It doesn’t matter how many of them come in here. I will warm my hands in their intestines. And she,” he pointed at the screen. “will tell them all about it.” He let his words hang in the air before continuing.

“Nothing changes. I want 26 hours on the video screen now. Start counting it down. I want a big crowd tomorrow.”

FORTY-FOUR

Betty didn't mind life in the refugee camp. She spent her time healing. Her trips to the infirmary twice a day to change the dressing on her wound provided the semblance of routine. Between those times, she slept.

She hated mornings in the camp. To start off, it was cold. The weather had begun to match the season, but morning cold was the worst. She would wake up with a shudder on the canvas floor of the tent, then trudge to the showers and stand under a jet of ice water. She never really got clean. She would walk out of the stalls with her teeth chattering, convinced that she was in the first stages of hypothermia. This would suck even in the summertime, she thought.

But the worst was the mess-hall. All's fair in love and breakfast, she often thought to herself, while attempting to slide a slimy yellow paste they called "eggs" into her mouth. Some mornings she was starving, yet still had trouble finishing the "eggs." Betty wasn't picky but this was ridiculous. It wasn't so much the flavor of them but their consistency. How anything could be powdery and yet slither at the same time was a mystery to her. There were also waffles that somehow managed to be crunchy and something pink called a smoothie. She doubted that the smoothie had any fruit in it.

Most mornings Betty awoke to searing brightness. There was no hope of sleeping late, the lack of color in the tent's exterior did nothing to blunt the light coming through. She thought fondly of the blackout curtains in the series of hotel rooms that were her home over the summer.

She stretched. Her toes touched the wall of the tent. She laid there, looking at the limp canvas ceiling for a moment. She wasn't tired, just delaying the inevitable. She rubbed her face and rolled over. She pulled on an army issue shirt and camo pants. She loved the pants, tight and full of

pockets. This entire thing was worth it for these cool-ass pants, she thought to herself.

She parted the tent flaps and walked out into the choking cold air. She looked in the direction of the showers and made the decision to skip it today. There was no need. I am not shoving my ass in anyone's face today, she thought, so it's not worth cleaning it. She wandered into the mess-hall and decided to take her chances.

Apparently it was a special day. Added to the offering of "eggs" was now a selection of "hash browns." Betty didn't really know if they came from potatoes, but that would be a positive. The white and stringy clumps looked like someone had boiled them. It looked like "waffles" was the way to go today.

She finally folded into a mess-hall table with her tray of food and she started gnawing on the "waffle". She hated mornings for just this reason. She started thinking about how much she wanted to go back to Florida.

She looked up at the TV and saw Josh.

<<>>

Betty quickly abandoned her breakfast and ran toward the Army headquarter building. Her shoulder didn't hurt anymore. She would lead an army, be part of an army, anything. She just needed to get to Detroit, now.

She went into the command center and made it through the lobby before the guard outside the main office stopped her. "Can't go in there," he said.

"The Citizens are going to execute the rest of the hostages!"

The guard wasn't moved. "Still can't let you go in there, ma'am."

"They know me. They will want to talk to me. Please let me in there."

His eyes got wide and he got a satisfied smile on his face. "Still can't let you in there ma'am," he said. He was really enjoying himself.

"They are going to saw my boyfriend in half. The Army needs to move!"

He shook his head. "You can get another boyfriend," he smiled like a lizard. "It looks like without much problem, either."

She walked away, realizing she was wasting her time. She got outside and paced in front of the command center, trying to think. She needed to save Josh but had no idea how. The Army wasn't just going to let her walk back into Michigan. She felt weak and hopeless. She squatted on the

ground, covered her face with her hands, and tried to control her panicked breaths.

“Hey,” Betty heard a voice. She removed her hands from her face. She saw knees. She looked up. A man with a gray buzz cut and a chiseled face stood over her. He seemed familiar for some reason but she could not figure out why. The man spoke again. “Didn’t you fight at Quarantine?”

Betty recognized him now. He was Mr. White Hair, the man she had led the charge against. She also managed to shove a knife into several of his guys. She fumbled at her legs for a knife that wasn’t there.

“Easy,” he said. He held his hands out defensively. “We are both on the same base now. My name’s Tom, and no hard feelings, it was war.”

She still felt uneasy. “Betty,” she said, an introduction seemed like the right thing to do. “So...what happens now, Tom?”

“I saw you come in a couple of weeks ago, and I decided to introduce myself once you got more settled,” said Tom. “You look like something is bothering you.”

“I need to get out of here,” Betty said, taking advantage of this fortuitous coincidence, “I need to get back to Michigan.”

“Need to get back to your buddies, eh?” said Tom, looking like he was ready to get aggressive. “Trying to join the other side again?”

“Jesus, no!” said Betty, snorting a laugh. She lifted her shirt and showed Tom both wounds. Tom appeared to be noticing her sports bra more than anything else. “My group membership was revoked.”

“Why do you want to go back then?” asked Tom.

“I need to save someone. Plus, I really want a chance to kill Max.”

“Well,” said Tom. “I am glad I decided to come up and introduce myself!”

“Wait, why should I trust you?”

“I can get you to Detroit for starters.”

“How are we going to get out of here? I doubt the Army is just going to let us leave.”

Tom Tucker grinned. “You haven’t done much work with the United States Army, have you?”

<<>>

In front of the RenCen the video screens flickered to life. The residents of the city turned to face them. The screens changed to black and then

numbers appeared in tall white characters: 26:00:00.

The seconds started to disappear from the total, another countdown had begun. The residents went back to their business, taking mental note of where they needed to be in 26 hours.

In coffee shops, restaurants, and bars, residents talked in groups about what was going to happen when the countdown was over. They talked about huddling in Hart Plaza. Many speculated, some placed bets.

They planned to attend with delirious enthusiasm. If any had second thoughts about the direction the city was going, they did not share them. Not out of support but of the terrifying thought that if they complained too loudly they might be next to stand on that stage. They would all be in the crowd with clapping hands and smiling faces when the clock struck zero.

Detroit was held together by fear now. Residents moved quickly among the buildings. They worked with purpose and carefully chosen words. When they spoke, they only spoke effusive praise of Max. They stole almost constant glances over their shoulders. Parents did not allow children outside of the house, for fear they would say the wrong thing.

The army advanced slowly from all directions. They moved on Ann Arbor and Lansing, setting up camps along the way. Opportunistic politicians were not far behind them, claiming abandoned offices in the state capital. Fabricated stories of time spent in Michigan refugee camps were written and memorized by those who might profit from them.

History unfolded live on television. People displaced by the rebellion fixed themselves to TVs at rest areas and tent camps. The rest of the world sat in their homes watching in wonder, interested but uninvolved. Some wiped tears onto their hands to mark the occasion, disappointed to see the grand experiment fail. Others observed with enthusiasm, anticipating the moment when Max finally got his.

All prepared. From the soldier driving the Humvee on I-75, to the grandmother who thought about her grandson in Detroit, to the residents that had planned on belying up to the stage in twenty-six hours, everyone, everywhere held their breath.

FORTY-FIVE

Josh lay on the floor in Quarantine. His ribs ached from being kicked. He could taste blood. Max's guys had tuned him up before dumping him. Betty had talked about this floor, how empty it was. It wasn't empty anymore. Every bed was filled, many with more than one person. The space was vast, but it wasn't intended to hold thousands. Josh felt like a fish in a rapidly dirtying, overpopulated tank. The dominant odor of gym clothes clung to every surface.

The stale air hung sick and unmoving. There was no breeze or plants to mitigate the feeling. The occupants of the ward gathered the exhalations of others into their lungs and regarded their own heartbeats. The simple functions of life were compelling to these prisoners, as they were all aware that these functions would not last very much longer.

The people hoisted no protest. The futility of the situation had seeped in deep. There was no hope left. They were simply thinking of the time that remained.

Josh knew he was a man going down with the ship. His experiences, interests, loves, losses, and friends all colored the tapestry of his days. They had informed his every decision and those decisions led him to this very spot. To Josh, the date with Mr. Chainsaw was writ large in bold letters before the day he was born. He had made the choices that had doomed this ship. The only thing left to do was drown.

<<>>

Pamela Brown had not left her hotel room since that morning. She hoped that any moment now her producer would come up and tell her that the army was about to flood the city. She kept her ear cocked to the door, but the knock hadn't come.

She wanted out. She didn't want to be a reporter any more. She thought she was strong enough to deal with carnage. That was before she witnessed the chainsaws. She prayed that her mind wouldn't eat her alive.

The world slipped away many times as she sat in the hotel room and she could not control it. She felt like she was having out of body experiences. Those moments came often now. Nothing as bad as the day in the elevator but she knew the feelings would be with her long after she left Detroit.

She wanted to get out of the city and find sanctuary far away. She thought about going to California and checking into one of those barefoot rehab places. Her only thoughts were to escape everything that had happened the last few months. She wanted to kill herself to silence the screams, the screams of the dead...and her own.

The thoughts of suicide went away when her producer came through the door. Had she heard the knock? He looked out of breath but not panicked. He looked at her with wide eyes. "The video boards have started a countdown. It's under twenty-four hours."

Pamela swallowed. She couldn't be down there, not with what she knew. The countdown was for Josh.

<<>>

Betty slammed her fist into the dashboard. "A fucking Celica? Really? Radio Flyers go faster than these damn things!"

"You sound like my wife," said Tom.

"Them's fightin' words," she said. "We could have stolen anything. I could be riding in a Benz right now and you hot wire a Celica."

"It's an hour to Quarantine. Shut the fuck up," said Tom. "Why Quarantine, anyway? Isn't that place shut down?"

"Max opened it back up. It's that stupid ass public safety thing. He started putting prisoners in there about a month ago," She propped her feet up on the dashboard. Tom noticed.

"So do we have a plan?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, get my boyfriend out of there," she said.

They were silent for a moment. Tom looked at her legs. The woman could really pull off tight camo pants.

"Tom," Betty said with her eyes closed, "please stop staring. I can understand the first ten times but nothing's changed since then. If it does, I'll let you know."

Tom Tucker's face felt hot.

<<>>

Jim Hightower sat behind his desk. Outside, the newsroom was a riot of limbs and phones. Everywhere, papers carpeted the cubicles and littered the floor. Jim thought about the meeting he took almost two years ago when some arrogant kid from a start up company said that offices across the world would be "moving beyond paper". He thought about what utter bullshit that was.

There was almost constant shouting in the newsroom. Men in rumpled shirts looked to the ceiling with their index finger stuffed into their ear. There were dozens of cries of "CAN YOU CONFIRM THAT?" and "WHAT'S HIS NUMBER?"

Jim sat in his office and ran his hands through his hair. He also remembered people telling him about how citizen journalists would render the news business irrelevant. He fantasized about that. He relished the idea of forced retirement. No more reporters who assumed they are the most important thing that has ever existed. No backstabbing, no more "she's destroying me" speeches, no constant back and forth. His heart warmed at the idea of no more adult sized children begging for assignments and no more egotistical garbage. Jim just thought about laying on a boat and drifting far out to sea, no more noise or egos or whining.

He worried about Pamela. It was like talking to a different person every time she reported in. The experience changed her. He wished he hadn't sent her there. She begged for it and had no idea. None of them did. It's not like I had ever seen anything like this either, Jim thought, trying to absolve his guilt.

One of the reporters, whose name Jim had forgotten, was bounding toward the office. His shoulder bumped the door frame.

"Jim, Army's set to move in thirty-six hours. 'Not for air.'"

"Where is that from?" Jim said with his hands now rubbing his face.

"Joint chief's office."

Jim nodded. "Good lead." He pointed down the hall. "Tell them to air it in thirty-four hours."

Whatever his name was smiled at the sound of praise. He turned and sprinted through the newsroom.

Jim wasn't sure if he could get the info to Pamela.

<<>>

Max stared out the window from one of the upper floors of the RenCen. He rubbed his chest with an open palm and looked at the ants below.

He thought about how disgusting they were. A week ago, Max thought the ants were ready to take the next step. This was a hope based assessment. Hope and optimism had blinded him. He decided, once and for all that day, he would never make that mistake again.

The ants are weak, Max thought. They cannot be given respect lest you doom yourself to failure. Tomorrow will solve this problem. The ants don't have the capacity to learn. You have to fill a spoon and shove it in their mouth, holding their nose until they either expect the concept or choke on it. This is how the ants go through evolution. They stay the same until nature makes them choose. They get smarter or die.

The ants needed correction. They needed simple language and strong direction or they would be lost forever.

Max hated the ants for not thanking him for all he had done, but that emotion had to be put away, too. Standing at the window of the RenCen, Max found it difficult to pack away all the feelings. Especially with only seventeen hours left on the countdown clock.

He made a fist and then allowed his hand to open. He put his hand underneath his shirt and drummed his fingers on his collarbone. He needed to concentrate, no emotion now. Let that come later. He could relax after the ants have been corrected.

He could let himself go for a week, after tomorrow. He needed it. There were an entire stash of uncooperative people in Quarantine at his disposal and so many things he still wanted to try.

<<>>

Betty pointed out the windshield. "Get off here. Here!"

Tom left the highway and they were now underneath the shadow of the giant black tower. He got a chill looking at it.

"We should have brought guns," he said, glancing over at Betty. "What are you doing?"

She was folded forward. "I do this out of habit."

Women, Tom thought. "Don't you think we need guns?"

"Trust me," she said, staying forward. "we don't need guns."

“We’re going to take on a group of rebels without weapons?” Tom looked at her like she had three heads.

“Look Tom,” she said, sitting up. “you understand the Army, I understand the Citizens. They are only dangerous if you attract their attention, and they don’t pay attention. I walked into this building before without a single problem.”

“We should have stolen some fucking guns.”

Betty pushed a little harder. “Guns are perfect for attracting attention we don’t want, Tom!”

Tom looked at her, frustrated. “But what if we get attacked? What if one of the guards notices your pink hair? Guns aren’t the only thing that are noticeable!”

Betty smiled right in his face. “If anybody decides to get up in our faces, we will kick their fucking asses.”

Good answer, thought Tom.

FORTY-SIX

Josh rolled over on his side. He stared at a family who was in the cot next him. A mother sat on the bed with her arms wrapped around her daughter. They both had dead eyes that just stared at the open space in front of them. They looked like they were watching TV but there was no screen in their line of sight. None of the TVs worked since Josh got there. He wondered if they ever did but never summoned enough curiosity to ask.

He kept his arms over his stomach. His ribs hurt less than they did yesterday. His resignation held as strong as ever.

He pressed his face into the linoleum. A small cloud of brown dust ballooned off the tiles. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes. He listened to the sound of his heart beat and the occasional cough in the humid, sticky darkness. He was surrounded by people he helped imprison. Not with his two hands but with his actions. He was every bit as responsible as Max.

He felt someone kick the bottom of his shoe. He rose to his elbows and squinted at a figure that he did not recognize at first. He blinked as his vision came back. Josh's insides squeezed. He could not breathe.

Betty.

<<>>

They stared at each other, unable to speak at first. He felt his eyes filling with tears. She couldn't even breathe. The people around them noticed the meeting and all turned to look. The feeling in the room loomed large. The presence of joy was so foreign that many turned just to see it with their own eyes.

They continued to stare. Another bubble formed. They wanted to embrace but couldn't. They wanted so badly to say everything they had been thinking for weeks, but neither knew where to start. They stood, silent

and stammering, the bubble between them seemingly made of steel, and everyone in the room could feel its presence.

Betty began stammering. She was beaming like a ray of radiant light. The stammer finally broke. “H-Hi, baby.”

Josh leapt from the floor and embraced her tightly. He hoped that she was not hurt. She wept. He could feel her tears through his shirt. He buried his face in her hair. She smelled like home.

“I am so sorry.”

“ Please don’t be sorry. I am so sorry.”

“I shouldn’t have”

“I should have listened to you.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Please don’t be.”

“Just don’t stop holding me.”

“I don’t ever want to.”

“I miss how you smell.”

“I miss every single thing about you.”

“I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too.”

They kissed. With purpose. He pulled her close so he could feel her breathe. Her lips tasted like home, because she was home. In the stale dank and humid air he was home. Betty.

Serenity washed over him. He had no idea how she got here or why she had come. He didn’t ask. He just held her.

<<>>

A man with white hair walked up to them. “Good, you found him.”

“Josh, this is Tom Tucker. Tom, this is Josh.”

The two men nodded at each other.

Betty rounded to Josh. “We gotta go. We came to get you out of here. We took care of the guards but there could be more on the way.”

Josh got excited. He turned to the family on the cot beside him. They looked at him with helpless eyes. Josh looked back at them and in the little girl he saw something else, “Please.”

He shook away that vision in his mind and followed Betty. They hopscotched around people laying on the ground. Josh looked around the room as they ran. He turned to see a young boy with brown hair, dressed in

a long sleeve shirt with colored stripes. He looked at Josh with a dazed set of smoky eyes. In his hands he held a blue plush bunny, the fabric of the ear worn down from his grip. His face looked confused and defeated at the same time. Josh now noticed that all of the people in the ward were staring at him. He started slowing down. Something turned his stomach.

“Betty.”

She stopped and turned. “What’s wrong?”

“We...can’t.”

She had a grave look. “Yes, we can. Yes...yes, you can!” she said. She looked crestfallen. “Josh, don’t. Please, don’t. We have to go.”

Josh hung his head. His throat was closing. He knew.

“Betty we can’t leave these people.”

“They made their own choices, Josh, we have to make ours.”

“No, they didn’t, Betty. We did this.”

“Josh, no, it was Max. Max tricked us.”

“But we helped Max, it doesn’t matter why, we helped him do this. We can’t leave them here to die. We can’t.”

“Josh, the Army is coming.”

“When?”

Betty didn’t have an answer. Josh could tell she was searching.

“Don’t you understand? We made decisions that destroyed these people’s lives. We are responsible for this, for everything that has happened. Now we’re just going to run away?”

Tom Tucker stepped into the conversation. “He’s right.”

“Josh, just get in the elevator.”

“Betty,” said Tom. “You said you wanted to go after Max.”

“But now that I see him,” she said, looking desperately at Josh. “I just want to get him out of here.”

“Betty, look around this room,” said Josh. “They did nothing to deserve this. We joined the Citizens to save lives. Instead, our actions mean these people will be executed.”

Betty was quiet, her eyes slowly filling with tears. Josh kept his mouth closed, he knew she was coming around. He could still read her.

“You’re right,” she said. “but that means we have to kill Max.”

“If we kill him, we will make him a martyr. Besides, we’ll never be able to get close to him.”

Josh took a breath and brought his words out carefully. “If I get executed, and you start protesting it, that anger could spread quickly.”

“I will not,” said Betty. “NOT, let you be a sacrifice, Josh. New plan.”

“Betty,” said Josh. “You would finally turn the people against Max, tens of thousands will be saved,” he said as he pulled her face to his. “We need to let this go on as planned. He will be on stage and vulnerable in front of an angry crowd that knows he’s gone too far.”

“That’s your plan?” she said. “You sacrifice yourself and I give a speech about how wrong everything is? What if I get shouted down and chopped up myself? Then we went all Reservoir Dogs for nothing.”

Josh looked at her. “Do you have any ideas?”

Then Betty thought of something. She went silent for a moment as she worked out the details in her head. She asked Josh if it would work. He agreed, and made a suggestion. Betty started writing things down. There was only one thing that might not work. It was a gamble but it was better than going through with the alternative.

“So,” she said. “where is Pamela’s hotel room?”

Josh felt his face get hot. “This is kind of weird.”

Betty smiled. “All is forgiven, Josh. You should have just told me that she was that smoking hot and I would have given you a pass. I mean, Jesus.”

“She’s not you. She will never be you.”

“Never forget that,” she said as they kissed.

Tom tapped them both on their shoulders. “So we have the plan. Let’s get out of here before anyone realizes the guards are dead.”

Betty turned to Tom. “You killed them? The chainsaw guys?”

“Believe me, it was my pleasure.”

<<>>

Pamela Brown sat watching the sun go down outside her window. It felt like a countdown clock of its own. She knew that tomorrow morning Josh would be executed in front of the building. He would be strapped to a board and his body ripped into pieces.

She cried when she thought about it. She also cried when she thought about the girl, the victim of the same fate. She thought about her house in Falls Church. She remembered how beautiful it looked in the summertime. She missed it now more than she ever had.

She hadn't learned much from the updates from her producer, as far as she knew the Army wasn't coming. She hadn't heard from Jim but then again she hadn't been down to the truck either. She just sat alone in the hotel room, hiding away so the demons inside her head, and outside the door, wouldn't be able to find her.

A knock sounded. She prayed for good news as she opened the door to a pretty girl with pink hair.

"Hi! I'm Betty," she said. "You stole my boyfriend, which means you owe me a favor. Mind if we come in?"

Pamela fell back a couple of steps. She didn't know what was going on. Betty shouldered past her and walked to the window. Betty found Pamela's purse and started going through it.

Pamela sat down on the bed and watched Betty, not knowing what to say. She didn't even notice Tom enter the room.

Tom smiled wide and stuck out his meaty hand. "Hi Pamela, Tom Tucker. Big fan." His hand hung in the air for a few moments without acknowledgement. Pamela continued to stare at Betty like no one else existed. A spark of recognition finally flashed in Pamela's eyes.

"Are you Betty?" she said.

Betty turned around. "Look, I know you have been through a lot but I really need your 'A' game for a couple of minutes." Betty took Pamela's phone out of the purse and started looking through its contents.

"It doesn't..." Pamela began, still dazed.

"Work. Yeah I know that. Nobody's does. No biggie, I just need to use the camera function, that's all." Betty rubbed Pamela's shoulder.

Pamela looked directly into Betty's eyes. It was obvious she needed more help to understand.

"Pamela, I need you to help me save Josh."

<<>>

In the morning, the guards walked through the warehouse toward the elevators. The day was bright, a cloudless sky with the chill of winter. No one said anything on the ride up. They were all hoping at the bare minimum to get over their hangovers. It took a lot of alcohol to show up for work these days.

The elevator door opened and the men poured out. They saw two dead guards in the hallway. Their chainsaws lay useless beside them. They

scanned the areas in the hallway for the murderers. They checked spare rooms and closets and found nothing.

They opened the door to the ward and were shocked at what they saw. A lone man sat on the cot nearest to the door, a satisfied look on his face. The guards looked around the empty expanse with horror.

“Ready to go guys,” said Josh through his smile.

Two of them grabbed each arm and dragged Josh to the elevator. As they rode down, Josh didn’t feel so much like a drain anymore.

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FORTY-SEVEN

The driver of the great green tractor pushed the gas and the sound of acceleration filled the city streets. An acrid plume of black exhaust climbed into the air and dissipated. The large cart that dragged behind bobbed without ceremony, its wheels turned with a squeak.

The residents of the city gathered. Just as the clock had told them. They stood around with curious enthusiasm and craned their necks to get a good look at the condemned.

The last time this happened, the cart was packed. Standing room only with arms and legs sticking out of the bars. Today was different. Only one passenger this time, the same man who once stood on stage with the Citizens. Josh sat in the middle of the floor, his hands bound behind him.

The video screens stopped the count but Max had not appeared. Danton stood at the back of the stage, his arms folded behind him. There was restlessness in the crowd. A murmur went up when they saw Josh sitting there. The tractor came to a stop and its engine ceased. The crowd was in the thousands. In all directions stretched a sea of people gathered to watch justice be served.

Tyson walked to the cart and opened the door. It groaned on its hinges and clattered with metal on metal as it swung wide. He didn't grab a box for Josh to step down on but instead hove his gigantic frame into the rickshaw. Josh remained seated, regarding Tyson's presence with confidence.

Tyson grabbed Josh and led him out the door. He moved without protest and jumped down to the asphalt below. Tyson did the same, landing with a large thud against the stone. They walked without words and ascended the stage to face the crowd.

As they had walked, all eyes were on Josh. The assembled struggled to get a look. Many of the gathered recognized the man they saw bound. Once

the two men stood on the stage, the crowd noticed Max.

Josh looked at Max. His gaze never left him. It was a stare of disgust and hatred.

Max strode to the front of the stage. He grabbed the microphone and unwound it from the stand. He held it for a moment as he surveyed the crowd in front of him.

“I come before you today to admit I was wrong,” he said with his hand held to his chest. “The last time we were assembled in this place I told you the enemy was already among us, but this was not my error,” Max’s face was large and luminous on the video screens around the city. His voice echoed through the streets. “No, my error was that I was not vigilant enough. The traitor was one of my own.” The crowd buzzed.

Betty stood shoulder to shoulder in the crowd. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Josh led to the stage. She felt like she was parachuting, waiting for the right time to pull the cord. She held a single finger up to Tom Tucker who was sitting near the video screen. One minute, she mouthed.

Max continued, “This man has been by my side since the beginning. It pains me to go through with this but there is no choice. Understand that anyone who seeks to destroy our society must be dealt with in the same manner! There can be no exceptions, regardless of what they have contributed in the past.”

Betty looked at Tom Tucker. She nodded. She mouthed the word “now”. He looked down at his smart phone, the app he needed was loaded on the screen. He double checked the WiFi. He pushed the numbers he was told and then looked at Betty. They met eyes and Tom gave a thumbs up.

The video screens blinked. The image of Max speaking dissolved into a test pattern. A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. Max was confused by this and turned around to see what had drawn their attention.

The video screens were now filled with the radiant picture of Pamela Brown. She stood against a window that was looking from high above down onto the city. Betty breathed, relieved when she heard the sound worked.

<<>>

A young blond woman is looking directly down the camera. Her face is streaked with dried tears. Behind her, the sun sets. She looks exactly like

the blond woman who was executed a few days before. The assembled crowd murmurs, some saying the word 'ghost'. Her eyes plead as she speaks.

"I start with a question. What has this man done? Already so many lives have been cut down in front of you. Is this what you agreed to? Is this what you wanted the world to look like? I ask you, please. If you do this, what makes you different from the people you have fought against?"

I understand. This country hasn't been on your side. Those in charge have painted the poor as losers. They kept you down. You have been laid off, downsized, forced to take pay cuts to keep your job, and all while the people who hurt you profited. You have every right to be angry. We are all angry. But your point has been made, loudly and with authority. If you do this, you lose everything for which you fought so hard to gain.

The rich need the poor to survive and they know that now. We've made them aware. But the poor need the rich too. We need them to compel us to reach for the stars. We need their knowledge and resources. We all need each other to survive.

Every one of us has a personal history full of memories of family, friends, love, and every one of us knows the sting of their absence. As alone and as desperate as we all feel, we share this experience, this human experience, regardless of our background. Our common bond is this humanity and you are throwing that away. This isn't your fault, we were deceived. We were all deceived.

Max has lied to you. He played on your emotions. Ask yourself this, has your life really improved? You are still living poverty while Max lives in a mansion. He lords over you from a glass tower and proclaims himself your savior. Is this the fairness and justice you came here for? He controls you with fear, just like the ones you turned your back on. You are living your life as a reaction to his choices. I ask the question. Who are you fighting for?"

The tape stops, and the image of Pamela Brown freezes on the screen.

<<>>

Max stood on the stage, silent. His face twitched as he looked over at Josh.

No sound came from the crowd. Not even a cough. Every one of the thousands stood as if in a dream. The seconds hung suspended above the

ground. The assembled masses all feeling that this was the moment where everything turned.

Tyson stood next to Max holding a chainsaw. He felt thousands of eyes burning him. He opened his hand. The chainsaw fell to the stage.

The crowd exhaled.

Max bent over and grabbed the chainsaw. It started on the first pull. He swung the spinning blade at Tyson and swept off his leg. Tyson tipped over and came crashing to the ground. The stage suddenly oily with a deep pool of blood.

Max's face was ghoulish. His eyes narrow and his teeth bared. People screamed, hundreds started running. Danton ran at Max as Josh dropped to the ground, Josh's hands still bound helpless behind him. He pushed away with his feet.

Danton lunged for the chainsaw. Max jerked his hands away. Max's eyes gleamed red. Danton fumbled for his holstered gun but Max brought the spinning chain down onto his forehead. Danton's head split down the middle.

Betty lunged for the stage. She pulled and pushed and ran, desperate to move forward while others were pushing away.

Danton's body stood ghastly for a moment, dead on its feet. Max leaned forward and took the gun from Danton's holster. He turned around to face Josh, who still struggled to get up from ground, and pointed the gun at his head.

Betty lowered her shoulder and smashed into Max, sending him to the ground. The gun clattered away.

She landed on her feet. She turned to see Max on the ground and kicked his head.

Josh was still down. He threaded his feet past the zip ties to get his hands in front of him.

Max rolled around in a frantic search for a weapon. The chainsaw engine still purred, catching his attention, but was out of reach. Max moved for the gun. His fingers found the muzzle, he gripped and smashed Betty in the face.

Betty blinked, trying to see. She heard a click and regained her vision, staring down the barrel. She leaned back and kicked the gun out of his hand, but slipped in the pooling blood on the stage and fell to the ground.

Max shook his hand to recover from the pain and looked around to find the chainsaw again. He dropped to his knees and grabbed it. He was focused on Betty. He wanted to kill her.

Many of the gathered crowd had fled but those who remained exchanged glances, thinking about rushing the stage. Everything happened fast. Betty tried to get up but slipped again on the bloody stage. Max revved the saw. The remaining crowd, who had started to move toward the stage, hung back.

Max held the chainsaw over his head and brought it down. Betty closed her eyes.

Josh crashed into Max and knocked him to the side. Max held his grip on the chainsaw this time. He got to his feet. Josh struggled. Betty opened her mouth in horror.

Josh lunged at the chainsaw with bound hands. He missed. Max parried and with one motion ran him through. Betty screamed. She jumped to her feet and elbowed Max in the nose and he fell backward. Betty shut off the chainsaw, then opened the choke wide to flood the engine. She pulled the quiet blade out of Josh and he fell to the ground gasping.

Betty gathered Josh in her arms and pulled him to the side of the stage. The wound went all the way through, missing his spinal column but shredding everything else. He took labored breaths with giant gulps.

The loud sound of legs and feet stomping rose up as the crowd flooded the stage, like an ocean rushing into a breach. There was no one to protect Max now. He dove for the silent chainsaw but his fingers could not reach the handle before he was consumed. Every part of his body was pushed down by hands. They carried him off the stage as dozens held him tight. He tried to move but the weight rendered him immobile. Capture was the ultimate horror.

Max screamed for someone to kill him. No one did.

<<>>

Betty rubbed Josh's chest, her hands slicked with his blood. Josh spoke in gasps.

"I...I don't think I'm gonna make it."

"Baby, it's okay. I am so proud of you."

"I...am...I am proud of you, too."

Betty cradled him. She put her hands on either side of his face and pulled her forehead to his. She did not cry. She spoke in a whisper. "Everything is okay, from now on it's going to be okay."

"I am so...I am so...I am so happy you are here right now."

For a moment Josh saw pain in her face. She brushed it away. She needed to be strong. For him. She needed to bring calm to this moment.

An easy smile came to her face, "Then stay here with me, baby."

Josh gasped, "Okay, baby...I missed you."

Betty kept his forehead pressed to hers. She smelled like home. In that moment, Josh was home. She held him close. Her words were soft. "Josh, just look into my eyes."

He did. Betty's green eyes became his entire world. The smell of gas and the sound of people melted away. They were the only two in existence. The only thing he knew was the sight of her eyes. The smell of her hair. The warmth of her breath. Betty. The only thing in the world was Betty.

Her lips pressed into his. Not in a kiss, but a whisper. He felt her lips moving against his as she spoke. "Never stop looking in my eyes, Josh."

The world that he knew was gone. The area that surrounded them felt warm. The air smelled like summer again. There was Betty with her pink braids blowing in the wind. All around them was sunlight. Just the two of them, alone. They were on the overpass again with Betty bathed in the radiant light. She glowed like an angel. She smiled at Josh.

"Hey Josh," she said. "You know what they say about happy endings?"

"It all depends on when you stop telling the story."

They pulled each other tight. Black spots swirled around them but they were together. They kissed. She tasted like home. He was home.

Then everything was gone.

FORTY-EIGHT

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