

She has no past.
The future is in her hands.

NOMAD



JL BRYAN

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by J.L. Bryan

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Some advance reviews for *Nomad* by J.L. Bryan:

"Raven's personality and smarts made it easy for me to take a liking to her. She's quick on her feet and intelligent in a way that completely fits with where she's really from – the future is not a pretty place... The advancement in technology, the history that led to this dystopian society, even the fashion, it's a solidly imagined world that is made believably futuristic without any overkill."

-Xpresso Reads

"I really liked this character. She was strong, determined, smart and sincere. She was also witty and resourceful. As female leads go, Raven pretty much nailed it...There was also plenty of action, humor, romance and heartbreak." *-Creative Deeds*

"This book was epic beyond epicness. What does that mean? It means JL Bryan took the best parts of almost every book I have read and threw them in here. It was a wild ride." *-Contagious Reads*

"From the minute I met Raven I connected with her. She is so easily relatable. She's smart and tough but also kind and sensitive...I ended up really caring for each and every character and I was just hoping for a happy ending for all of them. And wow that ending. Those last few pages I was literally reading the book at the edge of my couch!" *-Ladybug Storytime*

Other books by J.L. Bryan:

The Paranormals series:

Jenny Pox

Tommy Nightmare

Alexander Death

Jenny Plague-Bringer

The Songs of Magic series (for younger readers):

Fairy Metal Thunder

Fairy Blues

Fairystruck

Fairyland

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Nomad is the first book I've written in more than two years that hasn't been part of my Jenny Po or Songs of Magic series. It's a story I've wanted to write for many years. I hope that you'll enjoy this new one!

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Enormous thanks to all my readers who've supported me and enabled me to spend far more time with my son (he's two now!) than I otherwise would have. I'm grateful to every one of you! Now, the new story begins...

*For my parents
Thanks for everything*

Chapter One

Her hands were red with blood, but the cold rain washed it away. Whose blood? She couldn't remember.

She became aware of pain throughout her body. Freezing water and tiny hailstones lashed her face as she stumbled through a storm. Dying thunder echoed in her ears, and crackles of lightning faded in the night around her.

A pair of lights rushed toward her through the darkness, but her brain couldn't interpret what her eyes saw. A long screech ripped through her ears, followed by shrill bleats.

Car horns, she realized as the lights loomed closer. Through her thick, fuzzy brain, it dawned on her that she was staggering along a multi-lane road, seconds away from getting splattered across the oncoming grill of an eighteen-wheeled truck.

She discerned a dark space off to her left and moved into it, stepping from hard pavement into squishy wet earth. The truck that had nearly killed her squealed past as the driver braked, dousing her with a wave of cold mud. Horns blew at the stopped truck blocking up the left lane.

She rubbed her eyes and tried to grasp her surroundings—a grass median dividing an interstate highway, up to her ankles in frigid mud.

She couldn't remember where she was, or how she'd come to be there. After a moment's reflection, she realized she wasn't entirely sure who she was, either.

Raven, she remembered. She clung to that word like a lifeline. *My name is Raven. It is now, anyway.* She'd once had a different name, but that original, scribbled-on-the-birth-certificate name no longer mattered.

She wore black boots and a long black jacket. A backpack weighed down her shoulders, but she didn't know what it contained. She trudged on weak, trembling legs toward an overpass bridge ahead. Once she was out of the downpour, she could gather her brains and figure things out. She didn't seem to be bleeding, so the blood on her hands must not have been her own.

"Hey! Hey there, girl! You all right?" shouted the truck driver who had almost flattened her. More cars honked and swerved to avoid crashing into the back of his trailer, which was decorated with puffy pink sheep.

Raven squinted up at him. The man was in his forties, severely overweight, with a handlebar mustache and scratchy, graying beard stubble. His blue and white cap read: ***MoonPie: The Original Marshmallow Sandwich!***

"I'm fine!" she shouted through the downpour. "Keep going!"

"You got a car?" he asked.

"No," she told him. "I don't think so."

"Where you headed?"

"I don't know."

"The troopers gonna lock you up if they see you! You drunk or what?"

"I don't think so." She raised a hand to her mouth to check her breath. Not drunk.

The trucker eyed her up and down, a soaking wet girl stumbling along the interstate alone at night and then he swung open the passenger door.

"Best climb on up in here with me," he said. "Gonna freeze your pants off out there."

Raven looked at the gruff, obese man and the warm, sheltered transport he was offering, and then at the overpass bridge in the distance. Her legs were rubbery. She might not make it to the overpass before she collapsed.

"Lady, I got to get moving," he said. "You want a ride to the exit or what?"

“Yeah,” Raven said. She had no reason to trust him, but he seemed soft-bodied and slow. If he tried to get rough, she would break his wrists. Even in her current state, she knew she could take him if he pushed her to it.

Raven stumbled around to the passenger side and struggled to climb with her weakened limbs until he took her arms and pulled her up.

“Thanks,” she whispered, still shivering. She was almost too weak to pull the door closed.

“Just glad you ain’t tore in half.” He settled back into the driver’s seat, and it groaned under his weight. “You musta been one, two, three, four inches from me. Or less. Just popped up outta nowhere when that lightning hit.” He drove cautiously through the storm. “Didn’t seem like no normal lightning, you ask me. What was you doing out there? That big flash hit the road, then you come stumbling out....Did the lightning get you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. The interior of the cab smelled like cigarette smoke and old hamburgers. A collage of small objects was glued to the dashboard—action figures, an old watch face, postcards, salt and pepper shakers. Hail clattered on the cab’s roof.

“You don’t know?” he asked.

“Sorry.” Raven shrugged off her backpack and set it on the floor between her wet boots. She wanted to see what was inside it, but not while he was watching.

“It’s Jebbie, by the way.” He offered his calloused hand, and she hesitated a moment before taking it. “Jebbie Walters. From Yazoo City, Mississippi. You got a name, darling?”

“Angela. That’s my name,” Raven said. She knew not to trust a stranger with data about herself. He might be the enemy, and she felt informants and spies were everywhere, looking to report those who resisted.

“Huh. Where you from, Angela?”

She tried to remember, but finally shrugged.

“You ain’t gotta tell me,” he said. “You going north? Cause that’s where I’m going, way up north of here. You might want to hop out quick if that ain’t your plan.”

“I’m not sure.”

“You ain’t sure about much of nothing, are you?”

“Not right now,” Raven said.

“I guess I ought to drop you up at the exit.”

“You can.” Raven shrugged. “I think I’m lost.”

He looked her over again. “Tell you what. About three, four, five miles from here’s a good spot, the Big Porcupine Travel Plaza. Got showers, motel rooms, an all-night-you-can-eat place. We could stop there, get you a place to sleep. Maybe in the morning you’ll start remembering things. I figure you just need to sleep it off. You’re on drugs or something, ain’t you?”

“Maybe,” Raven said.

He laughed. “It’s okay by me. I don’t do drugs, myself. Just pills and booze. Well, you think about what you want to do.”

He turned up the radio, where a woman sang a slow, gentle song that Raven gradually recognized. Someone—her mother?—had once played it on the piano. It was an old song called “The Rose.”

“Uh, sorry.” Jebbie blushed pink and spun the radio knob. “I, uh, usually find a good honky-tonk or country gold station. Don’t know how my radio ended up on that soft-rock junk, or whatever that was. Yeah, here we go.” He found a song with a steel guitar and a man singing about his wife leaving him for his boss.

Raven looked at herself in the rain-streaked side mirror. She was about twenty years old, maybe nineteen. That felt right. Her black hair was pulled into a short ponytail with a rubber band. She wore all black: boots, fatigues, blouse, backpack, jacket. The knee-length jacket was made of a

stretchy artificial material with a texture like a crocodile's back. She felt a web of metallic fibers between the layers of leathery fabric. *That's armor*, she realized, and she wondered why she might need armor. Her only jewelry was on her left wrist, a thin silver bracelet with a large moonstone.

She tried to reach back in time with her mind. She'd been stumbling along the highway. The moment before that: what? It was a solid blank slate, as though a giant magnet had wiped her brain clean. Perhaps the trucker was right, and she'd been struck by lightning.

Raven, she reminded herself. *I know my name.*

She didn't know much beyond that. She closed her eyes and concentrated, and she managed to summon a few confused shadows—screaming, gunfire, a million stars exploding inside her brain, the feeling of being turned inside out. It didn't make any sense, and then it was gone.

"So." Jebbie cleared his throat. "That place is coming up, if you want a room for the night. How'd you like that idea? I could use some rest, myself. Been driving since asscrack of dawn o' clock."

Raven thought it over, wondering what the man's intentions were.

"I mean, uh, we'd get two rooms, of course," he said. "If we can. You got any money?"

"I'm not sure." Raven unzipped her backpack just enough to peek inside.

The first thing she saw gave her a quick jolt of fear that kicked up her pulse, but she tried not to show any reaction. She ignored it for now.

In a mesh pocket on the inside of the pack, she found a roll of green paper as big as her fist, all of them hundred-dollar bills. She didn't know how much a motel room might cost, but she estimated several hundred dollars for one night at a cheap place. She lifted out the spool of crisp, bank-fresh cash. "Do you think this is enough?"

"God damn, girl!" Jebbie choked. "Don't go whipping that out in front of people, or someone's gonna rob you. Hell, I'm half-tempted to do it myself." He smiled with nicotine-stained teeth. "Hey, I'm just yanking your paws, huh? But really, put one of them in your pocket, put the rest back for now. That's what I'd do."

Raven took his advice, pocketing just one bill, though that didn't seem like much money.

"You really are into drugs, ain't you? Wandering the highway at night, don't know where you're going, got a big barrel of cash." He cast a suspicious look at her backpack. "You ain't got no drugs in there now, do you? I can't afford to get arrested again."

Raven checked again. The backpack held a few odd objects and some tightly rolled clothing, but nothing like drugs, no powders or crystals.

"No drugs, just clothes." She zipped it up.

"Did you steal that money? Is somebody chasing after you?"

"No," Raven said. "I don't think so."

"You ain't telling me much."

"I just don't know. My memory is messed up, honestly. Because of that lightning, probably."

"Oh, yeah, that was a strange piece of lightning, landing right in the road like that."

Raven wanted very much to change the subject away from herself. She looked over the odd objects glued to Jebbie's dashboard, the watch face, the bobble-headed kangaroo, the black and white photograph of a woman in a 1920's bathing dress and cap. Another picture, very faded, showed a stern-looking old man on the porch of a general store, by a Coca-Cola sign.

"Are these your family?" Raven asked.

"Naw, just stuff I liked." He waved at the collection of junk. "Come from flea markets, mostly. Each one cost a quarter or less, just somebody else's memory that got throwed out. I ain't got much kin left, myself. Did get married once, but that didn't turn out."

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t think I was made for it. I’m a man of the road.” He nodded, as if confirming this to himself. “~~She was more into staying home and sleeping with the loser next door. Don’t matter. You got folks?~~”

“I’m not sure. That part of my memory’s gone. I remember a girl, we must have been close...” Raven saw flashes of a girl at her side, with freckles and unevenly cut red hair. Raven and the girl were both about twelve years old, racing through a dark alley with dozens of other people, panic on everyone’s faces. Behind them, a row of armored bulldozers lit up the night with a barrage of white-hot fire as they razed a crowded slum in one city or another, maybe Seattle, maybe Detroit, indifference to the screaming residents.

Later, Raven and the other girl sparred against each other. They were fifteen or sixteen and lived in an old factory loft that had been overrun with teenage squatters. Life was fighting, so everyone had to practice if they wanted to survive.

Even later, she and the girl wore gas masks and black-scaled armored jackets. They were part of a team raiding a heavily guarded concrete facility in the desert. The girl unleashed a hail of plastique cartridges from a rapid-fire rifle, decimating the front of the building. Raven shivered.

“Hey, you still there?” Jebbie asked.

“Sorry. I remember growing up in rough places, the big slum-sprawls outside the cities. We were always in danger.”

“What cities?”

“I think Detroit was one, for a while.”

“Oh, yeah, Detroit, that’s pretty bad.” He nodded as though he understood her better now. “That where you’re headed?”

“It might be,” she said, doubting it was true.

“Welp, looks to me like you got more than enough cash for a night at the Big Porcupine Inn. Dinner, too. You hungry?”

“Yes,” Raven said. It was a lie—her stomach was full of her own twitching nerves. Eating might be good for her, though, and make her feel a little more sane.

They pulled off at an exit ramp. From signs, she had determined they were traveling north on Interstate 65 toward Louisville, Kentucky.

Jebbie drove into a brightly lit clump of concrete buildings, identified by a tall sign as Big Porcupine Travel Plaza, where he parked alongside a row of other rigs. Another parking area hosted RV’s under its glowing sodium lights.

“They got everything here,” Jebbie said. “Food, fuel, place you can send mail, everything. There’s the motel.” He nodded at a dingy, two-story cinderblock structure all the way across the parking lot, ringed by scrubby weeds. “You feel like eating? Or more like sleeping?”

“Both,” Raven said, and she relaxed, knowing she would have a safe place to sort things out.

Outside, she passed a small vending machine that sold preprinted daily newspapers, which somehow struck her as quaint. From a glance at the newspaper inside, the *Courier-Journal*, she learned it was October 2013. That didn’t feel right at all. She wondered how much time she’d lost, and how long she’d been suffering this amnesia.

Jebbie led her into the Porcupine Cafe, which featured a greasy buffet table surrounded by grimy booths. Though it was approaching midnight, several truckers occupied booths, most of them eating alone.

The food was a sensory overload—chicken floating in blobs of lard, fried steak in gravy, collards, turnips, cut fruit, puffy rolls of bread. Her first instinct was to eat as much as she could cram into her stomach, then take all she could carry for later.

“Good stuff, ain’t it?” Jebbie piled his plate high with mashed potatoes and gravy.

“How much can I take?” Raven asked.

~~“All you can eat, like the sign says.”~~ Jebbie chuckled and shook his head.

The idea amazed her. She took a warm plate and filled it with country fried steak, fried chicken, sausage, and every type of vegetable offered—fried okra, fried tomatoes, and fried squash. The entire kitchen must have been one giant deep fryer, she thought.

She sat down in a booth across from Jebbie and caught herself clutching her knife and fork, hovering protectively over her food. She glanced at the women in checkered pink and black aprons who staffed the place, expecting one of them to come tell her she’d taken too much food and had to put some back. Nobody bothered her. At the other tables, most of the truckers ate even bigger piles of food. Everyone appeared very well-fed, even excessively so.

The steak was chewy and slathered in a congealed, greasy sauce, but it tasted fantastic to her, heavy with fats and proteins to keep her alive another day. She chased her food with sweet tea from a tall mason jar, so thick with sugar it almost put her into shock.

“Look at that,” Jebbie said. “I never seen a woman so little eat so much.”

“Sorry, I’m hungry. It’s okay to eat this much, right?”

“Hey, all you can eat.”

Raven ate all she could. She finished her meal quickly, eager to get a room and finally study the contents of her backpack.

They crossed the parking lot to the small motel, where the elderly desk clerk looked suspiciously at the two of them. A calendar featuring Jesus and the Disciples hung on the wall behind him.

“Two rooms?” the man asked. “I don’t see no wedding rings, and this ain’t that kind of motel, hear?”

“Two rooms. What is the rental price for mine?” Raven asked him. She’d broken her hundred-dollar bill to buy dinner and still had over ninety dollars left. It seemed an unbelievably cheap price for so much food, just pocket change. She was equally surprised to learn she could rent an entire room, with her own bed, for under forty dollars.

They walked up the outdoor concrete stairwell, lit by a flickering, greenish floodlight, and followed the cracked second-story walkway to their rooms.

“Here’s your spot.” Jebbie gestured at her door. “I could, uh, come in, if you want some company.”

“No, thank you.” Raven slid the key into her lock.

“You sure?” He had a desperate look in his eyes. The man clearly wanted to stay with her. Raven balled her hands into fists, hoping he didn’t get too forceful about it. He’d been nice enough so far.

“I’m fine,” she told him.

“Be right next door if you need anything.” Jebbie scurried into his room, looking away as though he were a little ashamed of himself for even trying, however slightly and ineffectively.

Raven entered her dim motel room and slid the deadbolt behind her.

Chapter Two

Raven's room was small, with musty curtains, a rusty old steam radiator, and a threadbare comforter on the double bed. The heat felt sweet on her cold skin, but it also filled the room with the stench of steamed mildew. The storm had passed over, leaving a quiet night outside.

She drew the curtain, but the size of the window worried her. It didn't have an outer cage or a barred panel to lock for the night, so anyone could break into her room with a brick or a hunk of cinderblock.

She closed her eyes and saw herself, fourteen years old, sharing a cigarette with the freckled, red-haired girl from her broken memories. They were dirty, dressed in clothes that were little more than rags, with old-fashioned lead-firing pistols holstered at their hips. They camped in an overgrown railyard deep in the slum-sprawl of one horrible city or another. They laughed as they smoked. They'd succeeded at some scheme, maybe a petty robbery. It was a happy moment.

She tried to remember the girl's name, but couldn't. She opened her backpack, hoping for clues about herself and her past.

She brought out the clothes first, since she was still dripping wet. There were two pairs of slacks, two collared shirts, a necktie, socks and boxer shorts, and a pair of size 12 brown loafers. Not her clothes. They belonged to a man several inches taller than her, with bigger feet.

She shrugged off her long jacket and felt the flexible metal mesh beneath the tough, leathery fabric. *Battle wear disguised as street clothes*, she thought.

She draped it over her shower bar, then set her boots in the tub and hung her blouse and fatigues over the towel bar. It would all be dry by morning, but she had nothing to wear until then.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her black bra was frayed, and her gray undershorts had ragged holes. She clearly wasn't rich, wasn't accustomed to running around with a thick roll of money on hand.

Her body was lean, wiry, and marred with scars and burns on her arms, shoulders, torso, legs, and feet. It was the body of a soldier. *I was a teenage child soldier*, she thought, and it made her want to laugh for some reason, like an old joke linked to some happy memory. No specific memory surfaced for her, though.

She changed into a starched white button-up shirt, too big and long for her, and a pair of boxers that were loose and baggy but dry. She dug into the backpack again, hoping for some object that would trigger her lost memories.

First, she brought out the thing that had startled her when she'd first seen it. It was a gun—specifically, a nasty-looking pistol, its barrel bulky with industrial coils and steel chambers clustered around a central shaft. It was tucked into a shoulder holster made from the same material as her jacket. She brought out a long, narrow, conical piece of metal, girded with more steel chambers.

Without a thought, she snapped the long piece onto the pistol, extending it into a long-range rifle. She checked the clip. It was loaded with a full cartridge, which contained concentrated hydrogen gas and a small fuel cell to power the weapon.

This was a plasma gun, and she knew how to break it down, clean it up, and put it back together in less than thirty seconds. The gun heated hydrogen gas by several thousand degrees to make plasma, like the material on the surface of the sun, and ejected the plasma ball towards a target. A single shot on the lowest-energy setting could burn out a man's chest cavity and leave a hollow, smoking corpse behind.

She knew all about the weapon, but she didn't know *how* she knew or where she'd received such training.

She set it on her bed, followed by a rack of twelve round cartridges, refills for the gun. She brought out pitch-black wraparound sunglasses and tried them on in the mirror. Dark glasses, a wet mop of hair, a shirt that hung on her like a bedsheet, and oversized underwear—she looked ridiculous. She tossed the glasses onto an end table by the bed.

The only other object in the backpack was a small cube that fit inside her palm. It resembled an ornate little music box, but carved from steel and silicon instead of wood. She traced her fingers over the geometric designs on the outside, not sure what they were—buttons, contact panels, or decorations.

She sat on the bed and slumped, disheartened. She'd hoped to find something more useful, clear identification that told her who she was. From the clothes, it was obvious the backpack wasn't even hers. Perhaps she'd stolen it.

Raven packed away everything but the little steel cube, since it remained an enigma to her. She turned it in her hands, pushing and prodding the little raised triangles, squares, and squiggly lines on its surface. Each side had a tiny aluminum circle in the exact center, so she tried pressing the tip of her index finger against one.

The aluminum circle opened like an iris, revealing a black glass lens. A scorching flash of blue seared her eyes, and she grimaced and threw the cube aside. She closed her scalded eyes, waiting for the intense blue afterimage to fade.

She rubbed her eyes and blinked. The cube lay in the corner, projecting a meaningless jumble of grids onto the walls. She nudged it upright with her toe, so that the glass lens pointed toward the ceiling.

A three-dimensional blue mesh diagram of a city unfolded in the air around her, made entirely of threads of light, as though someone had modeled it out of glowing graph paper. A highway ran right through her stomach. Raven backed away until she was outside of the holographic diagram, which took up most of her motel room.

One district of the city grew particularly large, while the rest of it vanished. The cube was zooming in her view for her.

The graphics were just a skeletal blueprint, but they were loaded with dense text. Street names and numbers were clearly labeled, as were businesses and other public locations. Homes and apartments showed the names of their occupants.

Two bright red dots blinked on the map. One was labeled **LAST KNOWN LOCATION**, with a time and the current date, at least according to the newspaper she'd seen. The other blinking dot was labeled **NEXT KNOWN LOCATION**, also with the current date but a later time, several hours into the future.

“What is this?” she asked. “Next location of what?”

The cube didn't answer.

“What city are you showing me?”

The text appeared in the air above the 3-D map like blocky skywriting above the city: **NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, USA, NORTH AMERICA.**

“Good, now explain the red dot.”

Red dots appeared all over the map, each with a date and time in tiny letters and numbers. A glowing box of a map legend appeared directly in front of her, containing only a single symbol: the red dot. Next to it was the word **TARGET**.

“Yeah, very helpful,” Raven said. She noticed all the dates and times were in the future, hundreds of seemingly random moments scattered over the next few months, from October to December, in and around the city of New Haven.

She had heard of New Haven, but she couldn't remember any details. It sounded creepy, like the

name a freaky religious cult might give its compound in the wilderness.

“What’s in New Haven?” Raven asked the cube. “What target are you tracking? Is it a person?”

The cube did not respond.

“Do you have a start-up screen? A main menu?” Raven asked.

The map vanished, replaced by a rotating blue sphere that read TRIOD DATASYSTEMS in silver letters. Rings of tiny three-dimensional icons orbited around it.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” she whispered.

A high-pitched metallic whine like a buzzsaw sounded outside her window. The pane shattered behind the curtain and broken glass rained down onto the carpet. The curtain bulged toward her, making a shape like a child’s ghost costume. A horizontal gash ruptured across it.

A round metal-plated disk the size of a manhole cover emerged through the gash. A circular saw blade spun around its midsection, its steel teeth a blur. The disk hovered on muffled air jets. A turret gun the size of a pencil was mounted on top, and it swung toward her like a pointing finger.

Raven grabbed her pillow—about the only thing in the motel room that wasn’t bolted down—and flung it at the floating, saw-toothed device. She rolled to the foot of her bed while the whirling saw blade shredded the pillow and spewed up a confetti cloud of sour, yellowed fluff.

The disk’s little turret gun fired a bright blue laser that grazed her thigh, cutting and cauterizing her instantly, and she screamed as she tumbled off her bed. The laser carved the bed in half, and the air filled with the sound of sizzling and the mingled stench of ozone and burning motel sheets.

Raven hit the carpet on her stomach and grabbed the plasma gun from her pack. She rose up to peer over the foot of the mattress.

The disk fired another blue-hot laser at her, burning right through the mattress. She dodged aside but it still skimmed her high on the arm near her shoulder, and she howled in pain. The disk dove toward her, letting out a high, buzzing whine as its cutting teeth accelerated.

Raven squeezed her trigger as she landed on her back, unleashing a blob of white fire the size of a tennis ball. It engulfed the disk, which swept past her and slid across the carpet, trailing flames, and crashed into the baseboard, instantly blackening the wall all the way up to the ceiling.

She heard a footstep. The motel’s sickly-green outdoor lights outlined a shape against her curtain, a large man armed with a gun. He reached out to draw aside the sliced, sagging curtain, and she aimed for his head.

“What in hell’s gravy is going on? You okay, girl?” Jebbie leaned in through the shattered window. He wore jockey shorts and a sweat-stained shirt advertising *Chunky’s Bowl-A-Rama*. He waved a .44 Magnum Colt Anaconda in his right hand. His jaw dropped at the sight of the crashed silver disk radiating runners of fire up the wall and across the carpet.

“Jebbie, do you see any more of these out there?” She pointed to the disk.

“Naw, I think I’d noticed by now...” Jebbie looked out over the parking lot. “What in St. Peter’s pooter is happening? You better tell me, now.”

“Grab your keys,” Raven said. “We have to go. There could be more of these on the way.”

“What is that thing? Some kinda flying saucer?”

“Hurry! I’ll explain later.” She ran to the bathroom, crammed her boots and wet clothes into her backpack, and pulled on the damp, armor-lined jacket.

On the way out, she hopped over patches of burning carpet. As she grabbed her sunglasses from the end table, she noticed a tiny, blinking red light on the side of the crashed disk. It blinked faster and faster, and with each blink it emitted a beeping sound, almost too soft to hear.

Raven panicked as she realized what was happening. She ran outside and met Jebbie on the walkway as he emerged from his room. In addition to his underwear, he now wore his socks and MoonPie cap. He clutched his gun in one hand and his keys in the other.

“Hey, I was coming to ask, should I get my shaving kit, too? Do you figure we’re coming back here? Cause the Big Porcupine Big Breakfast Special just can’t be beat—”

“Duck!” She tackled him and knocked him onto his back on the concrete walkway. The motel quaked as the disk exploded inside her room. A wave of burning furniture fragments blew out through her window and over their heads. Most of it hurtled over the railing to rain down on the parking lot below, but the charred television set slammed against the walkway railing and crashed next to Jebbie and he screamed.

She jumped up and helped Jebbie push his way to his feet. His mouth dropped as he looked into the smoking cave of her room, where nothing remained but swirls of ash.

“Devil’s dingleberries,” Jebbie gasped. “That thing woulda killed you all over the place.”

“We have to run!” Raven took his arm and tried to pull him along.

“But my shaving kit—” Jebbie pointed back over his shoulder.

“Now!” Raven dragged him down the walkway to the stairs. They jogged as fast as he could manage down to the parking lot.

“What in the name of James Earl Jones was that thing?” Jebbie asked as they crossed the asphalt dodging the scattered burning debris from her room.

“A drone,” Raven told him. “They’re remote-operated attack units.”

“Sure, I heard of them.”

“We have to keep moving. Let’s get to your truck.”

“Who sent it? And why’d they do a thing like that? Who’s trying to kill you?”

“I don’t remember yet, but I know they’re good at killing people. Hurry!”

Raven dashed across the wide parking lot toward the lights of the restaurant, while Jebbie jogged behind, panting. Only a few cars were parked in front of the motel. Raven hoped the rooms around theirs had been vacant for the night.

“Hey!” a voice shouted. Raven raised her pistol as she looked back over her shoulder, but it was only the elderly night clerk, still on duty at three in the morning. “Hey! Y’all done blowed up my motel! Y’all can’t go! Y’all can’t go!”

“Keep going!” Raven shouted at Jebbie.

“Come back, you dang meth heads!” the clerk shouted. “I know what you done! I’m calling the police!”

They climbed into the truck, and Jebbie raced toward the ramp to the interstate.

Chapter Three

As they drove off down the highway, Raven looked back at the smoking motel. The flashing blue light of a police car approached it, and she clutched her gun more tightly. Police were not her friends.

“Cop better not come after me,” Jebbie muttered, looking into his side mirror. “I am not gonna get blamed for all that mess.”

Raven couldn't help smiling a little.

“What the hell *was* all that mess, anyhow? Drones? You in trouble with the government?” He squinted at her. “It's drugs, ain't it?”

“I don't think so.” She pulled on her black fatigues, still wet from the rain, and tucked in her oversized collared shirt. She strapped on the combat boots.

“What is it, then?” he asked.

“I told you, I'm trying to remember. It's not clear.” Raven fitted the shoulder holster around herself and took it in by several sizes.

“What kinda pea-spitter you got there? That ain't no Remington.”

“It's a Deuterion K-300 Adaptable Plasma Generator. Heavy combat pistol.” Raven was surprised to hear these words coming out of her mouth, but she knew they were correct.

“Ain't never heard of that. Can I see it?”

“Be careful.” Raven double-checked the safety before handing it over.

Jebbie whistled as he gripped the heavy pistol. His other hand remained on the steering wheel, guiding the rig down the dark, sparsely populated highway.

“What kinda rounds does this thing shoot?”

“Plasma.”

“Like blood?”

“Like the fourth state of matter. Liquid turns into gas when you heat it enough. When you heat gas enough, it turns into plasma. That pistol uses hydrogen gas.”

“Hot puppy shit, girl. I knew you was trouble, but...” He shook his head. He returned her pistol, then handed over his stainless-steel revolver, butt first. “Colt Anaconda. They don't make that no more. It don't shoot no hydro-fire or nothing fancy, but a .44 Magnum cartridge does the job every time.”

“It's a good projectile weapon,” Raven said, testing its weight in her hand. She didn't want to see the revolver struck her as antiquated, as though he'd proudly presented a handful of stone-tipped arrows. She returned it to him, then brought out the rifle extender from her backpack and snapped it onto her pistol.

“Now, that's a mean-looking machine,” Jebbie said.

“The extender accelerates the plasma, for shooting at a distance or penetrating armor.”

“Armor? What is this, the Dark Ages?”

“Essentially.”

“You won't say who sent the dang thing, but who all has drones like that?” Jebbie asked. “It must be the military, right? Or the government?”

“Other people might have them, too.”

“What other people?”

“Private security,” Raven rubbed her head, struggling to remember. “The expensive kind.”

“I guess. I don't know.” He took his gun back from her. “Listen, are we gonna have more trouble up the road? Cause dying ain't high on my to-do list right now. You can't tell me who they are or why they're after you...”

"I understand. I'm putting you in danger. You can drop me at the next exit."

~~"You know where you're going yet?"~~

"North."

"North, huh? Well, listen, I'm only going so far as Toledo, then I got to drop my load and turn south again. So, you're welcome to stay that long, if, I mean, I noticed you got a whole lotta money there...so maybe some of them hundreds for the trouble, and my lost shaving kit and all..."

"That's fair." Raven opened her pack, peeled off six bills, and handed them over. "Is that good for now?"

"Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah..." He stuffed the money into his shirt pocket. "Yeah, that's good. And maybe a little for gas."

Raven sighed and paid him another hundred.

"What are you hauling back there?" she asked. She squinted through the rear window at the semi-trailer decorated with fluffy pink cartoon sheep. "It's not volatile, is it?"

"Naw, but the people who buy 'em might be." He chuckled to himself.

"What is it?"

"Puflex."

"Is that a...pharmaceutical?" Raven asked.

"I kinda figured you'd know." He flushed as though embarrassed and scratched his neck, looking out his window. "Puflex. Uh, the lady's product? For your monthly, uh, visits? Got twenty tons of 'em back there. Enough for all the women in Toledo, I guess."

"Oh!" Raven said. "So...yeah. Got it. Tampons." She looked out at the road.

He drove well past the speed limit to put the trouble behind them. The dashboard clock read **1:10 a.m.**

After only a couple of miles, Jebbie veered toward another exit ramp.

"Where are we going?" Raven asked.

"Got to pull off. Running on empty. I was gonna gas up at the Big Porcupine in the morning, but it ain't morning yet, and here we are driving. We need fuel, and I need me a coffee and something sugary. Didn't get much sleep with that UFO drone and all." He pulled alongside a pump at another, smaller truck stop.

"We have to keep moving," she said.

"You want to keep going, that means fuel, me and the truck both." He climbed down to the gas pump.

"I'll get the coffee. Wait out here with the engine running," she said.

"Well, yes, ma'am. But don't forget something good to eat, like a bear claw, and four or five Moon Pies." He stuck his credit card into the pump. "Biggest coffee they got, black, but with sugar and some creamer."

The convenience store sold groceries, t-shirts, and, for some reason, a wide selection of novelty items like whoopee cushions and joy buzzers. She filled two extra-large paper cups from an urn labeled "Ultra Dark Roast," one of several choices at the coffee bar by the rotating wiener rack.

"How ya doing, honey?" asked the large woman at the cash register, who was working a crossword puzzle and didn't look up from it while she spoke. "Need a little coffee, huh? Tell me about it."

"Are you talking to me?" Raven asked.

"You see anybody else in here, honey?" She cast Raven a bewildered look, as though Raven were crazy.

Two motorbikes parked slantwise in front of the convenience store, blocking the front door. Each bike had three tires, two in front and one in back, giving them a crossbow shape, and their engines

made no sound at all. The riders wore full armor, including helmets with black faceplates. They set off red alerts all over her brain.

Raven ducked into the closest aisle, hiding among cans of Spam and Chef Boyardee. Keeping her head low, she crept toward the front of the aisle. She watched between boxes of Frosted Flakes and Lucky Charms as the two bikers entered, jingling a little bell on a string over the door.

Their helmets were ridged and plated like medieval battle gear. Tinted shields hid their faces. Their black, armor-ribbed suits were scaled and leathery like Raven's jacket, but they each had a golden logo on the shoulders, an eye inside a triangle. The sight of it made Raven's skin crawl.

"We-hell, looks like the aliens have landed at last!" the lady behind the counter joked. "Can I help you boys?"

The riders' helmets broke apart like jigsaw puzzles and collapsed into rings around their shoulders, leaving them wearing goggles with pitch-black lenses. They were young men with close-cropped hair and flat expressions on their faces.

"We're looking for a girl. Have you seen her?" One rider held up his gloved hand and projected full-size, three-dimensional image of Raven, a video loop of her running somewhere dim. It repeated itself every few seconds. The image wore the same clothes that Raven wore now, down to the boots. Her hair was even pulled into the same ponytail.

The clerk gawked at the hologram, then glanced over to the coffee bar where she'd last seen Raven.

"There!" The other rider pointed at a curved mirror high in a corner. In the reflection, his dark goggles looked right at Raven.

Raven dropped her two cups full of coffee and ran the only way she could, toward the back of the store. They opened fire on her, and white plasma consumed the shelf beside her, melting the cans of ravioli and beans. A box of Pop Secret packets exploded, hurling smoking black corn across the aisle.

Another ball of glowing plasma melted the glass doors of the beverage cooler at the back of the store. Hundreds of bottles and cans exploded, ejecting a superheated steam cloud of Fanta and Budweiser. The steam scalded her face and hands but provided some cover as Raven ran through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

She found herself in a storage room piled with cardboard boxes. A dusty Slush Puppy machine occupied one corner, with a plastic cartoon dog presiding over a row of empty cylinders and nozzles.

She wedged the Slush Puppy machine between the doorknob and the wall, pinning the EMPLOYEES ONLY door shut. She ran out the back door under the glowing EXIT sign, emerging onto the small concrete pad of the convenience store's loading dock. She'd finally made it outside.

She raced across the parking lot, where Jebbie, to his credit, was idling near the exit, ready for a quick escape. She glanced through the glass wall of the store.

Inside, the clerk raised a double-barreled shotgun and fired it at the first of the riders. He staggered back, grimacing and brushing at his chest. The other rider shot back with a plasma rifle, incinerating the clerk and the entire counter. A nearby rack of fried fruit pies boiled and burst through their cellophane wrappers.

Raven fired a round of plasma at the two armored bikes parked outside the store. The plasma spread out to engulf them, but she didn't have time to check whether she'd done any real damage.

She climbed up into the truck and slammed the door. "Let's go!"

"I don't see no coffee. I said 'large coffee,' not 'no coffee.'" Jebbie scratched his stubbly face. His eyes were sagging, with heavy dark spots underneath. "Don't see my Moon Pies, neither."

"The attackers are here. We don't have time!"

"Them fellers on them freaky bikes?" Jebbie asked. He checked his side mirror as he accelerated out of the parking lot. "Helen's damnation, they done set the Flying J afire!"

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